

Benesch Snags Cybersecurity Pro From Steptoe & Johnson

By **Emily Sawicki**

Law360 (April 24, 2023, 4:31 PM EDT) -- Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff LLP announced that cybersecurity expert Michael Vatis, founding head of the computer crime and infrastructure program for the FBI, would be departing Steptoe & Johnson LLP to join Benesch's New York office as part of its privacy and cybersecurity practice.

Vatis most recently served as chair of Steptoe & Johnson's privacy and cybersecurity practice, where he worked for 18 years as a litigator, including before the U.S. Supreme Court and nine U.S. circuit courts. But, Vatis spent most of his early career in the federal government.

Before his work establishing the FBI's National Infrastructure Protection Center, Vatis was associate deputy attorney general for national security matters at the U.S. Department of Justice. Prior to that, he was special counsel in the office of general counsel at the U.S. Department of Defense.



Michael Vatis

Vatis said he initially became interested in cybersecurity during his time at the Pentagon, where, following the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the Clinton administration ordered the DOJ to study potential infrastructure vulnerabilities, including in technology.

After leaving government service, Vatis worked for two years as the inaugural director of the Dartmouth College Institute for Security Technology Studies.

After earned an undergraduate degree from Princeton University, Vatis got his law degree from Harvard Law School.

Vatis' resume also includes a clerkship with Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as well as a clerkship with then Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg during her time on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit.

Risks have only increased over the years, Vatis said, and that has kept him hooked in the world of cybersecurity and privacy.

"This is a really big problem that's only getting worse, and every company is affected by this and has to deal with it," Vatis said. "I'm always motivated by the desire to help people in the way I can best help. As a lawyer, I have many years of experience, so that's the best way I can help."

Over about 25 years working in the world of cybersecurity — and later, data privacy — Vatis said the No. 1 threat has remained the same: "a sophisticated nation-state attacking critical infrastructure that could be really debilitating."

For the last 18 years in private practice, Vatis has turned his focus from national security to the private sector, helping clients not only to defend themselves against hackers and other threats but also to navigate developing security and privacy statutes. In addition, Vatis engages heavily in privacy-related litigation.

The move to Benesch is somewhat of a homecoming for Vatis, joining members of his former Steptoe & Johnson team, notably Stephanie Sheridan, who joined Benesch's San Francisco office in February as chair of the firm's retail and e-commerce group. Another Steptoe & Johnson retail partner, Meegan Brooks, also joined Benesch's San Francisco office this year.

"Mike and I have worked closely together over the past five years on behalf of my national retail and e-commerce clients," Sheridan said in a statement provided by Benesch. "[H]e is well-respected across the industry as a thought-leader in privacy developments in this important, ever-evolving field, particularly as we encounter newer issues like [the Video Privacy Protection Act] litigation and the constant flow of new legislation on both the state and federal levels."

"I'm thrilled for Mike to be reunited with our team, as we continue to build Benesch's powerhouse national practice group from coast to coast," Sheridan added.

Vatis said he was particularly drawn to Benesch's ability to maintain its "really special" culture while growing at a fast but sustainable clip, he said.

"They're really fast growing — fast growing in terms of opening offices, bringing in new people — but they're doing it in a different way that's yielding great results," Vatis said.

"One of the ways that convinced me that this is not all talk ... was their retention rate," Vatis went on.

"With laterals, oftentimes what you see is it's almost like a revolving door, where laterals come in, they don't work out and leave after two years. At Benesch, despite the significant growth, their overall retention rate is ... just far, far above the industry standard."

Business law firm Benesch employs more than 300 attorneys at offices around the country in Ohio, Illinois, New York, Delaware and California, plus an overseas outpost in Shanghai.

--Editing by Andrew Cohen.