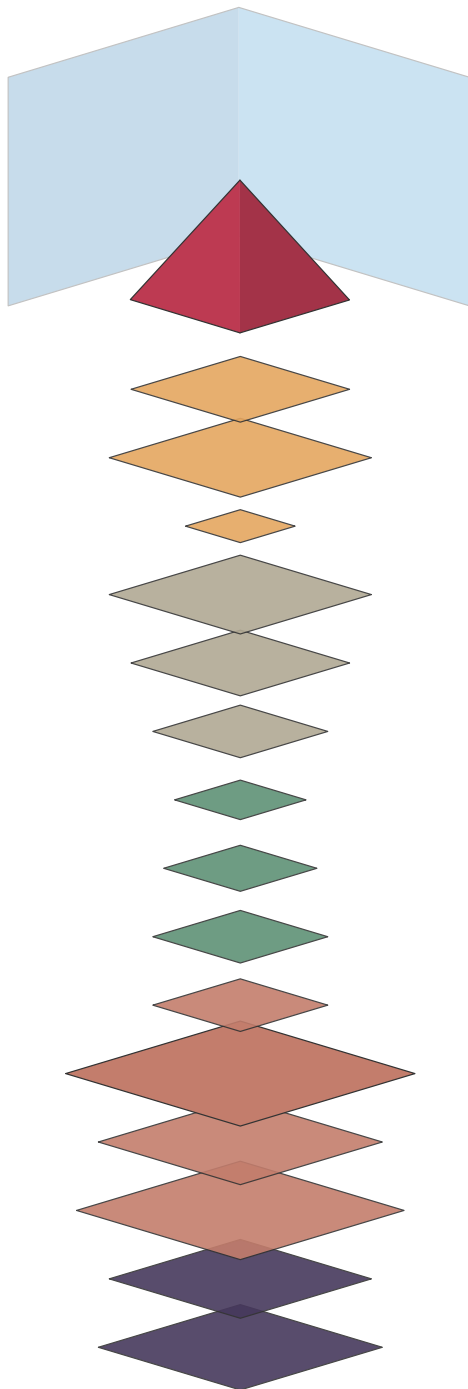


BELGIUM



4.43

CRIMINALITY SCORE

129th of 193 countries

29th of 44 European countries

7th of 11 Western European countries



CRIMINAL MARKETS

5.17

HUMAN TRAFFICKING 5.00

HUMAN SMUGGLING 6.00

EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING 2.50

ARMS TRAFFICKING 6.00

TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS 5.00

ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS 4.00

FLORA CRIMES 3.00

FAUNA CRIMES 3.50

NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES 4.00

HEROIN TRADE 4.00

COCAINE TRADE 8.00

CANNABIS TRADE 6.50

SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE 7.50

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES 6.00

FINANCIAL CRIMES 6.50



CRIMINAL ACTORS

3.70

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS 3.00

CRIMINAL NETWORKS 5.00

STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS 2.00

FOREIGN ACTORS 5.00

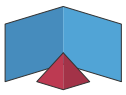
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS 3.50



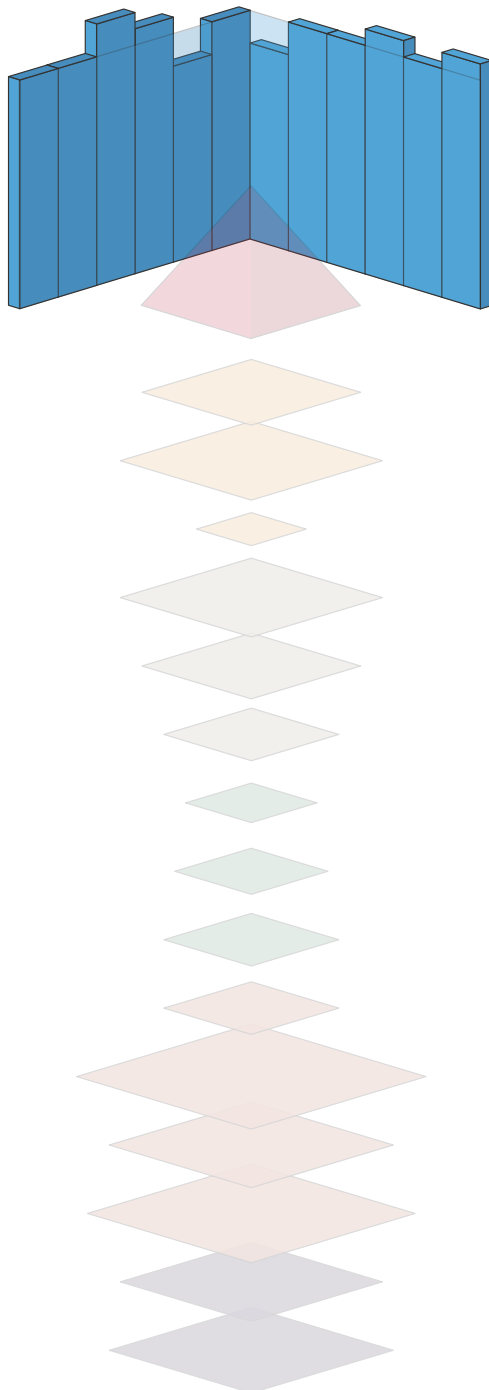
7.04

RESILIENCE SCORE





BELGIUM



7.04

RESILIENCE SCORE

25th of 193 countries

17th of 44 European countries

9th of 11 Western European countries

POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	7.00
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	7.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	8.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	7.50
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	6.00
LAW ENFORCEMENT	7.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	6.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	7.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	7.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	7.50
PREVENTION	7.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	7.50



4.43

CRIMINALITY SCORE



CRIMINAL MARKETS 5.17



CRIMINAL ACTORS 3.70



CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Belgium is targeted by human trafficking networks for both transit and destination purposes, with demand for such activity being particularly prevalent in major cities like Brussels, Antwerp, and Liège. While the recorded number of presumed victims of human trafficking is relatively low and decreasing, it is uncertain whether this is due to underreporting or their decreasing prevalence. Human trafficking cases in Belgium are primarily related to sexual and labour exploitation, begging, and coercion-based crimes. However, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine may result in a spike in human trafficking, as people who have been displaced by the war may be targeted by pre-existing trafficking networks, many of which operate through or within Belgium. The local human trafficking market is made up of different types of actors, including family networks, independent traffickers who cooperate with one another, and individuals. West African networks, which are largely involved in the illegal sex industry, are well-known for their significant dominance in the market. Chinese human smugglers are increasingly involved in trafficking, as well as smuggling, primarily for purposes of sex work.

Given its location, Belgium is not only a destination but also a transit country for human smuggling. Organized networks, many of which are based on kin, dominate the human smuggling landscape, and a growing number of minors has been smuggled into the country in recent years. The market for human smuggling has been growing, although significant law enforcement successes indicate that responses to this activity are becoming stronger. West African networks involved in human trafficking are also engaged in human smuggling, while Albanian smuggling networks are highly active. In terms of individuals transiting Belgium, there is a rising number of arrests of individuals from African states, primarily from Eritrea and Sudan, as well as from Libya, Morocco, Ethiopia, Somalia, and West African countries.

In contrast to human trafficking and smuggling, there appear to be few instances of extortion and protection racketeering in Belgium. No organized criminal groups are known to be involved in such activities. However, criminals who are involved in drug trafficking or other crimes in the country may be involved in extortion as part of their illegal business.

TRADE

Belgium is a major source and transit country for arms trafficking in Europe due to its location and its history as a firearms producer and exporter. Most firearms are smuggled through Belgium to other European countries, and cross-border smuggling is considered the most significant source of supply for the Belgian illicit firearms market. The Balkan region is the primary source of weapons, but firearms also enter Belgium from neighbouring countries and other EU member states. The increased smuggling of weapons from the Balkans has led to a significant rise in the possession and use of military-grade assault rifles among criminals. Moreover, there has been an increased import of Flobert guns (a type of firearm that does not fire traditional ammunition), which are relatively easy to convert into higher-calibre firearms. The trafficking of firearms through 3D-printing and dark web acquisitions is also on the rise.

Belgium is also a significant destination for counterfeit goods in Europe, with the majority of seized products being shipped by sea. Toys and games are the most commonly counterfeited products. Moreover, counterfeit cigarettes represent a large portion of the market and their illegal production is becoming a growing business in Belgium. Young Belgians tend to buy more counterfeit products than the EU average. Technology plays a significant role in making these goods easily accessible over the internet. The sale and purchase of counterfeit goods in Belgium surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, and criminal networks quickly adapted to the new demand.

Excise fees in the country are imposed on alcoholic beverages, energy products, manufactured tobacco products, non-alcoholic beverages (such as soda and bottled water), and coffee. The illicit trade in these goods (with the exception of energy products) does exist, although to a lesser extent than the illicit trade in counterfeit goods. As a transit point for excisable and other types of goods that are smuggled to neighbouring countries, Belgium has maintained its fight against the illicit trade of these products.

ENVIRONMENT

Belgium is a source and transit point for illegal flora and timber in Europe, particularly through the port of Antwerp. Large amounts of illicit timber are shipped from Central Africa and imported by a number of Belgian companies, some of them reportedly collaborating with criminal organizations and militia groups. Belgium is also a destination for illegal flora, with plants for plant-based supplements and furniture made from North Indian rosewood being seized at Brussels' Zaventem Airport. Belgium also plays a role in the illegal wildlife trade, acting as a transit point

for traffickers moving wildlife products from Africa to Asia. These include, among others, ivory, pangolin scales, and big cat products. Additionally, the country is involved in the illegal trade of live birds and reptiles, as well as primate species. Bush meat is also smuggled through Zaventem airport to supply the African diaspora living in Belgium and beyond.

Belgium remains a central hub for the illegal trade of diamonds and gold, with criminal organizations operating in Antwerp. This has resulted in the smuggling of diamonds and money laundering through the jewellery sector. Although Belgium has taken steps to control the trade, these efforts are often circumvented by illicit actors who exploit loopholes in monitoring mechanisms. The diamond trade is critical to Belgium's economy, creating a conflict of interest between effective law enforcement and maintaining a profitable trade hub. Moreover, some gold traders in Belgium have been linked to the financing of violent conflict actors with 'blood gold' in Central Africa.

DRUGS

Belgium is mainly a destination for heroin, which enters the country via four different trafficking routes, with the Balkan and southern routes being the most significant ones. Despite relatively few seizures, the Belgian heroin trade remains prevalent, with recent cases involving the use of online delivery services for drug sales.

Belgium is a major hub for the cocaine trade on the continent and is responsible for a disproportionately large share of Europe's cocaine seizures. The port of Antwerp has become a key trafficking point for cocaine, while Brussels and Liège airports are also important centres. Trafficking strategies include hiding drugs in containers of ordinary goods or transferring them to containers that are less likely to be inspected. Cocaine can also be ordered through call centres and delivered by Dutch drug couriers. There are also concerns over an increase in violence linked to this market in the country. Despite law enforcement successes, organized crime corruption payments to port workers and violence linked to the cocaine trade remain persistent problems.

Belgium is a source, transit and destination country for cannabis, but professional cultivation is also expanding, with some involvement of crime organizations. Most herbal cannabis consumed in Belgium is either cultivated locally or imported from Spain, the Netherlands and some North African countries; cannabis resin comes mostly from Morocco and is trafficked mainly by road through Spain and France. An increasing number of cannabis growers have moved from the Netherlands to Belgium in the hope of escaping law enforcement. Criminals from the Netherlands play an important role in the Belgian crime market for cannabis. However, Belgians themselves seem to be increasingly involved in supplying the domestic drug market.

The country is a major player in the synthetic drugs trade, with MDMA (Ecstasy) production being a key component, particularly in the Flanders region near the Dutch border. The synthetic drug market in Belgium is closely linked to that of the Netherlands, and conversion labs in Belgium are often run by Dutch organized crime groups. Online orders are sent from Belgium to recipients worldwide. Chemical waste dumping from Ecstasy production in Belgium indicates that it continues to be produced there, despite the dismantling of Dutch Ecstasy laboratories in the EU. In addition to Ecstasy, Belgium is also a notable transit zone for new psychoactive substances coming from China, and synthetic cannabinoid products have also been documented as being processed in the country. Although the Belgian production of methamphetamine and amphetamine is not predominant in their respective markets, synthetic drug production is expanding in the Belgian-Dutch border region.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes are a significant concern in Belgium, with ransomware and coordinated cyber-attacks being increasingly observed in recent years. Businesses are also targeted, with up to three times more cyber-dependent attacks occurring in Belgium since early 2020. Most attacks focus on data theft, and the government and financial institutions are prime targets for cybercriminals. Cross-border law enforcement operations are common in Europe, as most cyber-dependent crimes in Belgium and the EU are perpetrated by loosely organized criminal groups that operate across borders. However, local police forces in Belgium are not equipped or trained to deal with such cases, and the federal police are understaffed and lack resources.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Belgium are typically committed by loosely organized criminal networks, with identity fraud and Ponzi schemes being the most common types of fraud. However, there are also numerous cases of international tax fraud. Moreover, cyber-enabled financial crimes have been on the rise in recent years with the cloning of fuel cards, online Ponzi schemes, phishing and smishing attacks being increasingly observed. Despite various policies implemented by the Belgian authorities to address these crimes, a lack of resources often leads to most financial crimes going uninvestigated or unprosecuted.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Smaller, informal criminal networks in Belgium are the dominant type of criminal organizations in the country, primarily involved in drug trafficking. The networks are relatively widespread but are concentrated more in city areas, such as Brussels and Antwerp, or at the Dutch

border. They are known to use violence, including shootings, and are also known to cooperate with their international counterparts, specifically with Albanian and Dutch organized crime groups. Overall, foreign actors also have an important presence in organized crime markets. Balkan organized crime groups collaborate with Italian mafias and Turkish organized criminal groups, mainly involving drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human smuggling. Dutch organized crime groups are involved in all aspects of drug trafficking, including cannabis production, import and export, cocaine production and export, and synthetic drugs export, as well as money laundering and labour exploitation. Romanian organized crime groups are involved in human trafficking, the sexual exploitation of women, and labour exploitation of men. Competition between Italian and Albanian organized crime actors has intensified violent attempts to control the drug trafficking market, with longer-term implications and actor shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The highly sophisticated command structures of foreign actors make

them well suited to adapt to changes and exploit economic and social vulnerabilities.

Belgium has a number of mafia-style groups, including biker gangs, which engage in criminal activities such as arms and drug trafficking, as well as sexual exploitation. Despite efforts by the German and Dutch governments to crack down on these groups, recent arrests and seizures suggest that they are still active in Belgium and are often involved in transnational organized crime flows. There is also collaboration with Spanish criminal groups, and there are concerns that these groups may have overlapping membership with lower-level state institutions.

Even though the involvement of private sector actors in criminal markets is limited, there are reports indicating these actors' involvement in money laundering schemes both within and outside of the country, specifically in Dubai through the use of the real estate sector. The influence of state-embedded actors in Belgium is reportedly minimal, although a few recent cases have been reported.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Belgium has recognized organized crime as a significant issue and has taken measures to combat it, with the government declaring it a priority. The country is also known for its good governance and commitment to protecting human rights, with EU institutions based in Brussels making it the centre of Europe. Although Belgium has low corruption levels, there is room for improvement in the transparency of parliamentarians' and third parties' contacts and the publication of parliamentarians' asset declarations. Additionally, ministers lack integrity policies or codes of conduct, and their private office staff's recruitment and remuneration are solely at their discretion. In recent years, Belgium has seen the rise of xenophobia, which is a major concern.

Belgium has ratified various international conventions against organized crime and the European Convention on Extradition, including its first and second protocols (its third and fourth protocols have not been signed). The country also has bilateral extradition agreements with many countries. To combat organized crime, Belgium collaborates with Europol and Interpol and participates in several regional cooperation bodies. Belgium's national legal framework covers all major crime markets of interest, apart from non-renewable resource crimes, and its criminal code criminalizes any involvement in organized-crime activities. A National Security Strategy (NSS) was adopted in early

2022, which includes, in its 10-15 years long-term vision, the fight against organized crime as a national priority

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Belgium's judiciary is fully independent and guarantees due process in criminal trials. Belgium's federal public prosecutor's office has a dedicated section for organized crime, one of four sections in the office. The section covers the whole of Belgium and is directly supervised by the minister of justice. Belgium has an integrated police service divided into federal and local levels that work together to provide law enforcement. The federal judiciary police units at the local level detect, investigate, and destabilize criminal organizations, specializing in human trafficking, smuggling, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and other organized crime activities. The federal police have set up three information centres to complement the criminal, judicial, and financial tools to tackle organized crime. However, both the federal and local police are understaffed and due to recent budget cuts have insufficient resources to deal with organized crime at different levels.

Belgium's vulnerability to organized crime is due to its location on major trafficking routes for drugs and human smuggling. The country's ports and airports are key transit hubs for illicit products and have been identified as attractive targets for organized crime. In terms of cyber-security, Belgium has had cyber-security strategies for

more than a decade, focused on improving defences and incident response. However, changes in the cyber-security landscape have left Belgium vulnerable to cyber-infiltration. The new cyber-security strategy includes clear points that focus on improving the country's protection systems and identifying cybercrimes and cyber-attacks as risks of national priority.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The country has the relevant mechanisms to combat money laundering. The Belgian financial intelligence unit receives tens of thousands of disclosures of suspicious transactions annually and has reported an increase in files on organized crime transferred to judicial authorities. Despite having a solid legal framework and preventative mechanism to combat money laundering, the public prosecution office has faced criticism for prioritizing the investigation and prosecution of predicate offences over money laundering. To address this issue, a new collaborative platform against money laundering has been launched, which aims to exchange information, share expertise, and serve as a reference point for common objectives and feedback structures for anti-money laundering legislators. Recently, the Belgian Parliament amended its anti-money laundering act to further regulate specific crypto-service providers, with an aim to improve the country's resilience to money laundering and terrorist financing.

In recent years, Belgium's competitiveness has improved. However, tax rates, restrictive labour regulations, and tax regulations remain problematic for doing business. The country's communication infrastructure is highly developed, with major roads, railways, waterways, airports, seaports, and one of the most advanced broadband telecommunication networks in Europe. The workforce in Belgium is highly qualified, with a strong education and training system that fosters business sophistication and innovation. Belgium is a small but open economy, dominated by the growing importance of the services sector; however, the budgetary deficit remains a growing concern.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Belgium has policies in place to assist victims of human trafficking and punish their perpetrators. The victim procedure and victim status provide temporary and permanent residency rights to victims who cooperate with authorities and break off all contact with suspected perpetrators. While Belgium is one of the leaders in Europe in providing mechanisms to support victims exiting modern slavery, the low number of individuals who have entered the victim procedure can be attributed to beliefs in migration myths, victims' dependence on smugglers, and police officers' lack of knowledge and limited opportunities to offer appropriate victim support.

Belgium has implemented a range of preventive strategies to combat organized crime, including specific plans targeting human trafficking, human smuggling, and drug trafficking. The federal government has devised a national action plan to combat crimes, which is executed through regional consultation bodies comprising various law enforcement and social services. Civil society in Belgium plays an important role in providing support services to vulnerable groups. In fact, civil society remains very active and collaborates with political leaders and public authorities in addressing the threat of transnational organized crime. However, press freedom in Belgium has retreated due to increasing police violence, online hate against journalists, and a government directive that violates the Constitution's stipulation of press freedom. Journalists covering demonstrations against public health measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic have been subjected to intimidation and violence from protesters, leading some journalists to quit altogether or refuse to cover specific topics.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.