



UNIVERSITÀ
DI TRENTO

Advanced Programming of Cryptographic Methods

Project Report

IDENCA
CERTIFICATE AUTHORITY FOR IDENTITIES

Emanuele Civini, Alessia Pivotto

Academic year 2024/2025

Contents

1	Introduction	4
1.1	Key features	4
1.2	System architecture	4
1.3	Report structure	4
2	Requirements	5
2.1	Functional requirements	5
2.1.1	FR1: Certificate issuance	5
2.1.2	FR2: Certificate revocation	5
2.1.3	FR3: Certificate Revocation List (CRL) accessibility	5
2.1.4	FR4: Identity verification	6
2.1.5	FR5: Public key publishing	6
2.1.6	FR6: Certificate renewal	6
2.1.7	FR7: Cryptographic algorithm support	6
2.2	Security requirements	6
2.2.1	SR1: Certificate authenticity	7
2.2.2	SR2: Certificate validity verification	7
2.2.3	SR3: Secure key management	7
3	System architecture and certificate lifecycle	8
3.1	Source code structure	8
3.1.1	CA backend server	8
3.1.2	User interface	8
3.1.3	Database	8
3.1.4	Hardware Security Module (HSM)	8
3.2	Security-first architecture	8
3.2.1	Cryptographic isolation	8
3.2.2	Identity verification	9
3.2.3	Signed responses	9
3.2.4	Replay protection	9
3.3	Certificate lifecycle operations	9
3.3.1	Phase 1: identity commitment	9
3.3.2	Phase 2: certificate generation	9
3.3.3	Phase 3: certificate revocation	10
3.3.4	Phase 4: certificate renewal	11
3.4	Component interactions and message flows	11
3.4.1	Frontend-backend communication	11
3.4.2	HSM integration patterns	12
3.4.3	Key creation	12
3.4.4	Certificate signing	13
3.4.5	Root certificate generation	13

3.5	Signed responses	13
3.5.1	Response structure	13
3.5.2	Certificate status responses	13
3.5.3	Revocation list responses	13
3.6	Code Structure and organization	14
3.6.1	Backend service (ca/)	14
3.6.2	Frontend application (ui/)	14
3.6.3	Certificates (dev-certs/)	14
3.6.4	Deployment configuration	14
3.7	Dependencies and libraries	14
3.7.1	Backend dependencies	14
3.7.2	Frontend dependencies	15
3.7.3	Infrastructure dependencies	15
3.7.4	Security and compliance dependencies	15
4	Security considerations	16
4.1	Missing certificate extensions	16
4.2	Side channel attacks and information leakage	16
4.3	HSM as a single point of failure	16
4.4	Simplified revocation mechanism	16
4.5	Lack of post-quantum cryptography support	17
4.6	Use of custom JSON-based OCSP responses	17
4.7	Secure communication between components	17
5	Known limitations	18
5.1	Limited identity verification	18
5.2	Limited number of email addresses	18
5.3	Simplified certificates usage	18
5.4	Lack of revocation cause	18
5.5	System scalability	18
5.6	Standards compliance	19
5.7	Requiring internet access for all operations	19
5.8	Single-email address limitation	19
6	Instructions for installation and execution	20
6.1	Software prerequisites	20
6.2	Installation process	20
6.2.1	Environment setup	20
6.2.2	Configuration	20
6.2.3	Starting the CA	21
6.2.4	Service verification	21
6.3	Generating a Key Pair with OpenSSL	22
7	A practical demonstration of a certificate lifecycle	23
7.1	Home page	23
7.2	Creating a certificate	24
7.2.1	Identity commitment	24
7.2.2	Proving identity	24
7.3	Certificate management	25
7.3.1	Viewing certificates	25
7.3.2	Renewing a certificate	26
7.3.3	Revoking a certificate	26

7.4 Certificate Revocation List (CRL)	27
Bibliography	27

1 Introduction

This project implements a Certificate Authority (CA) system that manages digital certificates for secure communications. Our CA is a trusted entity that issues digital certificates to verify the identity of users and the possession of a private key. The system provides a complete solution for certificate management, including issuing new certificates, checking their validity, renewing them before expiration, and revoking them when necessary. The implementation focuses on security by using an Hardware Security Module (HSMs) to protect the CA's private key and implementing proper verification procedures. The system provides user-friendly interfaces through both API endpoints for developers and a web interface for end users.

1.1 Key features

The Certificate Authority supports the complete certificate lifecycle. For certificate issuance, the system processes certificate requests, verifies the requester's identity, and issues signed certificates. It provides certificate validation by checking if certificates are valid, not expired, and haven't been revoked.

The system allows users to renew their certificates before they expire and handles certificate revocation for compromised or no longer needed certificates, maintaining a Certificate Revocation List (CRL). Identity verification ensures that certificate requesters own the private key and control the email address associated with their request.

1.2 System architecture

The system consists of several integrated components. The backend server is a Go API that handles all certificate operations and communicates with the database and HSM. A Next.js frontend application provides an easy-to-use web interface for certificate management.

Data persistence is handled by MongoDB storage for certificate records, user commitments, and system data. Security operations are performed by an HSM that stores the CA's private key and performs cryptographic operations. An automated email service supports identity verification during certificate requests.

1.3 Report structure

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the Certificate Authority implementation. Chapter 2 presents the requirements analysis and system specifications. Chapter 3 details the system design and architecture. Chapter 4 covers implementation details and technology choices, while Chapter 5 discusses security considerations and best practices. Finally, Chapter 6 provides deployment guidance and usage instructions, and Chapter 7 gives a practical example of the CA in action.

Each chapter builds upon the previous one, providing a complete understanding of the Certificate Authority from idea to deployment.

2 Requirements

This chapter defines the requirements for our Certificate Authority, categorized into functional and security requirements. Each requirement focuses on what the system must accomplish rather than implementation details.

2.1 Functional requirements

The functional requirements define the core capabilities that the Certificate Authority must provide to fulfill its role.

2.1.1 FR1: Certificate issuance

The CA must generate and issue digital certificates after verifying the identity of the certificate requester. This includes:

- Receiving and validating certificate requests
- Verifying the authenticity of certificate requests
- Generating X.509 compliant certificates

Certificate issuance is the foundation of a certificate authority, requiring identity verification to prevent unauthorized issuance.

2.1.2 FR2: Certificate revocation

Users must be able to request revocation of their certificates at any time, particularly when suspecting private key compromise. The system shall:

- Accept authenticated revocation requests from certificate holders
- Verify proof of private key ownership before processing revocation
- Immediately update the certificate status upon successful verification

This capability ensures certificate holders maintain control over their digital identities and can respond quickly to security incidents.

2.1.3 FR3: Certificate Revocation List (CRL) accessibility

The CA must maintain and publish a Certificate Revocation List that allows anyone to verify certificate status. Requirements include:

- Maintaining an up-to-date list of all revoked certificates
- Providing public access to CRL information
- Digitally signing the CRL to ensure authenticity

Public CRL access enables relying parties to perform proper certificate validation.

2.1.4 FR4: Identity verification

The CA must verify both email authenticity and private key ownership for certificate applicants. This simplified verification process includes:

- Email verification through challenge-response mechanisms
- Private key ownership verification via cryptographic challenges

This approach provides reasonable assurance that certificate requests come from legitimate key-holders controlling the specified email addresses.

2.1.5 FR5: Public key publishing

The CA must publish issued certificates and its own public key to enable certificate validation. This requires:

- Maintaining a publicly accessible certificate repository
- Publishing the CA's public key as a trust anchor
- Providing standard interfaces for certificate retrieval

Public availability of the CA public key enables the complete certificate validation process for all relying parties.

2.1.6 FR6: Certificate renewal

The CA must support certificate renewal before expiration to ensure service continuity. The renewal process shall:

- Verify the current certificate has not been revoked
- Perform cryptographic verifications equivalent to initial issuance
- Ensure proper timing to prevent service interruptions

Renewal maintains trust relationships beyond individual certificate lifespans while preserving security through re-verification.

2.1.7 FR7: Cryptographic algorithm support

The CA must support both RSA and ECDSA cryptographic algorithms to ensure broad compatibility:

- RSA support with minimum 2048-bit key sizes
- ECDSA support using the P-256 curve
- Key generation, signing, and verification for both algorithms

Multi-algorithm support accommodates diverse client requirements and provides flexibility for different security and performance needs.

2.2 Security requirements

Security requirements define the protective measures the Certificate Authority must maintain to ensure service integrity, confidentiality, and availability.

2.2.1 SR1: Certificate authenticity

Certificates containing valid CA signatures must be considered authentic and trustworthy. This requires:

- Cryptographically strong signature algorithms
- Secure certificate signing procedures
- Readily available signature verification mechanisms

Certificate authenticity forms the foundation of PKI trust, enabling relying parties to confidently validate certificate legitimacy.

2.2.2 SR2: Certificate validity verification

Expired certificates and those appearing in the CRL must be considered invalid regardless of signature authenticity. Validation must include:

- Expiration date verification for temporal validity
- CRL consultation for revocation status
- Clear rejection of certificates failing either test

Comprehensive validity checking prevents acceptance of certificates that may pose security risks despite technical authenticity.

2.2.3 SR3: Secure key management

The CA private key must be protected using Hardware Security Modules (HSMs) with the following protections:

- Tamper-resistant hardware storage
- Protection against unauthorized access and extraction
- All signing operations performed within the HSM boundary

HSM protection ensures the CA private key, the most critical PKI asset, remains secure against various attack vectors.

These requirements collectively define the functional capabilities and security posture necessary for effective and secure Certificate Authority operations.

3 System architecture and certificate lifecycle

This chapter presents the architectural design decisions and operational flows of the Certificate Authority. The focus is on explaining how the various components interact throughout the complete certificate lifecycle, from initial identity commitment to certificate issuance, renewal, and revocation.

3.1 Source code structure

The system consists of four primary components, each serving a specific role in the certificate lifecycle:

3.1.1 CA backend server

The core service responsible for all cryptographic operations and certificate lifecycle management. Go was selected for its strong and complete cryptographic standard library, excellent performance characteristics and simplicity of development.

3.1.2 User interface

A React-based frontend providing certificate management capabilities. As this UI is intended to be used only for demo purposes, Next.js was chosen for its ease of use, built-in routing and vast ecosystem of libraries.

3.1.3 Database

Persistent storage for certificates and revocation lists. We decided to use MongoDB for its document-oriented structure, which allows flexible storage and suits well with the certificate and metadata requirements. It also provides indexing capabilities for efficient querying and retrieval of certificate data.

3.1.4 Hardware Security Module (HSM)

We decided to use an HSM, in particular an emulated version of AWS KMS, to ensure that all CA cryptographic operations requiring its private key occur within FIPS 140-2 Level 3 certified hardware. This design decision eliminates the risk of private key exposure while providing enterprise-grade security and audit capabilities.

3.2 Security-first architecture

The architecture implements security principles through multiple layers of protection.

3.2.1 Cryptographic isolation

The CA's root private key never exists outside the HSM boundary. All signing operations are performed through secure API calls to the HSM, ensuring the key material remains protected even if other system components are compromised.

3.2.2 Identity verification

A two-step identity verification process combines email ownership verification with cryptographic proof of private key possession. This dual verification ensures only legitimate key owners can obtain certificates.

3.2.3 Signed responses

Critical CA responses are cryptographically signed to ensure integrity and authenticity. This prevents response tampering and provides non-repudiation for all CA operations.

3.2.4 Replay protection

Nonce-based replay protection mechanisms prevent malicious reuse of previously captured requests, protecting against replay attacks.

3.3 Certificate lifecycle operations

This section details the complete certificate lifecycle, explaining the message flows, cryptographic operations, and component interactions for each phase.

3.3.1 Phase 1: identity commitment

The certificate issuance process begins with an identity commitment phase that establishes and verifies user identity through a multi-step protocol.

Client-side operations

The user commits their identity by sending their public key, PEM-encoded, along with their email address.

CA backend processing

When the CA backend receives the commitment request at the ‘/v1/identity’ endpoint, it performs comprehensive validation. The system validates the email address format using standard RFC 5322 compliance checking. The public key undergoes cryptographic validation to ensure it is valid and properly formatted.

Upon successful validation, the CA generates a unique challenge string and creates an identity commitment record in the database. This record contains the user’s email, public key in DER format, challenge string and an expiration timestamp. The CA reserves a unique serial number for the eventual certificate, ensuring no conflicts occur during concurrent requests. An identity commitment is valid for the next 24 hours, after which it expires and must be re-committed. In addition, it’s not possible to verify the same identity twice.

Email verification

The identity verification process leverages email ownership as proof of identity. The CA’s email service sends the challenge string, encoded in base 64, to the user’s provided email address using a secure email delivery service. This email-based verification serves dual purposes: it confirms the user has access to the claimed email address and provides the challenge string needed for the subsequent cryptographic proof phase.

3.3.2 Phase 2: certificate generation

The certificate generation phase requires cryptographic proof of private key ownership before the CA will issue a certificate.

Challenge response

After receiving the challenge via email, the user returns to the certificate interface and provides the challenge string. The client application retrieves the challenge and prompts the user to sign it using their private key. The signing operation occurs entirely within the browser using the Web Crypto API. The client signs the raw challenge bytes using the private key corresponding to the public key submitted during commitment. This creates a digital signature that proves the user possesses the private key without exposing it.

CA verification and certificate issuance

The CA receives the challenge response containing the challenge string and the cryptographic signature. The system performs several critical verification steps. First, the CA retrieves the identity commitment record using the provided challenge. It verifies the commitment hasn't expired and hasn't been previously used, preventing replay attacks and ensuring temporal validity. Next, the CA performs signature verification using the public key from the commitment record. This cryptographic verification proves the requester possesses the corresponding private key. The verification process uses the appropriate algorithm (ECDSA or RSA) based on the committed key type.

Upon successful verification, the CA initiates certificate generation. The system constructs an X.509 certificate containing the user's public key, email address as the subject, and the reserved serial number. The certificate includes standard extensions such as key usage, basic constraints, and subject alternative names.

HSM-Based certificate signing

The certificate signing operation represents the most security-critical component of the entire system. The CA never signs certificates using local private keys; instead, all signing operations occur within the Hardware Security Module. The CA formats the certificate structure and sends it to the HSM through the AWS KMS API. The HSM performs the cryptographic signing operation using the CA's root private key, which never leaves the secure hardware boundary. This approach ensures the highest level of security for the CA's signing operations. The HSM returns the signature, which the CA combines with the certificate data to produce the final signed X.509 certificate. The completed certificate is returned to the client in PEM format, ready for immediate use.

3.3.3 Phase 3: certificate revocation

Certificate revocation enables certificate owners to invalidate their certificates before their natural expiration, essential for handling key compromise or changing security requirements.

Revocation request authentication

The revocation process begins when a certificate owner accesses the revocation interface and provides their certificate's serial number. The system requires cryptographic proof that the requester owns the certificate's corresponding private key. The client constructs a revocation message in the format "Revoke: <serial number>" where the serial number matches the certificate being revoked. The user signs this message using their private key, creating a revocation signature that proves their authority to revoke the certificate. A nonce is not required in this case because the operation can be performed only once per certificate.

CA revocation processing

The CA receives the revocation request containing the serial number and signature. The system retrieves the original identity commitment record associated with the serial number to obtain the corresponding public key. The CA verifies the revocation signature against the constructed

message "Revoke: <serial number>" using the certificate's public key. This verification ensures only the legitimate certificate owner can initiate revocation.

Upon successful verification, the CA updates the certificate record in the database, marking it as revoked with the current timestamp. The revoked certificate is immediately added to the Certificate Revocation List (CRL), making the revocation status publicly available through the CRL endpoint.

3.3.4 Phase 4: certificate renewal

Certificate renewal allows users to extend their certificate validity period without generating new key pairs, maintaining continuity while refreshing the certificate's temporal validity.

Renewal request process

The renewal process requires the certificate owner to prove continued possession of the private key. The client constructs a renewal message in the format "Renew: <serial number> Nonce: <random nonce>" and signs it using the certificate's private key. This signature proves the requester still controls the private key associated with the certificate, ensuring only legitimate certificate owners can renew their certificates. To avoid replay attacks, the renewal message includes a random nonce that must be unique for each renewal request. Subsequent requests for the same certificate using the same nonce will be rejected by the CA.

CA renewal validation and processing

The CA performs several validation steps before processing renewal requests. First, the system verifies the certificate exists and hasn't been revoked. It confirms the certificate hasn't expired, as expired certificates cannot be renewed. Then, the CA validates the renewal signature against the message "Renew: <serial number> Nonce: <provided nonce>" using the committed public key. Upon successful validation, the CA extends the certificate's validity period (typically by one year) and generates a new certificate with the updated expiration date. It also keeps track of the used nonces for this certificate to prevent replay attacks. The renewed certificate maintains the same serial number and subject information while reflecting the extended validity period.

HSM integration in renewal

Similar to initial certificate issuance, the renewal process involves HSM-based signing operations. The CA constructs the renewed certificate structure and submits it to the HSM for signing using the root private key. This ensures renewed certificates maintain the same level of cryptographic integrity as originally issued certificates, with all signing operations occurring within the secure hardware boundary.

3.4 Component interactions and message flows

This section provides detailed analysis of how system components communicate during certificate operations, emphasizing the role of the HSM and signed responses.

3.4.1 Frontend-backend communication

The web interface communicates with the CA backend through RESTful API endpoints, with each operation following specific message flow patterns. The process starts with the identity commitment flow, where the frontend sends a POST request to '/v1/identity' containing the user's email and public key in PEM format. The backend responds with an HTTP 200 status upon successful commitment creation, triggering the email verification process. Then, once the user has received the challenge via email and wrote it into the 'Sign' section together with the

associate private key, the frontend computes the required signature and submits a POST request to ‘/v1/certificate’ with the challenge string and signature. The backend validates the signature and returns the signed certificate in PEM format. When a user wants to revoke a certificate,

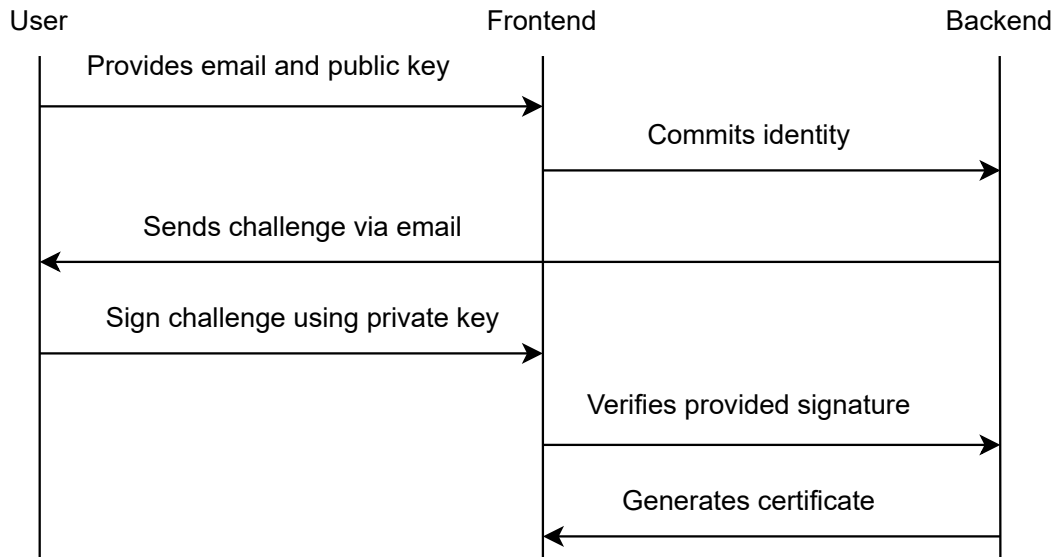


Figure 3.1: Identity commitment and certificate generation flow

the frontend sends a POST request to ‘/v1/certificate/revoke’ containing the serial number of the certificate and the revocation signature. The backend validates the signature and confirms revocation through a JSON response.

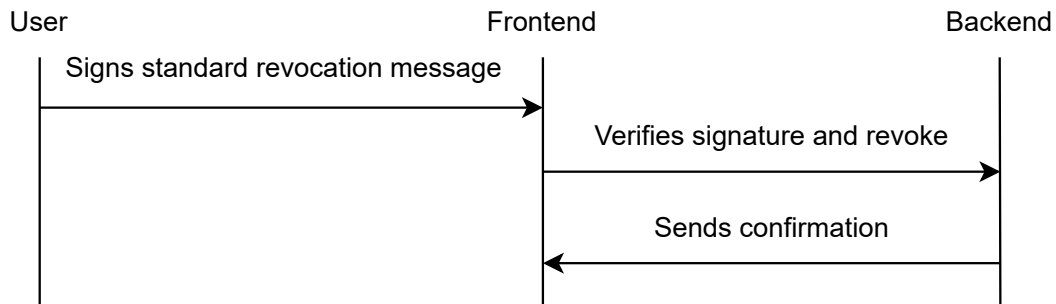


Figure 3.2: Certificate revocation flow

Similarly, when a user wants to renew a certificate, the frontend sends a POST request to ‘/v1/certificate/renew’ containing renewal signatures and the serial number of the certificate. Successful renewal returns both confirmation and the renewed certificate.

3.4.2 HSM integration patterns

The HSM integration follows secure communication patterns that ensure private key material never leaves the secure boundary:

3.4.3 Key creation

During system initialization, the CA creates a root key within the HSM using the AWS KMS CreateKey API. The key specification uses ECC NIST P-256 for its security and performance.

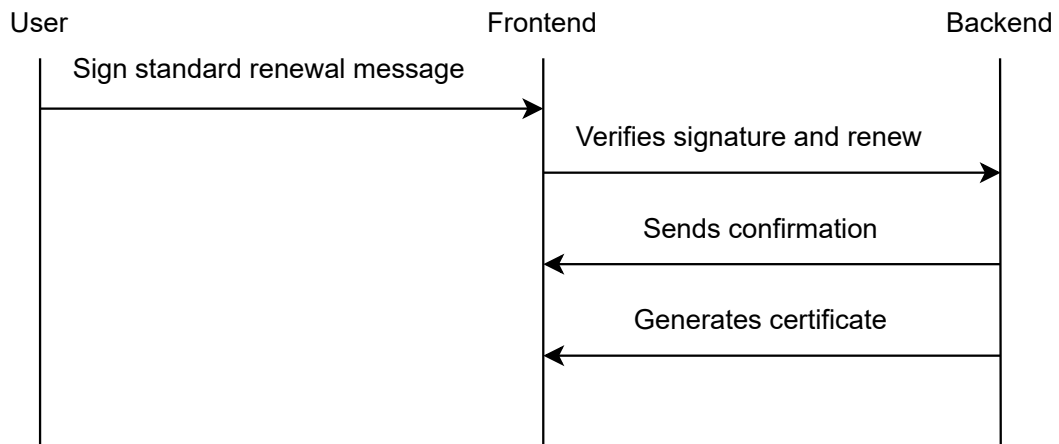


Figure 3.3: Certificate renewal flow

The HSM generates the key pair entirely within secure hardware, returning only the key identifier.

3.4.4 Certificate signing

For each certificate signing operation, the CA constructs the certificate structure locally and sends it to the HSM via the KMS Sign API. The HSM performs the cryptographic signature using the stored private key and returns only the signature bytes. This pattern ensures the private key never exists outside the HSM boundary.

3.4.5 Root certificate generation

The system generates the CA's root certificate by creating the certificate structure and requesting HSM signing. The resulting self-signed root certificate establishes the trust anchor for all issued certificates.

3.5 Signed responses

To ensure response integrity and prevent tampering, the system implements OCSP-like signed responses for critical operations:

3.5.1 Response structure

Each signed response contains response data, signature algorithm identifier, Base64-encoded signature, and optional signing certificate chain. The response data includes nonces for replay protection and timestamps for freshness validation.

3.5.2 Certificate status responses

When clients query certificate status, the CA constructs a response containing the serial number, status (good/revoked/unknown), update timestamps, and revocation details if applicable. The complete response is signed using the HSM to ensure authenticity.

3.5.3 Revocation list responses

Certificate Revocation List queries return signed responses containing the list of revoked certificates with pagination support. Each response includes update timestamps and replay protection nonces.

3.6 Code Structure and organization

The project follows a monorepo structure with clear separation between different services and components, enabling independent development and deployment while maintaining code organization.

3.6.1 Backend service (ca/)

This directory contains the complete Go-based Certificate Authority server implementation. This module includes the REST API server, HSM integration, database operations, and email services. The structure follows Go's standard project layout with clear separation between commands, internal packages, and configuration. It is organized as follows:

- **cmd/**: Contains the main application entry point and service initialization logic.
- **internal/**: Core business logic modules including configuration, database operations, HSM integration, email services, and HTTP server implementation.
- **handler/**: RESTful API endpoint implementations organized by functionality (e.g., certificate operations, health monitoring).

3.6.2 Frontend application (ui/)

This directory contains the Next.js-based web interface providing user-facing certificate management capabilities. The structure follows Next.js App Router conventions with organized pages, components, and utility functions for cryptographic operations. In particular:

- **app/**: Contains the main application entry point, routing, and layout definitions. The directory structure follows Next.js conventions with pages organized by functionality.
- **components/**: Reusable UI components such as forms, buttons, and modals used across different pages.
- **utils/**: Utility functions for cryptographic operations, API communication, and data formatting.

3.6.3 Certificates (dev-certs/)

This directory, initially empty, contains the root certificate generated by the CA.

3.6.4 Deployment configuration

In the root directory of the project there are files including Docker Compose orchestration, MongoDB configuration, and environment setup scripts for containerized deployment.

3.7 Dependencies and libraries

The system uses external dependencies to provide robust functionality while minimizing security risks and maintaining code quality.

3.7.1 Backend dependencies

Go 1.21+ provides all the packages required for cryptographic operations, thanks to its standard library including `crypto/x509`, `crypto/rsa`, `crypto/ecdsa`, but also `net/http` for API server functionality. To integrate MongoDB, we decided to use the official MongoDB Go driver (go.mongodb.org/mongo-driver/v2) as it provides secure and comprehensive access to MongoDB features, including document-oriented data storage, indexing, and querying capabilities. For the HSM, we decided to opt for the official AWS SDK Go library (github.com/aws/aws-sdk-go-v2) as it provides programmatic access to AWS KMS for secure key management and signing operations. Lastly, we opted for Resend Go package as it is the official client of the email delivery service we decided to use.

3.7.2 Frontend dependencies

At the core we decided to use Next.js 15 with React 19 as it provides easy routing and lots of UI packages with pre-built components, which allowed us to speed up the development process. We opted for Web Crypto API (browser native) to handle client-side cryptographic operations without requiring external libraries.

3.7.3 Infrastructure dependencies

We opted for Docker and Docker Compose as they allow for easy and consistent deployment environments with isolated service containers. For the database, as we wanted a document-based one, we decided to use MongoDB since we were already familiar with it and it provides document-oriented data storage with indexing, and querying capabilities for scalable management. For the HSM, the only free solution we found was LocalStack KMS, which provides a local HSM emulation for development and testing environments without requiring cloud resources, but emulating the AWS KMS API.

3.7.4 Security and compliance dependencies

All selected dependencies prioritize security and maintain active development with regular security updates. The minimal dependency approach reduces attack surface while leveraging proven, well-maintained libraries from reputable sources. Cryptographic operations rely primarily on standard library implementations and certified hardware modules rather than third-party cryptographic libraries, ensuring compliance with security standards and reducing implementation risks.

4 Security considerations

This chapter critically examines the security architecture of the implemented Certificate Authority system, focusing on identifying fundamental vulnerabilities and proposing concrete pathways for improvement.

4.1 Missing certificate extensions

The certificate generation process lacks Authority Key Identifier and Subject Key Identifier extensions, which may cause problems for certificate chain validation. The absence of Certificate Policies extensions prevents policy-based validation required in production environments. This issue can be addressed by fully supporting RFC 5280 [1] compliance, including configurable policy engines, name constraints support, and complete certificate path validation logic.

4.2 Side channel attacks and information leakage

While Go's crypto library provides constant-time operations for most of its primitives, the CA relies on database queries and nonce lookup mechanisms that can leak information through timing patterns. Database queries reveal certificate existence through timing patterns, while nonce lookup mechanisms use standard hash operations with predictable performance characteristics. Resolution requires implementing constant-time operations and normalizing response timing, eventually through artificial delays.

4.3 HSM as a single point of failure

The current architecture relies on a single HSM instance for all cryptographic operations. This design creates a single point of failure for the entire CA, making it inoperable if the HSM becomes unavailable due to hardware failure, network connectivity issues, or maintenance requirements. Furthermore, the HSM represents a single point of compromise where an attacker who gains access to the HSM could potentially sign malicious certificates, extract private key material, or manipulate the cryptographic operations. This issue can be addressed by requiring HSM redundancy through clustered HSM deployments, threshold cryptography that distributes signing operations across multiple HSMs, automated failover mechanisms that maintain service continuity during HSM maintenance or failure, and comprehensive HSM monitoring with real-time availability checking.

4.4 Simplified revocation mechanism

The revocation mechanism lacks reason codes that specify the cause of the revocation events, limiting incident response capabilities. Because of the same reason, the system provides no mechanism for CA-initiated revocation, creating problems when certificates need revocation due to external threats, but certificate holders are unavailable. This problem can be addressed by extending the revocation mechanism to include reason codes that specify the cause of the revocation events, and by implementing a mechanism for the CA to initiate revocation when necessary. This would allow the CA to revoke certificates in response to external threats, even when certificate holders are unavailable. To prevent censorship, the reason codes should be included in the OCSP responses,

allowing the relying parties to understand the reason for the revocation without trusting blindly the CA.

4.5 Lack of post-quantum cryptography support

The current implementation lacks post-quantum cryptography support, creating a significant long-term security vulnerability as quantum computing technology advances. The system relies entirely on ECDSA-SHA256, which will become vulnerable as quantum computers become more powerful. While we initially thought about adding support for post-quantum algorithms, we were limited by the ones supported by *LocalStack KMS*, an emulated version of AWS KMS that provides a simplified HSM capabilities for development purposes. Unlike production AWS KMS, *LocalStack KMS* does not support post-quantum algorithms such as CRYSTALS-Dilithium, preventing the implementation of quantum-resistant cryptography within our development environment. Because of this, the CA cannot generate hybrid certificates that provide both current ECDSA compatibility and quantum resistance. To address this issue, it is enough to use a production HSM that supports post-quantum algorithms, such as AWS KMS, but unfortunately there is no free plan to use it.

4.6 Use of custom JSON-based OCSF responses

The implementation uses custom JSON-based response formats due to simplicity and speed of development for this exam. These responses try to emulate the ones in RFC 6960 [2], implementing a subset of all specified cases due to time constraints. Because of this, a significant future improvement would be to use ASN.1 OCSF responses, making this implementation more compatible with the already existing PKI ecosystem. Considering that the core functionalities of OCSF are already implemented, this change should not require significant effort.

4.7 Secure communication between components

The current implementation is using HTTP protocol for communications between components, which is not secure. This choice has been taken as usually, in a production environment, such components are never accessible from the internet directly, but only through a reverse proxy that provides TLS termination. In particular, the reverse proxy is supposed to be configured to make only the UI and the CA server accessible to the public, while the HSM and the database are placed inside a private network, accessible only from the CA server. As this is not a functionality of the project itself, and requires a significant effort to implement, we have decided to not implement it and focus on the core functionalities of the CA.

5 Known limitations

Despite the project aimed at creating a certificate authority capable of issuing X.509 certificates able to verify the identity of the certificate holder, we had to make some compromises due to time constraints, high cost of services and practicality of the implementation.

5.1 Limited identity verification

The current implementation uses a simplified identity verification process that only checks email ownership and private key possession, thus lacking a proper identity validation processes.

5.2 Limited number of email addresses

Due to the use of Resend.com for sending emails, the system is limited to a single email address for sending challenge emails. This is because the free plan of Resend.com only allows sending emails from their email address *onboarding@resend.com* and to the email address associated to the Resend.com account. It is possible to use custom domains to remove this limitation, but we did not find any free solution.

5.3 Simplified certificates usage

The system implements basic X.509 certificate profiles without the full range of extensions and policies, for example:

- Authority Information Access (AIA) extensions
- Subject Alternative Names (SAN) for multiple identities

5.4 Lack of revocation cause

While the CA implements a revocation mechanism to revoke certificates, it does not include reason codes that specify the cause of the revocation events. As a consequence, the system itself is not able to revoke certificate on behalf of the certificate holder.

5.5 System scalability

The system is implemented as a single-instance application without considering scaling solutions, which would improve availability and overall security. In particular, a significant improvement would be to use a clustered HSM deployment, which would allow the CA to continue operating even if one of the HSMs fails or is under maintenance, and to use threshold cryptography, which would allow the CA to distribute the signing operations across multiple HSMs.

5.6 Standards compliance

While the system implements main operations for managing X.509 standards, it lacks full compliance with advanced PKI standards, in particular tries replicate RFC 5280 and RFC 6960 in a simplified way.

5.7 Requiring internet access for all operations

As our CA is implemented to be real-time, it does provide certificate revocation list files. This means that it is not possible to verify the status of a certificate without access to the internet, in contrast to what happens within RFC 5280, which allows to download the CRL file beforehand and verify the status of a certificate without requiring internet access, since it is able to cache CRL files and use them for offline verification.

5.8 Single-email address limitation

As domain providers always require a paid plan to create custom email addresses, the system is limited to using a single email address for sending emails, which is the default one provided by Resend.com, and is able to send challenge emails only to the address that is associated to the Resend.com account.

6 Instructions for installation and execution

This chapter provides instructions for installing, configuring, and executing the Certificate Authority. These instructions are designed to enable readers to successfully deploy and test the system in their own environments.

6.1 Software prerequisites

The following software must be installed on the target system:

Required software:

- **Operating System:** Linux, macOS, or Windows with WSL2 (tested on Linux)
- **Docker:** Version 28.0 or higher (tested with 28.3)
- **Docker Compose:** Version 2.37 or higher (tested with 2.37.3)
- **Git:** Version 2
- **Firefox:** Version 133 or higher (for the web interface, other browsers may not work correctly)

6.2 Installation process

6.2.1 Environment setup

There are two ways to set up the project: via git or by downloading the zip archive.

```
# 1) Verify Docker and Docker Compose are installed
```

```
$ docker --version
```

```
Docker version 28.3.0, build 38b7060a21
```

```
$ docker compose version
```

```
Docker Compose version 2.37.3
```

```
# 2.a) (Git approach) Clone the repository
```

```
$ git clone https://github.com/ecivini/advanced-programming-of-cryptographic-methods.git
```

```
# 2.b) (Zip approach) Download and unzip the project archive
```

```
$ unzip apocm.zip
```

```
# 3) Move to the project directory
```

```
$ cd advanced-programming-of-cryptographic-methods
```

6.2.2 Configuration

If you have downloaded the project as a zip archive, you will find a `.env` already populated with the necessary configuration values. On the other hand, if you have set up the environment using

the git approach, you need to create a new `.env` file in the project root directory with the following configuration:

```
# MongoDB Configuration
MONGO_USERNAME=camanager
MONGO_PASSWORD=<choose a safe password>

# AWS/HSM Configuration
AWS_REGION=eu-west-1
AWS_ACCESS_KEY_ID=111122223333
AWS_SECRET_ACCESS_KEY=aaaabbbb11111

# Email Service Configuration (Resend.com)
RESEND_API_KEY=<copy your API key from Resend.com>
RESEND_FROM=onboarding@resend.dev
```

As the CA is using an emulated version of AWS KMS, the `AWS_ACCESS_KEY_ID` and `AWS_SECRET_ACCESS_KEY` can be set to the proposed test values which emulates real ones. In addition, as the free plan of Resend.com allows sending emails only to a single email address, and there are no free domain providers, `RESEND_FROM` must be set to the default email address provided by Resend.com.

6.2.3 Starting the CA

Initial startup:

```
# Build and start all services
docker compose up --build
```

During the first startup, the system automatically:

1. Creates a new root ECDSA key pair in the HSM using curve P256
2. Generates the root certificate for the CA
3. Initializes the database schema
4. Sets up necessary indexes

After that, and in any execution, the system will start the following services:

- **MongoDB:** Database on port 27017
- **Local KMS:** HSM on port 8080
- **Backend:** CA server on port 5000
- **Frontend:** Web interface on port 3000

6.2.4 Service verification

Health check endpoints:

```
# Backend health check
curl http://localhost:5000/v1/health
```

```
# Frontend accessibility
curl http://localhost:3000
```

6.3 Generating a Key Pair with OpenSSL

To use the system, users must generate a cryptographic key pair. The private key should be kept secure, while the public key can be shared with others. OpenSSL provides a straightforward way to generate keys from the command line. Users can choose among the following algorithms:

- **RSA 2048-bit**

```
openssl genpkey -algorithm RSA -out private_key.pem -pkeyopt rsa_keygen_bits:2048
```

- **RSA 4096-bit**

```
openssl genpkey -algorithm RSA -out private_key.pem -pkeyopt rsa_keygen_bits:4096
```

- **ECDSA with P-256 curve**

```
openssl ecparam -name prime256v1 -genkey -noout -out private_key.pem
```

After generating the private key, the corresponding public key can be extracted with:

```
openssl pkey -in private_key.pem -pubout -out public_key.pem
```

Make sure to store `private_key.pem` securely, as it grants access to all operations requiring your identity.

7 A practical demonstration of a certificate lifecycle

This chapter provides a simple guide for users on how to interact with the User Interface (UI) of the Identity Certificate Authority (IdenCA) system. The UI is designed to be intuitively allow users to perform essential operations. It's important to note that all cryptographic operations requiring the use of the user's private key are handled in the browser, so it never leaves the user's device.

7.1 Home page

The Home Page serves as the starting point for interacting with the CA and is designed to show users the public key of the Certificate Authority (CA) and provide access to various functionalities.

On this page, users can:

- View the Certificate Authority's public key.
- Download the public key for use in their applications.
- Copy the public key to their clipboard for easy access.
- Navigate to other important sections of the CA system.

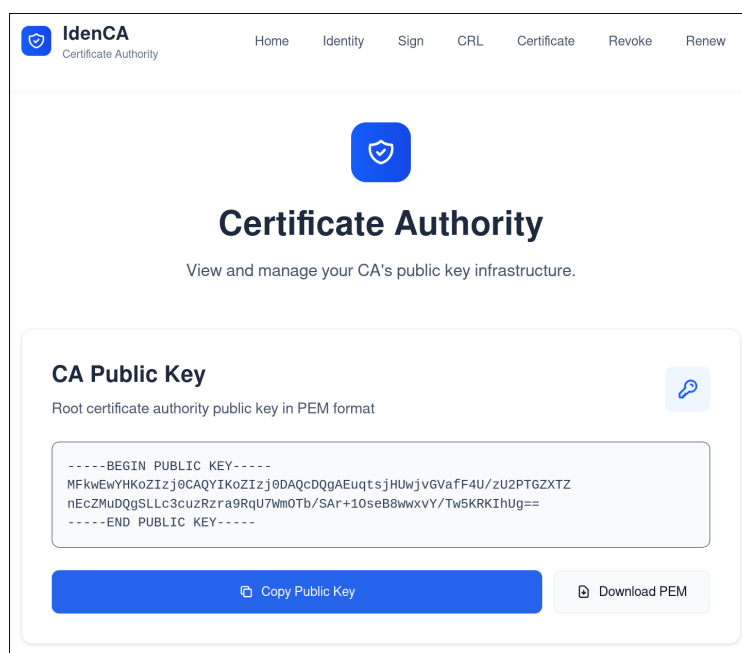


Figure 7.1: Certificate Authority home page

7.2 Creating a certificate

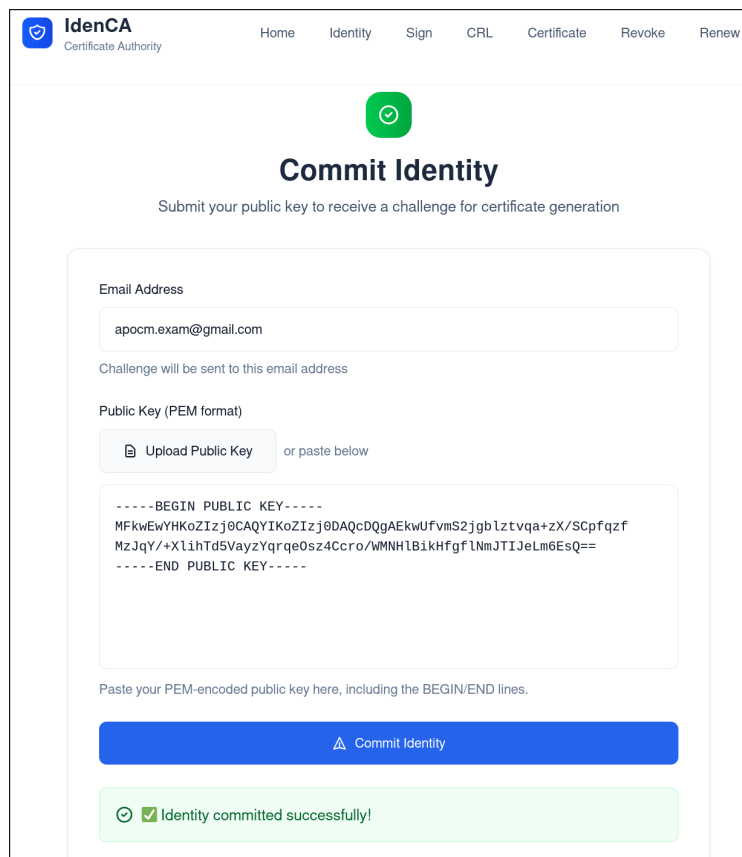
To create a certificate, users must follow a series of steps that involve providing necessary information and completing a verification process.

7.2.1 Identity commitment

To begin the certificate request process users must first commit their identity:

- Navigate to the "Identity" section.
- Enter email address in the designed field.
- Upload public key.
- Click the "Commit Identity" button to submit the request.

These steps register the user's identity with the CA and sends the verification challenge that must be signed in the next steps with the private key associated with the public key uploaded.



The screenshot shows the IdenCA 'Commit Identity' page. The header includes the IdenCA logo and navigation links: Home, Identity, Sign, CRL, Certificate, Revoke, and Renew. The main heading is 'Commit Identity' with a subtext: 'Submit your public key to receive a challenge for certificate generation'. The form contains an 'Email Address' field with the value 'apocm.exam@gmail.com' and a note 'Challenge will be sent to this email address'. Below this is a 'Public Key (PEM format)' section with an 'Upload Public Key' button and the text 'or paste below'. A text area contains a sample PEM public key: '-----BEGIN PUBLIC KEY-----\nMFkwEwYHKoZIzj0CAQYIKoZIzj0DAQcDQgAEkwUfvms2jgblztvqa+zX/SCpfqzf\nMzJqY/+XlihTd5VayzYqrqe0sz4Ccro/wMNHlBikHfgfLnMjTlJeLm6EsQ==\n-----END PUBLIC KEY-----'. Below the text area is a note: 'Paste your PEM-encoded public key here, including the BEGIN/END lines.' A blue 'Commit Identity' button is at the bottom of the form. A green success message at the bottom of the page reads: 'Identity committed successfully!'.

Figure 7.2: Identity commitment page

7.2.2 Proving identity

Once the identity commitment is created, users must copy the challenge sent by the CA to the provided email address and sign it with their private key:

- Navigate to the "Sign" section.
- Paste the challenge received from the CA into the designated field.
- Sign the challenge using the private key associated with the public key uploaded during the identity commitment. This private key never leaves the browser.

- Click the "Sign & Request Certificate" button to submit the signed challenge.

If the process is successful, the new certificate will be displayed on the screen and can be downloaded for use.

The screenshot shows the IdenCA 'Sign Certificate' page. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: Home, Identity, Sign, CRL, Certificate, Revoke, and Renew. The main heading is 'Sign Certificate' with a subtext: 'Use your private key to sign the challenge and obtain your certificate'. Below this, there's a 'Challenge (Base64)' field containing a long Base64 string. A note says 'Paste the base64-encoded challenge you received via email'. Then, there's a 'Private Key (PEM format)' section with an 'Upload Private Key' button and a text area for pasting the key. The key content is a PEM block starting with '-----BEGIN EC PRIVATE KEY-----'. Below the key input, a note states: 'Your private key (PKCS#8, PKCS#1, or SEC1 format). Supports RSA and ECDSA keys.' A large blue button labeled 'Sign & Request Certificate' is present. Below it, a green success message says 'Certificate generated successfully!'. At the bottom, there's a 'Your Certificate' section with 'Copy' and 'Download' buttons. The certificate content is a PEM block starting with '-----BEGIN CERTIFICATE-----'.

Figure 7.3: Identity proving and certificate generation flow

7.3 Certificate management

7.3.1 Viewing certificates

To view the details of a certificate, users can navigate to the "Certificate" section. Here, they can:

- Upload a certificate.
- View the certificate's details, including its validity period, public key, and associated identity.

- If the certificate is valid and not expired, there will be two buttons:
 - **Revoke Certificate:** To initiate the revocation process.
 - **Renew Certificate:** To request a renewal of the certificate.

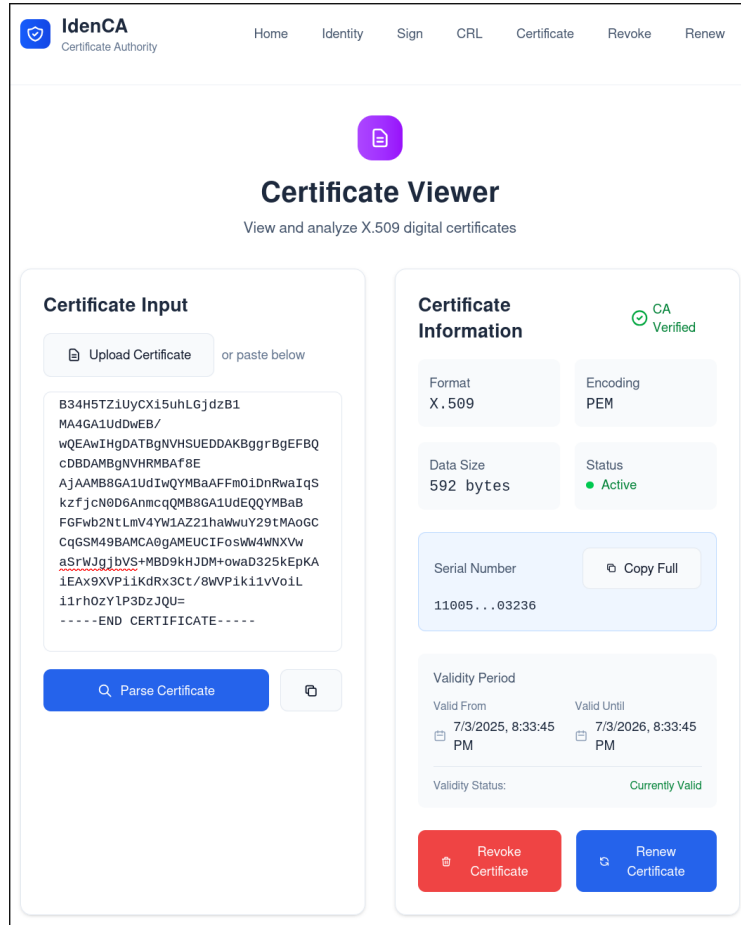


Figure 7.4: Certificate view of a valid certificate

7.3.2 Renewing a certificate

Renewing a certificate requires the certificate's serial number and the private key associated with the certificate. Users can renew a certificate by:

- Navigating to the "Renew" section.
- Entering the certificate's serial number and uploading the private key. A nonce is automatically generated.
- Clicking the "Sign Message & Renew Certificate" button to submit the renewal request.

Alternatively, users can renew a certificate directly from the "Certificate" section by clicking the "Renew" button after viewing the certificate details. In this case, the serial number will be automatically filled in.

7.3.3 Revoking a certificate

For revoking a certificate, users need the certificate's serial number and the private key associated to the certificate. There are two ways to revoke a certificate:

IdenCA
Certificate Authority

Home Identity Sign CRL Certificate Revoke Renew

Renew Certificate
Sign a message to renew a certificate from the Certificate Authority

[Back to Certificates](#)

Certificate Serial Number

1100555067462516991865511586883509997628574797975920361667111038279273367032

Enter the full serial number of the certificate you want to renew.

Auto-generated Message to Sign

Renew: 110055506746251699186551158688350999762857479797592036166711103827927336703236 Nonce: 1357694759

This message will be signed with your private key to authorize the renewal.

Private Key (PEM format)

[Upload Private Key](#) or paste below

```
-----BEGIN EC PRIVATE KEY-----
MHcCAQEEILRF1cEL18gJ6VSTJWm9D0oFEQUAeLFWGAz8PgnPrPhoAoGCCqGSM49
AwEHoUQDQgAEKwUfVmsS2JgbLztvqa+zX/ScpfqzFMzJqY/+xLiHtd5VayzYqrqe0
sz4Ccro/WMMH1B1kHfgfLnmJTJIJeLm6ESQ==
-----END EC PRIVATE KEY-----
```

Your private key (PKCS#8, PKCS#1, or SEC1 format). Supports RSA and ECDSA keys.

[Sign Message & Renew Certificate](#)

Figure 7.5: Certificate renewal page

- Navigate to the "Revoke" section.
- Enter the certificate's serial number and upload the private key.
- Click the "Sign Message & Revoke Certificate" button to submit the revocation request.

Alternatively, users can revoke a certificate directly from the "Certificate" section by clicking the "Revoke" button after viewing the certificate details. In this case, the serial number will be automatically filled in.

7.4 Certificate Revocation List (CRL)

Visit the "CRL" section to view the Certificate Revocation List. This list contains all certificates that have been revoked by the CA.

This guide covers the basic functionalities of the UI. For advanced features or troubleshooting, refer to the system documentation or contact the administrator.

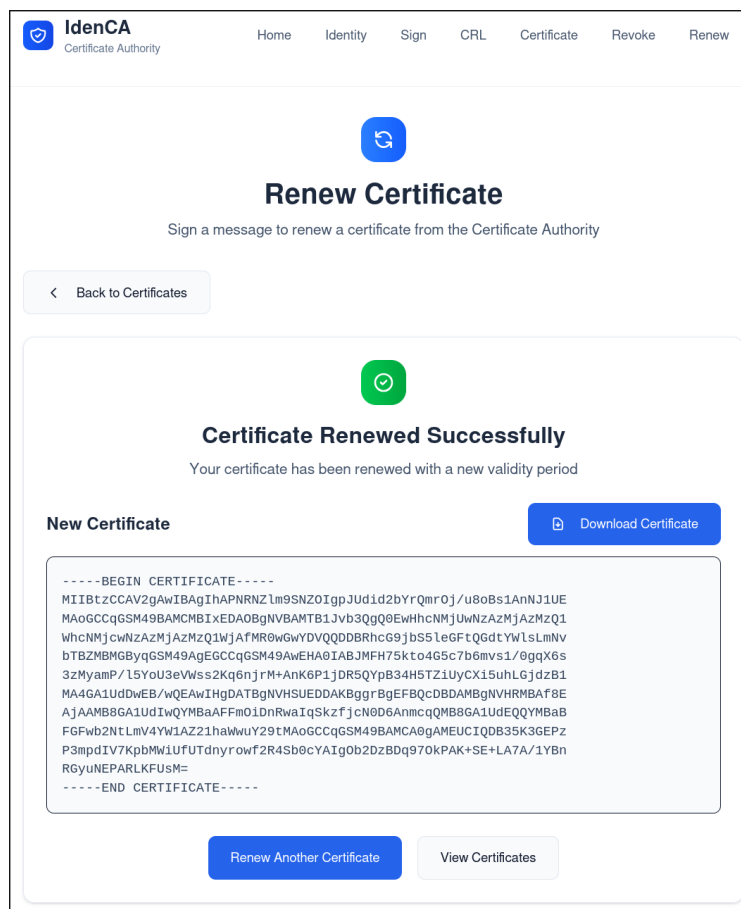




Figure 7.6: Result of a successful certificate renewal



IdenCA
Certificate Authority

[Home](#)
[Identity](#)
[Sign](#)
[CRL](#)
[Certificate](#)
[Revoke](#)
[Renew](#)



Revoke Certificate

Sign a message to revoke a certificate from the Certificate Authority

[< Back to Certificates](#)

Certificate Serial Number

1100555067462516991865511586883509997628574797975920361667111038279273367032


Enter the full serial number of the certificate you want to revoke.

Auto-generated Message to Sign

Revoke: 110055506746251699186551158688350999762857479797592036166711103827927336703236

This message will be signed with your private key to authorize the revocation.

Private Key (PEM format)

 Upload Private Key
or paste below

```

-----BEGIN EC PRIVATE KEY-----
MHcCAQEEILRF1cEL18gj6VsTJwmm9d0oFEQUAeLFWGAz8PgnPrPhoAoGCCqGSM49
AwEHoUQDQgAEkwUfvmS2jgbLztvqa+zX/SCpfqzFMzJqY/+XL1hTd5VayzYqrqe0
sz4Ccro/WMNHlBikHfgfLnmJTIJeLm6EsQ==
-----END EC PRIVATE KEY-----

```

Your private key (PKCS#8, PKCS#1, or SEC1 format). Supports RSA and ECDSA keys.




 Sign Message & Revoke Certificate

Figure 7.7: Certificate revocation page



IdenCA
Certificate Authority

[Home](#)
[Identity](#)
[Sign](#)
[CRL](#)
[Certificate](#)
[Revoke](#)
[Renew](#)



Certificate Revocation List

View certificates that have been revoked by the Certificate Authority

Revoked Certificates

10 certificate(s) revoked




Serial Number	Revocation Date	Status
175778100461829392911674107818 286027631861643908551581761761 19703695452155692	6/14/2025, 11:08:04 AM	 Revoked
131668944433172595357950753741 266273456419836626414349404370 25903576143625018	6/16/2025, 10:17:30 PM	 Revoked
655159499894674110089591512843 319012656530598651674172141311 89255198482896238	6/29/2025, 7:08:37 PM	 Revoked

Figure 7.8: Revoked certificates page

Bibliography

- [1] D. Cooper et al. Internet x.509 public key infrastructure certificate and certificate revocation list (crl) profile. RFC 5280, Network Working Group, 2008.
- [2] S. Santesson et al. X.509 internet public key infrastructure online certificate status protocol - ocsp. RFC 6960, Internet Engineering Task Force, 2013.