

# How COVID-19-related crime infected Europe during 2020

11 November 2020



# INTRODUCTION

While the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> is first and foremost a global public health crisis, it has also proven to have a significant and potentially long-lasting impact on the serious and organised crime and terrorism landscape in Europe as well as the ability of Member State law enforcement authorities to counter security threats.

Providing the Member State law enforcement authorities and our partners with an up-to-date situational picture is a key priority for Europol during this crisis. Europol has been closely monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on crime and terrorism in the EU from the initial introduction of lockdowns and quarantine measures in March 2020.

Europol pursued various activities in order to respond to the crisis. In order to maintain an up-to-date intelligence picture of emerging security challenges in the EU, Europol collects, processes and disseminates intelligence on criminal activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Europol coordinates investigations and targeted operations related to the current crisis while carrying out prevention campaigns to address major crime threats, particularly in the areas of cybercrime, counterfeit goods, fraud and property crime.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Europol has produced a range of reports to law enforcement partners, policymakers and the public.

<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 is the official name of the disease caused by the new corona virus SARS-CoV-2 (SARScoronavirus-2). COVID-19 stands for coronavirus disease 2019. An epidemic is an outbreak of disease that affects a limited group or a limited geographical area. A pandemic is an epidemic that spreads over large parts of the world and affects large numbers of people.

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*Looking back at the last eight months, we can trace how criminals have used uncertainty and change to identify and exploit opportunities targeting individual citizens, businesses and the public sector. Unfortunately, uncertainty over the development of this pandemic and its impact on our lives appears set to remain with us for at least some months to come. However, it is encouraging to see how effective law enforcement authorities across the EU have cooperated to find responses and counter COVID-19 related security challenges in a very short timeframe. I strongly believe that we will benefit from this proof of strength of collaboration in difficult circumstances far beyond the current pandemic crisis.*

**CATHERINE DE BOLLE**  
Executive Director, Europol



# KEY FINDINGS

Europe appears to be in the grip of a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. During 2020, the impact of COVID-19 on crime changed over time. While some types of crime, specifically in a pandemic context, are here to stay, others come and go with the pandemic and its measures. Greater awareness has however reduced the impact that some types of crime had.

The (online and offline) distribution of counterfeit and substandard personal protective equipment, pharmaceutical and sanitary products, including fake 'corona home test kits' and alleged vaccines preventing COVID-19 infection, remains a consistent pandemic-related criminal activity.

The area of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has remained a grave concern during the pandemic; with children spending more time online, the potential increase in demand for CSAM and attempt to engage in child sexual exploitation continues to be a considerable threat.

Various types of schemes involving deception have been adapted by criminals linked to organised property crime during the pandemic, including the well-known 'grandchild' or 'nephew trick'. Looting of medical facilities and pharmacies appears to have increased.

Pandemic-themed campaigns have appeared across a wide range of cybercrime activities, including phishing campaigns, ransomware, malware and business email compromise attacks. Healthcare and health-related organisations have also been targeted and fallen victim to ransomware attacks.

After initial disruptions in the supply of some drugs to some European drug markets, the overall impact of the crisis on the EU drug market appears to have been limited.

The impact of the pandemic on terrorism and violent extremism has been limited and primarily involved some extremists adapting narratives and propaganda materials to the COVID-19 topic. This development has been less and less apparent after May 2020.

The volume of fake news, conspiracy theories and harmful narratives undermining public institutions disseminated online around the COVID-19 pandemic has been substantial.

# KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN CRIME AND TERRORISM SINCE THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown measures imposed across the EU manifested over the course of 2020. The mid- to long-term impact of the situation on society, economy and political discourse is becoming apparent and points to significant economic strain on a European and global level during and in the aftermath of a prolonged pandemic. Some countries have already entered into recession and others are expected to do so imminently. As witnessed in the past, economic crises are fertile ground for the growth of organised crime in terms of its scope of activities and its influence. Economic hardship and rising unemployment may also drive the recruitment of individuals for organised crime groups (OCGs<sup>2</sup>).

On the whole, organised crime activities appear to have intensified for some criminal

activities and in some regions. Violence among OCGs has been increasing in some EU Member States during the first half of 2020, which may point to an expansion of territory and criminal activities by some OCGs during the pandemic<sup>3</sup>.

Individual criminals and OCGs have been quick to exploit the crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting their activities and modi operandi to the new situation. Criminal threats have remained dynamic; altered and new criminal activities have emerged during the crisis and in its aftermath. The most affected areas of criminal activity included cybercrime, the illicit supply of counterfeit and substandard goods as well as the various types of fraud and scams often linked to organised property crime.

<sup>2</sup> Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>3</sup> Europol information.

## Counterfeit and sub-standard goods

The pandemic economy has presented new business opportunities for criminals attempting to capitalise on goods high in demand and the fear induced by the COVID-19 virus. The distribution of counterfeit and substandard goods has been one of the key criminal activities during the pandemic. With the onset of the pandemic, the demand for healthcare and sanitary products (masks, gloves, cleaning products, hand sanitizers), as well as personal protective equipment increased significantly. There has been a substantial increase in the sales of substandard masks due to their compulsory use in public spaces and public transport in some of the Member States<sup>4</sup>.

Some additional developments, such as the sales of fake 'corona home test kits' and fraudulent pharmaceutical products, advertised as allegedly treating or preventing COVID-19, have been particularly worrying from a public health perspective. Scammers have already offered fake vaccines<sup>5</sup>.

The illicit sales of such products have significantly increased online and offline via various online platforms and standard door-to-door sales methods. Such fraud schemes have been targeted at individuals, companies, pharmacies and medical practitioners. While some product offers for counterfeit goods related to the COVID-19 pandemic have appeared on the dark web, the product offerings available there remain limited compared to the surface web, which continues to host the primary distribution platforms for counterfeit goods. Dedicated websites have been set up for the purposes of selling counterfeit sanitary and pharmaceutical products. These often disappeared shortly after receiving negative reviews by defrauded customers. Targeted ads on social media platforms, web shops and in some cases messaging apps have been also reported to have been used to drive up the sales of counterfeit or non-existent goods<sup>6</sup>.

The OCGs involved in the illicit activities related to counterfeit and sub-standard goods have proven to be highly adaptable in adjusting their business model by shifting product focus and marketing<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Europol 2020, Viral marketing – counterfeits, substandard goods and intellectual property crime in the COVID-19 pandemic accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/viral-marketing-counterfeits-in-time-of-pandemic>

<sup>5</sup> Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>6</sup> Europol information.

<sup>7</sup> Europol 2020, Viral marketing – counterfeits, sub-standard goods and intellectual property crime in the COVID-19 pandemic accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/viral-marketing-counterfeits-in-time-of-pandemic>

# Cybercrime

Cybercriminals have been at the forefront of taking advantage of the crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. As usual, cybercriminals were particularly quick to adapt to the COVID-19 crisis, leveraging the current events and news in order to increase the likelihood of infecting victims looking for related information online. They have exploited individuals' increased anxiety, demand for information and supply for certain goods as well as reliance on digital solutions while working from home and providing homeschooling to children.

In addition to cyber-related attacks, criminals have also used the current crisis to recruit money mules under the disguise of fighting the spread of the virus. From an infrastructure perspective, from the onset of the pandemic there has been a sharp increase observed in registering domain names with a reference to or containing the word 'corona' or 'covid'. A significant share of these registrations have been observed to be malicious and linked to other types of cybercrime activity such as orchestrating spam campaigns, hosting malware or scam sites.

## Phishing

Phishing emails through spam campaigns with a specific reference to COVID-19 and with the primary purpose of harvesting credentials and other sensitive data, as well as infecting users, have been going around since the beginning of February. To lure potential victims, the general modus operandi revolved around false claims of providing information about the virus.

Phishing emails have been also reported to come from organisations which, for example, focus on disease prevention and health. SMS phishing and phishing attacks occurring against crowdfunding campaigns have been also noted. However, towards the end of the second quarter of 2020, CERT-EU reported a decreasing number of phishing emails affecting victims<sup>8</sup>.

## Malware, ransomware and malicious apps

Since the onset of the pandemic, threat actors have tailored their modus operandi to the COVID-19 context and have distributed malware, ransomware and malicious apps targeting individuals and organisations in an attempt to extort payments and personal data. Phishing campaigns and the creation of COVID-19 domains have consistently supported these activities<sup>9</sup>. The observed trend of ransomware-targeted attacks against public health organisations appeared to have decreased towards the second quarter of 2020. Cybercriminals have exploited new attack surfaces; malware has appeared on typondomains relating to commonly used video conferencing software, exploiting the attack vector of increased teleworking practices.

The number of malware families using COVID-19 as a lure have continued to grow. Some of the malware types identified during the monitoring period suggested the involvement of highly skilled criminals. The number of malicious apps has been observed to increase as well<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Europol 2020, Viral marketing – counterfeits, sub-standard goods and intellectual property crime in the COVID-19 pandemic accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/viral-marketing-counterfeits-in-time-of-pandemic>

<sup>9</sup> Europol 2020, Catching the virus – cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/catching-virus>

<sup>10</sup> Europol information

## Child sexual exploitation

With children spending more time online due to the various restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential increase in demand for CSAM and attempt to engage in child sexual exploitation has been a considerable threat. Though it has remained a priority for law enforcement, it has been difficult to quantify the seriousness of the threat posed. In March 2020, Europol had already highlighted the notable surge of COVID-19 topics appearing on child sexual exploitation boards on the dark web. Referrals to illegal websites with CSAM have also increased<sup>11</sup>.

There have been also reports received that minors were targeted with pornography during hacked Zoom conversations. Attempts to log into blocked child pornography sites have also appeared to rise<sup>12</sup>.

## Dark web

The COVID-19 situation has similarly affected the dark web. The numbers of overall criminal listings on dark markets have fluctuated over time as a result of vendors' decreased ability to source and/or deliver goods. Nonetheless, the number of listings offering COVID-19-related products such as masks, fake test kits and pharmaceuticals on dark web platforms has been increasing. The dark web has been extensively used to carry out fraud as well, by taking money and never delivering the illicit products purchased<sup>13</sup>.

- 11 Europol 2020, Exploiting isolation – Offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/exploiting-isolation-offenders-and-victims-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- 12 Europol information
- 13 Europol 2020, Catching the virus – cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/catching-virus>



## Drug production, trafficking and distribution

As Europol reported in its baseline assessment, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have had little immediate impact on the wholesale trafficking of drugs<sup>14</sup>. Apart from some disruptions at the onset of the first lockdown, trafficking of cannabis, cocaine and heroin was observed to continue over the monitoring period. Drugs continued to be seized on arrival in shipping containers at main European entry points, in some cases in unprecedented quantities. Wholesale traffickers have continued to arrange shipments and the effects of the pandemic appear to have been limited to mid-level supply and distribution networks based in the EU. Due to the downturn in the export of essential chemicals and precursors typically imported from China and used in the production of synthetic drugs, manufacturing of such drugs did slow down, however, it did not cease<sup>15</sup>. Some reports also indicated that producers of synthetic drugs had stockpiled the necessary chemical materials in order to ensure production and supply<sup>16</sup>.

Due to OCGs' preparation for a temporary suspension of their trafficking activities, and some traffickers stockpiling drugs, at the

end of the first quarter of 2020, there were some indications pointing to fluctuations in drug prices on EU drug markets. As a result, for instance, cocaine prices were reported to have risen by 25% that underlined the impact movement disruptions had on the import drugs to Europe<sup>17</sup>. Due to the restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for certain drugs was also affected. With lockdown measures imposed, there was a notable drop observed in the consumption of MDMA, a drug that is usually taken in recreational settings<sup>18</sup>.

Some criminals had adapted their modus operandi for the distribution of drugs in order to circumvent barriers. Europol received information that several dealers used falsified certificates, commercial vehicles and corporate vests, impersonating internet provider staff supposedly tasked to install optical fibres in order to deliver drugs<sup>19</sup>.

There were also incidents reported of increasing violence as tensions between drug users, dealers and rival gangs intensified as a result of pressures on supply<sup>20</sup>.

14 Europol 2020, Pandemic profiteering – How criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/pandemic-profiteering-how-criminals-exploit-covid-19-crisis>

15 EMCDDA and Europol, 2020. EU Drugs Market. Impact of COVID-19, accessible at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19_en)

16 Europol 2020, Pandemic profiteering – How criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/pandemic-profiteering-how-criminals-exploit-covid-19-crisis>

17 EMCDDA and Europol, 2020. EU Drugs Market. Impact of COVID-19, accessible at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19_en)

18 Ibid

19 EMCDDA and Europol, 2020. EU Drugs Market. Impact of COVID-19, accessible at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19_en)

20 EMCDDA and Europol, 2020. EU Drugs Market. Impact of COVID-19, accessible at [https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19\\_en](https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/joint-publications/eu-drug-markets-impact-of-covid-19_en)

## Fraud schemes and financial crime

Fraudsters have been very quick to adapt well-known fraud schemes to exploit widespread anxiety, targeting individual citizens, businesses and public organisations. The observed scam schemes have included various types of adapted versions of telephone fraud schemes, supply scams and decontamination scams. The modi operandi of these schemes have been adapted thematically with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus.

Several types of telephone fraud schemes have been reported to Europol. This includes calls to victims by criminals claiming to be health care officials and demanding payments on behalf of a relative supposedly undergoing medical treatment. Fraudsters have been also using an adapted version of the 'grandchild or nephew trick' impersonating a family member pretending to be sick to ask for money to pay for medicine

or hospital bills. This type of scam has been observed to be committed both via the phone and in person, targeting vulnerable people such as the elderly. There have been incidents reported where fraudsters contact their victims claiming that their money is no longer safe in bank accounts due to the crisis and offer to withdraw the money on the victims' behalf. In some cases, criminals impersonating police officers have issued on-the-spot fines to members of the public wearing masks. Criminals have also adapted investment scams to elicit speculative investments in stocks related to COVID-19 with promises of substantial profits<sup>21</sup>.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, criminals have quickly exploited purposely established legal business structures to orchestrate supply and fraud schemes, facilitate the distribution of counterfeit goods and money laundering activities<sup>22</sup>. In some cases, criminal operators have used the identities of genuine and legally operating companies for such purposes.

<sup>21</sup> Europol 2020, Pandemic profiteering – How criminals exploit the COVID-19 crisis, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/pandemic-profiteering-how-criminals-exploit-covid-19-crisis>

<sup>22</sup> Europol information.

## Organised property crime

While the number of domestic burglaries and common thefts has generally declined in the immediate aftermath of the introduced COVID-19 control measures, these crimes have been on the rise since the easing of the lockdown restrictions. There have been several instances of medical facilities and pharmacies being increasingly targeted, stealing medical equipment, sanitary products and pharmaceuticals that have been high in demand across the EU<sup>23</sup>. Alongside shoplifting, there have been also an increased number of reported burglaries of unoccupied commercial sites and trucks. Physical ATM attacks have continued to take place despite the confinement measures. An increase in violent robberies has been reported against

establishments selling essential goods. There have been similar indications pointing to an increase in crimes in the areas of tool theft, copper theft and light construction vehicle theft<sup>24</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the *modi operandi* of criminals involved in organised property crime. Various types of schemes involving deception – that had existed before the crisis – have been adapted by criminals to exploit the current situation. Perpetrators use techniques such as the impersonation of representatives from public authorities or medical staff to gain access to private homes providing information material, hygiene products or conducting a ‘corona test’ with the aim of stealing valuables<sup>25</sup>.

23 Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

24 Europol information

25 Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

## Migrant smuggling

Despite general fear, travel restrictions and enforced border checks, migrant smuggling activities have continued, albeit at a lower-than-normal rate<sup>26</sup>. Curfews, lockdowns and border restrictions entailed constraints in the possibilities and smuggling networks' own capabilities to keep running their illicit business at the usual pace. At the same time, the measures implemented to tackle the pandemic have confronted criminal structures with different scenarios and realities giving them the potential to adapt, train and test new responses upon critical situations. Migrant smugglers have changed their modi operandi and routes.

With the restrictions imposed on international movements, air smuggling had similarly drastically dropped at the end of the first quarter of 2020. This situation forced smuggling networks to seek alternative routes, shifting more to land and sea routes and using larger capacity means of transportation to compensate for potential economic losses<sup>27</sup>.

Freight trains have been often reported as facilitating irregular migrants in secondary movements and from countries outside the EU. Since the transport of goods has not been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, this modus operandi of smuggling in lorries has been widely used by smugglers.

Along the Western Balkan routes, migrant smugglers guided larger groups of irregular

migrants (up to 47 at once) on foot. Europol also received intelligence on potentially newly emerging routes, such as the sea corridor from Albania to Italy. Smugglers have also been forced to use less explored and riskier routes, adapting to new measures, putting migrants' lives at risk. Rivers such as the Danube and Evros have been increasingly reported to be used by smugglers.

The pandemic has brought to light an increase in nationalities that have not reported transiting the Central Mediterranean corridor in a long time, such as Bangladeshi nationals. This shift may have occurred due to the worsening of conditions in Libya, further aggravated by the effects of the sanitary emergency and tightening of police checks along Western Balkan routes.

Since the pandemic outbreak in Europe and especially since the end of March, there was an increase in detections of small boats crossing the English Channel towards the United Kingdom, involving different nationalities. This trend continued in April and May 2020. Europol has also received information on migrant smugglers facilitating irregular migrants in vehicles to north western EU coastal areas used as departure points.

Smugglers have used social media for the purposes of advertising their services and spreading misinformation and narratives around the COVID-19 pandemic to increase demand for their facilitation services<sup>28</sup>. Prices have gone up due to the greater difficulty in travelling, the continuous demand and the compensation mechanisms that criminal networks put in place due to the increase of risks<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Europol information.

<sup>27</sup> Europol information.

<sup>28</sup> Europol information.

<sup>29</sup> Europol information.

## Other crime threats

### Distribution of disinformation

The volume of fake news disseminated online around the COVID-19 pandemic has been substantial. Conspiracy theories, harmful narratives undermining public institutions, bogus scientific information, and links to online scams about the coronavirus pandemic have been steadily distributed via Facebook and other social media platforms despite efforts to clamp down on misinformation<sup>30</sup>.

### Extortion, assaults and violence

On the whole, other general violence incidents were seen to decline, arguably due to lockdown measures<sup>31</sup>. However, assault against law enforcement personnel in relation to enforcements of COVID-19 restrictions, domestic violence caused by stress and extortion by some criminals targeted at

pharmaceutical manufacturers to gain access to medicines used in the treatment of COVID-19 patients have been observed during the monitoring period.

### Trafficking and disposal of medical waste and environmental crime

The COVID-19 crisis has also represented a sanitary emergency with a significant impact on waste management, posing risk both to the environment and public health. Increase in medical waste due to the COVID-19 pandemic has also created opportunities for OCGs to traffic and illegally dispose of medical waste<sup>32</sup>.

In addition, stockpiling of wildlife products in key countries has intensified, as traders had encountered difficulties in accessing markets. There have also been changes to means of transportation of stock<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Europol 2020, Catching the virus – cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/catching-virus>

<sup>31</sup> Europol information.

<sup>32</sup> Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>33</sup> Europol information.

## Terrorism and violent extremism

The impact of the pandemic on the current terrorism threat level in the EU has been limited. There are no indications that the surge in jihadist attacks of the last weeks is influenced by the COVID pandemic. The occurrence of jihadist attacks in general as well as the applied modus operandi seen in the recent months fit Europol's terrorism threat assessments that predate the pandemic. Nevertheless, there have been indications that extremist groups have made use of the pandemic in advancing their ideological and political agendas and reinforcing their established narratives<sup>34</sup>.

Issues related to anarchist and left-wing extremist groups have continued to be reported, with cases of vandalism and damage based on extreme ideologies related to the virus pandemic. Various left-wing extremist groups (anarchists, anti-capitalists,

anti-globalists, environmental extremists) have identified the source of the pandemic in line with their ideologies as societal structures, environmental policies, or the economic system.

Right-wing extremists have been using the current pandemic to agitate against minorities and political rivals. Some groups have called to create chaos by vandalising property and attacking and robbing minorities, in order to start (racial) civil wars<sup>35</sup>.

Certain social movements with links to violent extremists have been noted to be increasingly active over the reporting period. These groups have mostly adapted some of their rhetoric to the COVID-19 context, agitating against quarantine and lockdown measures instituted by governments, especially those with an impact on specific socio-economic groups<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Europol 2020, Beyond the pandemic – how COVID-19 will shape the serious and organized crime landscape in the EU, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/beyond-pandemic-how-covid-19-will-shape-serious-and-organised-crime-landscape-in-eu>

<sup>35</sup> Europol information.

<sup>36</sup> Europol information.

# CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CRIME AND TERRORISM RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Few new trends related to crime and terrorism due to the COVID-19 pandemic have emerged since the last report issued by Europol in May 2020. Overall, the pace of adaptation of existing criminal activities or innovation in exploiting new criminal opportunities has slowed significantly. Now well-known *modi operandi* that appeared during the initial phase of the lockdown continue to be used, but their impact is more limited due to greater awareness of these criminal threats. Across

the spectrum of serious and organised crime, most criminal activities appeared to have largely adapted and returned to a 'new normal'. Some threats in the area of cybercrime, especially the sexual exploitation of children online, persist and remain a priority for law enforcement authorities. The impact of the pandemic on terrorism and violent extremism remains limited to the adaptation of narratives and propaganda materials.

## Counterfeit and substandard goods

Distribution of counterfeit and substandard products including PPE continues. Large shipments of substandard facial masks continue to arrive in Europe especially from Asia, such as Bangladesh, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Turkey. In August 2020, European customs agencies intercepted, seized or returned more than 8.5 million masks without CE certification or presenting other irregularities. The trafficking of infrared thermometers and hand sanitising gel is increasing.

A warehouse belonging to an OCG involved in counterfeit products distribution was found to

contain 53 000 counterfeit products plus more than 1.1 million medical masks of unknown origin and without customs documents<sup>37</sup>.

No recent offers for COVID-19 related illegal Internet Protocol television (IPTV) subscriptions have been reported. The number of new COVID-19 related website registrations is decreasing. Social media groups exchanging information on COVID-19 related products were closed. Counterfeiters are likely to shift from trafficking PPE to trying to sell fake vaccines. PPE scams will be replaced by vaccine and treatment scams, which will also include cyber scams.

## Cybercrime

COVID-19 demonstrated how cybercrime – at its core – remains largely the same but criminals change the narrative. They adapt the specifics of their approach to fit the societal context as a means to enhance their rate of success. Traditional cybercrime activities

such as phishing and cyber-enabled scams quickly exploited the societal vulnerability as many citizens and business were looking for information, answers and sources of help during this time. There were even more challenges for both individuals and business

37 Europol information.

as teleworking during the pandemic became the norm.

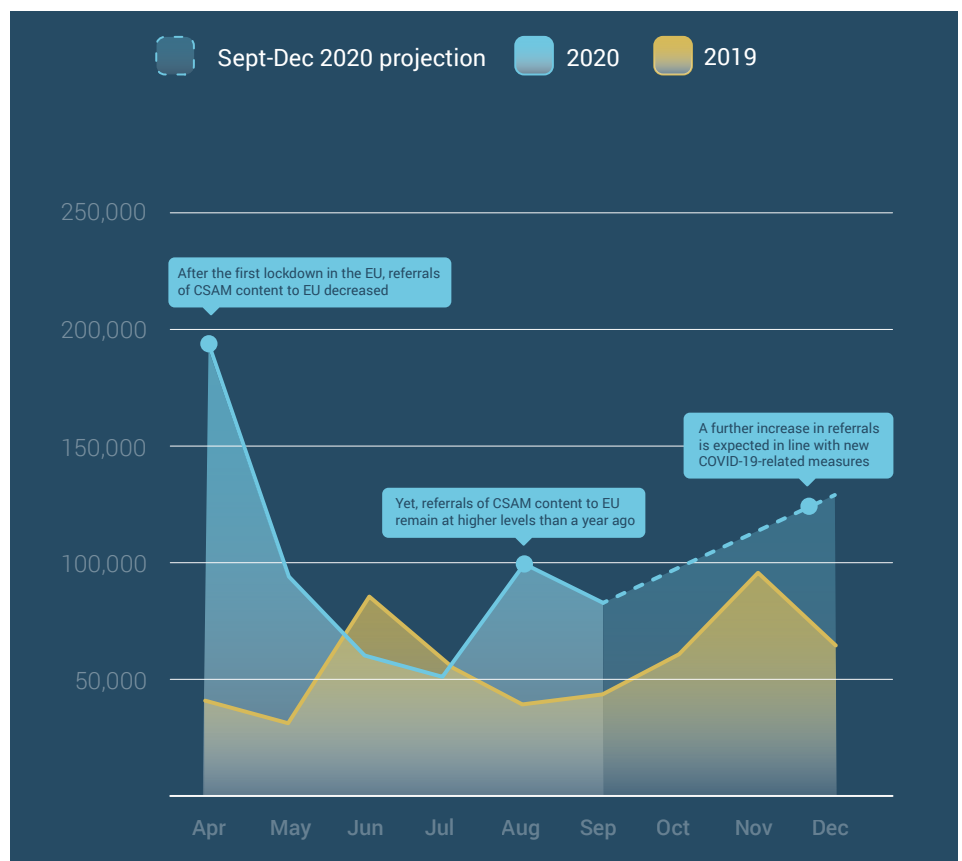
Both seasoned cybercriminals and opportunistic individuals spread disinformation to benefit from it in different ways. Significant political motives can drive disinformation to influence elections or referendums affecting entire countries. However, for criminals the ultimate aim is always to obtain profit. Some individuals simply seek to obtain direct financial gain through digital advertisements, as engagement with fake news messages about COVID-19 can be very high. The number of new domains and websites related to COVID-19 soared at the start of the pandemic<sup>38</sup>.

Another strategy to profit financially from the COVID-19 crisis was to spread fake news about potential cures for the virus or effective prevention measures. Such messages also

facilitated criminals seeking to sell items that they claim will help prevent or cure COVID-19, which emerged both on the Clearnet and the dark web.

The use of CSAM remains higher than at pre-COVID-19 levels. CSAM use can be measured via several indicators, one of which is the referrals from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to Europol. NCMEC receives information on CSAM detected from online platforms providing social media and messaging services, and refers them to Europol if relevant for the EU. During the March-April lockdown in Member States, the number rose, but returned to usual levels when the measures were lifted. However, towards the end of summer, referrals again increased throughout the EU. The new partial lockdown measures re-instated in several Member States from October might further sustain this rise in the spread of CSAM and related referrals.

**Figure 1** NCMEC referrals to EU, April-December, 2019 vs 2020, including projection. Source: NCMEC.



38 Europol 2020, Catching the virus: cybercrime, disinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic, accessible at [https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/catching\\_the\\_virus\\_cybercrime\\_disinformation\\_and\\_the\\_covid-19\\_pandemic\\_0.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/catching_the_virus_cybercrime_disinformation_and_the_covid-19_pandemic_0.pdf)



## Excise fraud

Supply and production problems have led to an increase in market prices for illicit cigarettes and tobacco. OCGs initially experienced difficulties in sourcing non-tobacco materials (NTMs – paper, glue, filters, foil, etc.) and tobacco through legitimate tobacco industry suppliers. In addition, the pandemic limited the availability of skilled workers and technicians to operate the illicit production facilities and many workers from Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Ukraine and other countries have returned home prior to the lockdown<sup>39</sup>. Supply has shifted and there was a threefold increase of the availability of

cheap white cigarettes (particularly menthol cigarettes) from Belarus on the illicit cigarette market in countries on the Baltic Sea.

Despite the disruptions and measures in place in this field, criminals have demonstrated their resourcefulness. With traditional sales outlets out of action, the flow of the illicit products continued, thanks to the deployment of technology to enable sales. Online gateways such as WhatsApp and Facebook have facilitated sales as quick and easy communication tools between consumers and providers.

## Migrant smuggling

In the last nine months, the use of the Western Mediterranean route has seen unusual landings in Portugal with long trips in wooden boats that have again triggered alerts of the potential (unconfirmed) use of 'mother boats' given the long distances and harsh conditions of such a trip.

Some changes in modi operandi traditionally used in certain corridors were also witnessed during the lockdown periods (i.e. an increase of smuggling incidents on foot to cross specific borders to then transfer to vehicles on some Western Balkan routes).

The relatively low number of newly arrived irregular migrants along the Eastern Mediterranean route<sup>40</sup> has not affected facilitated secondary movements by plane from Greece and Cyprus towards other EU and/or Schengen Associated countries using fraudulent documents. It is expected

to further increase as long as restrictions for international passenger travels are lifted.

The increase in smuggling by air using fraudulent documents has resumed along different intra-Schengen routes and towards the United Kingdom. With the re-opening of the air traffic, more cases of visa abuse have again been reported.

Smugglers continue to act recklessly and to put irregular migrants' lives at risk. There were occasions on which smuggling by car resulted in multiple casualties and injuries among irregular migrants.

The Central Mediterranean route remained the most transited route to Europe in 2020<sup>41</sup>. In the last three weeks of August, more than 4 000 irregular migrants were registered in the Italian hotspots. Migrants arrived in groups of 15-20 per boat from Tunisia and in groups

<sup>39</sup> Europol information.

<sup>40</sup> Frontex, News Release: Situation at EU external borders – Illegal crossings down in August, 10 September 2020, accessible at <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/situation-at-eu-external-borders-illegal-crossings-down-in-august-3fHR48>

<sup>41</sup> Frontex, News Release: Situation at EU external borders – Illegal crossings down in August, 10 September 2020, accessible at <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/situation-at-eu-external-borders-illegal-crossings-down-in-august-3fHR48>

of 60-90 in boats from Libya. The largest groups comprised Bangladeshi and Tunisian nationals. Arrivals from Tunisia often land autonomously on Italian shores, featuring fibreglass boats instead of rubber boats.

### **Migrant smuggling in the digital environment**

Several criminal networks active along the Western Balkan routes advertise their services using a specialised social media account (group). The posts in this group include advertisements for various facilitation services, experiences and impressions of irregular migrants, photos and videos showing what happens during and after the smuggling. They are frequently advised to use instant messaging applications.

## **MORIA CAMP FIRE IN LESVOS, GREECE**

*On 8 September 2020, three separate fires broke out and destroyed most of the refugee camp at the Moria Reception and Identification Centre, located on the Greek island of Lesbos. The fire destroyed 80% of the largest refugee camp in Europe, displacing over 12 600 migrants and refugees. The UN's Refugee Agency, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), issued that no casualties were reported due to the help provided by local authorities in containing the fires. The cause of the fires is still under investigation. The camp was designed to accommodate around 3 000 migrants and refugees. However, the facility had been overcrowded for a long time due to the high number of refugees. A strict lockdown was imposed after confirming 35 positive COVID-19 cases one week before the fire broke out, forbidding entry and exit from the camp.*

*The International Organization for Migration, UNHCR, UNICEF and the European Union's Asylum Support Office (EASO) are working closely with the Greek authorities to organise the relocation of unaccompanied children and vulnerable asylum seekers to other Member States. UNICEF emphasised the need for a "swift and safe response" as the pandemic further complicates the assistance of vulnerable unaccompanied children<sup>42</sup>.*

<sup>42</sup> UN News 2020, Greece: Devastating fire compounds overcrowding and COVID-19 challenges in refugee camp [9 September 2020], accessible at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1071942>  
UN Refugee Agency 2020, UNHCR offers support as large fire destroys asylum center in Moria [9 September 2020], accessible at <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/9/5f588b0e4/unhcr-offers-support-large-fire-destroys-asylum-center-moria.html>  
EASO 2020, Fire in Moria, Lesbos [9 September 2020], accessible at <https://www.easo.europa.eu/news-events/fire-moria-lesvos>

# Terrorism

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital world has become an even more fertile ground for the spread of anti-systemic narratives. New issues emerged globally, including the COVID-19 restrictions themselves.

In the Netherlands, three suspects were arrested for setting fire to transmitter masts. Some 30 cases have been reported. The fires were probably started by anti-5G activists, stemming from a conspiracy theory that radiation impairs the immune system.

The threat from terrorism remained unchanged during the first semester of 2020 indicating that, at least in the short term, COVID-19 has had minimal impact on the terrorist threat level in Europe<sup>43</sup>. Many of the dynamics that existed prior to the outbreak of the pandemic persisted during the first months of the pandemic:

- The number of **jihadi**-inspired attacks remains high (at least six in the first half of 2020 compared to seven in entire 2019) and, in line with previous *modi operandi*, all were committed by lone actors using rudimentary weapons such as knives or cars;
- **Right-wing extremists** are trying to expand their networks and influence by increasing their online presence;
- **Left-wing extremists** are committing more (group) violence against non-civilian targets, particularly in southern Europe.

## Short-term impact

The lockdown period in many Member States, as well as the strict measures on international travel, are likely to have hampered aspiring terrorist and extremist activity, regardless of their ideology.

Restrictions on gatherings and travel will have decreased the opportunities to organise events, limited physical contact and the ability to raise funds and reduced possibilities to consume radical ideology and indoctrination, e.g. via certain venues known to facilitate groups with radical views.

## Propaganda

Before May 2020, Member States and Europol did witness an increase in propaganda published on terrorist and extremist scenes. All scenes have been publishing propaganda framing the virus and pandemic to their own ideological agenda. Much of that propaganda boasted conspiracy theories on purported sources of COVID-19, but also on alleged hidden government agendas. Jihadist terrorists tried to portray the pandemic as a punishment from God to weaken Islam's enemies and encourage their followers to take advantage of the situation to perpetrate attacks while right-wing extremists blame the emergence and spread of the pandemic on foreigners and minorities and suggest using the virus to voluntarily infect minorities. The idea that the disease is an invention by the elite to control the population has also been promoted among right-wing extremists. Activists against COVID-19 measures have likewise propagated this theory, with both groups attending protests such as those organised in Berlin in August by anti-COVID-19 protesters where right-wing extremists tried to storm the seat of the German parliament, the Reichstag building. Member States also witnessed more anti-government sentiments and propaganda, not only on the extreme left and right wing, but also with parts of the population that are not easily identified as left or right wing. Different ideas and topics seem to blend into each other, making it increasingly

43 Europol information.

difficult (for example with demonstrations) to distinguish the actual ideology behind it. After May 2020, the focus of propaganda shifted again to usual narratives or to other, new causes as COVID-19-as-a-weapon and 5G.

100 attacks. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands have been the most affected countries, followed by Ireland, Sweden and Belgium.

The analysis of current information available at Europol shows that it is unclear to which ideological scene these attacks can be attributed: right-wing extremists boast anti-5G propaganda, yet left-wing extremists have a longer 'track record' on this topic. There is a clear link to the pandemic however, as a considerable part of recent propaganda claims that the virus is spread or transmitted through 5G waves and antennas. A more diverse scene such as anti-vaccination and anti-government activists and conspiracy theorists have also noticed this. Investigations in Member States resulted in some arrests but there was no evidence of organisational links between them, nor could it be established that the suspects belonged to a specific right or left-wing scene. Similar to the propaganda related to the use of COVID-19 as a weapon, the initial surge in 5G attacks in March and April 2020 was followed by a drastic decrease in the number and frequency of attacks in May and the months thereafter.

As the ideological motivation behind the most attacks is unclear, it is also impossible to determine why the number of attacks dropped so much. One possibility is that some perpetrators stopped the attacks because of the release of lockdown measures, which happened roughly at the same time as the number of attacks dropped. Another possibility is that some of them found a different cause to fight by joining the Black Lives Matter movement<sup>44</sup>.

## **COVID-19 as a biological weapon**

During the lockdown period in March and April 2020 a considerable part of online extremist discussion focused on the use of COVID-19 as a weapon. In particular, right-wing extremist fora and propaganda addressed this issue. With the situation is still evolving and scientific research on the virus is ongoing, it is not possible at this stage to perform an accurate and reliable assessment on how realistic or feasible the discussed methods of spreading the virus are. Nevertheless, online discussions on using the virus as a weapon seem to have dropped off after an initial peak in March and April. The Black Lives Matter developments in the United States, which arose after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, could have caused this decrease as much of the COVID-19-related right-wing extremist propaganda originated in the United States.

## **5G attacks**

As COVID-19 spread throughout Europe, a relatively unknown form of violent extremism developed in the form of arson attacks against 5G antennas. Although the anti-5G protests and arson attacks were taking place long before the existence of COVID-19, March and April 2020 saw the number of arson attacks in Europe grow rapidly, totalling close to

# OUTLOOK ON CRIME AND TERRORISM IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

## Crime

The impact of the pandemic on the serious and organised crime landscape in the EU depends on a range of factors. However, two factors are most critical to the security situation in the EU.

In the short term, the return of strict lockdown measures may present a situation similar to the start of the pandemic. In this scenario, criminal activities will continue to exploit the situation and various crime schemes may become more sophisticated in order to counter the increased public awareness of crime threats during the pandemic. The use of new technologies and online activities in serious and organised crime will be further accelerated.

In the longer term, an enduring economic downturn could trigger serious and organised crime to flourish. This situation may mirror some of the developments during and after the global financial crisis and recession of 2007 and after. Criminal markets are likely to shift and criminals will adjust the *modi operandi* they employ. Economically deprived individuals might be increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by OCGs. Corruption may increase, and fraud and financial crime schemes may proliferate. Certain types of counterfeit goods will be subject to increased demand. In the context of migrant smuggling, there might be an impact on the EU as a destination, since the economic impact of the pandemic will be global. Overall, organised crime structures operating in the EU may benefit from the situation and could emerge stronger

States expect that the long-term impact of the pandemic will boost the threat level via two interrelating processes.

First is the expected rise in radicalised individuals resulting from the increase in propaganda published and the increased level of propaganda consumed by susceptible persons. Although 'venues' for radicalisation were limited during the lockdown period, it is expected that much of the consumption of propaganda and radicalisation in this period may have been accelerated as a result of vulnerable people spending more time at home on the internet and social media.

Secondly, the ensuing economic recession will lead to increased unemployment, social inequality and poverty, all strong drivers for radicalisation, regardless of the ideological scene.

The expected increase of radicalised persons in an economically unstable climate with a growing number of conspiracy theories and anti-government/anti-establishment sentiments will likely fuel the political, social and economic contrasts that already exist, further pushing extremists to their ideological fringes. At the same time, ideological scenes have in the past shown to react aggressively to opposing scenes (e.g. left-wing extremists' reaction to right-wing extremists, right-wing extremists' reaction to jihadists). Combined, this could lead to a downward spiral of polarisation and possible reactive violence. As already mentioned, followers of all ideological scenes have spent more time online during the pandemic, not only boosting and improving propaganda but also discussing and researching new targets and possible ways to commit attacks. This could also materialise in future plots that could be more sophisticated or directed at unanticipated targets.

## Terrorism

While the short-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the terrorist threat in Europe has been very limited, Europol, along with Member



## HOW COVID-19-RELATED CRIME INFECTED EUROPE DURING 2020

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