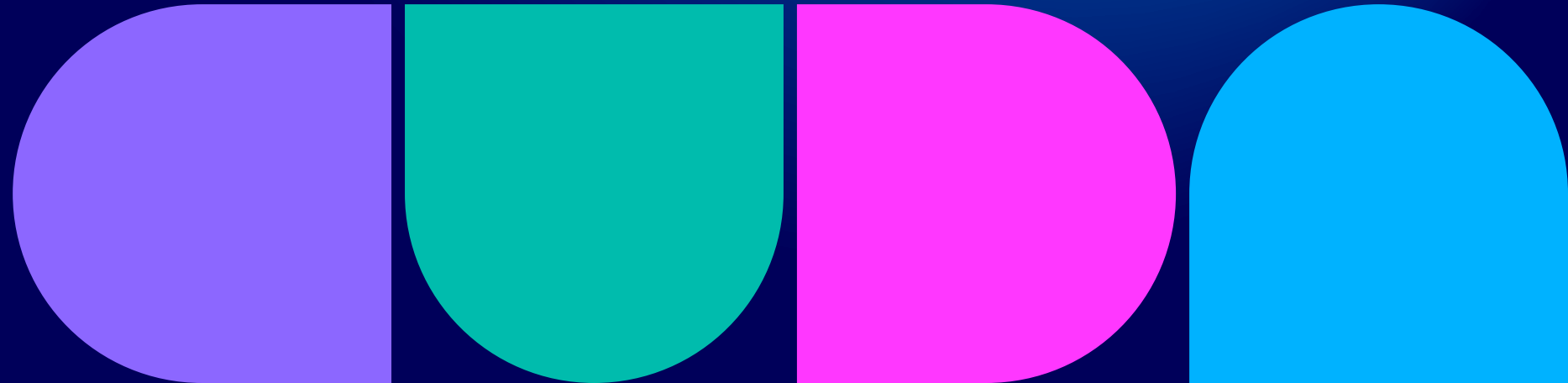


European Conference on Drug-Related Violence

This presentation was delivered at the European Conference on Drug-Related Violence on 26-27 November 2024 in Brussels. The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union.



Has Cocaine Trafficking in Belgium Become More Harmful?: Initial Findings on Harm from a New Script Analysis

Prof. Letizia Paoli (KU Leuven)

with Dr. Victoria A. Greenfield (George Mason University)
and Leen Gabriëls (KU Leuven)

Outline



➤ Motivation

- Our conceptualization of harm
- The state of harms in the early 2000s
- Initial findings on recent conditions
- Concluding remarks on differences and policy implications

Political and social context for research

Prior harm assessment

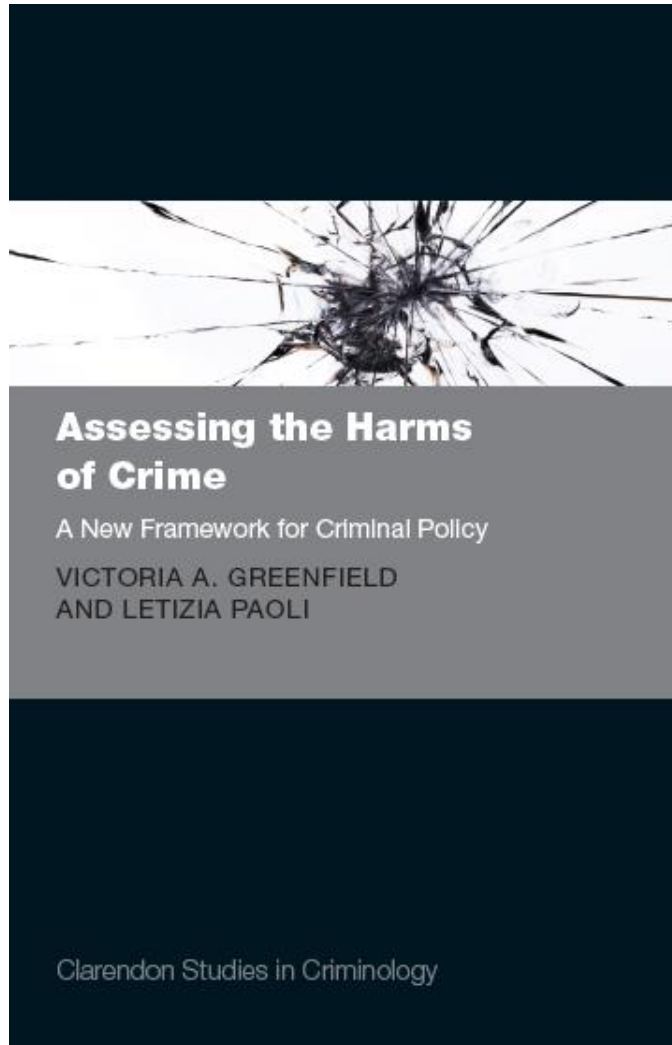
- Paoli, L., Greenfield, V.A., & Zoutendijk, A. (2013). *The Harms of Cocaine Trafficking [in Belgium]: Applying a New Framework for Assessment*^a
- Conducted amidst general concerns about ongoing threat of organized crime, but without specific focus on cocaine trafficking

New script analysis

- Paoli, L., Greenfield, V.A. & Gabriëls, L. (2024). *Has Cocaine Trafficking in Belgium Become More Harmful?: Initial Findings on Harms from a New Script Analysis*
- Conducting amidst rising concerns about increasing cocaine flows and violence, “undermining,” and potential for narco-state as well as media portrayals of brutality

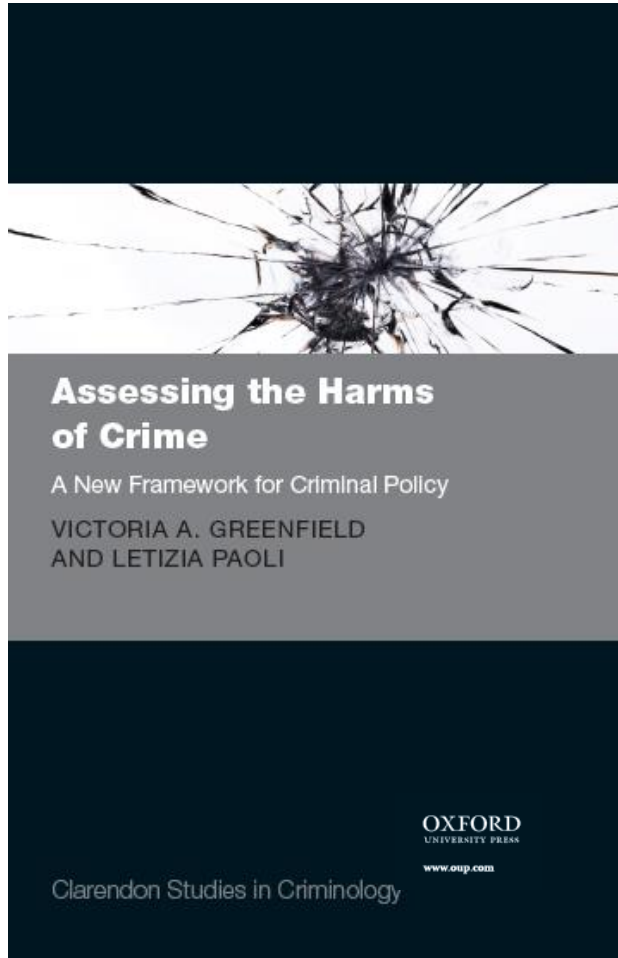
a. Belgian Federal Science Policy Office funding under grant TA/00/20.

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- Motivation
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We treat harm as “a setback to a rightful claimant’s legitimate interests”



- We define harm as a negative outcome
 - of a particular type, severity, and incidence
 - that emerges from a particular activity
 - is borne by particular individuals, institutions, and/or the environment
- We provide means to identify harm, reduce harm, and align policy with harm reduction systematically and empirically in a “harm assessment framework”

Taxonomy homes in on standing

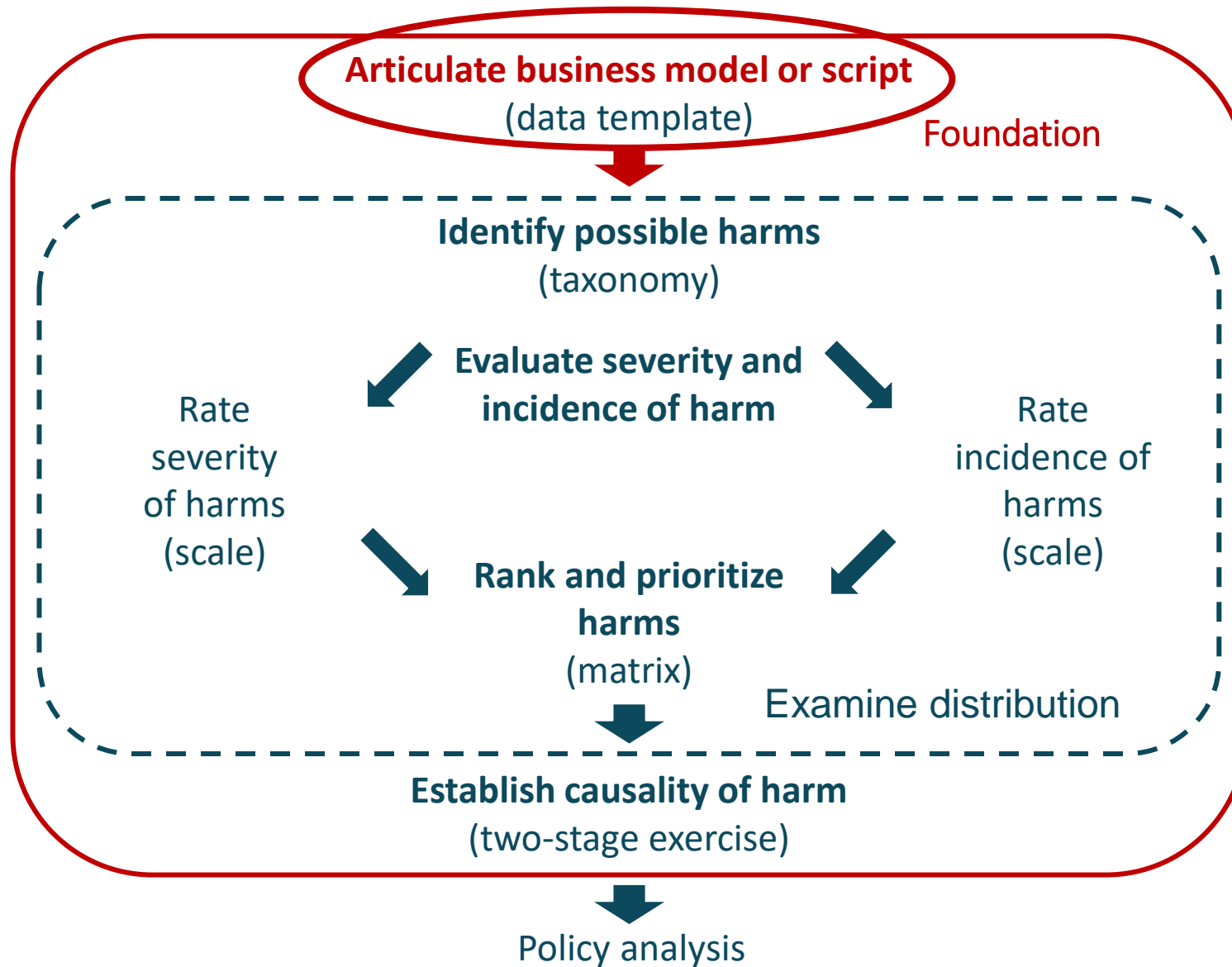
TYPE OF HARM BY INTEREST DIMENSION	CLASS OF BEARER			
	Individuals	Private-sector entities	Public-sector entities	Environment
Functional integrity	X	X	X	X
Material support	X	X	X	n/a
Reputation	X	X	X	n/a
Privacy and autonomy	X	X	X	n/a

SOURCE: Authors' extension of von Hirsch and Jareborg 1991.

NOTES: Interest dimensions represent generalizable 'capabilities' (Sen, 1987 and 2009) and public-sector entities include government agencies. Functional integrity refers to individuals' physical, psychological, and intellectual condition, entities' operational condition, and environments' physical, operational, and/or aesthetic condition.

X = applicable; n/a = not applicable.

We operationalize harm with our framework



- We assess harms associated with complex crimes using a multi-step process
- We employ quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence on harms

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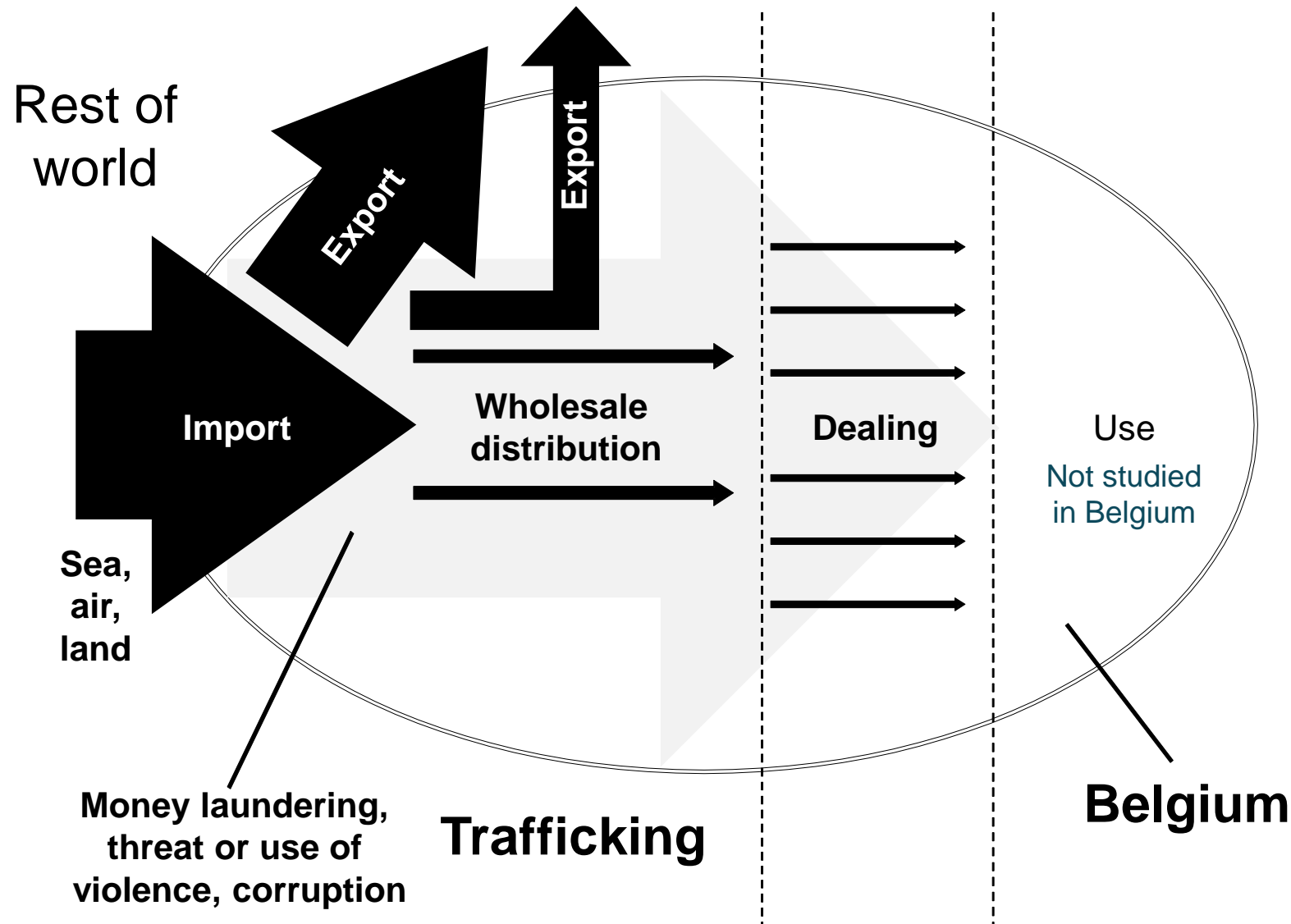
Analytical basis for prior assessment

Full framework application

- Included trafficking, dealing, money laundering, violence, and corruption
- Excluded drug use
- Limited to harms accruing in Belgium
- Entailed extensive years-long data collection

Sources of evidence	Coverage	
	Extent or type	Years
Criminal proceedings	52	2003-2009
Organized crime database files	81	2006-2008
Official reports and statistics	Yes	Various
Interviews		
Law enforcement experts	15	2010-2011
Imprisoned traffickers or dealers	12	2010-2011
Scientific literature and media	Yes	Various

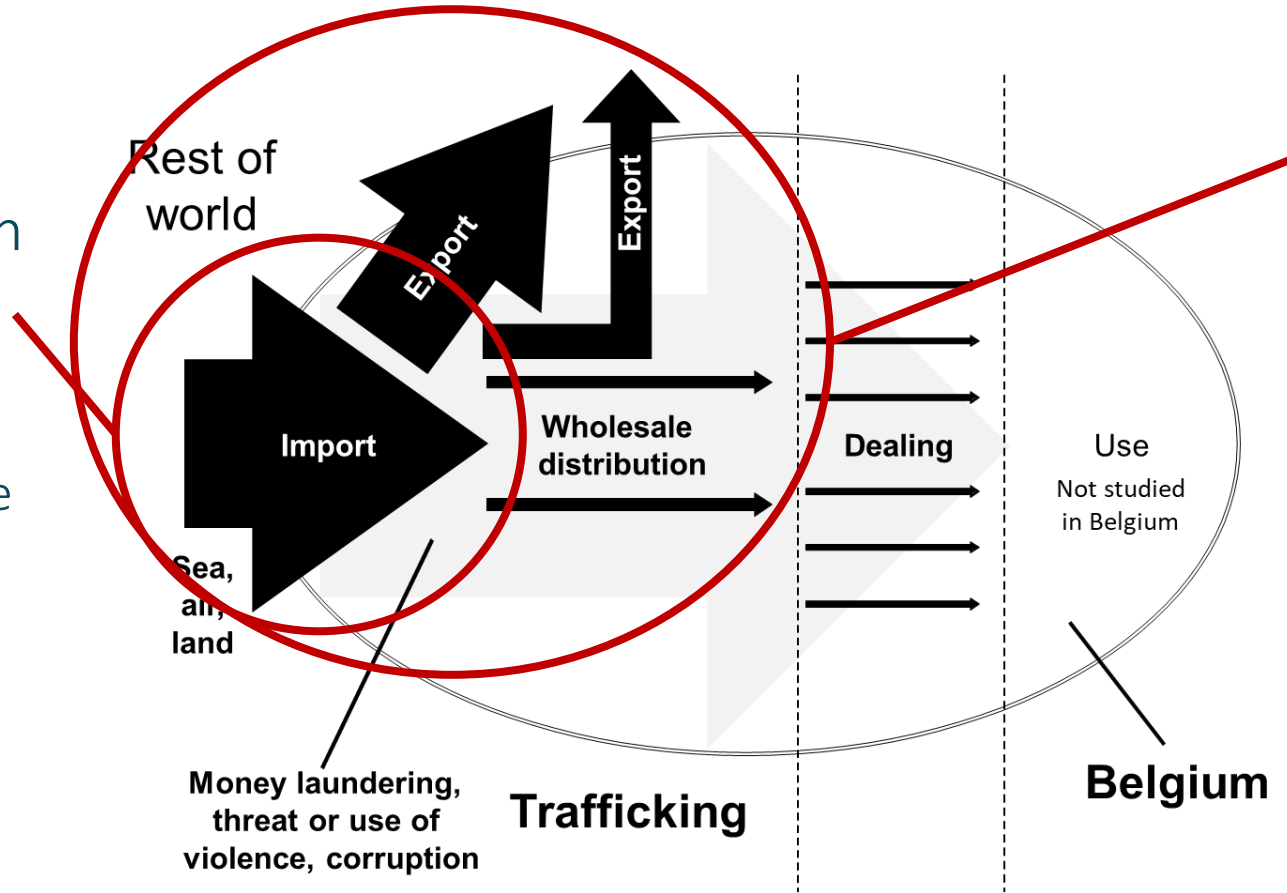
Script spanned major phases of activity



- Imports far exceeded consumption, implying transshipment
- Belgian cocaine traffickers
 - exploited air, sea, and land transit with
 - some violence,
 - limited corruption, and
 - scattershot small-scale money laundering

Belgian cocaine traffickers exploited air, sea, and land transit

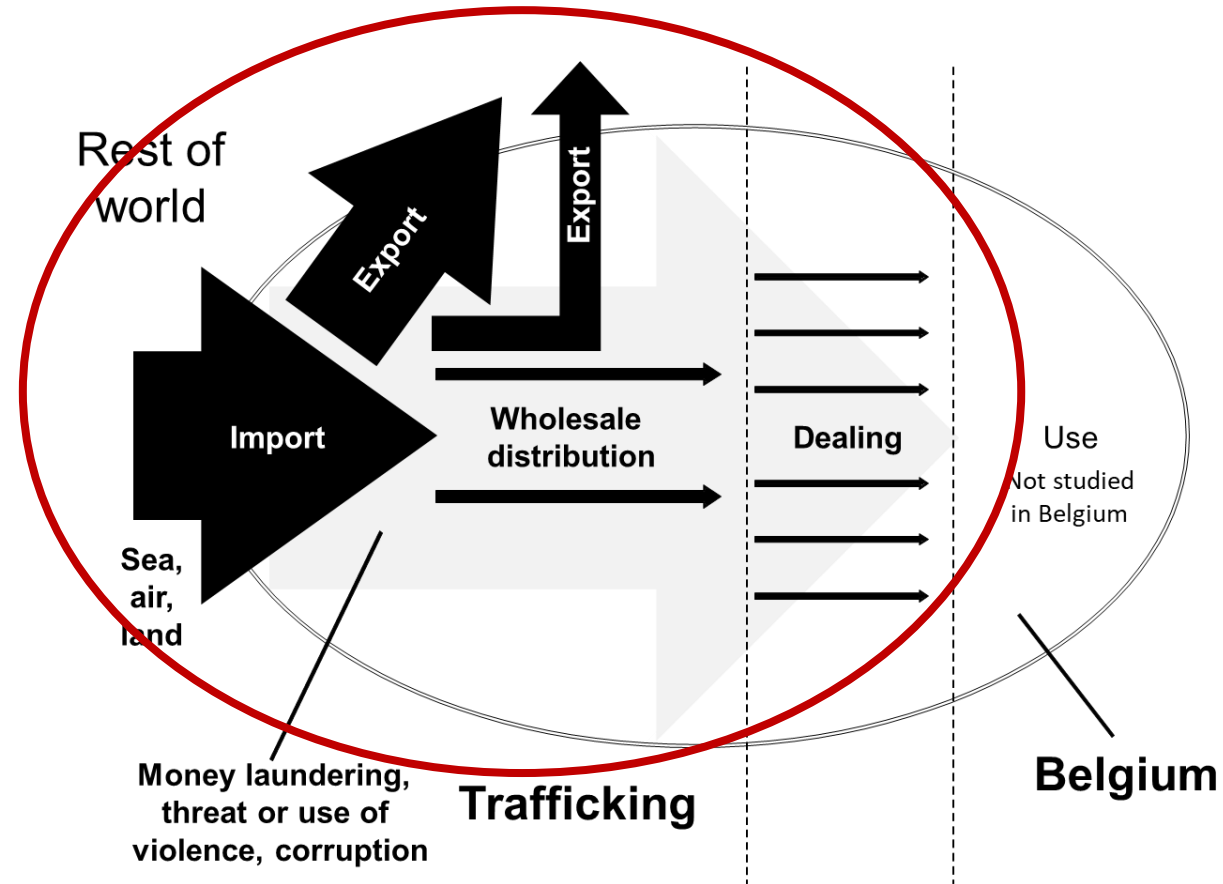
- Cocaine entered Belgium mainly by sea and air through
 - Port of Antwerp in commercial vessels
 - Brussels Airport by courier or in luggage



- Trafficking to/from other markets also occurred over land, but open borders impeded detection
- Large shipments cut and re-packaged, often in NL, for onward distribution

Violence was not widespread

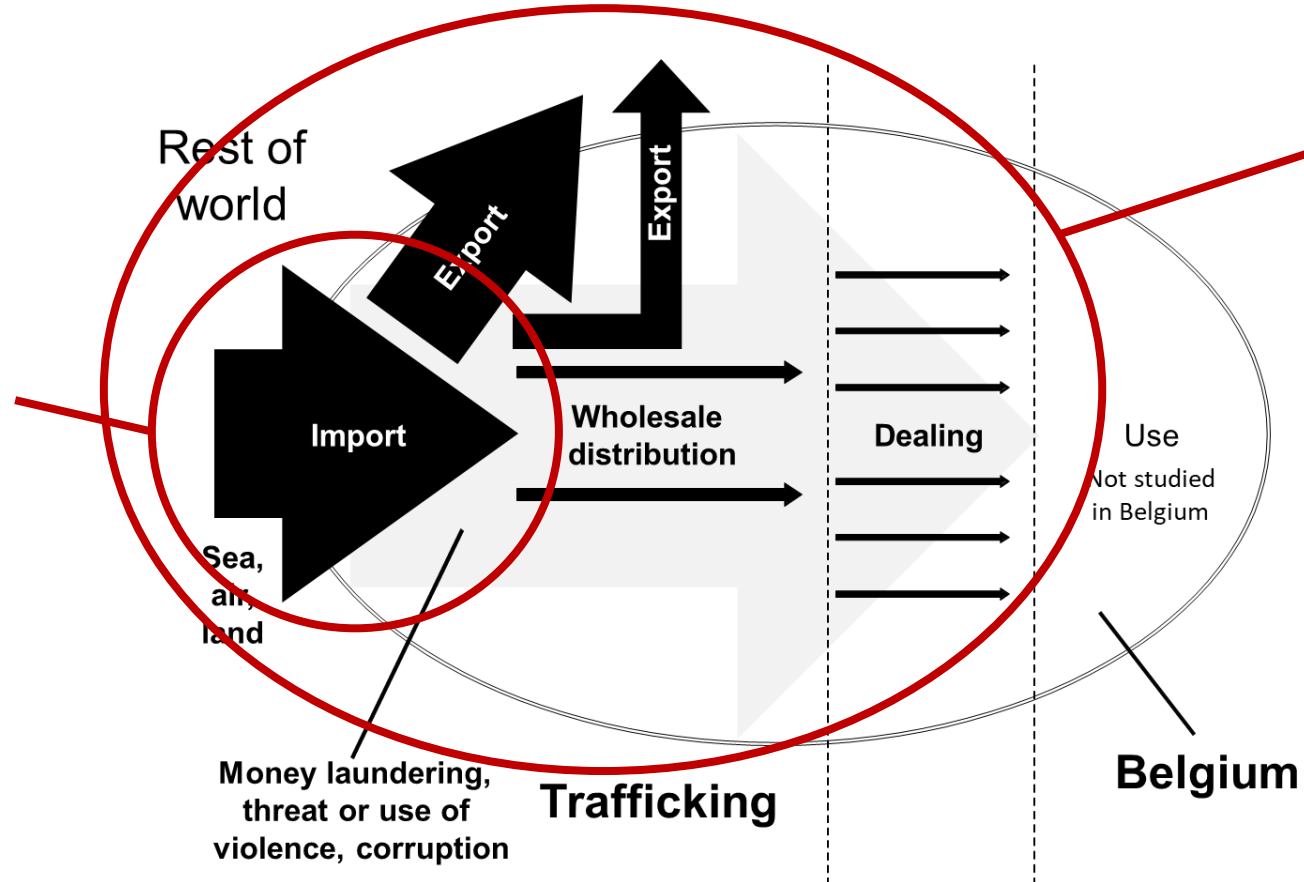
- Most victims were perpetrators, engaging in transactions
 - when money changed hands
 - with hardly any use of “lethal force”



- Law enforcement, other officials, and bystanders faced little risk

Corruption did not feature prominently

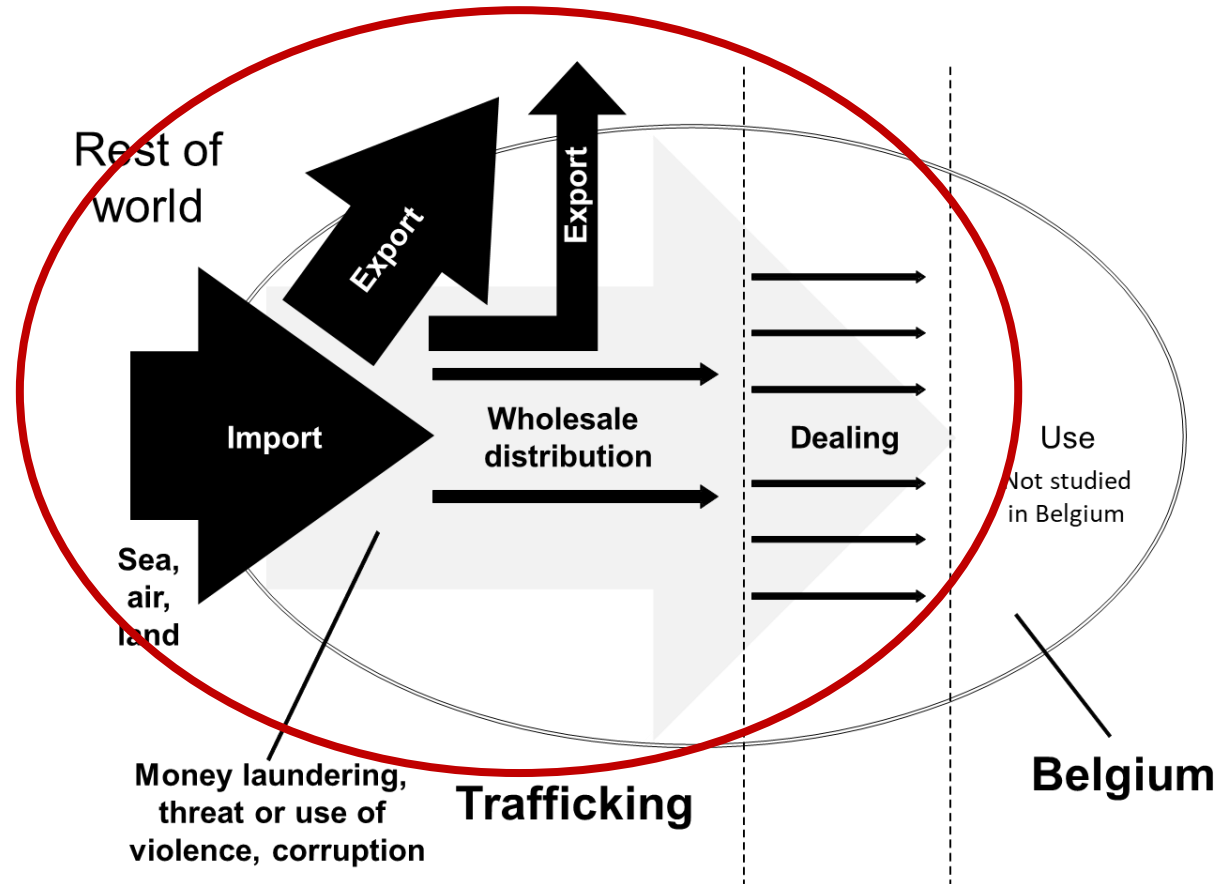
- Low-level corruption in the logistics sector occurred occasionally, largely in facilitation at points of entry



- Corruption among public officials was much more unusual
- No indication of systemic corruption

Money laundering was scattershot and economically unimportant

- Revenue from cocaine trafficking and related activities amounted to less than 1/10 of 1% of the Belgian economy



- Revenues largely stashed in Belgium, but also
 - spent on luxury goods and lifestyles,
 - smuggled out of the country, or less typically,
 - laundered through real estate, small businesses, and investments

Script supported detailed assessment

Results by each class of bearers, i.e., individuals, private sector, government, environment

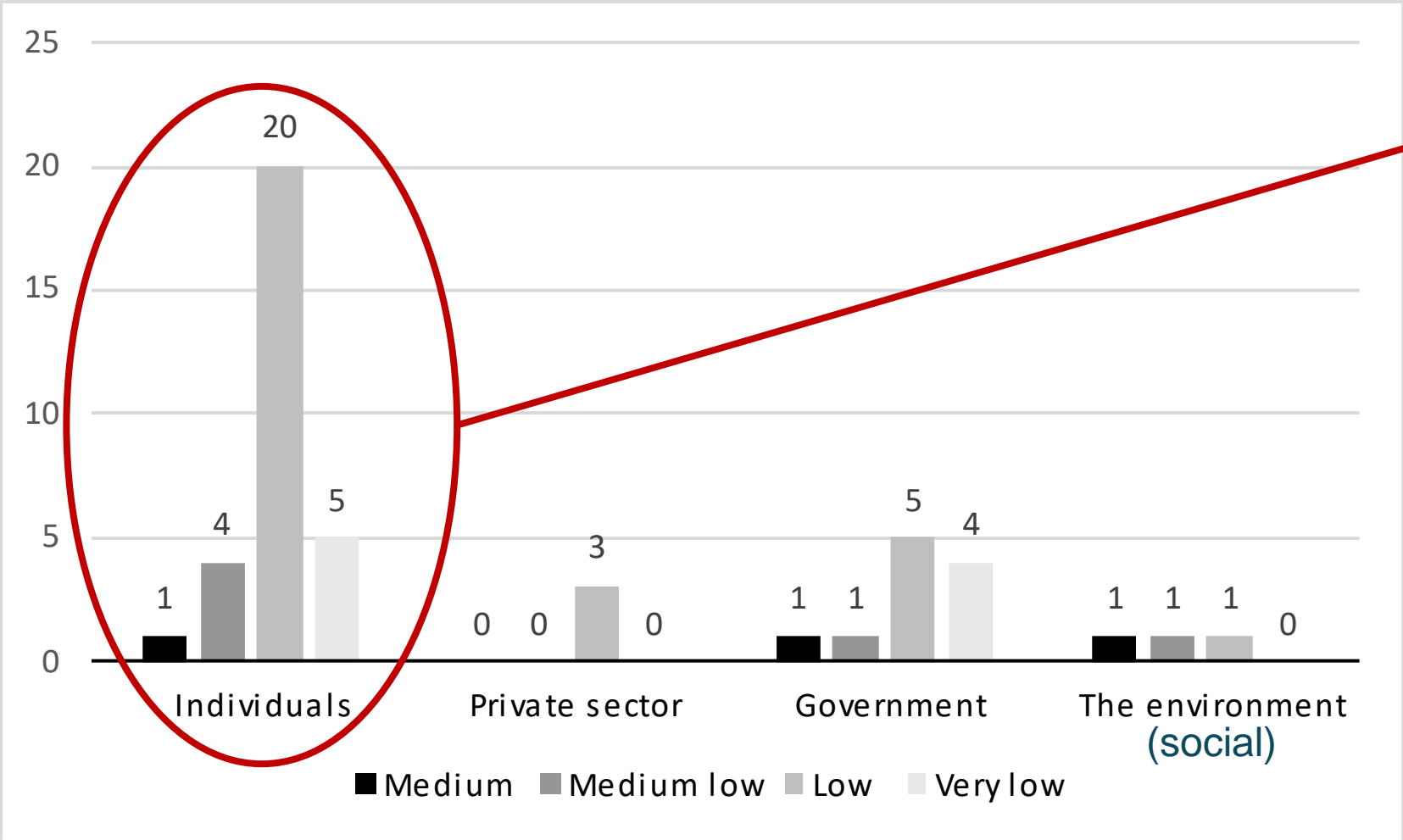
Type	Rank	Activity	Instances ^a	Subclass of bearer	Count
INDIVIDUALS'					
Functional integrity					
Loss of life	M _I	- Trafficking	- Body packing ^b	- Perpetrator	1
Other physical, psychological &/or intellectual	ML _I	- Trafficking	- Body packing	- Perpetrator	1
	ML _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults, kidnapping ^c	- Perpetrator	2
	ML _I	- Violence in dealing	- Assaults	- Perpetrator	1
	L _I	- Trafficking	- Body packing	- Perpetrator	3
	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults, threats	- Perpetrator	4
	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults, threats	- Non-perpetrator	2
	L _I	- Violence in dealing	- Assaults, threats	- Perpetrator	4
	VL _I	- Trafficking	- Body packing	- Perpetrator	1
	VL _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults, kidnapping	- Perpetrator	2
Material support	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Threats, blackmail	- Perpetrator	1
	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Threats, blackmail	- Non-perpetrator	1
Reputation	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults	- Perpetrator	2
	L _I	- Violence in dealing	- Assaults	- Perpetrator	2
	VL _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Assaults	- Perpetrator	1
Privacy & autonomy	L _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Kidnapping ^d	- Perpetrator	1
	VL _I	- Violence in trafficking	- Kidnapping ^e	- Perpetrator	1

Script supported detailed assessment

Results by each class of bearers, i.e., individuals, private sector, government, environment

Type	Rank	Activity	Instances ^b	Subclass of bearer	Count
PRIVATE-SECTOR ENTITIES'					
Functional integrity	L _{ps,bus}	- Corruption in trafficking	- Employees' involvement	- Businesses, local	1
Reputation	L _{ps,bus}	- Corruption in trafficking	- Employees' involvement	- Businesses, local	1
Privacy & autonomy	L _{ps,bus}	- Corruption in trafficking	- Employees' involvement	- Businesses, local	1
GOVERNMENT'S					
Functional integrity	VL _{g,le}	- Corruption in trafficking	- Officials' involvement	- Law enforcement	1
Material support	L _{g,med}	- Trafficking	- Treating body packers	- Medical facilities	1
	L _{g,med}	- Violence in trafficking	- Treating assaults ^{c,d}	- Medical facilities	2
	L _{g,med}	- Violence in dealing	- Treating assaults	- Medical facilities	2
	VL _{g,med}	- Trafficking	- Treating body packers	- Medical facilities	1
	VL _{g,med}	- Violence in trafficking	- Treating assaults	- Medical facilities	1
Reputation	M _g	- Dealing	- Repeated law-breaking	- Overarching	1
	ML _g	- Trafficking ^a	- Repeated law-breaking	- Overarching	1
	VL _g	- Corruption in trafficking	- Officials' involvement	- Law enforcement	1
ENVIRONMENT'S					
Functional integrity (social)	M _{e,s}	- Dealing	- Repeated law-breaking	- Social, overarching	1
	ML _{e,s}	- Trafficking ^a	- Repeated law-breaking	- Social, overarching	1
	VL _{e,s}	- Dealing	- Public nuisance	- Social, local	1

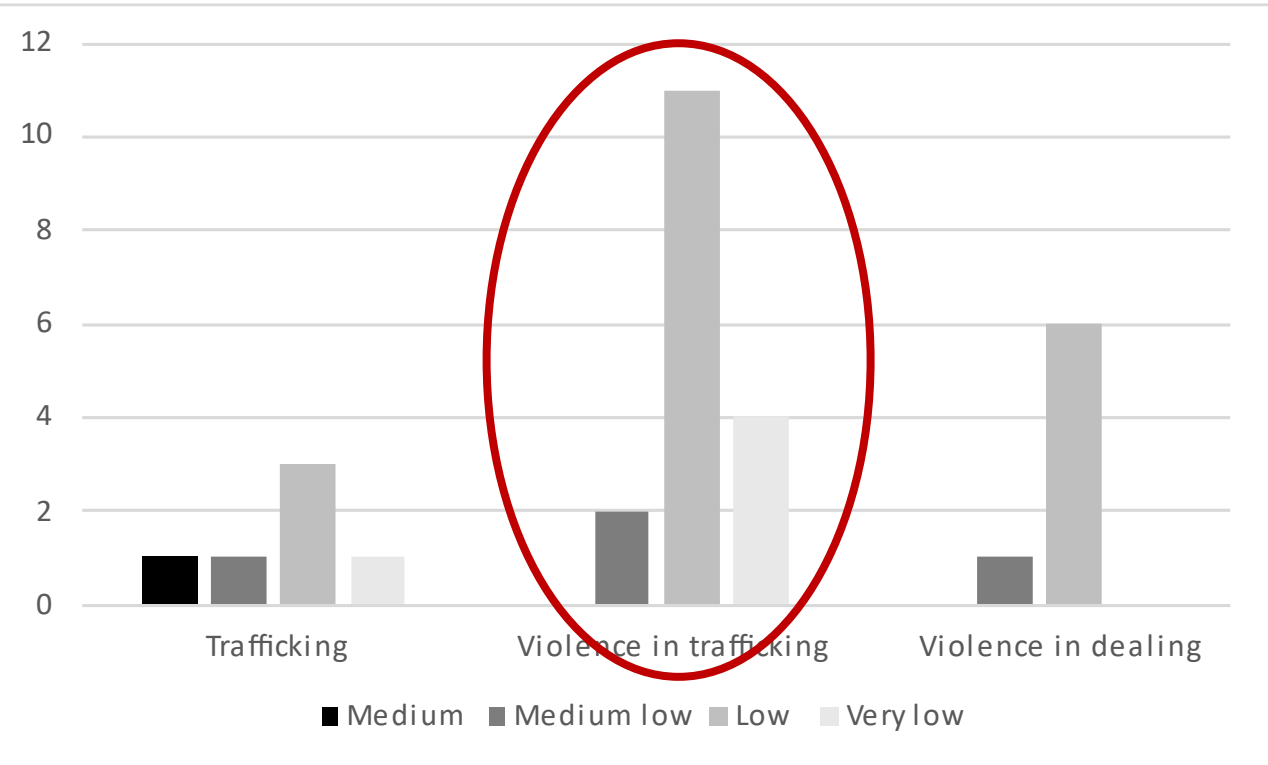
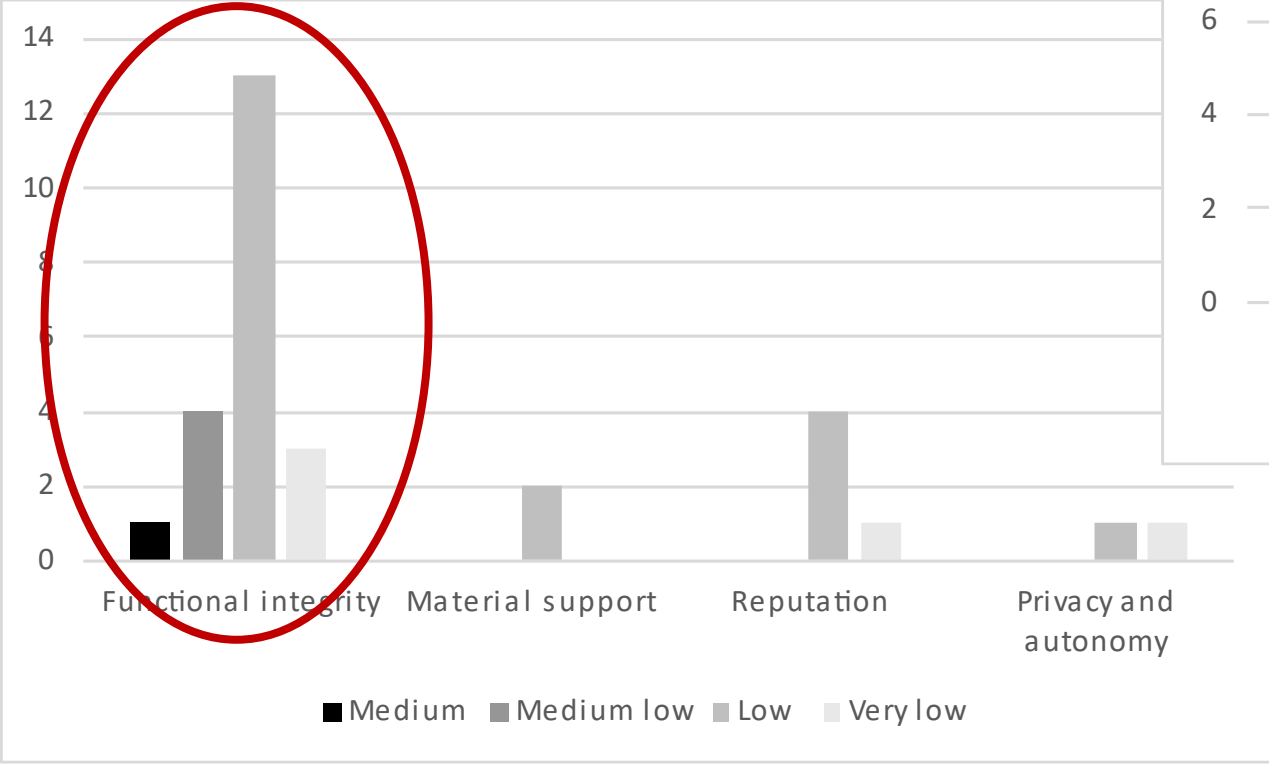
Most harms were shouldered by individuals



Overwhelmingly borne by perpetrators

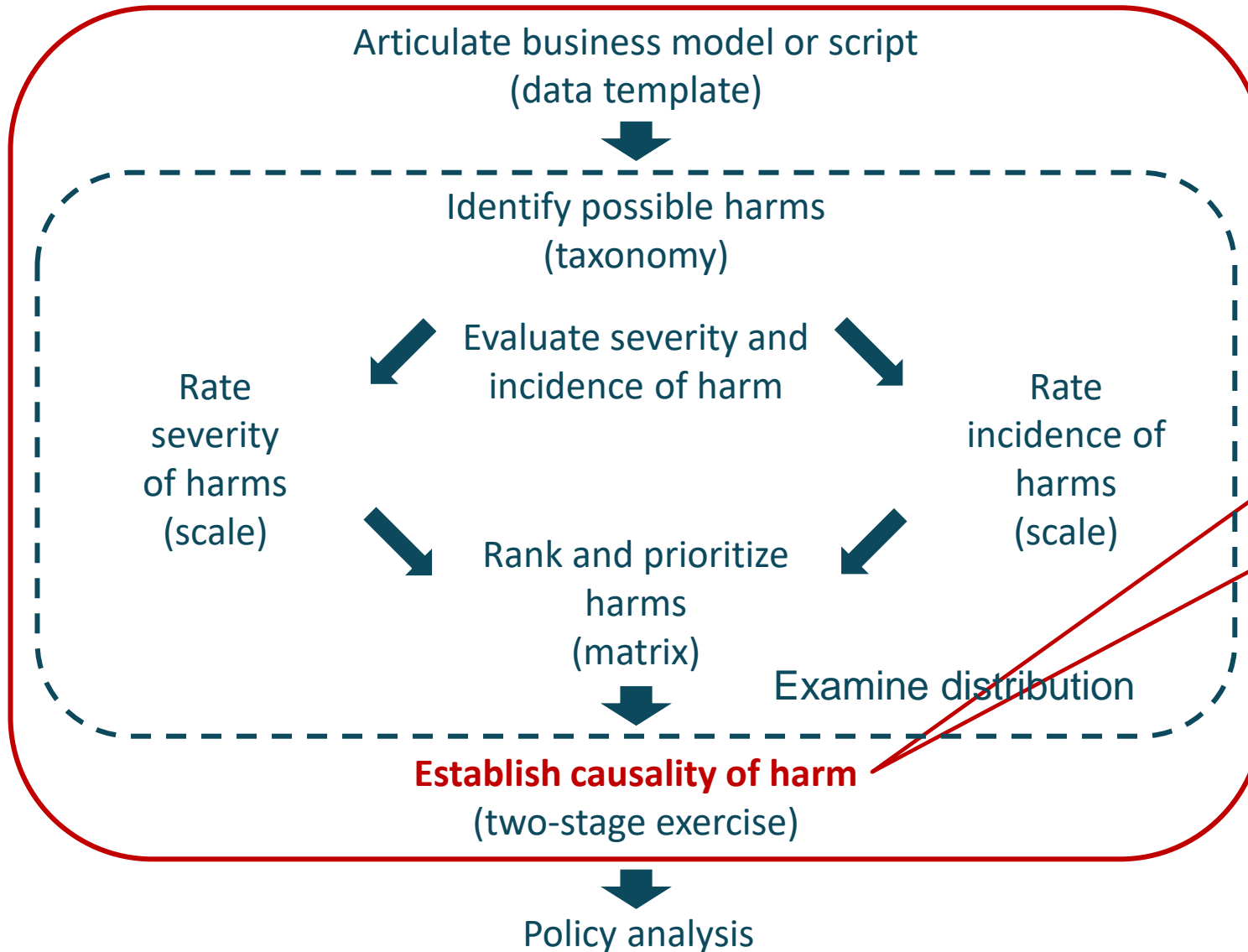
Harms largely entailed damages to functional integrity from violence in trafficking

Harms to individuals by type



Harms to individuals by activity

Harms driven largely by policy and interventions



Two-stages

- Remoteness of harm
- Dependence of harm on policy and other contextual factors

If not illegal, cocaine trafficking would likely look much like any other regulated trade

Prior assessment directed attention to individuals and violence but refuted popular wisdom

- Most harms accrued to individuals, especially perpetrators, and were associated with violence in trafficking
- Most harms to all bearers were low-ranking
- No harms were more than medium-ranking
 - One medium-ranking harm associated with fatal overdoses among traffickers
 - Two medium-ranking harms—one each to government and the social environment—resulted from repeated law-breaking

Harms were largely unremarkable

Outline



- Motivation
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Analytical basis for new script analysis

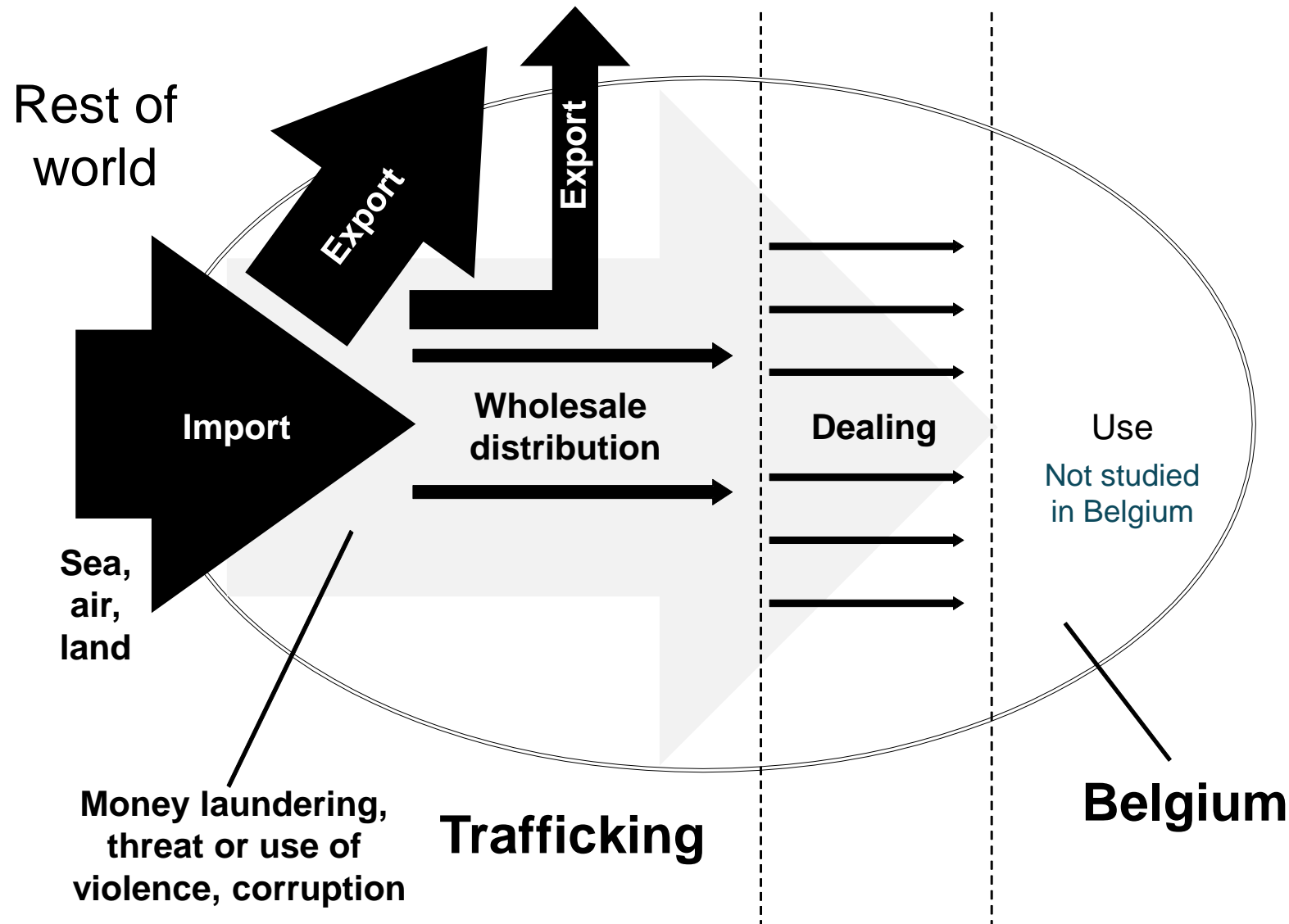
Partial framework application

- Includes trafficking, dealing, money laundering, violence, and corruption
- Excludes drug use
- Limited to harms accruing in Belgium
- Relies more heavily on available data

Conducted script analysis preliminary to full application

Still working with scientific literature, official reports and statistics, and media, but fewer interviews and no case records

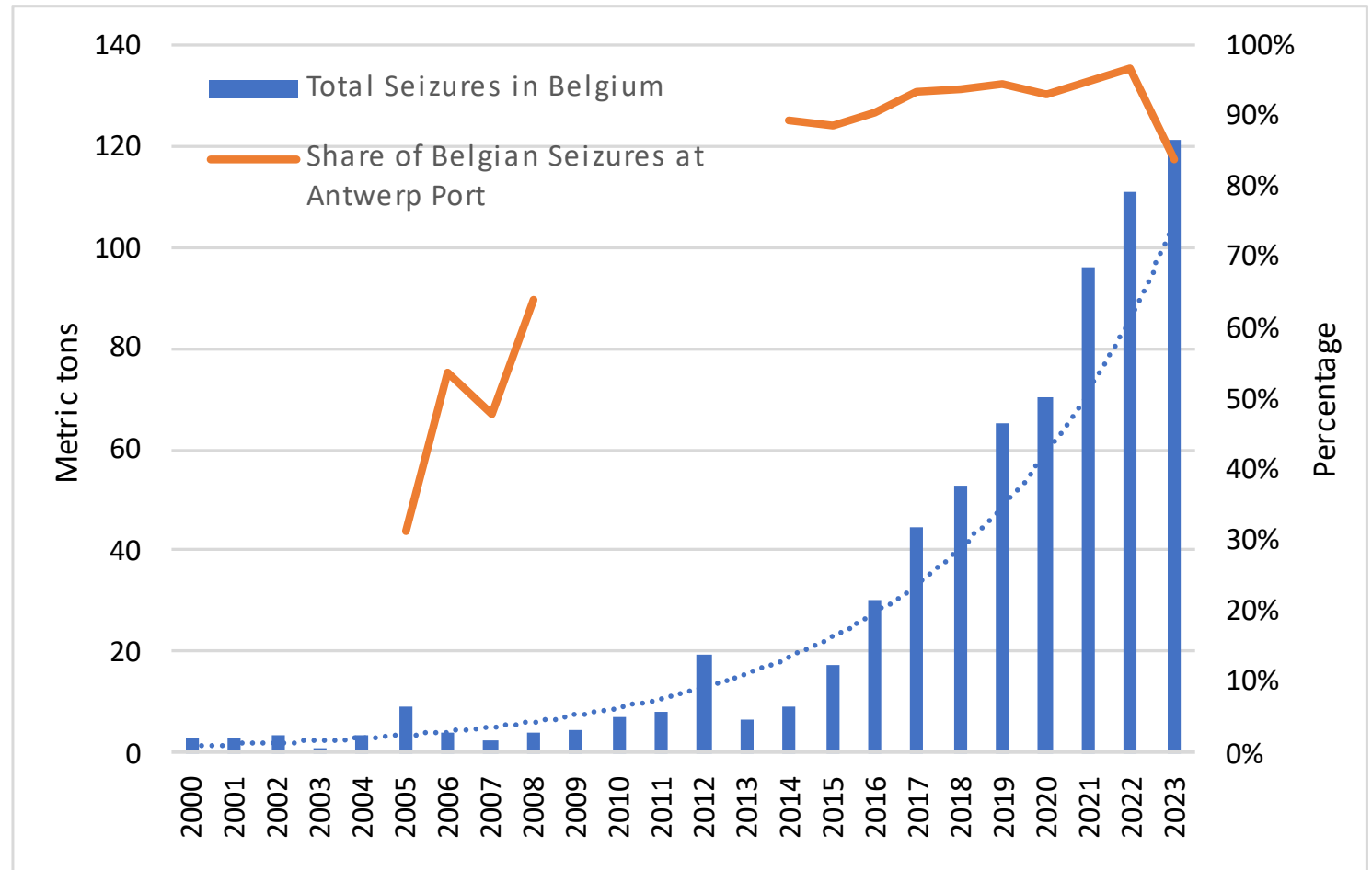
Broad contours of script remain intact but...



- Trade flows have increased dramatically
- Some important “particulars” have changed, regarding modes of transit and the scope and intensity of damages

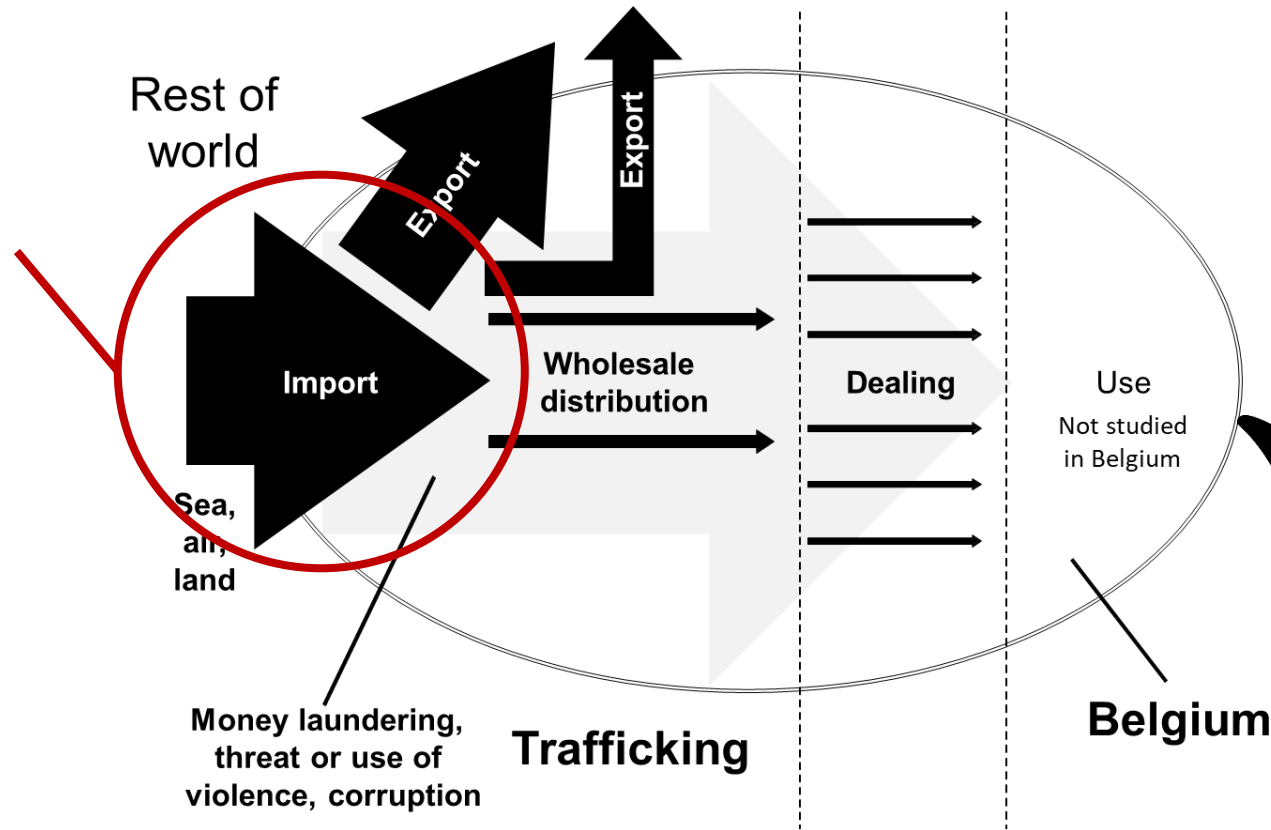
Trade flows have increased dramatically

- Seizures in Belgium have grown from less than 5-10 tons per year in the early 2000s to well-over 100 tons currently
 - Global cocaine production has surged
 - Antwerp is the 2nd largest European port, a main entry point for all Latin American goods, and especially hard to control



Sea routes now dominate trade...

- Cocaine enters Belgium mainly through Port of Antwerp
 - About 2/3's of seizures in early 2000s
 - More than 90% in most recent years

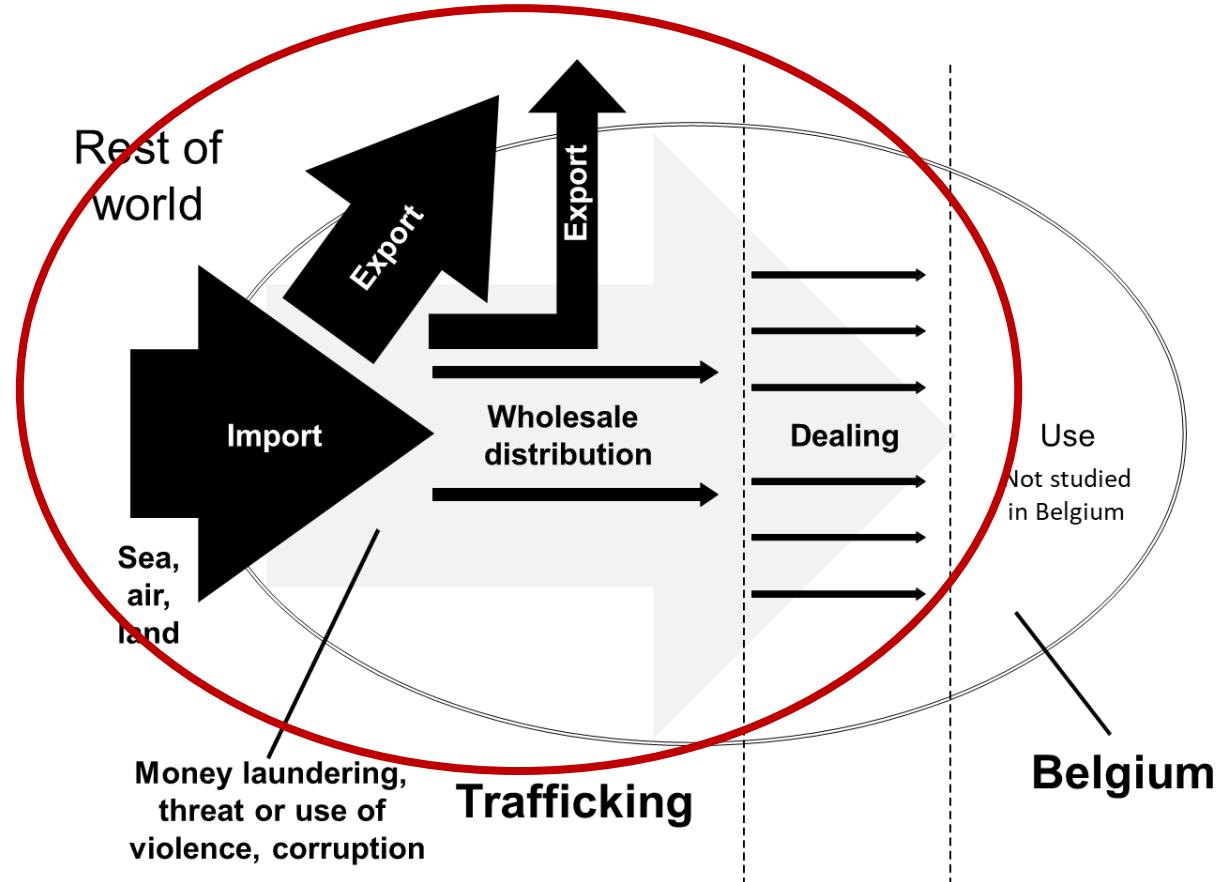


- ✓ ■ Trafficking to/from other markets occurs over land with uncertain dimensions
- ✓ ■ Large shipments cut and re-packaged, often in NL, for onward distribution

... with local “drug barons”
and stronger ties to criminal networks in source countries

Violence has escalated with wider range of consequences to more and different bearers

- Most victims are still perpetrators, but violence is
 - more frequent
 - less tethered to immediate transactions
 - more often entailing “lethal force” and targeting people and property



- Law enforcement, other officials, bystanders, and businesses face new risks, e.g.,
 - crossfire
 - arson
 - explosions
- Communities feel greater pain

Violence has escalated with wider range of consequences to more and different bearers

- Up to 20 homicides associated with cocaine trafficking/dealing in Belgium in 2013-23
 - v. 162 homicides reported in Belgium in 2023 alone
- Most victims are still perpetrators, but violence is
 - more frequent
 - more often entailing “lethal force” and targeting people and property

Episodes do not necessarily involve fatalities or acute damage, but both have increased

Evidence on drug-related violence in/close to Antwerp, 2015 to mid-2024 cumulative

Episode	Number
Victims of murder/ manslaughter	6* ^Δ
Victims of non-fatal shootings	13*
Victims of kidnappings	5*
Arsons, shootings, explosions, targeting building exteriors or vehicles	210
Shootings and explosions on public roads	4*

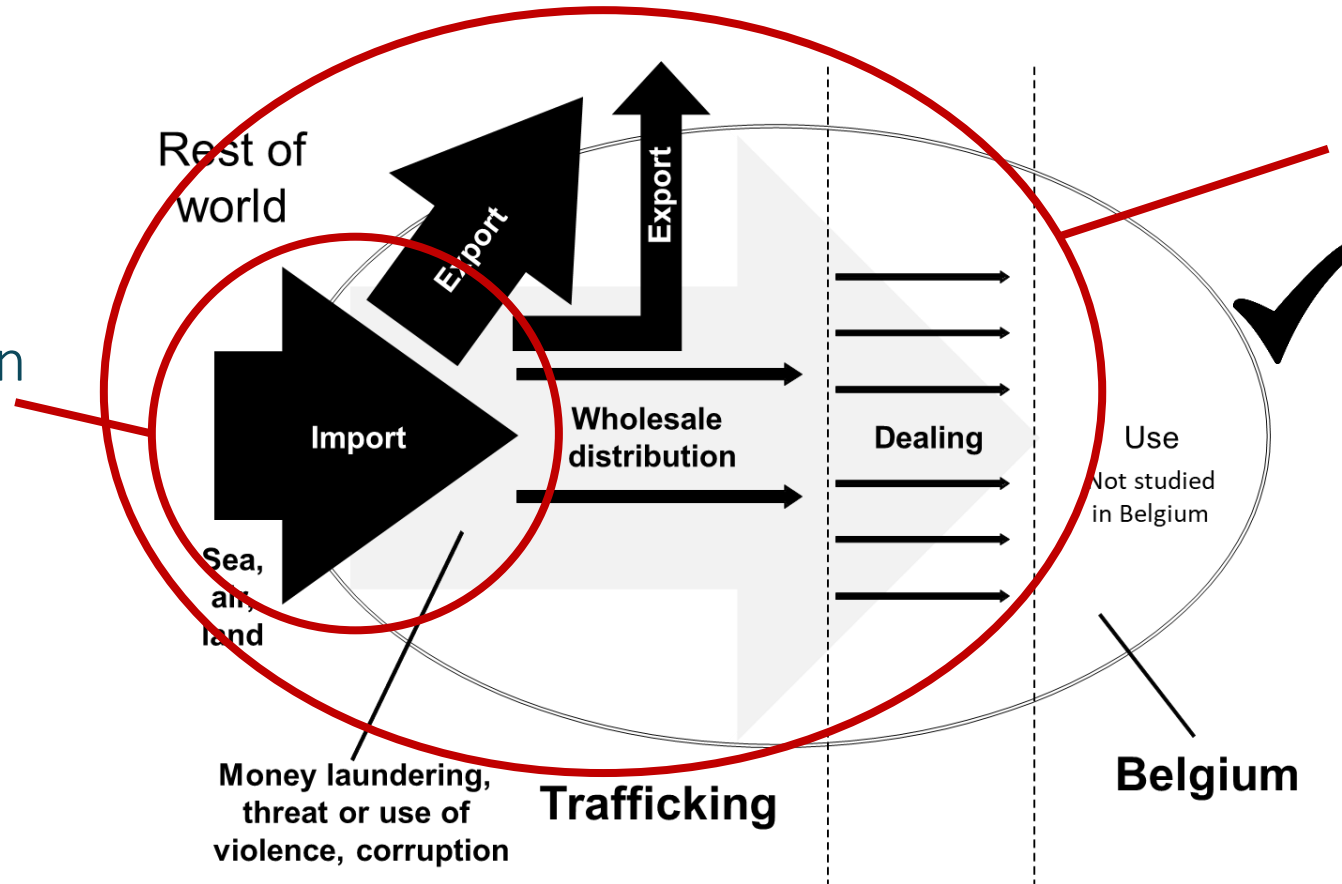
Source: *Het Nieuwsblad*, our elaboration.

*no clear trend in annual data

^Δ of which two in the Netherlands

Corruption still takes backseat

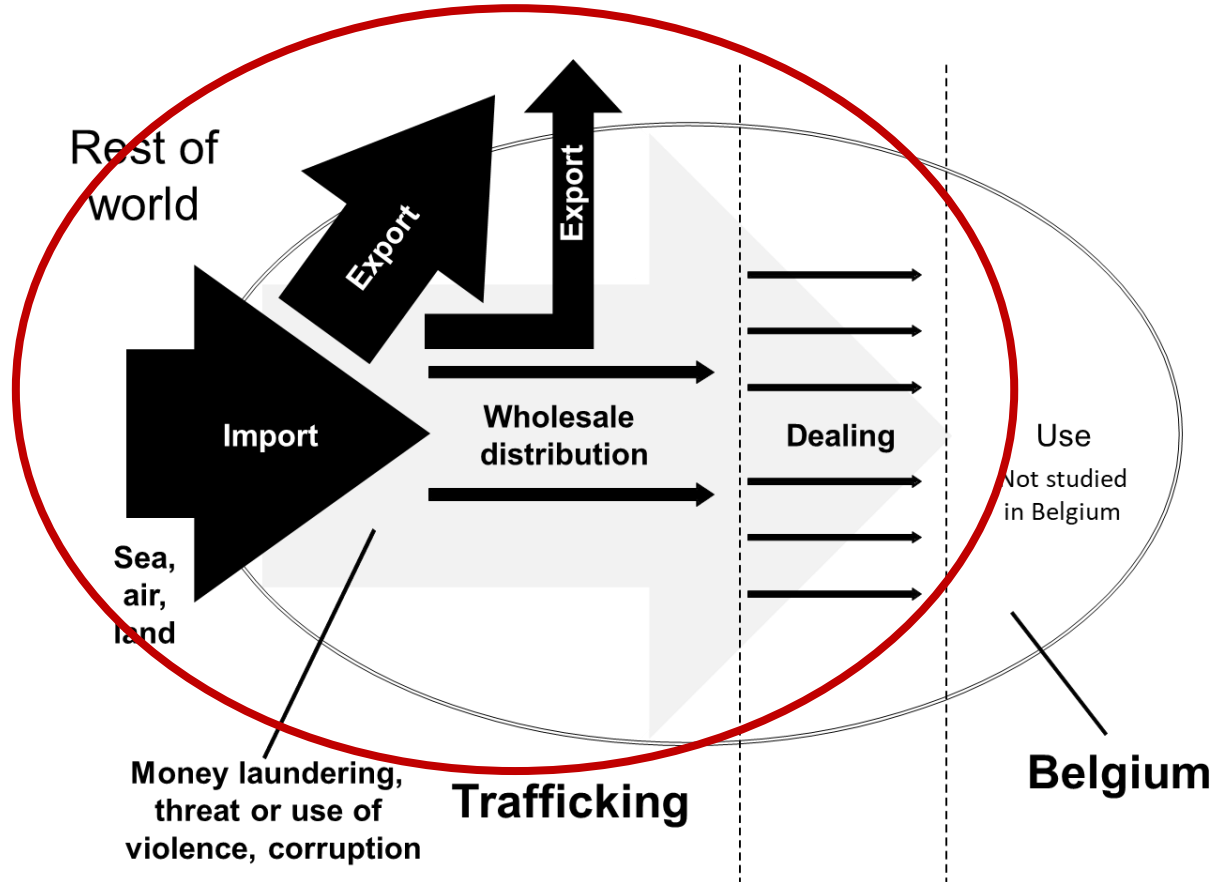
- Low-level corruption in the logistics sector occurs more often than it did in the past



- Corruption among public officials has also expanded slightly, but still unusual
- No indication of systemic corruption

Money laundering looks much as it did

- ✓ Revenue from cocaine trafficking and related activities amount to a larger, but still very small share of the Belgian economy, despite dramatically larger trade flows



- ✓ Revenues largely stashed in Belgium, but also
 - spent on luxury goods and lifestyles,
 - smuggled out of the country, or less typically
 - laundered through real estate, small businesses, and investments

New analysis suggests causes for concern but still departs from popular wisdom

Causes for concern

- Trade flows have increased dramatically
 - Cocaine availability, too
- Violence affects broader range of victims with more varied consequences
 - Perpetrators
 - Law enforcement and other government officials
 - Bystanders, businesses, and communities, especially concentrated in certain neighborhoods

Departures from popular wisdom

- Violence has not increased as dramatically as trade flows
- Nothing in script suggests an impending “narco-state”
 - No evidence of systemic corruption
 - No evidence of strategically-oriented or economically significant money laundering
- Most violence-related harms *may* still reflect policy choices

NEW ANALYSIS SUGGESTS CAUSES FOR CONCERN BUT STILL DEPARTS FROM POPULAR WISDOM

Causes for concern

- Trade flows have increased dramatically
- Violence affects broader range of victims with more varied consequences
 - Perpetrators
 - Law enforcement and other government officials
 - Bystanders, businesses, and communities, especially concentrated in certain neighborhoods

Overall picture is worse than in early 2000s

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Findings today are different from, but surprisingly similar to those of early 2000s

- Belgium is still a major transhipper, but looking more like a hub and with closer ties to international criminal networks
- Violence is still main source of harm, but more intense and with non-perpetrators, property, and local communities at risk
- Corruption and money laundering still play minor roles in narrative
- Some differences are jarring and demand our and the policy community's sustained attention, arguing for
 - full harm assessment and additional data collection,
 - Better understanding of the causes of harm, especially from violence
 - Analysis of hacked encrypted communication data (e.g., Sky ECC) is promising option

Policy implications

- Findings show resilience and integrity of Belgian society and state institutions
 - Harms have not “kept pace” with trafficking
- But they also point to limits of contribution of enforcement to supply reduction
 - Belgium alone has yearly seized more than half of cocaine consumed in EU (96 v. 154 tons in 2021), but cocaine availability has grown
- If violence generates most harms associated with drug trafficking, better data is needed
- Systematic and empirical harm assessment of multiple organized crime activities would provide stronger evidentiary base for priorities at local, national and EU levels