



Ethnic profiling of organised crime? A tendency of mafia-cation in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article will explore how the current narratives (and corresponding changes) in Dutch organised crime policing relate to ethnic profiling of minorities in the Netherlands. It will do so by developing a theoretically informed narrative understanding of what we would like to conceptualise as ethnic profiling of organised crime (in the Netherlands), digging deeper into the connection between the role of ethnicity in organised crime studies inasmuch as it relates to the history of the mafia concept and, even further, lingering colonialism in law-and-order approaches. By focusing on (assumed) socio-historical connections between Italy, mafia and organised crime and on the social construction of Italian mafia as organised crime, based on narrative criminology, this article discursively and interpretatively understands the dominant and hidden Dutch narratives on (policing) organised crime. The discovered narratives will be critically discussed in light of the juxtaposition between mafias and ethnic organised crime and post-colonial implications.

Keywords Organised crime · Mafia-cation · Ethnic profiling · Policing · Narrative criminology

Introduction

On the 6th of July 2021 journalist Peter R. de Vries was shot in Amsterdam; he died in hospital on the 15th of July. The murder provoked a shockwave of reactions in the Netherlands; it represented the tipping point of a series of events and gangland-style murders—including the murder of a lawyer, Derk Wiersum, on the 18 September

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2019—that in the words of the Minister of Justice and Security at the time, Ferd Grapperhaus, were a clear sign that “*Organised crime has crossed a line*” (Loudis 2022). What that line was is still unclear, but surely this war-on-organised-crime declaration was the start of a new approach of the Dutch state against organised crime, its violence and also its structures, in addition to its commodities and illicit activities.

One of the most obvious products of the alarm that these two murders elicited is the media and police-fuelled narrative around the Netherlands as a ‘narco-state’.¹ Typical characteristics of a narco-state, according to news comments, are violence on the one hand, and an economy severely affected by illicit trade, on the other hand. Crucially, according to the *Guardian*,² the mayors of the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam warned about of a “*culture of crime and violence that is gradually acquiring Italian traits.*” This allusion to Italy is supposed to consolidate a reference to impressive amounts of seized drugs in the port of Rotterdam, the violence that led to killings of both a lawyer and a journalist, the rise of the so-called ‘Mocro-mafia’ in the cocaine trade, and the attractiveness of the Dutch economy for money laundering. While arguably comments and reactions to high (perceived) levels of crime and violence are often characterised by emotional, hyperbolic, and/or extreme references (Reiner et al. 2000), the Dutch allusion to ‘Italian traits’ begs the question to which extent this recalls a certain rhetoric of mafias and how this may be leading to ethnic profiling of organised crime in the Netherlands. That the reference to ‘Italian traits’ implies more than it is acknowledged *prima facie*, is also exemplified by Dutch authorities seeking to learn from the Italian experience and organising a symposium for law enforcement³ titled the Italian Approach, bekng a renewed focus on Italian mafias in the Netherlands peaking in 2015 and still ongoing (Spapens 2019). In fact, recently, the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security, Dilan Yesilgöz, the head of the Dutch National Crime Division, Andy Kraag, and other higher-ups in Dutch policing attended a conference on the Italian Mafia Approach in October 2022. The Anti-Mafia Team (AMT) was praised for their use of crown witnesses and how it combats (organised) criminal activities in prisons.

The current Dutch ‘war’ on the narco-state (with reference to drug-related violence and increased laundering of proceeds of crime) and on the ‘Mocro-mafia’ (as a nebulous aggregation of individuals with Moroccan descent specialising in trafficking of cocaine and other narcotics) might reveal a risk of what we call *mafia-cation* of the fight of organised crime in the country, which requires observers to critically go back to the basics of the mafia and anti-mafia strategies. We call mafia-cation the process first observed by Sergi (2017) when a script in policy and policing narratives appears: organised crime is seen as serious and sophisticated crime *because* it

¹ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50821542>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/03/mob-style-killings-shock-netherlands-into-fighting-descent-into-narco-state>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/19/netherlands-narco-state-dutch-lawyer-murder-fear-fury>; <https://unherd.com/2022/03/how-the-netherlands-became-a-narco-state/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/03/mob-style-killings-shock-netherlands-into-fighting-descent-into-narco-state>

³ <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/1996633dbb79d9afc637360341>

crosses borders; in crossing borders, organised crime groups become ‘mafias’ when they are characterised by bonds of ethnicity and/or culture. This, in turn, influences the perceived key role that ethnicity has for the success of criminal groups. Mafiation is the result of the juxtaposition between ethnic organised crime and serious organised crime (that usually is serious because it crosses borders). Albanese (1996) rightfully noticed that a deterministic focus on ethnicity often disregards the causes and prevention of criminal opportunities and the crimes themselves. Attributing a deterministic role to ethnicity in organised crime is a form of ethnicity trap (Morselli et al. 2011): the ethnicity trap is the tendency to over-rely on ethnic profiling in organised crime policing as if ethnic bonds were prescriptive of certain behaviours and interconnections. The ethnicity trap has been repeatedly found at the core of many shortcomings in policing and law enforcement approaches to (Italian) mafias outside of Italy (Sergi 2022; Sergi and Rizzuti 2022).

Hence, in this contribution, we shall provide the theoretical ingredients to explore to what extent current Dutch organised crime policing risks to fall into an ethnicity trap when profiling minorities in the Netherlands in connection to organised crime. This implies, first, exploring the connection between the role of ethnicity in the history of the mafia concept specifically linked to mafia internationalisation and ethnic labelling; afterwards we’ll consider the theoretical underpinning of ethnic profiling in policing in the Netherlands; third, we’ll need to consider lingering colonialism in law-and-order approaches in the country to be able to sketch the risk profiles of the current Dutch countering strategy to organised crime.

Interpreting Italian mafias

Italian organised crime, almost exclusively intended as mafia-type organised crime, is often considered the archetype of organised crime in the West (Paoli 2002; von Lampe 2016). Italy suffered violence on the hands of Sicilian Cosa nostra, Calabrian ‘ndrangheta, and Campanian camorra groups between the 1970s and the 1990s, terror-like fear with the so-called excellent murders (murders of high-profile professional) like iconic Italian heroes Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino killed by Cosa nostra in 1992, which were followed by bombs denoted in Florence, Rome and Milan in 1993. Violence and fear were indeed associated to Italian mafias right when the Maastricht Treaty founding the European Union was signed in 1993.

By referencing the Italian traits of the violence experienced in the Netherlands, therefore, the door was opened not only for recollection of an Italian-like crime problem, but also of an Italian approach to it. The Italian approach to organised crime – almost exclusively developed around the anti-mafia strategy – has been long considered as one of the best practices in Europe and beyond (Vigna 2006; Balsamo 2016; Sergi and Rizzuti 2022). The primate of the Italian state in the fight against organised crime is a mix between competence and reaction. In reaction to the violence of the 1990s, the Italian state accelerated a process of renovation of the anti-mafia, anti-organised crime system that Judge Giovanni Falcone had envisioned and started before he died, made of specialised police and prosecutors, ad-hoc legislation to support anti-mafia criminal laws and of course increased knowledge of the

mafia phenomenon. Cause and effect of the Italian primate in fighting mafias and organised crime is also a negative pride (Sergi 2017) that Italy exhibits – and the world recognises—when it comes to both its mafias and its anti-mafia.

In criminological studies, mafias are those groups that are involved in illicit profit making (including trading and producing) as well as in power seeking activities (including extra-legal governance) (Varese 2020). A tension between power and profit (Sergi 2017) intended as enterprise vs power (Block 1980), and the ‘will to power’ exhibited by mafia groups (Paoli 2002) are indeed part of the mafia definition. Moreover, Paoli (2020) has designed a framework that helps to identify the traits of mafia groups, included, but not limited to, the multifunctionality of activities, the ability to cross from upperworld to underworld, extra-legal control of territory, and so on.

The concept of mafias has a bifurcate evolution. At the international level, and for policy and policing purposes, the concept of mafias has not been shaped by the Italian approach, but rather by the American definition of the mafia phenomenon (Jacobs and Dondlinger Wyman 2014; Beare and Woodiwiss 2014). Since the 1950s and until the early 1990s (when federal and national law enforcement recorded their most visible success against this type of organised crime) the debate on what mafia was in the United States had two (more or less) clear positions. On the one hand mafias were equated with Italian organised crime and therefore assumed to be an ‘ethnic’ crime problem (Cressey 1969): this fuelled critiques of ‘alien conspiracy theory’ and xenophobia (Lupo 2009). On the other hand, more forward-thinking scholars (Smith 1975; Albin 1971; Reuter 1983) kept pushing for a business approach to mafias, as criminal enterprises, independent of ethnicity but with characterising ‘traditional’ traits such as hierarchy, *familiness* and a certain patterns of activities (Jacobs et al. 1994).

Both strands of this debate are still visible and have their legacies in both the European approach to organised crime (Carrapico 2014; Sergi and Rizzuti 2022) and in the North American one (Albanese 2014). On one side the concept of mafias is linked to the concept of ‘traditional organised crime’ which still informs policing perspectives around the world. Primarily modelled on a vague understanding of, and reference to, Italian criminal groups, the expression ‘traditional’ organised crime and ‘ethnic’ organised crime have overlapped, in the USA as much as in Canada (Albanese 2014; Woodiwiss 2015a; Sergi and Storti 2020). In fact, Italian organised crime/mafia became ‘traditional’ organised crime; as traditional organised crime was also qualified as ‘ethnic’; the juxtaposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘ethnicity’ became the norm (Sheptycki 2003; Sergi 2018). The paradigm of traditional organised crime as ethnic organised crime is flawed. In fact, it can be argued that the juxtaposition of ethnicity and tradition in mafia discourses is a by-product of alien conspiracy theories that, since the beginning of last century, did not account for the effects that marginalisation and deprivation had on the integration of migrant groups (Arsovska 2016). The relationship among crimes for profits, crimes for power, migration and ethnicity remains at the core of the problematic notion of traditional organised crime, serious organised crime, and that of mafias.

Mafia mobility, ethnicity and mafia-cation

The arsenal of countering activities against ‘the Mob’, intended as ‘traditional’ and ‘ethnic’ organised crime, has shaped policies and policing against both mafias beyond the US as the quintessential form of organised crime (Jacobs et al. 1994; Woodiwiss 2015b; Beare 1996; Schneider 2004). On the other side, the focus on criminal enterprises, in opposition and alternative to the ethnicity of mafias, still has an echo in the criminalisation of organised crime as serious enterprise group criminality (Sergi 2017) but also in the approach to the migration of mafias and criminal groups (Lupo 2002). The result is that mafias (as traditional and ethnic organised crime groups) and serious enterprise crimes also come to overlap.

In fact, the mobility of criminal groups is arguably as much a sub-product of globalisation as it is an effect of capitalism (Morselli et al. 2011; Ruggiero 1985). It does come from a conceptualisation of organised crime, including mafias, as enterprise criminality. When organised criminal activities are linked to groups of migrants, which are often considered ethnic groups (Sergi and Storti 2020) – or minorities abroad – questions naturally arise about the similarity or difference between these activities and those committed by these groups in their homeland (Arsovska 2016). A tendency to equate migrant/mobile and ethnic organised crime with mafias has clearly emerged in past years (Sergi 2022; Arsovska 2021; Sergi and Rizzuti 2022). In a simplistic way, common ethnicity is often identified as a determining element of mafia mobility, albeit critically so (Morselli et al. 2011) but, at the same time, mobility of criminal groups is a product of capitalism and entrepreneurialism (Calderoni et al. 2016). Additionally, the transnational character of criminal mobility has raised the bar of the *seriousness* of these groups as threats to national security (Carrapico 2014). Ultimately, the equation of mafias to serious (sophisticated, complex) criminality that moves cross-border is probably the main finding of research on mafias in Europe (Sergi and Rizzuti 2022).

In the on-going debate between ethnicity and enterprise in organised crime studies, operationalisations of concepts can become blurry. As said, Morselli et al. (2011) have highlighted how the attribution of organised crime to a group of immigrants can trigger the so-called ‘ethnicity trap’, the belief that ethnicity is a *determinant* of organised crime. This often represents an attempt, more or less aware/intentional, of the host society to preserve an ideal of itself as virtuous and non-criminal (Luconi 2007). As indicated above, in reaction to the ethnicity trap, scholars have pushed for an interpretation of the mobility of criminal groups based on theories of economic deprivation and rational search of opportunities for the socio-economic rise of entire communities of migrants, which appear to be disadvantaged when abroad (Arsovska 2016; Morselli et al. 2011). Despite the numerous criticisms, however, echoes of the alien conspiracy, which triggers the ethnicity trap, remain particularly attractive, especially for some law enforcement agencies and analysts looking for easy answers to a complex phenomenon such as criminal mobility.

Given the difficulty to justify a focus openly on ethnicity as driver of crime at political level (as it leads to openly discriminatory policies difficult to justify), it is not uncommon that a discourse on mafias might emerge instead. Indeed, the

juxtaposition and fusion of concepts like alien conspiracy-ethnicity-mafia on the one hand, and criminal mobility-traditional organised crime-mafias on the other hand, have paved the way for a *descriptive* and *ascriptive* use of the term mafia to mean *ethnic organised crime that moves*, and is therefore considered more *serious* than others because it's *transnational* or multi-national (Sergi 2017), e.g., the Albanian mafia, the Chinese mafia, the Turkish mafia, and the 'Mocro' (Moroccan) mafia. What the term mafia has come to imply not only does not match what mafias are or can be, but also it completely overshadows other characteristics of these groups by ascribing them vague determinants that echo the ethnicity trap. As anticipated, we call this process mafia-cation, a process by which a country's policies and policing strategies against organised crime use a purposefully crafted link between the increased (or perceived) seriousness of the organised crime threat and the attribution of such seriousness to the presence – and scapegoating—of ethnic minorities. This is how an uncritical anti-mafia discourse falls into the ethnicity trap. Mafia-cation can be considered a process, a script, built up by three (often intersecting) steps:

- 1) A consolidating narrative on the seriousness of the threat of organised crime linked to the alarm caused by organised crime groups, their violence, their reach. This is often linked to murders outside the 'underworld' (e.g., lawyers, politicians, journalists) and to the reframing of organised crime as a national security threat (Sergi 2017).
- 2) A consolidating narrative on the links between an ethnic group and organised crime. This was the case for Italians in various countries but is also the case for other ethnicities in foreign countries (e.g., Albanians in the US and UK – Arsovska 2021).
- 3) Policing actors, usually those involved into high policing of complex criminality *ethnicise* organised crime in practice even if not officially or consciously (Sergi 2018).

We can also problematise this further: to what extent mafia-cation processes lead (or depend on) ethnic profiling in the policing and justice system?

Ethnic profiling in criminal justice and policing in the Netherlands

In February 2020, Amnesty International, along with two citizens and other organizations, filed a lawsuit against the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (KMar) for selecting individuals for border controls based on their appearance, skin colour, or ethnicity, which they argued constituted racial discrimination. On February 14, 2023, the court ruled in favour of Amnesty International, stating that the KMar's current practice is a form of racial discrimination and therefore prohibited. The court ordered the KMar to adjust their procedures immediately. The court also acknowledged that ethnic profiling leads to individuals feeling unaccepted and treated as second-class citizens (Amnesty International 2023).

The KMar cases is one of many examples in the Netherlands where it becomes clear that ethnic profiling by criminal justice and policing in the Netherlands has become more rule than exception (cf. Çankaya 2015; Huisman et al. 2017; Van der Woude and Van der Leun 2013).

According to Çankaya (2015), the police organization symbolically serves as border guards in the exclusion of marginalized citizens, primarily male migrants, in the neoliberal and racialized production of privileged and "white" spaces in the city. The police surveil and discipline ethnic minorities within the police organization and society, known as police surveillance of "race" and "ethnicity". Huisman et al. (2017) admit there is an overrepresentation of individuals with a non-Dutch appearance among those who are suspected and targeted by the police. This overrepresentation is not always objectively and reasonably justified, and individuals are often stopped based on their non-Dutch appearance. It depends largely on definitions, including those of the phenomenon itself, disproportionality, and objective and reasonable justifications. Moreover, there are (substantial) variances between regions and police teams. Van der Woude and Van der Leun (2013) argue that the dynamics of the Dutch security culture, with its specific focus on migrants, may have a catalyzing effect on ethnic profiling in the exercise of control powers. They suggest that police officers are faced with a difficult task within the Dutch cultural security complex. Discretionary powers have been expanded for more efficient enforcement, without systematic safeguards in the form of objective selection criteria or monitoring mechanisms, thereby increasing the likelihood of ethnic profiling. However, police officers are not passive pawns of societal change and modernity and can take responsibility for their actions and reflect on them. Police organisations have a duty to ensure that policies and procedures are in place to guide their members in the appropriate use of their power, the authors conclude.

It is important to consider the symbolic relevance of policing organised crime to target and exclude male migrants, while taking into account there might be different definitions that underpin such ethnic profiling of organised crime. Moreover, there might be a role of the Dutch security culture at play which may influence ethnic profiling of organised crime in the Netherlands which should be considered.

Notes on methods

This paper is mostly a theoretical contribution to read critically the current reality of policing organised crime in the Netherlands prior to further empirical work. However, to produce such a contribution, we have considered media and institutional resources to paint a contemporary picture of reality. We analysed media and institutional data through the lens of narrative criminology (Carrabine 2016; Maruna 2015; Presser and Sandberg 2015) whereby the stories in media and the discourse emerging from stories are constitutive of the reality we seek to analyse while it manifests itself.

This 'narrative turn' in criminology is based on the idea "*that the human being is fundamentally a storytelling creature*" (Maruna 2015: vii) and that crime can be understood narratively, including spoken, written and visual material, predominantly focusing on people's stories through interviews, fieldwork, diaries, documentary

archives, but also through people's own stories (Carrabine, 2016). The media analysis has proven to be a fluid but pragmatic approach (cf. Street and Farrell 2017), focusing on *"discovery and description, including search for underlying meanings, patterns, and processes, rather than mere quantity or numerical relationships between two or more variables,"* according to Altheide (2000: 290). Initially, the choice of media sources was based on Dutch quality newspaper reporting on organised crime (cf. Althoff 2018), which in turn says something about how the broader public is exposed to the reporting on organised crime. By analysing Dutch quality newspapers in this way, *"is a significant means of achieving understanding of society"* (Ericson et al. 1987: 15). We scored not so much based on keywords but looked at the content (cf. Altheide 2000; Althoff 2018; Ericson et al. 1987; Street and Farrell 2017).

In doing so, this contribution focused on narratives and discourses regarding policing organised crime in the Netherlands, specifically on the "things said", or the dominant narratives and the "things not said", or the ignored and slithering narratives. As this is mostly a theoretical piece, the empirical part of our work is imagined supporting the theoretical claims, especially focusing on supporting the risks of mafia-cation. In this sense, our analytical process was purposive and deductive. We aligned our methods to discursive research using open source and crowdsourced data on public perceptions deviance and crime (Gundur et al. 2021), and specifically to Kostakos' research (2018) on organised crime, mafia, and terrorism, who used *"disaggregated data from Google Trends and Twitter to gain theoretical insights"* (id. 282).

Using Google Trends ourselves to determine a relevant time range of Dutch public interest in 'narco-state (transl.: 'narcostaat' – red line) and 'mafia' (transl.: 'maffia' – blue line) as key search terms, which was from: from January 2018 until November 2022. It was since especially since February 2018 when both these key terms started to emerge as peaks – see following graph (Source: Google Trends 2022) (Fig. 1):

Following up on Sarno's comparative research on Italian mafias in Europe, specifically Spain, Germany and the Netherlands (2014), we made use of LexisNexis Uni (2022 – university version) and keyed in the same Dutch key terms and 2018–2022 time range to analyse media content, in order to examine and discover the prominent and not so prominent key discourses (see also: Lombardo 2010; Reiner 2007; 2000; Sheley and Ashkins 1981), or put differently, the dominant, ignored and slithering narratives on the 'narco-state' Netherlands. This eventually led to 132 publications, of which 103 newspaper articles in Dutch quality newspapers like De Volkskrant and Trouw, as well as popular press such as De Telegraaf; 20 web-based publications; 5 magazines & journals publications; and 2 undefined news items. They were scrutinised with the use of a qualitative, critical discourse analysis as has been done recently (Alexander et al. 2022), also regarding moral panics (Altheide 2009), as well as on British and German press articles on 'organised crime' (Young and Allum 2012). We enriched the analysis with relevant criminological literature and official (and publicly available) reports on organised crime. The following paragraph is a result of our critical discourse analysis.



Fig. 1 Google Trends - screenshot: key terms “narcostaat” and “maffia”

Two ‘narco-state’ Netherlands narratives

The dominant narrative: Mocco-mafia and the alarms of violence

As mentioned previously, the narratives on the Netherlands becoming a narco-state, and perhaps the first original narco-state (Eski 2021a, b), are becoming more widespread and normalised through media as well as political attention in the Netherlands connected to increasingly violent outbreaks of organised crime (Crijs and Van der Meij 2019; Roks et al. 2021). Whereas the murder of well-known crime reporter Peter R. de Vries and of criminal lawyer Derk Wiersum, have led to more serious concerns about the state of organised crime in the Netherlands, there have been more instances.

In September 2021, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte received heavy security after signals that he may be the target of an attack or kidnapping by organised crime. Apparently, ‘spotters’ are said to have been seen in his vicinity; people who explore how best to execute an attack or kidnapping. These spotters have been linked to the ‘Mocco-mafia’ and associated with the Marengo trial against the criminal organisation led by Ridouan Taghi (Van Oost and Charlotte Jansen 2021).

A year later, Rutte utters his worries about the threats made against Dutch Royal family member, Princess Amalia van Oranje who just started her studies at the University of Amsterdam: *“I am very sorry for her and of course I am also very concerned about it”*, he said. *“The threats are severe: she can no longer leave the house because of it”*, her father King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima announced, as reported by Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf (2022). Politicians followed the same line of expressing their worries. D66 chair, Jan Paternotte, spoke in shock and awe about the threats made against Princess Amalia:

“This is really bad. The crown princess - from whom our country will ask a lot in the future - cannot develop as a young person like any other Dutch person in peace and safety. [...] It goes against what we all want in this country. What is so beautiful about the Netherlands is that the prime minister goes to work by bicycle and the royal family is at the heart of society. If we want to become that country again, we have a lot of work to do” (id.).

Others spoke of being worried that Princess Amalia is not able anymore to go about her rather worryless student life; a life most of the Dutch students enjoy (id.).

The newspaper *De Telegraaf* itself has been vandalised, the day after it published the name of Ridouan Taghi, with an attack presumably executed by the outlaw motor gang (OMG) Caloh Wagoh that has, allegedly, ties with Taghi. That OMG is also responsible for the shooting of an office of the Dutch magazine *Panorama* (RTL Nieuws 2020). This all was received as a sign of increasing out-of-control violence in the streets linked to both Mocro-mafia and in general organised crime.

Other instances of the violent organised crime outbreaks relate to crown witness in the Marengo Trial, Nabil B. (who is Taghi’s brother), assassinated in 2018 and a public prosecutor, Koos Plooi, who was going to be assassinated as well (Westland 2019). Overall, the narrative of the violence linked to drugs at the hands of the Mocro Mafia, indicated – without much explanation of why as a cartel – has now become established also outside the Netherlands. As noticed, “*the Mocro Maffia uses violence to expand its reach into the cocaine market*” (ENACT 2023), which effectively places on the actors’ agency, rather than the nature of the activity (the prohibition that leads to the drug trade) the chief reason for the violence. This in turn raises the alarm. The term Mocro Mafia is internationalised also because of the phenomenon itself being international. Dennis G. (47), a Dutch national and alleged member of the Mocro Mafia has been arrested in the Dominican Republic by the National Police’s National Criminal Investigation Division (De Landelijke Recherche). He is accused of continuing the Mocro Mafia’s large-scale drug trafficking from South America. According to police sources, his arrest has resulted in the dismantling of almost the entire board of the Mocro Mafia (De Telegraaf 2023).

Next to the violent outbreaks of ‘Mocro Mafia’ organised crime in the Netherlands and elsewhere, (policing) responses are intensifying as well. Previous Minister of Justice & Security Ferd Grapperhaus initiated the Multidisciplinary Intervention Team (MIT) of ‘super-investigators’ that was supposed to be the newest, cutting-edge investigative unit to engage in a national fight against organised crime (Rijksoverheid 2019). It was a direct response to Derk Wiersum’s assassination that, however, apparently failed to deliver, while costing €900 million (De Koning and Tieleman 2022). The desperate need to do “something”, became clear in the continuation of a stripped-down version of the MIT, namely the National Cooperation against Undermining Crime (Nationale Samenwerking tegen Ondermijnende Criminaliteit (NSOC)) (Rijksoverheid 2022). MIT’s mixed results are the results of the challenges linked to “*developing a collaboration of organizations with substantially different tasks, objectives and cultures in combination with an innovation challenge takes time*”. Also, “*given the situation in the Netherlands, it is necessary to move to a model in which results are achieved and thus the added value becomes clear*” (Yesilgöz 2022: 1).

A clear escalation of the alarmist security discourse is in the judicial qualification of the two people who filmed the murder of Peter R. de Vries, Gerower M. (26) and Erickson O. (27): they are being prosecuted for murder with terrorist intent, the first charge of this kind brought forward in relation to fighting organised crime in the Netherlands (De Waal 2022). The idea that there is a form of narcoterrorism in the Netherlands is unprecedented, said professor of international and political history Beatrice de Graaf of Utrecht University (id.). The reason to prosecute them for a terroristic murder, has to do with the notion of how “[t]he rule of law has been deeply shaken by this murder” of Peter R. de Vries, the prosecutors argued, and that the filming was done to exactly do that: to shock and instil fear into the Dutch society, apparently (Vugts 2022a).

The other reaction to tackling organised crime in Netherlands, is to support legalisation of illegal drugs, such as cocaine, to end (and presumably win) the war on drugs. For example, and following the high-profile murders of Peter R. de Vries and Derk Wiersum Netherlands, Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema stated at a congress on organised crime in October 2022 that the "war on drugs" is not effective and hopes for a different approach to drug use (De Volkskrant 2022). A striking detail is how Peter R. de Vries himself has previously criticised the failing wars on drugs at home and abroad (Tuinstra 2021). However, this move toward possible drug legalisation in the Netherlands could be considered an expression of political-rhetorical exploitation of the attacks by organised crime, behind which may lie ideologies based on biased visions on drugs and drug policy (Eski 2021a, b).

The distorted narrative on the disposable army: young ‘extractors’ and corrupted dockers

As loud and dominant the narratives on ‘narco-state’ Netherlands and tackling it through tougher policing and/or instead, drug legalisation, as distorted is the narrative on how visible ‘drug criminals’ are dealt with. A narrative of demonisation of criminal perpetrators has emerged around groups of actors that can to an extent also be considered victims, about whom popular, media remains analytically unconcerned, or perhaps (wilfully) ignorant to.

One of the suspects, the shooter of Peter R. de Vries, is the now 22-year-old Delano G. from Rotterdam, a rapper with apparently some local name and fame (Vugts 2022b). He and other members of organised crime groups in the Netherlands are often only teenagers or young adults. They deal in drugs, observe/“spot” (for potential hits on targeted victims) and commit violent crimes. Interesting examples of such young delinquents are ‘the extractors’ (in Dutch: ‘uithalers’) who remove drugs from imported containers in the ports of Rotterdam (as well as Antwerp) (Colman 2018). They have been considered ‘eager’ young boys, aged on average between 19–34, sometimes even younger (in some cases even between 8 to 14–16 years old (see Bunskoek 2022; Catlender 2022)), and are part of larger ethnic minority groups in the Netherlands (Fijnaut 2019). They have been considered by the Public Prosecution Services “*an essential link in the logistics of the drug chain*”; without them there would be “*no drug trafficking, no poisoning, no subversion, no corruption and no violence*” (NOS 2022).

In the media, they are portrayed as seasoned criminal entrepreneurs, using advanced professional equipment of breaking in and out of port facilities and container terminals. There are so-called ‘hotelcontainers’, driven into the port area, from where the young extractors go to work at night (Van der Wal 2022). The fact that these hotelcontainers are very dangerous, became clear when on September 13, 2021, some ‘extractors’ have gotten out of breath, and had to be taken from the container on the Maasvlakte (a large area in the Port of Rotterdam). The extractors themselves called the alarm number 112, and after six emergency cars arrived, they were checked by paramedics and then arrested (Stolker 2021). Some other features mentioned in media about the extractors are that they are often repeat offenders and arrested multiple times (NOS 2022). They are confronted with police violence, like a 16- or 17-year-old boy who were stopped in Rotterdam by police that gave a warning shot (Crimesite 2022).

When apprehended, suspect ‘extractors’ fall under a new ‘extractor law’ since January 1, 2021 that allows for imprisonment of up to one year of those trespassing the port without a valid reason with a penalty of €2500 (NOS 2022). Before a trespasser would have received a €95 fine for entering prohibited areas. So far, the highest sentence was given to a 26-year-old: eleven months imprisonment. An extractor’s lawyer said that these are “*bizarrely high demands [...] I can’t help feeling that it’s mainly for show*” (id.). Another lawyer argued that there is not a strong legal basis for these high penalties.

What seems underplayed in media, is that these ‘extractors’ take great risks; although well paid, in case they want to quit, organised crime groups might not be too willing to let them go. If they continue, the risk of getting caught by police increases as well. Often young, easily manipulated, and even more easily replaced should they themselves be killed or caught, the extractors can fit into the definition of a disposable army (Sergi 2021) for organised crime groups in the Netherlands. The disposable army, when involving very young people, could imply the presence of ‘child soldiers’ even though such a step would need to consider and measure the ‘agency’ and capability of these young people to ‘choose’ or merely ‘obey’ to orders and higher powers. Indeed, whereas in places like Sierra Leone child soldiers were also drugged (by alcohol and other substances) and did things they may not have done otherwise (Betancourt et al. 2008; Maclure and Denov 2006) in the Dutch context the question of agency remains of course more nuanced. Young males in the organised crime disposable army in the narco-state Netherlands may be seduced by money, status, and respect, but also may be threatened in case they do not follow orders, or if they cooperate with justice and reveal details of the criminal venture – death of yourself or of your family and friends is a real risk (Bunskoek 2022; Gunneweg 2021). One extractor of cocaine told during his trial the following to the judge:

I am 26 years old; I am training in healthcare and I work as a hairdresser. I am a caregiver for my sick parents. I am fine and well brought up. It is my duty to take care of them. [...] Guys from the neighbourhood once helped me when I had a conflict. Later they came back to me. Now you do something for us, they said. I was told a week in advance: there and there you

have to be. I couldn't help it. They were tough guys. [...] Many young people have bad intentions. They have big cars and beautiful women. They do bad things (Laparlière 2022).

There is another group of 'soldiers', who, although adult and often in their (late) 30ies to 50ies, are considered as morally corrupt villains: the port worker, or dockers (Eski and Buijt 2017; Staring et al. 2019). They are often used for their access cards, know-how of the port facility and sometimes for taking the drugs out of the port. They are described as "*real drug criminals*" (Pentury and Bareman 2021) who are "*crucial for importing drugs*" (Opsporing Verzocht 2020). Organised crime "*tries everything to recruit port employees*", even "*having their own children educated to port employee*" (Oosterom 2021). However, what seems to lack emphasis in media, is the element of how...

...they [port employees] are asked to assist for which they receive money; [and] the second time, pictures of family, relatives, or friends are shown. For example, a father would be shown a photograph of his child at the school yard; this way a port employee is blackmailed by third parties (Eski and Buijt 2017: 373).

On the one hand, youngly recruited males, usually of foreign descent, and port employees in the Netherlands are vilified in media and are hardly understood as victims of organised crime. On the other hand, the Dutch narco-state 'mafia' is mediatised as (merely) consisting of 'Mocro-mafia' and drug importers. This dichotomy reveals a type of politics of policing organised crime that remains blind for deeper, historical, and sociocultural underpinnings of the contemporary status of organised crime in the Netherlands that shall be discussed in the following paragraph.

Discussion. Mafia-cation and 'ethnic' organised crime policing: between othering and colonialism

The process of mafia-cation in the Netherlands is already at play although not fully consolidated yet. The dominant – master – narrative on the seriousness of the threat of organised crime has coincided with the violence of 'external' murders (of lawyer Derk Wiersum and crime-reporter Peter R. de Vries). 'Ethnicisation' of the threat has emerged, with the focus on the so-called Mocro-mafia. The Mocro-mafia itself does not appear to be a mafia group in the specific sense of the word mafia, also according to the conceptualisations given above, nor does it appear to be the only group responsible for the (perceived) increase in organised crime activities associated to the drug trade. Indeed, research on cocaine trafficking in the Netherlands, and specifically on the role that logistics play through ports like Rotterdam and Amsterdam, shows the 'openness' of the market to a variety of actors looking for 'doors' (Roks et al. 2021; Eski and Buijt 2017). If this is visible, what is less visible is the consolidation of a policing approach following the consolidation of this master narrative.

In this mafia-cation process, the underlying power mechanism of othering is at work on a societal level (Said 1978), in which meaning is (re)created through (narrated) differences and oppositional representations, also in relation to the police/“criminal” and one’s own identity – the Self – and the other’s identity, or, the Other (Hall 1997b). To know your Self through the Other is a never-ending process of renegotiation in which power asymmetries are established between dominant Selves and dominated Others, especially in policing (cf. Eski 2016; Nijjar 2022; Pauls et al. 2023).

In this case in the Netherlands, the Dutch policing domain fighting organised crime consists of an ethnic majority that is predominantly represented by a white and male group; a group that is responsible for combatting organised crime by an ethnic minority that is predominantly represented as coloured and male. It is these differences that are narrated as such in media, as we have shown. These (narrated) majority and minority groups and their interplay, (re)affirm (unintendedly) a dominant white and male – and thus included—policing Self within Dutch society, in renegotiation with a dominated coloured and male – and thus excluded – policed Other. Policing organised crime and being policed as organised crime, therefore (re)creates an *excluded* and *dominated* ethnic minority (organised criminal) Other, ipso verso an *included* and *dominant* ethnic majority (policing) *Self*. In this sense, this Dutch War on Drugs reflects the War on Terror – being a covert war on meaninglessness – waged in the ports of Rotterdam and Hamburg, where policing actors (re)establish a counter-terrorist Self through an absent terrorist Other (Eski 2016). To an organised crime *Other* that finds in a ‘mafia’ (with its imprecise double-faced conceptualisation outside of Italy) an identifiable enemy, is opposed an anti-organised crime Self, which aligns with a sought-after anti-mafia professionalism, based on best practices from Italy (with all the issues that might come from policy transfers).

More research is needed to explore the ways in which the policing Self accepts (in The Netherlands), reiterates, and builds narratives on the ‘Mocro-mafia’, and members of criminal networks of Turkish and Moroccan descent. But the ignored, distorted, and slithering narratives on the ‘narco-state Netherlands’, the ‘young’ extractors, and the dockers, reveal something about the self-understanding of policing actors too. If organised crime is ethnicised as cause and effect of increased alarm, seriousness of the threat and securitisation of responses against a set of actors who are easy targets, then it follows that also the policing of organised crime is ethnicised, made serious and securitised. This has repercussions in practical terms. For example, in order to be seen as taking the ‘new’ threat seriously, policing authorities might invest a disproportioned amount of time and resources in gathering evidence against individuals who have been connected to the high-profile murders and drug cases, connected to the ‘Mocro-mafia’. This inevitably takes time and resources out of other investigations against the underlying drivers of organised crime. Indeed, when we look at the ‘extractors’ as ‘child soldiers’ of the Dutch underworld, then we will see that their work is indeed symptomatic of the problem of organised crime; it’s not the problem itself. As argued by Atkinson-Sheppard (2022) the issue with the children in the ‘disposable army’ of organised crime groups, it is not just about a matter of identifying

victims and perpetrators, but also needs to be linked to considerations of child labour and moral economy. They are not (only) offenders, but (also) victims of systemic economic faults.

As for previous research (Catino 2019; Sergi 2018; Sheptycki 2003), the ‘battle’ between ethnicity and enterprise in organised crime at the policing level loses the cultural element of organised crime. This means that the politics of policing organised crime fails to understand power dynamics across criminal groups of different ethnicities and cultures in a given context (in our case the Netherlands) before taking action, much like Reiner (2010) pointed out before on power, politics and policing in general. This means that law enforcement is required to deal with an increasingly multicultural and *transcultural* society, where organised crime is function-driven, not necessarily ethnic-driven.

Indeed, the ethnic composition of Dutch organised crime reflects the diversity of Dutch society in the same way in which the ethnic composition of Australian, Canadian and United States’ organised crime (with the emphasis placed historically on Italian offenders) was a product of ethnic tensions, discrimination practices, and different access to integration policies in increasingly diverse societies (Lupo 2002; Sergi 2022). This pushes us to go beyond the narratives and wonder about the underlying drivers of the ethnicity trap, the script of mafia-cation and the ethnicisation of policing organised crime in the Netherlands.

Literature has considered before how the (lack of) cultural capital of post-colonial immigrants from especially Suriname the Antilles, may have led to racist rejection of them by Dutch society (Van Amersfoort and Van Niekerk 2006). It has also considered a similar rejection of first generation Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants (Zorlu and Hartog 2001) and their second-generation offspring (Crul and Doornik 2003), a group with high unemployment rates and hit especially hard by discrimination in the labour market (id. 1039). Given these observations and our narrative analysis in this contribution, we suggest that the fact second and third generation immigrants of Turkish and Moroccan descent are considered to be involved in organised crime, and specifically within the so-called Moco-mafia ethnicity trap, might be the product of several years and decades of failed integration and post-colonial policies of the Netherlands.

When the mafia-cation script consolidates in public debate and in the politics of organised crime policing, through narratives, a post-colonial approach emerges and should be further explored and advanced. However, the challenges of policing organised crime today as we have discussed them so far within these frameworks, are not only peculiar to the Dutch context. We see the seeds of such controversies, and the mafia-cation script at play in the UK (with the so called ‘Albanian mafia’) and in Germany with the focus on clan-based criminality linked to Arab minorities (von Lampe 2022). The trinomial juxtaposition between organised crime, ethnicity, and mafia and the underlying meaning of such juxtaposition to signify seriousness, transnationality and therefore calls for securitisation, needs further research in different national contexts. In increasingly cosmopolitan contexts of aspired tolerance, equality, and diversity, where intergenerational clashes shape and force societies to change, an inclusive discourse on migrant communities’ transcultural identities, on cultural and economic integration, and on how such identities are not the root causes for organised crime to exist, should remain the priority of any country that declares itself ‘tough’ on crime and on the causes of crime.

Declarations

Informed consent No human participants have been involved in this research, hence no informed consent was necessary.

Human and animal rights No animals were involved in this research.

Conflicts of interest There are no potential conflicts of interest (financial or non-financial).

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