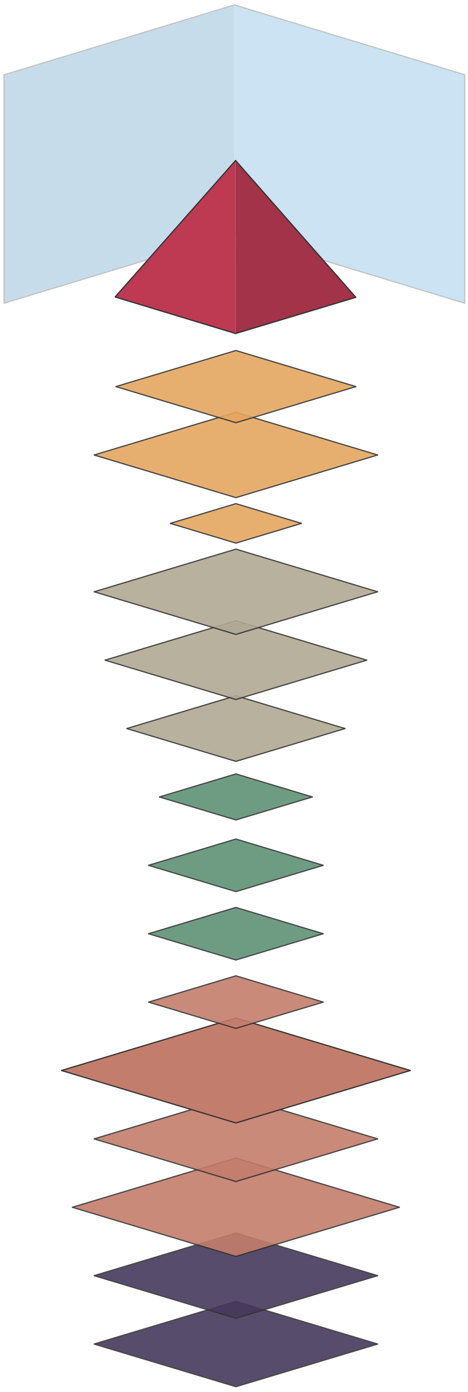
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

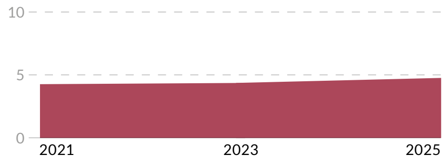
GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

BELGIUM



4.82 ↗0.38 CRIMINALITY SCORE

114th of 193 countries ↗15
23rd of 44 European countries ↗6
6th of 11 Western European countries ↗1



CRIMINAL MARKETS	5.53	↗0.37
HUMAN TRAFFICKING	5.50	↗0.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	6.50	↗0.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	3.00	↗0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	6.50	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.00	↗1.00
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	5.00	↗1.00
FLORA CRIMES	3.50	↗0.50
FAUNA CRIMES	4.00	↗0.50
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	4.00	0.00
HEROIN TRADE	4.00	0.00
COCAINE TRADE	8.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	6.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	7.50	0.00
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	6.50	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6.50	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS	4.10	↗0.40
MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	3.00	0.00
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	5.50	↗0.50
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	2.50	↗0.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	6.00	↗1.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	3.50	0.00

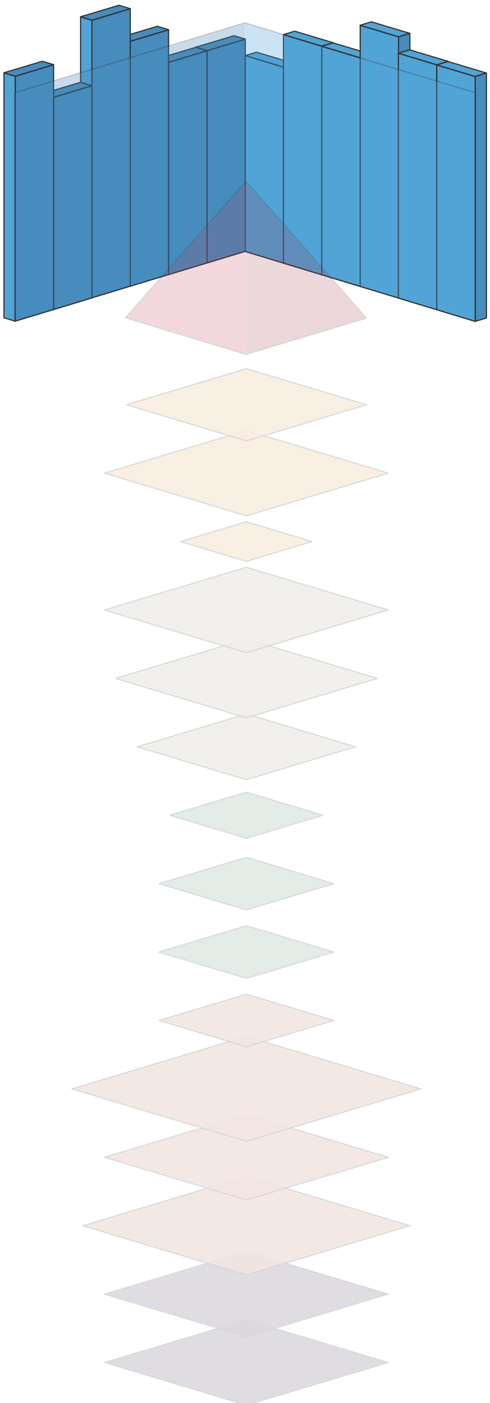
This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

enact

Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

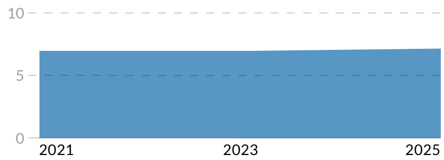
BELGIUM



7.17 ↗0.12

RESILIENCE SCORE

25th of 193 countries -
18th of 44 European countries ↘1
10th of 11 Western European countries ↘1



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	7.50	↗0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	6.50	↘0.50
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	8.50	↗0.50
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	7.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	6.50	↗0.50
LAW ENFORCEMENT	6.50	↘0.50
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	6.00	0.00
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	7.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	7.00	0.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	8.00	↗0.50
PREVENTION	7.50	↗0.50
NON-STATE ACTORS	7.50	0.00

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Belgium remains a central hub for human trafficking, with labour and sexual exploitation cases prevalent across several sectors. Economic exploitation has risen, particularly among vulnerable populations. Victims are trafficked from Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa, with Chinese and Vietnamese nationals notably exploited in nail salons. West African networks dominate Belgium's illegal sex industry, while Thai organizations control Thai massage parlours. Belgian and Dutch children have also been subjected to sexual exploitation. Many victims are lured via social media, subjected to forced confinement, and experience physical and/or sexual violence. The country's geographic proximity to France and the UK makes it a major conduit for Vietnamese trafficking networks. Debt bondage is common, particularly among Asian victims, and trafficking schemes frequently involve false self-employment or 'mailbox' companies.

Belgium is both a transit and destination country for human smuggling, particularly for migrants aiming to reach the UK. Smuggling networks include ethnic Albanians and actors from Asia and West Africa. The 'impostor' system, which involves smuggling migrants using authentic documents with similar photos, remains common. Criminal networks exploit legitimate businesses such as retail stores and transport companies to facilitate smuggling operations. Smugglers charge high fees, with some migrants paying extra for specialized 'VIP' smuggling services. Reports of physical and sexual violence against smuggled migrants continue, and debt repayment through forced labour is an emerging trend. Belgian law enforcement has prioritized the dismantling of smuggling networks, with national and international cooperation leading to significant arrests.

Extortion and protection racketeering are not widely reported in Belgium, though isolated cases have emerged. Cyber-enabled extortion schemes have been documented. Maritime workers, police and judiciary members have been implicated in criminal networks, sometimes having participated under coercion. Despite occasional reports, extortion is not considered a 'stand-alone' market but rather a supplementary tool used by organized crime groups to exert control.

TRADE

Belgium is a significant player in arms trafficking as both a source and transit country. The port of Antwerp serves as a key entry point for illicit firearms, which are often smuggled alongside narcotics. The market has expanded in recent years, with Western Balkan and Italian criminal groups facilitating the trade. Firearms are commonly used in violent incidents linked to drug trafficking. Turkish non-lethal pistols, easily converted into lethal weapons, are widely available, and online sales of gun parts have increased. Despite regional efforts to curb arms trafficking, Belgium's strategic location continues to make it a crucial hub for the illicit firearms trade.

The trade in counterfeit goods has grown substantially, with Belgium serving as a transit and distribution centre. Key counterfeit items include medicines, cosmetics, cigarettes and electronic parts. Foreign actors, mainly from China, Singapore, the UAE and Türkiye, dominate supply chains. The port of Antwerp is a major entry point for counterfeit products, while the city of Liège has become a hub for illicit e-commerce. Local production of counterfeit cigarettes has been uncovered, with factories linked to organized crime groups. Customs authorities remain overwhelmed by the influx of counterfeit shipments, and enforcement efforts have failed to match the scale of the problem.

Belgium has also seen an increase in illicit trade in excise goods, particularly tobacco products. The country is among the top EU nations for illicit tobacco consumption. Smuggling of these goods occurs daily, with the country serving as a gateway to both the local market and other European countries, and Chinese online sales platforms have compounded the issue. Despite sustained enforcement efforts, customs authorities remain understaffed, making it difficult to reduce the scale of illicit trade.

ENVIRONMENT

Belgium plays a transit role in flora crimes, acting as a major hub for timber trafficking. The port of Antwerp facilitates the import and export of illegal timber, particularly from Africa. Legal timber imports have increased, but illegal timber imports continue, often disguised as legitimate shipments. Organized crime groups and private-sector actors collaborate to launder illicit timber through legal supply chains.

Belgium also functions as an entry and transit point for wildlife trafficking, due to links to its former colonial territories. Illegal wildlife trade through Belgium includes exotic birds, reptiles and ivory. The port of Antwerp and Brussels Zaventem Airport serve as major entry points for illicit wildlife products, which are often destined for

Asian markets. Local demand for exotic pets and bushmeat contributes to the market's persistence. The online wildlife trade remains insufficiently regulated, and this limits the capacity of enforcement agencies to combat such trafficking.

The country is also a major hub for diamond and gold trafficking, particularly in Antwerp due to its historic role in the diamond trade. Illicit diamonds from conflict zones enter Belgium by obscuring their origins. The diamond industry's economic significance complicates enforcement efforts, and there are concerns about its involvement in money laundering and its ties to cocaine trafficking. Efforts to regulate the trade remain politically sensitive, particularly in connection to Russian diamond imports. Non-renewable resource crimes in Belgium are also associated with economic crimes and tax evasion, as illustrated by a recent case in which authorities arrested individuals over a multimillion-euro biodiesel fraud. The suspects were part of a criminal network that misdeclared the origin and type of biodiesel to evade EU duties and gain environmental benefits.

DRUGS

Belgium is primarily a destination for heroin. Although heroin trafficking remains secondary to other drugs, including cocaine, recent trends show an increase in opioid imports from Iran. The port of Antwerp continues to be a key entry point, with mafia-style actors and criminal networks overseeing distribution. The drug is also transported via cargo and trucks through the Caucasus and the Balkan Peninsula, often hidden in legitimate shipments. Heroin consumption is lower than that of other illicit substances, and its related violence is less prevalent than cocaine-related violence. But local consumption has increased, and its use appears prevalent among young males in precarious communities.

Cocaine trafficking is the largest drug market in Belgium, with Antwerp serving as the main European entry point for South American shipments. Corruption among customs and law enforcement officials has facilitated the trade. Western Balkan groups and the 'Mocro Mafia' play a significant role in distribution, often collaborating with Italian and French networks. Cocaine-related violence has increased in recent years, particularly in Antwerp and Brussels, as groups compete for control. Despite frequent seizures, authorities have struggled to curb the flow of cocaine into the country.

Belgium is both a transit and destination country for cannabis. The market is dominated by the 'Mocro Mafia' and Western Balkan groups, with local cultivation on the rise. While cannabis remains the most widely used drug, its impact is less severe than that of cocaine. Social acceptance of cannabis use is high, and law enforcement prioritizes more destructive drug markets. Despite large seizures, authorities have not been able to disrupt trafficking networks significantly.

The country also plays a major role in the synthetic drug trade, with production centred along the Belgian-Dutch border zone. Criminal networks, including Dutch and Western Balkan groups, oversee production and export operations. Synthetic drugs, particularly amphetamines and Ecstasy, are frequently trafficked alongside other narcotics. Online sales and parcel-based distribution methods have expanded, making enforcement more challenging.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cybercrime is a serious concern in Belgium, with transnational criminal networks increasingly targeting local businesses. Ransomware attacks are widespread and small businesses in the country are particularly vulnerable. Although law enforcement cooperation with international partners has led to successful dismantling of cybercriminal networks, local police remain under-equipped to handle the scale of cyber threats, and this allows the market to continue expanding.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Financial crimes in Belgium encompass various forms including phishing, investment fraud (boiler room scams), spoofing, and online credit-card fraud. Phishing stands out as the most prevalent cyber-enabled scam, while newer forms of computer fraud like investment fraud, invoice fraud, help-wanted fraud and high-security account fraud are also on the rise. These illicit activities are known to be perpetrated by loosely organized criminal networks who exploit the country's role as an EU financial centre.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

Mafia-style groups operating in Belgium include several largely domestic outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs), who are involved in illicit activities, particularly drug and firearms trafficking. Notable OMGs in Belgium include the Outlaws, Hells Angels, No Surrender, El Diablo and the Bandidos. These groups operate with a hierarchical structure, engage in criminal initiation rituals, and use distinctive biker clothing to assert their presence. Their activities also extend to cannabis production, synthetic drug manufacturing and sexual exploitation. While crackdowns in Germany and the Netherlands in the previous decade have made Belgian chapters less visible, recent seizures and arrests indicate that these groups remain active in transnational organized crime. Despite the significant setback for mafia-style groups following the 2021 dismantling of Sky ECC, competition for trafficking territories persists, and their access to firearms continues. While territorial control is generally loose and limited to specific trafficking areas, conflicts between rival groups occasionally escalate into violence. Attempts to corrupt officials have been reported, though they remain infrequent.

Criminal networks in Belgium are mainly composed of small, loosely structured groups, particularly in the drug-trafficking arena. Belgian nationals in these groups play a major role in cannabis cultivation and synthetic drug production, while their involvement in the cocaine trade is secondary to that of foreign actors. These networks often resort to extreme violence, including shootings, surpassing the levels of violence seen among more structured organized crime groups. Informal criminal networks frequently involve foreign contacts and are heavily engaged in drug trafficking between Belgium and the Netherlands. They operate mainly in urban centres, with significant concentrations in Antwerp and Brussels, and along the Dutch border. These networks maintain strong ties to organized crime groups based in the Netherlands, facilitating the movement of illicit goods across national borders. Despite law enforcement efforts, the impact of these groups persists, and their activities continue to shape Belgium's organized crime landscape.

State-embedded actors have limited involvement in Belgium's organized crime landscape, with minimal evidence suggesting significant collusion between government officials and criminal organizations. However, recent cases indicate that attempts to bribe public officials, while not widespread, are becoming more apparent. Police officers, customs agents and even members of the public prosecutor's office have been implicated in trafficking-related offences. While such incidents remain isolated, they do point to vulnerabilities within Belgium's security infrastructure.

Foreign actors play a dominant role in Belgium's organized crime markets, accounting for the majority of criminal actors in the country. The most significant foreign influence comes from Dutch nationals, who control the majority of the cocaine trade destined for Belgium. Deep ties exist between Dutch and Belgian drug trafficking networks, particularly in Antwerp and Brussels. Albanian-speaking criminal groups are key players in cocaine procurement at the port of Antwerp, facing increasing competition from Italian groups and the 'Mocro Mafia', a generic and controversial term for local Dutch and Belgian criminal networks with ethnic Moroccan members. Major Italian mafias active in Belgium include the Camorra, Cosa Nostra and the 'Ndrangheta. These groups operate across different Belgian cities, engaging in drug trafficking and money laundering. The Italian 'Ndrangheta, in particular, is mainly involved in drug trafficking, arms smuggling and human trafficking. Foreign criminal networks connected to the 'Mocro Mafia' wield substantial influence in cannabis and cocaine trafficking. Similarly, mafia-style groups originating from the Western Balkans and Nigerian criminal organizations play a critical role in drug distribution, arms trafficking and human smuggling.

Organized crime groups in Belgium frequently exploit legitimate businesses to launder illicit funds. Companies in sectors such as car washes and the luxury goods trade serve as key channels for money laundering. Criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking often launder proceeds through businesses in Belgium and offshore locations such as Dubai. Professional facilitators, including accountants, notaries and lawyers, occasionally appear in organized crime cases, though reporting of suspicious transactions remains low. The Belgian Financial Intelligence Processing Unit (CTIF) has expressed concerns about the under-reporting of money-laundering activities by these professionals. In markets such as diamond and timber trafficking, registered private companies have also been implicated. Hence there are notable intersections between legitimate business activities and organized crime in Belgium.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Belgium upholds strong governance principles, aligning with broader European values that emphasize human rights protection. The country hosts key EU institutions in Brussels, reinforcing its role as the 'heart' of Europe. However, rising public distrust in political institutions has been observed due to factors such as corruption scandals, increasing xenophobia and perceptions of government inertia. While political rights and civil liberties are largely respected, problems such as terrorism threats and economic instability have contributed to growing public dissatisfaction. Belgium has taken a proactive stance in combating organized crime, particularly through its National Security Strategy, which complements the existing National Security Plan. The Belgian government has identified drug trafficking as a national priority, leading to increased police deployment, stronger customs operations and enhanced screening measures for individuals in sensitive positions. Legislation has also focused on empowering local authorities to shut down illicit businesses linked to criminal activities. Despite all these efforts, there remains a perception that criminal organizations are infiltrating state institutions, although Belgium is not classified as a narco-state.

Government transparency in Belgium remains relatively strong, with the country maintaining stable rankings in corruption perception and press-freedom indices. Belgium's Central Office for the Repression of Corruption (OCRC) and the CTIF oversee corruption investigations and suspicious capital flows. However, high-profile corruption cases surrounding misappropriation of public funds by parliamentarians and bribery allegations against European Parliament members, are concerning. Regulatory weaknesses persist, particularly on lobbying practices and conflicts of interest, and integrity checks within the Federal Police remain outdated. The legal framework governing foreign donations and gifts also remains underdeveloped.

Belgium is a committed participant in international legal frameworks against organized crime. It has ratified major treaties, including the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), the UN Convention against Corruption and the Arms Trade Treaty. Belgium actively engages in Europol and Interpol operations and has established bilateral extradition agreements. However, there has been controversy about Belgium's decisions to extradite certain individuals, particularly in cases that may violate human rights. In 2024, the Belgian EU Council Presidency launched the European Port Alliance, a regional initiative aimed at addressing drug trafficking. Belgium has also engaged in diplomatic efforts with Latin American countries to counter cocaine trade networks.

The Belgian Criminal Code criminalizes participation in organized crime, with specific laws addressing drug trafficking, human smuggling and financial crimes. However, there are shortcomings in legislation related to non-renewable resource crimes. In 2024, Belgium adopted a law allowing municipalities to screen applicants for business licences in high-risk economic sectors. While this measure strengthens oversight, bureaucratic obstacles are reportedly hindering effective enforcement.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Belgium's judicial system plays a crucial role in prosecuting organized crime, with the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (OC Section) handling high-profile cases. The office has been instrumental in investigating transnational crime, including operations against encrypted communication networks used by criminal groups. However, Belgium's prison system faces significant challenges, including overcrowding and understaffing. The inmate population exceeds the system's capacity, and government plans to construct four new prisons by 2030 to alleviate pressure on existing facilities.

Belgium's law enforcement structure consists of federal and local police forces, with police zones across the country operating autonomously. The Central Directorate for the Fight Against Serious and Organized Crime is tasked with disrupting criminal groups and prioritizing offences such as human trafficking, drug smuggling and cybercrime. In 2024, Belgium expanded its Expertise and Information Centres to every judicial district, aiming to enhance administrative approaches to combating organized crime. But resource shortages and fragmented policing structures remain problematic, particularly as drug trafficking and organized crime-related violence escalate.

Belgium's strategic location and porous borders make it an attractive transit point for smuggling operations. The Port of Antwerp and Brussels Zaventem Airport serve as major hubs for illicit goods. Schengen Area membership, while facilitating legitimate trade, also poses security risks by reducing border controls. Cyber threats have also become an increasing concern, prompting Belgium to strengthen national cybersecurity measures through updated protection systems and law enforcement coordination.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Belgium has a robust anti-money laundering framework, with the CTIF leading investigations. It processes approximately 30 000 suspicious transactions annually, and recent measures have improved information-sharing between law enforcement and financial institutions. However, Belgium remains listed as a high-risk jurisdiction for money laundering, particularly due to its focus on predicate offences rather than direct money-laundering prosecutions.

The country has a strong economic regulatory environment, ranking highly in global competitiveness. But rising public debt and fiscal instability are risk factors. Belgium has a well-developed transportation and trade infrastructure, but criminal groups exploit these advantages to facilitate illicit financial transactions. The Belgian government has faced European Commission scrutiny for budgetary deficits, with proceedings initiated in 2024 to address fiscal concerns. Still, no specific information on the links between the Belgian economy and organized crime has been found for the reporting period.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Belgium has a comprehensive victim and witness support system, particularly for human trafficking cases. Specialized shelters provide psychosocial, medical and legal assistance, with the Federal Centre for Migration overseeing victim protection programmes. Victims identified through law enforcement or NGOs can access temporary residence permits and long-term legal protections if they cooperate in criminal investigations. However, the high costs of legal representation have deterred many victims from seeking compensation. Shelters for trafficking victims, while government-funded, face capacity constraints. Lastly, Belgium's national anti-drug strategy emphasizes supporting victims, with the organization 'Infor-Drogues' providing anonymous information, assistance and advice regarding drug use. Protective measures are in place to safeguard witnesses who fear reprisals, including options for partial or complete anonymity.

Belgium has prioritized crime-prevention strategies at the national and municipal levels. Programmes focusing on awareness campaigns, early intervention and cross-sector collaboration are available. The Flemish Centre of Expertise for Alcohol and Drugs has developed training initiatives to prevent cocaine use. Belgium's National Action Plan on Organized Crime outlines four strategic objectives, including improving research methodologies, expanding investigative capabilities and enhancing inter-agency cooperation. While they are promising, the effectiveness of these strategies remains to be fully evaluated.

Belgium has a very active civil society sector, with NGOs playing a central role in combating organized crime. Organizations have been instrumental in shaping national and EU-level policies. Civil society initiatives have also targeted wildlife trafficking, financial crime and drug prevention. Following a decline in public trust in Belgian media, a media literacy programme was introduced to address concerns over bias and misinformation. Despite this, Belgium continues to have an independent and trustworthy media. Nevertheless, journalists continue to face online threats and violence at protests.

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.