

Illegal drug markets in Belgium and the Netherlands: Communicating vessels?

Background

Belgian and Dutch criminal networks have been interdependent for many years. That's why in Belgium, crime developments in the Netherlands have been followed with great care for a long time. Given the historical interdependence of the organised crime problem, there is a chance that issues that arise in one country will pop up in another country. From the years 2000 onwards, cannabis plantations are increasingly being found in Belgium, in which a connection with the Netherlands is usually present: Dutch people are directly involved, the growth material is purchased in the Netherlands or the harvest is distributed there. In addition, synthetic drug production, led by Dutch criminal organizations, is present in the Belgian-Dutch border region. Furthermore, from the end of the nineties more drug premises emerged in cities such as Ghent and Antwerp, which were also supplied from the Netherlands.

This raises the question of how recent developments in the Dutch and Belgian drug markets can be explained and what measures can be taken, both autonomously and in close cooperation between the two countries. Can we speak of a shift or an expansion of (parts of) illegal drug markets between the Netherlands and Belgium? If so, what is causing this?

Research objectives

The DISMARK research has three **research objectives**:

1. *Describe* what developments occur in the Dutch and Belgian markets for cannabis, synthetic drugs and cocaine;
2. *Interpret* how these developments could occur and *explain* whether there is a shift or expansion of (parts of) illegal drug markets from the Netherlands to Belgium;
3. *Find out* what the possible implications of these findings are for the (investigation) policy of the Belgian and Dutch government, and *formulate (policy) recommendations* in parallel.

The DISMARK research focuses on three **illegal drug markets**: cannabis, synthetic drugs (xtc / amphetamines) and cocaine. We highlight the different segments of the drug markets, *in casu* the **echelons** of production (cannabis and synthetic drugs), the middle market (cocaine) and the retail market (cannabis, synthetic drugs and cocaine).

Methodology

A combination of different **research methods** was used:

- A literature review of (inter)national academic literature and policy documents on drug markets and drug-related crime;
- An case study of public prosecutors' files about the cocaine middle market in Belgium (n = 59), of mutual legal assistance requests (n = 92) and of public prosecutors' files in the Netherlands (n = 63);
- A survey of professional key figures in Belgium (n = 55) and the Netherlands (n = 10), who have knowledge of the Dutch and Belgian illegal drug markets;

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews with prisoners, convicted for drug production and / or trafficking, in Belgian prisons (n = 25);
- Focus groups in Belgium (n = 1) and the Netherlands (n = 1) with professional key figures.

Conclusions

Some important conclusions can be drawn from the results of the research. Firstly, the findings indicate that the production of cannabis and synthetic drugs, as with the cocaine middle market, are phenomena which are more likely to have an autonomous increase (and thus an expansion) in Belgium. There are no indications that these phenomena are shifting from the Netherlands to Belgium. The same applies to the integration of Belgian and Dutch criminal networks. On the other hand, at the level of the retail market, and thus the supply of Belgian users, we do see a clear shift from the Netherlands to Belgium.

It can be expected that criminal groups based in Belgium will get their hands on the Belgian domestic drug markets, also in terms of supplying the user market. These groups are attracted by opportunities that occur at the right time in Belgium and they try to maintain a balance between various factors (such as personal contacts, price and quality of the drugs). However, it is difficult to predict to what extent the role of these criminal groups in Belgium will develop in the future, especially with regard to supplying foreign markets. Nor is it possible to predict the extent to which drug related phenomena in Belgium, by analogy with those in the Netherlands, will grow in the long term.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the (national and international) monitoring of illicit drug trafficking
- Adjust the investigation culture at national level
- Develop integrated collaborations with the public-private sector
- Strengthen the role of administrative enforcement
- Simplify the (national and international) recovery of criminal assets
- Stimulate the Belgian-Dutch operational cooperation
- Strengthen social safety nets for vulnerable groups
- Cannabis: tackle the grow shops
- Synthetic drugs: strengthen the monitoring of trade in chemicals
- Cocaine: tackle all smuggling methods

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