ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 12.05.2025 | Richard Van Herzeele

Cargo kings and cocaine rings

Rotterdam's fight against drug smuggling shows that public and private forces, when united, can set a new standard for European port security

Has the Netherlands become a narco-state? This question has been occupying the minds of politicians, academics and worried citizens alike for a while now.

January 2025 saw the start of the trial against retired criminal lawyer Inez Weski. Weski is suspected of having passed messages to and from Ridouan Taghi – who was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and attempted murder in 2024 – while she was his lawyer and he was held in a high-security prison. Taghi's conviction was part of the Marengo trial, one of the largest organised crime cases related to drug trafficking in the Netherlands to date.

The Marengo trial itself turned violent. Crown witness Nabil B.'s brother was murdered a few days after the first session in March 2018. So was his lawyer, in September 2019. Then, in July 2021, well-known investigative journalist Peter R. De Vries, who had supported Nabil B. as a confidential counsellor, was also assassinated. These events led the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* to ask whether the Dutch had become a nation of 'cheese, coke and killers' ('*Käse, Koks und Killer*'). While Weski vehemently denies all accusations, her trial stokes fears that there is something rotten in the Netherlands.

Stronger together

The new Dutch government has vowed to continue the fight against '*ondermijning*'. This term, which roughly translates as 'subversive crime', highlights how organised crime weakens society from within. Examples of this include cocaine traffickers laundering their money by investing in legal businesses or threatening and intimidating citizens and businesses into complicity. Such activities foster a sense of lawlessness and insecurity throughout society, undermining societal stability. They also threaten the integrity and sustainability of the legal economy as businesses backed by

illegal money, for example, are less constrained by regular market forces, potentially outcompeting their peers and thus distorting the market.

In other words, addressing *ondermijning* requires building resilience across society. The Dutch approach to drug trafficking stands out by its encouragement of public-private cooperation, which has received significant investment since 2019. This diverges from traditional approaches, in which the state is the sole security provider. The Port of Rotterdam is arguably the clearest example of this approach. But how successful has it been?

The Port of Rotterdam's highly automated logistics infrastructure feeds the European economy with goods from across the globe. But criminals also abuse this very infrastructure. The totemic image is that of cocaine packages smuggled into Europe hidden in containers delivering fruit. So-called *uithalers* are then sent into port premises to pick up (*uithalen*) these packages from the containers. Per the public prosecution's office's most recent announcement, the largest share of them (42 per cent) are between 18 and 22 years old. In 2024, 226 *uithalers* were arrested. Port employees are also targeted. Criminal organisations entice or threaten them to bring them into the criminal fold. Organised crime groups thus abuse both the Port's assets and its human capital.

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In the struggle against these crimes, security and business are linked. For example: due to the high level of automation of the Port, unauthorised individuals on the premises are a health and safety risk. As a consequence, their detection means shutting down the logistical process. This is very expensive for port companies. Tightening security so that unauthorised individuals are discouraged or unable to enter the premises thus makes sense from both a security and business point of view. Companies also realise that better security can support competitiveness. Employees and clients are harder to attract and keep when the port is considered unsafe. As a result, Port companies are motivated to make security an integral part of their operation. For the authorities, port companies can form a first line of defence and support constrained public budgets. And pooling information and resources is believed to increase the effectiveness of the approach to *ondermijning*. Such incentives have led to

notable cooperation in the Port of Rotterdam.

In 2014, the Information Sharing Center (ISC) for Port Safety and Security was initiated. Every six weeks, the ISC gathers port safety and security officers of the container terminals, operational specialists of the Seaport Police and the Rotterdam Customs Authority to share information on security and drug trafficking-related matters in the Port. A 2023 case study of the ISC concluded that it was 'a unique operational example of a public-private partnership'. Since then, other ISCs have been established in the Port of Rotterdam, and there are plans to apply the model in other Dutch ports.

These ISCs have been platforms to launch security projects in the Port. One example is the Secure Chain. This project involves actors across the logistical supply chain alongside the Municipality of Rotterdam, Dutch Customs and the Seaport Police. The Secure Chain enables participants to digitally exchange the authorisation for the release and collection of containers. This replaces the previous system where pin codes were used for clearance. Criminals proved able to acquire such pin codes, allowing them to infiltrate the port by using so-called Trojan containers. The Secure Chain eliminates this modus operandi.

Staying the course

The measures taken over the years seem to have brought some success. In the Port of Rotterdam, the amount of cocaine seized in 2024 was almost halved compared with 2023. The figures for the Port of Antwerp are even more spectacular: where 121.1 tonnes of cocaine were seized in 2023, this figure fell by almost two-thirds to 44.3 tonnes in 2024. In the port of Rotterdam, the number of *uithalers* also fell, from 452 caught in 2023 to 266 in 2024. The Antwerp authorities caught 127 *uithalers* in 2023 (58 of which entered via Trojan containers) and 111 in 2024 (with 13 entering via Trojan containers).

The approach in Rotterdam could chart a course for the rest of Europe.

But there are still many questions to grapple with. Building and maintaining trust between public and private partners remains challenging. Much of the cooperation was initially conducted on an informal basis, but as cooperation matures, the need for clear rules of engagement increases. This, however, poses difficult accountability and leadership questions. Meanwhile, the authorities still often measure effectiveness in seizures and convictions, but establishing a direct link

between cooperation and such Key Performance Indicators is not straightforward, even when participants have a clear sense cooperation contributes. Cultural differences between different institutions and companies, let alone across borders, also need careful management. This promises to be an ongoing challenge for the newly-minted European Ports Alliance, recently launched by the European Commission together with the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU. This alliance aims to bring together all relevant stakeholders across Europe to fortify the security of its ports.

Working together is hard work. But is it rewarding? The statistics listed above look promising. But are they really a sign that efforts are bearing fruit? These questions are as yet not answered. It is clear that as countermeasures evolve, so may cocaine trafficking techniques. The fight against *ondermijning* continues. It must, as the spillover violence and effects on the legal economy associated with the cocaine trade must be contained. A research project involving many of the actors listed in this article was launched in 2024 to examine whether the Port of Rotterdam is indeed 'focusing on the right things'.

The experiences in Rotterdam as well as the most recent figures give cause for cautious optimism. Progress is possible. Solutions can be developed. Remaining innovative and adaptable is a key imperative. And resilience is a keyword, especially in such a rapidly changing international context. Joining public and private forces may prove an enduring tool to build that resilience. The approach in Rotterdam could thus chart a course for the rest of Europe.



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