

Early Warning Notification

The Hague, February 2021

Ref. No: EWN 2021/013

Europol

Operations Directorate

The illicit sales of false negative COVID-19 test certificates

Background

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus, an increasing number of countries in the EU and beyond are obliging passengers to present a proof of negative COVID-19 test to be allowed entry when travelling from a high-risk area. The measure generally concerns passengers travelling by air and in some cases, international train and coach traffic.

What is happening?

Several cases - also confirmed by Member States - have emerged in open sources of fraudulent COVID-19 test certificates being sold to travellers. The latest case of detected bogus test certificates was reported from Luton Airport in the UK¹ when a man was arrested trying to sell false COVID-19 test certificates.

Earlier reports included the arrest of a forgery ring at the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris selling forged negative test results to passengers. The amount charged for the fake test documents ranged between EUR 150 to EUR 300². Intelligence suggests that in the UK, fraudsters were caught selling bogus COVID-19 test documents for GBP 100, faking the name of a genuine laboratory on the false certificates³. In December 2020, a fraudster was apprehended by the Spanish National Police for selling false negative PCR certificates on the surface web for an amount of EUR 40⁴. In the Netherlands, scammers were discovered selling fake negative test statements for EUR 50-60 through messaging apps⁵.

Europol received additional information on the alleged use of a mobile phone application by an Irish organised crime group, which allows members of the group to manually falsify test results.

¹BBC 2021, Covid-19 Man arrested at Luton Airport over fake test certificates, accessible at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55771852>

²Associated Press 2020, 7 charged with selling virus test documents at Paris airport, accessible at <https://apnews.com/article/paris-airport-false-virus-test-documents-3a23815e704540467636005dda7263d3>

³Warwickshire County Council, Beware Fake COVID-19 Tests Warn Trading, accessible at Standards <https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/news/article/1623/beware-fake-covid-19-tests-warn-trading-standards>

⁴Policia Nacional 2020, La Policia Nacional detiene a una mujer por vender certificados falsos de PCR, accessible at http://www.interior.gob.es/prensa/noticias/-/asset_publisher/GHU8Ap6ztgsg/content/id/12673663

⁵AD 2020, Valse coronavrij-verklaringen in omloop: artsen reageren geschokt, accessible at <https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/valse-coronavrij-verklaringen-in-omloop-artsen-reageren-geschokt~a049e666/>

Early Warning Notification

Why is this relevant?

The detection of fake COVID-19 negative test certificates confirms that criminals – be it organised crime groups or individual opportunistic scammers – seize profitable opportunities once they arise. As long as travel restrictions remain in place due to the COVID-19 situation, it is highly likely that production and sales of fake test certificates will prevail. Given the widespread technological means available, in the form of high-quality printers and different software, fraudsters are able to produce high-quality counterfeit, forged or fake documents.

The purpose of this notification is to increase further awareness of the illicit production and sales of fraudulent COVID-19 negative test certificates.