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Bail decision for man accused of laundering Ryan Wedding's money to come next month

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TORONTO

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A reward poster for the arrest of Ryan James Wedding.

ANDREW HARNIK/GETTY IMAGES

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A Toronto-area jeweller accused in the United States of laundering money for a violent, international cocaine smuggling ring allegedly led by former Olympic snowboarder Ryan Wedding would be a target for the gang if he were released on bail, prosecutors told a Toronto courtroom on Wednesday.

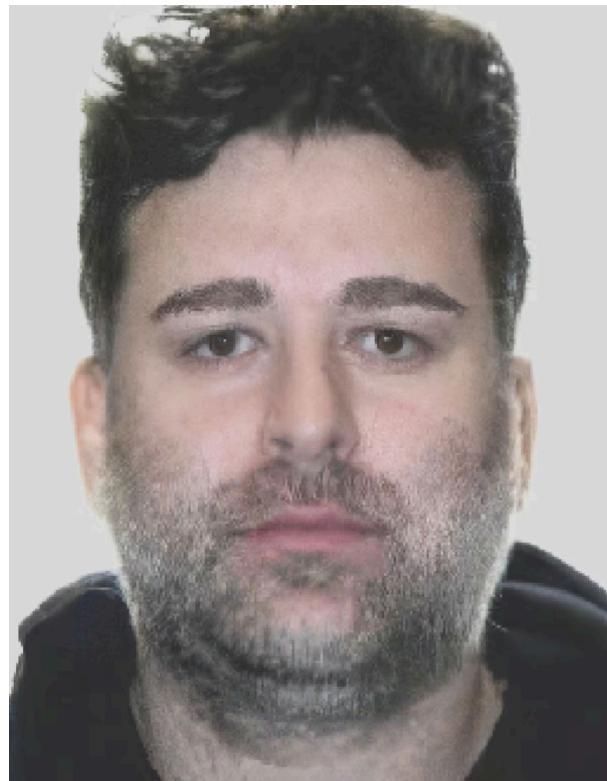
Rolan Sokolovski, a 37-year-old poker player turned jeweller is one of eight Canadians who were arrested in November. They are now facing extradition to the U.S. in connection to their alleged ties to Mr. Wedding, also a Canadian citizen. The others accused include Deepak Paradkar, a lawyer charged with murder conspiracy and released on bail in December.

Ontario Superior Court Justice Peter Bawden said he would deliver his decision about whether to grant Mr. Sokolovski bail on Feb. 20.

One of the allegations from U.S. investigators is that Mr. Sokolovski paid an alleged Montreal hitman with a “bejewelled necklace” for his role in orchestrating the killing last year in Colombia of a witness for the FBI who was expected to testify against Mr. Wedding.

On Wednesday, the final day of Mr. Sokolovski’s bail hearing, Crown lawyer Heather Graham told the court that he allegedly controlled cryptocurrency accounts through which he moved hundreds of millions of dollars. She said he cannot be safely released from jail because he is alleged to have unique knowledge of the inner workings of the Wedding organization’s financial structure and cryptocurrency accounts.

“They’re not going to let that sit there,” Ms. Graham said of Mr. Wedding and his alleged associates. “I think Your Honour



can presume they are going to hope to be able to use him to gain access to that money again."

Rolan Sokolovski.

HO/THE CANADIAN PRESS

None of the allegations against Mr. Sokolovski have been proven in court. One of his lawyers, Michelle Psutka, told the court last week that some of the U.S. information was "false."

Her co-counsel, Scott Fenton, told the court Wednesday that prosecutors are leveraging the Wedding gang's notoriety to make Mr. Sokolovski seem more sinister than he is.

"It's unfair to exaggerate that the applicant is ... the right-hand man," Mr. Fenton said. He added that unlike others accused in the same case, Mr. Sokolovski does not stand accused of having direct contact with Mr. Wedding.

Toronto-area jeweller accused of laundering funds for Ryan Wedding

Mr. Fenton said that U.S. court documents contain inconsistent information from prosecutors about how much criminal drug money Mr. Sokolovski is alleged to have channelled into cryptocurrency and luxury goods. "These numbers are radically changing," he said.

Ms. Graham, the prosecutor, countered that different U.S. totals arise from snapshots taken at different points in time when Mr. Sokolovski was allegedly moving vast amounts of money.

For the past two months, Mr. Sokolovski has been held in a triple-bunked cell at the Maplehurst detention centre in what his lawyers describe as "disgusting" conditions.

Mr. Fenton told the court that all risks around Mr. Sokolovski could be safely neutralized with a bail plan that envisions house arrest, GPS monitoring and several sureties who've pledged more than \$3-million toward his bail. The identities of his proposed sureties, including their relationship to Mr. Sokolovski, are protected by a publication ban granted after the defence argued their safety is at risk because of the violence allegedly linked to Mr. Wedding.

The proposed sureties have testified that they were unaware of how Mr. Sokolovski paid for a lavish lifestyle.

Potential sureties for Ryan Wedding's alleged money launderer questioned on his lavish lifestyle

During Wednesday's proceeding, Justice Bawden focused on his credibility. Evidence in bail hearings showed that the jeweller appeared to rarely talk about his finances – including a Toronto business he ran called the Diamond Tsar – to anyone.

“The business is a mailbox and a cellphone,” said Justice Bawden during the hearing. Describing it as a corporate shell without liquid money, he raised questions about how, just prior to his arrest, the accused man got a mortgage for a \$4-million house, bought a Porsche and paid for a Bahamas vacation.

Mr. Sokolovski last week testified that he did not declare hundreds of thousands of dollars he made in cryptocurrency trades on his tax returns because he was unaware of rules requiring him to do so.

Mr. Wedding is being sought by the RCMP and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation as a fugitive who is believed to be sheltered in Mexico by the Sinaloa drug cartel. He faces multiple murder conspiracy charges for allegedly ordering the killing of people in Canada and elsewhere whom he came to see as liabilities.

Prosecutors said Wednesday that even if Mr. Sokolovski did handle hundreds of millions for the gang, it would have been a mere overall fraction of the wealth allegedly amassed by the Wedding organization.

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