

Summary

Exploratory study into contract killings by organized crime groups

The Netherlands has seen a series of violent contract killings by organised crime groups in recent years. While contract killings are by no means new to the Netherlands (with around twenty to thirty cases a year over the last few decades), there is reason to believe that the nature of the killings has changed. Insight into the phenomenon itself and any changes that it may have gone through, however, is currently fragmented, and the policy department of the Ministry of Security and Justice expressed the need for an overview of the available knowledge. The Research and Documentation Centre (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*, WODC) was asked to perform an exploratory study into the subject. As such, we have taken stock of what knowledge is available on the subject on the 'shop floor' – among police-officers and public prosecutors - who are charged with investigation and prosecution of contract killings and, in that capacity, have accrued knowledge on the subject. This report sets out the results of that exploration.

The key question of this exploratory study was as follows:

What recent developments can be identified in relation to the phenomenon of contract killings by organised crime groups, according to key informants of the police and the Public Prosecution Service?

For recent developments, we have looked at motives and the background of contract killings, the composition of groups of offenders, the modus operandi and how those killings are facilitated.

For this exploratory study, we have interviewed twelve key informants: police officers and public prosecutors who have knowledge about contract killings due to the nature of their work. Furthermore, we have studied three internal police reports based mainly on operational investigative information, and consulted various public journalistic sources. All information was gathered between April 2016 and November 2016.

This exploratory study is not an analysis of 'hard' empirical material; it is exploratory in nature and is mainly based on the knowledge, experience and estimates of police-officers and public prosecutors who are charged with investigation and prosecution of contract killings.

Findings

According to key informants, contract killings within organised crime are usually a result of conflicts related to drug trafficking. They say it is virtually always about money and control of the drug market. Failure to pay or deliver often leads to threats, kidnappings, arson or assault. Killings are a last resort that is used to end the conflict. In addition to being used as an instrument for 'compensation', murdering serve as a means of punishment, intimidation and solidifying one's position within the market. Sometimes the perpetrators kill out of precaution, to prevent becoming a target themselves. Contract killings often lead to feuds and

cycles of revenge with multiple casualties on both sides. Finally, contract killings are also used as a means of silencing witnesses ('silence by killing').

The underlying motives for contract killings within organised crime targeted shootings have hardly changed over time, according to the key informants interviewed in the course of this study. There has, however, been an increase in the number of players on the drug market; the number of people involved in drug trafficking seems to have grown. At the same time, several of the major players from the 'Dutch networks' have been arrested or killed, and new players have taken their place. Interviewees felt that these developments lead to unrest, shifts in the power balance and all the conflicts that come along with that. While this has not resulted in an increase in contract killings, it may have changed the composition and the tactics of the groups involved.

Tasks are still divided between client, murder broker and hitman, but the threshold for killings seems to be lower now than it has been, say the interviewees. They have the impression that the number of people in the Netherlands willing to commit a murder in exchange for payment has increased. The hitmen are increasingly home grown. There is also the impression that they are generally younger nowadays, between 20 and 25. As a result, the age at which the hitmen themselves die is presumably also lower, as these (often young) suspects are often targeted themselves.

Changes in modus operandi identified by key informants are most evident in the preparatory and implementation phases of contract killings. Interviewees state that the availability of heavy automatic firearms has increased. The use of these weapons in the Netherlands is not a new phenomenon, but it seems to have become the 'standard' for contract killings. However, these fully automatic weapons require a certain level of skill, which is something that quite a lot of 'new' hitmen in the Netherlands do not seem to possess. According to the interviewees, they are not used to handling such weapons and have to fire off multiple rounds before successfully hitting their mark. Partly due to that lack of experience, the executors often perform their task in a crude and sloppy way, taking for granted any collateral damage they cause. This trend is mostly observed in shootings that are committed by a new generation of cocaine dealers. However, caravan dwellers and outlaw motor cycle gangs have also exhibited more excessive violence in contract killing shootings over the past few years.

Conversely, as far as the preparations for these killings are concerned, key informants detect a process of specialisation and professionalisation. Nowadays, there are specialised groups that assume the role of murder broker and take care of any preparatory action as a group. Key informants said that preparing for killings has become a business in its own right, a sector with specialists (individuals and groups) who can make a lot of money in little time. They use professional ICT equipment to keep track of potential victims. So-called 'scouts' copy modern-day tailing and observation strategies used by the police, and suppliers of the necessary espionage equipment now play an important part in the preparatory stage. Traces left by the offenders are erased in anticipation of new or established observational techniques used by the police. Criminal groups that prepare killings actively thwart the use of espionage equipment by sweeping cars and residences. A number of facilitating (car) companies actually offer such sweeping services. Another common method to erase digital traces is the use of specially prepared PGP phones and falsifying the number plates of stolen cars.

Based on the information we have collected, the picture that emerges from this report is that the availability of new groups of hitmen and new resources has led to a number of changes in modus operandi for contract killings within organised crime. On the one hand, there is a process of professionalisation when it comes to methods of observation and counter-strategies, which involves the use of the latest technological resources and active anticipation of techniques employed by the police. The digitisation of resources and traces plays a significant part in this. On the other hand, the perpetrators are resorting to much coarser methods for the actual killings. This may be attributed to the abundance of heavy firearms available in the Netherlands and of new inexperienced home-grown hitmen, who are willing to kill in exchange for payment. In practice, this combination of coarseness, clumsiness and professionalism means that, despite investing in professional digital counter-measures, groups of offenders often still leave (physical or other) traces. Contract killings are a form of physical violence and, as such, require physical action. While the coarse and clumsy methods do lead to safety risks, they also create new opportunities to track the offenders.