

Kick the drugs

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Cocaine has been romanticised by movies and shows like *Scarface*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, and *Narcos*, in which taking the drug is depicted similarly to something as casual as having a cuppa coffee. In real life, it is increasingly harder to imagine a party taking place in an average European city without 'snow.' At the same time, people from top to bottom nod their heads when it comes to banning the production, smuggle, storage, sell and use of cocaine – because of addiction and criminal violence. Taken together, it begs the question: how big is Europe's cocaine problem and are we in the middle of a war on drugs? Equally important: who is winning in it?

European countries and foreign investors have spent billions and billions of euros on port infrastructure and hinterland connectivity. It has given Europe hundreds of seaports of different sizes and shapes, glossy roads, polished railways, and navigable inland waterways. In other words, efficient means of trade, employment opportunities, and economic growth. It made it possible for such relatively small countries like the Netherlands or Belgium to become modern logistics powerhouses that many industries rely on, domestically and abroad.

From body-packers to containers, from south to north

The dark side of this development is that criminals are taking advantage

of it, too. While the Iberian Peninsula used to be the 'traditional' gateway for cocaine smuggling into Europe, given the region's historical and language connection with Latin America, the Netherlands or Belgium are also becoming 'drug hubs.' According to Europol, Antwerp and Rotterdam are becoming the centre of cocaine and heroin in Europe and beyond. Drugs are distributed east and south using the same perfect infrastructure that was meant to serve legal commerce only.

In the early days, drugs were smuggled in small amounts by 'body-packers.' Nowadays, they are brought in containers in hundreds of kilograms. Container vessels carrying fresh fruit from across the 'Pond' regularly bring in 'additions.' Not a day goes by without a media item about

another fruit shipment in which the police has discovered cocaine. Good news, right? Not until 'market statistics' kick in. It isn't all that clear whether the Dutch and Belgian police forces can trumpet success: there is no substantial difference in street prices of cocaine even after these police actions. It would mean that the drug catch is just a tip of the to-Europe cocaine iceberg.

It sounds disappointing and indicates that criminals are ahead of the game in the war on drugs, a fight that most of us don't realise we're in the middle of unless things get bloody.

Running the risk of paying the ultimate price

The war on drugs started in Europe years ago as a battle between rival gangs. It has led to liquidations with firearms as extreme



Photo: Canva

as Kalashnikovs or even grenade or rocket launchers. Though the violence was extreme, shocking the individuals who witnessed it, it had still been a far-from-my-bed-show for society. “Mexican-style” violence, like a severed head in front of a hookah lounge, was limited to ganglands.

The Dutch society and politicians’ attitudes started to change when a lawyer and a journalist got assassinated. Though not proved and confirmed officially, those are most probably related to a series of criminal cases against suspected drug criminals. Suddenly, it became apparent that delinquents were ready to use extreme violence to protect their multi-billion “businesses.” In contrast, the authorities didn’t have the means to prevent and get rid of drug-related activities, including using the transport infrastructure. With the import of cocaine, the violent culture around hard drugs was also imported to the Benelux. Like in Colombia and Mexico, anyone who is or can be a potential threat to a cocaine gang runs the risk of paying the ultimate price.

The Netherlands’ liberal drug policy has given the country a unique reputation with drug-lovers. With Amsterdam being Europe’s legal drug hangout heaven, soft drugs can be used freely in many places across the country. Some voices plea for the legalisation of cocaine, or at least tolerating its use, to stamp out the violence associated with hard drugs. On the other hand, in September this year, the Dutch government decided to spend billions to fight drug crime. Although the police catch thousands and thousands of kilograms of cocaine each year, they cannot fight this crime effectively.

The police lack personnel, money and technology, while the gangs make any effort, including cyberattacks, to bring cocaine safely from Latin America to Europe.

Anti-drug cooperation

It is an open secret that criminals have infiltrated shipping lines, customs offices, enterprises providing security services to ports and terminals, the terminal operators themselves, and road carriers. Having people on payroll gives the gangs a favourable position to obtain first-hand information on operations and transport. Dozens of employees of depots, shipping lines, other commercial companies, customs offices, police and other public duty officers were arrested on corruption and smuggling charges in the Netherlands and Belgium. It is not the question of if but when others get busted.

Though successful, the problem seems nevertheless too big for the Netherlands and Belgium, which cannot fight against drug-related criminality alone. Cooperation at the EU level – specifically between France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, which have the biggest ports in the EU – with Latin American anti-drug agendas is essential. The activities should be coordinated to

bring about the necessary effect. Even financial support from the EU would be desirable as the Netherlands and Belgium are fighting the war on behalf of Europe.

The white, blood-soaked powder

A central ethical question is what degree of responsibility cocaine users have in all the bloodshed, from Latin America to Europe. The white, blood-soaked powder is being smuggled to lessen the thirst of partiers, including lawyers, bankers, and chief execs from financial and commercial institutions.

Raiding the benders irrespective of the party-goers’ status and strict policing against these well-educated, highly-paid, power-happy few gentlemen in their tight suits and deep pockets might have a terrifying effect on these users if they risk losing their jobs and reputation. It is no rocket science to conclude that the fewer cocaine users there are in Europe, the lower the demand for drugs.

The dark side of logistics is a hazardous one. The fight against it is not a choice but a necessity. In all honesty, we should admit that we are currently losing it. Only with the right attitude, sufficient funding, and a good intra-Europe and cross-continental cooperation we can overcome this crisis. It is either now or never. ■



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