

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Public-Private Partnership in Policing: Experiences from Within the Belgian and Dutch Security Industry



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**Abstract** After the initial outbreak of a novel coronavirus was reported in March 2020, the European private security sector emphasized its essential role in dealing with the crisis, and in enforcing health and safety measures alongside the public police sector. The crisis, as was stated by the Confederation of European Security Services (Better recognition of private security for safe and secure economic recovery in the COVID-19 situation. Position paper, 2020b), “*proved the important character of private security*”. However, most research has hitherto been carried out on the involvement of the public law enforcement agencies, with particular reference to policing the Coronavirus outbreak. Notwithstanding the private security sector actively highlighted its relevance, little is known about the actual role of the private security sector throughout the several stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. This contribution describes how the security industry emphasized its support in monitoring measures of public health, safety and social and economic recovery, by focusing on developments in two European countries: Belgium and the Netherlands. In particular, the chapter will explore private sector involvement in the protection of vaccination centres in the two countries. Research data are drawn from three main sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with representatives from the private security industry, public officials, policy makers and police officers; (2) (policy) documents and reports on COVID-19 from both public and private agencies; (3) legislation (e.g., on private security and civil safety). The findings of this chapter will make an important contribution to the fields of public and private security, public-private cooperation and crisis management.

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## Abbreviations

APROSER	Asociación Profesional de Compañías Privadas de Servicios de Seguridad
BVBO	Beroepsvereniging van Bewakingsondernemingen
BDSW	Bundesverband der Sicherheitswirtschaft e.V.
BSIA	British Security Industry Association
CoESS	Confederation of European Security Services
NHO	Service og Handel
NV	De Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche
PPP	Public-private partnership

## 1 Introduction

Throughout several stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the Confederation of European Security Services (CoESS) emphasized the function and advantages of private security to ensure compliance with measures of public health and safety and support the recovery of the social and economic life. From the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization urged European governments on different occasions to reach out to the private sector for enhanced partnership support in policing the crisis:

Cooperation and exchange of information are crucial, and CoESS' national associations stand ready for an enhanced public-private partnership in these challenging times and to discuss a common way forward with competent authorities in the Member States (CoESS, 2020a)

The private sector's aim to enhance coordination between state and non-state agencies was certainly not new. In the years preceding the COVID-19 crisis, the European and national security industries had regularly emphasized the benefits of a close public-private cooperation for the security and protection of, amongst others, critical infrastructures (CoESS, 2016; BVBO, 2011). However, (security) crises have been mostly regarded by the industry – and governments – as key moments when private security could be called upon. In such moments, the state, local governments, the police and the security industry have been increasingly looking at the creation of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to tackle issues of crime, disorder, and insecurity.

In particular, in the post-2001 security environment, the role of the security industry and the extent of public-private cooperation in this area, became a more pervasive aspect of, for example, Homeland Security (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005). Additionally, in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings, the British government stated that the development and deliverance of their counter-terrorism strategy depended upon the successful establishment of public-private partnerships (HM Government, 2006). After the terrorist attacks on public spaces in Europe in

2015 and 2016, the role of the private sector as a resource for security provision significantly grew, while public-private partnerships increased (Leloup & White, 2022). Likewise, during the 2015 European migration crisis the private security sector became more involved in managing refugee and migrant flow, and other migration control tasks (Davitti, 2020; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022).

Deeper forms of collaboration between public and private police forces, however, have, been enabled in realms beyond security crises. In 2008, the global financial crisis and subsequent politics of austerity prompted UK police forces to explore, what White (2014, 1002), describes as, “*radical new budget-reducing policies, including outsourcing key service areas to the private sector on an unprecedented scale*”. Similarly, the recent global public health crisis which emerged in early 2020, was seized upon by European and national security industries as a crucial moment for accelerated cooperation and dialogue between the police and the private security industry (e.g., BSIA, 2020; CoESS, 2020a, d; Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche, 2020).

Notwithstanding the industry’s efforts to promote its crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic in general and the need for enhanced PPPs in particular, little research has been conducted on the actual impact of the crisis on the public-private cooperation of security actors in policing the crisis. This is especially pertinent given that some research had suggested that the public health crisis had the potential to create new opportunities to increase the role of commercial actors in the provision of security (e.g., Chen, 2020; Deckert et al., 2021; Leloup & Cools, 2022; White, 2022). That said, there has been no detailed investigation into the degree of outsourcing police tasks to the private sector, or the extent of actual (local) PPPs in policing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the security business’ experiences with these state collaborations.

This study explores and, accounts for, the experiences of public-private cooperation in policing the pandemic in Belgium and the Netherlands. It considers the extent to which the recent crisis affected and shaped relations between the public sector and the market in policing, and the methods and risks that can arise when PPPs are entered into during a crisis event. Due to the localized, ‘loose’ and largely ad hoc nature of the policing partnerships that emerged during the pandemic, the concept of ‘PPP’ in this chapter is interpreted in its broad sense. It refers to the wide range of informal and formal partnerships where public and private actors work(ed) alongside, and not strictly, for one another under the terms of a contract. As a case study, the protection of infrastructures such as vaccination centers in cooperation with or besides the police, will be explored in Belgium and the Netherlands.

## 1.1 Methodology

Drawing upon, and developing, research carried out as part of a study on the long-term changes and their causes in policy and regulation in Continental-European countries, mostly in Belgium and the Netherlands. It does not simply describe the broad area of all PPPs in the domain of policing and security provision that existed

during COVID-19, rather, it explores the views from inside the private security sector on the building and maintenance of such a PPP. By doing this, the study adds to the knowledge of a group often written about in academic research, yet whose inside views and perspectives are seldom articulated (Leloup et al., 2022) and who are most likely to be on the side that must adapt, rather than steer, in the public-private field. Moreover, by analyzing the relationship between the private security industry, public authorities and police forces, insights into the actual collaborations that are being established will be identified.

To achieve this, a considerable number of interviews were conducted with international experts and representatives, including the Director-General of CoESS, and the chairmen of 4 national private security associations<sup>1</sup> from the private security sector over a 2 year period. In the case of Belgium and the Netherlands, approximately 20 additional interviews with experts and representatives were conducted during the course of 2021–2022, mostly managers from the Dutch and Belgian branches of the private security companies Securitas and G4S. The study used qualitative semi structured interviews, offering an in-depth understanding of the experiences of private security managers and representatives of policing the crisis. The questions asked about the pre-COVID-19 role of private security in each country; its place besides public police forces; regulation and control of the sector; the impact of COVID-19 on the industry, its function and its activities; and forms and degrees of cooperation between the public and private police, and related challenges.

The information collected from the interviews has been supplemented by a wide range of published and unpublished sources, largely from the security industry, including (policy) documents and private security research. Overall, research data are drawn from three main sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with representatives from the private security industry, public officials, policy makers and police officers; (2) (policy) documents and reports on COVID-19 from both public and private agencies; (3) legislation (e.g., on private security and civil safety).

## 1.2 Structure

In this chapter, the following section provides a brief overview of private security in Belgium and the Netherlands, with a specific focus on the size and regulation of the industry, followed by a description of pre-COVID-19 forms of PPP to provide a contextual outline of the field of policing in both countries. A third section gives a detailed account of one particular case study: the involvement of the private security sector in the protection of vaccination centers in Belgium and the Netherlands during the coronavirus pandemic. Based on the evidence of this case, the fourth section develops an overview of possible challenges stakeholders and policymakers need to

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<sup>1</sup>i.e. BVBO – Beroepsvereniging van Bewakingsondernemingen (Belgium), APROSER – Asociación Profesional de Compañías Privadas de Servicios de Seguridad (Spain), BDSW - Bundesverband der Sicherheitswirtschaft e.V. (Germany), NHO Service og Handel (Norway)

take into account, and what lessons can be learned from for public-private cooperation in the field of security and private sector involvement in policing the COVID-19 crisis respectively.

## 2 Private Security in Belgium and the Netherlands

Belgium and the Netherlands are geographically situated within Western continental Europe between France, Germany and the UK, and share similar political and economic systems. Although important similarities do exist (Leloup & White, 2022), state-market interactions across security provision in Western continental European countries, differs from Anglo-Saxon countries such as North America, and England and Wales (Terpstra, 2017). In the former, private security tends to be less present than public security, while their security industries are more highly regulated (Button & Stiernstedt, 2016).

Although providing exact figures on the size of the private security sector in Europe poses important methodological issues – i.e., dissimilar definitions of private security are used across different countries – CoESS has published the most complete overview. In 2008, about 1,453,636 private security employees were active in the larger Europe,<sup>2</sup> with an average of 1 private security guard per every 624 citizens, in contrast to an average ratio of 1 police officer per 244 citizens (CoESS, 2009). In 2013 – one of the last years in which figures for the European private security sector have been available, a total of 2,299,922 private security guards were active in 34<sup>3</sup> European countries (CoESS, 2015). This rise has been mainly attributed to the increasing security needs of a growing number of private and public clients, like critical infrastructure facilities, transport hubs (e.g., airports, train stations), and governmental agencies and institutions (e.g., embassies, universities) (CoESS & UNI-Europe, 2014).

When compared to other European countries, the ratio between private security officers and police officers in Belgium and the Netherlands is low (Fig. 1). Based on figures by CoESS for the year 2013 (2015), the ratio for both countries registers at around 0,44, although one other study projected a more even ratio for the Netherlands (0,88) (Devroe & Terwel, 2015).

In the case of Belgium, with a current population of 11,590,000 inhabitants, exact figures on, and the evolutions in the size, of the security industry are very difficult to obtain, and given numbers often vary – even within the same year. However, broader trends can be identified. Where the number of (officially licensed) private security guards varied around 11,000 in 1990 (Leloup, 2021), the industry in 2018 consisted of almost 200 private security companies that employed 18,885 private

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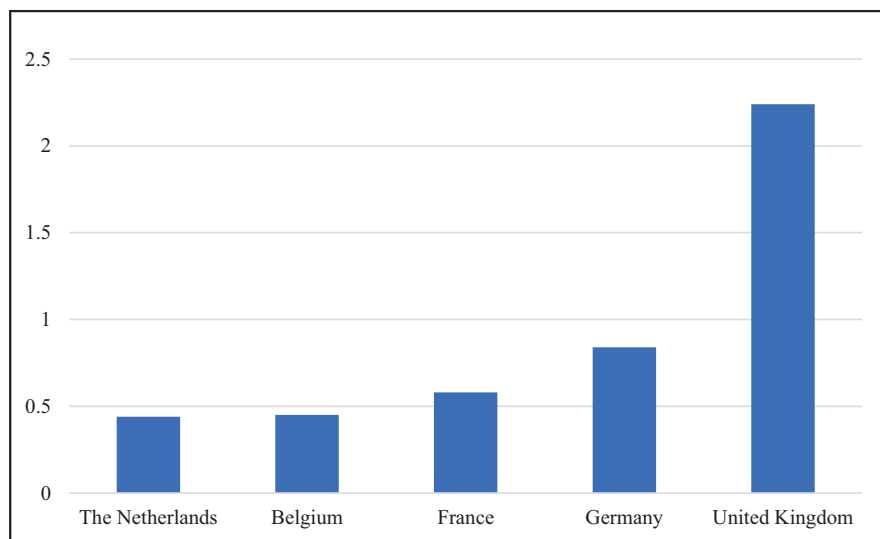
<sup>2</sup>The then 25 EU-countries and six additional European countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey).

<sup>3</sup>i.e. the then 28 EU Member States and six additional European countries (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey).

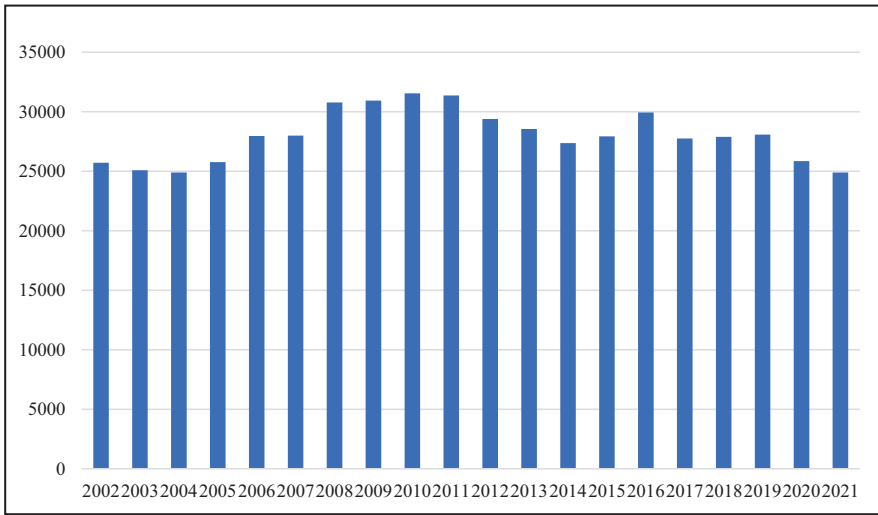
security officers, of which 1468 were allowed to carry a weapon. Armed security activities in Belgium mostly relate to the protection of cash-in-transit, bodyguarding, and providing security at NATO buildings and embassies. While this demonstrates a slow increase over the past decades, private security has increasingly become relied upon as a professional security partner. In recent years, the private security sector has steadily expanded its activities and powers, including the new law of October 2, 2017 that regulates private security. Any person wishing to work as a private security officer is required to undergo training at an institution approved by the Minister of the Interior; only after the successful completion of a basic training course consisting of 139 teaching hours can the trainee receive his or her license.

Figures on the private security sector in the Netherlands tend to be more accurate. In total, approximately 3000 licensed private security companies, investigation agencies, alarm centers, cash-in-transit companies, in-house security services and other security organizations are involved in private security activities (Fig. 1). Based on figures from the *Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche* (Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche (2022)), a yearly average of approximately 28,000 private security personnel has been operating since 2002 (cf. Fig. 2). Where police employed 63,131 police officers in 2021, the number of private security personnel for the same year was 24,896 (Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche, 2022). Although this indicates a visible decline in the number of personnel over the past decade, the annual turnover of the Dutch market in private security and criminal investigation in 2021 was still calculated at 1348 billion euros (Nederlandse Veiligheidsbranche, 2020, 2022).

In the Netherlands, the number of private security companies grew from 151 to 317 between 1992 and 1998, with an increase in the number of private security guards from 10,000 to 21,000 for roughly the same period (De Waard, 1999; van



**Fig. 1** Ratio private security guards to police officers (2013)



**Fig. 2** Private security personnel (the Netherlands)

Steden, 2007). It is not entirely illogical, then, that most researchers situate the creation of a sector-specific public policy at that juncture, where both the economic utility and the security function of the private sector were increasingly recognized publicly and politically (Cools & Verbeiren, 2004; Leloup & White, 2022). In the Netherlands, public-private partnerships were steadily increasing within the security domain (van Steden, 2007). This was grasped by the Dutch Legislature when drafting the Private Security Organisations and Private Investigation Agencies Act in 1997, which recognized the useful function that private security companies could perform. To protect the interests and rights of citizens, the then legislature necessitated a licensing and monitoring system to ensure the competence and reliability of such companies. While the Minister of Justice and Security is responsible for granting licenses, the police are charged with monitoring compliance with the law. With the exception of protecting merchant ships against piracy, Dutch private security personnel are not allowed to carry any firearms.

### 3 Public-Private Partnerships in the Field of Policing

#### 3.1 Definition

Quite often, PPPs are defined in ways consistent with the characterization of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which refers to “long term contractual arrangements between the government and a private partner whereby the latter delivers and funds public services using a capital asset,

*sharing the associated risks*” (2012). PPPs can be put in place to achieve a wide range of objectives – e.g., investments, risk sharing, maintenance duties – in a range of public services, such as transport, telecommunication, social housing, healthcare, education and research. Influenced by budgetary motivations and ideas surrounding New Public Management, interest in the concept and practice of PPPs increased from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, where they were originally used in connection to infrastructure projects, finances and economic renewal (Hodge & Greve, 2007), they have become a tool for providing a much wider range of public services “*with less public financial input and more private participation*” (Arthur et al., 2022, 16).

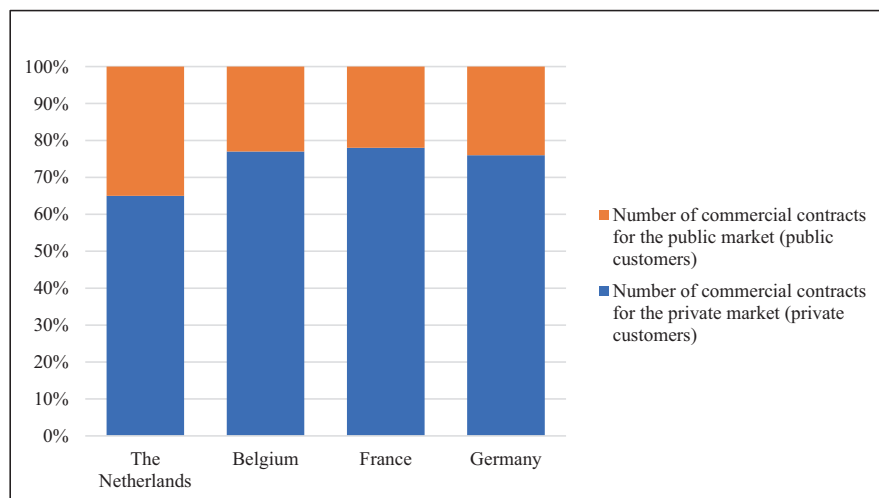
In the extant literature, several potential benefits are put forward for implementing such public-private collaborations. They can offer substantial public benefits by offering important additional funding and saving costs, by improving efficiency, maintenance and service levels, by sharing risks with the private sector, and by combining public and private expertise (Bloomfield, 2006, 400; Cheng, 2019). At the same time, authors have warned of contradictory results regarding the actual evaluation of these potential benefits. In practice, it is claimed, PPPs do not always provide adequate value-for-money, are subject to delays, downgrade employment conditions and service levels, etc. (Clark & Hakim, 2019; Lam, 2019).

### 3.2 *Public-Private Partnerships in Policing*

Since the late twentieth century, PPPs have emerged as part of a broader trends towards plural policing within the security landscape. Indeed, in large parts of the Western world security provision – and the actors involved – changed considerably and became more complex. Far-reaching shifts in late modern policing and security provision have attracted much academic attention, with authors referring to these phenomena in terms of ‘privatization’ and ‘hybridization’ (Dupont, Grabosky, & Shearing, 2003; Johnston, 1992, 1993), ‘multilateralization’ (Bayley & Shearing, 2001) and ‘pluralisation’ (Jones & Newburn, 2006; Loader, 2000). Intrinsic to this was the establishment of mostly local PPPs or ‘security networks’, which steered the sole responsibility of crime control away from the state (Jones et al. 2009; Terpstra, 2008; Cools & Pashley, 2018), especially since the 1980s, when they, “*developed under the tutelage of the Home Office in Britain, and largely by private enterprise and local government in the USA*” (Garland, 2001, 17–18). Such partnership arrangements were designed to pursue more effective crime prevention strategies and to enhance community safety (Garland, 2001; Gilling, 1997).

Even in Continental-European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium where security provision has regularly been characterized by more state-oriented approaches (Cools & Verbeiren, 2004; Cools & De Raedt, 2015; Devroe & Terwel, 2015; Devroe & Terpstra, 2015), whilst similar collaborations, as part of community policing strategies, were discussed and created from the early 1990s onwards.





**Fig. 3** Private security contracts (2011)

A survey by CoESS (2012) (cf. Fig. 3) showed that for the Netherlands, 35% of the private security sector's clients were public in nature. In Belgium, the public sector was the client in only 23% of the contracts with private security companies; a number close to this of France (22) and Germany (24).

In Germany, for instance, mobile private security staff reports about suspected persons and vehicles in the area of critical infrastructures sites to their operations centers, where the information is then shared with local police forces who use the security industry as a second pair of eyes and ears (CoESS, 2016).

In the Netherlands, research demonstrated that 14% of the municipalities hire a private security company to conduct surveillance in the public domain (Terpstra et al., 2013). In these specific cases, however, operational control remains with the police. These private security agents cannot wear any visible features that can be traced back to their company, while they have to be recognizable as municipal officials. They can carry handcuffs, but they do not have any access to police and/or investigation systems.

In Belgium, for instance, PPPs and outsourcing became increasingly common for, amongst other things, the design, construction and finance of new prison infrastructures, security and the care services of forensic psychiatric centers for ill offenders, as well as so-called transition houses, electronic monitoring, and probation services (Gudders & Daems, 2018; Herzog-Evans, 2018; Vanhouche & Nederlandt, 2019).

More recently, partnerships have gradually increased between (local) police forces and private security companies as well, both in contractual and non-contractual forms. In 2018, the Antwerp Police launched a European tender process for the permanent surveillance and security of its headquarters. Since then, the buildings of the Antwerp local police have been surveilled by Securitas. It was the

first police station in Belgium to outsource the security of its reception services to an external partner (De Standaard, 2018) including the provision of security officers, technological tools such as X-ray scanners and metal detection gates. The partnership between the Antwerp police and Securitas mainly covers two tasks: security and customer-care. On the one hand, security officers control access by identifying visitors and customers, and the presence of dangerous objects, whilst on the other, Securitas reception staff are responsible for greeting of visitors and customers and guiding them to the appropriate police departments. When required, the Antwerp police have the ability to use other ‘on-demand’ private security services from Securitas, such as dog patrols, mobile surveillance, drone cameras, telecommunication solutions, event surveillance assistance, or other technical aids. Similar, less formal collaborations have developed between Belgian police forces and private security companies in, for example, Ghent, where the local police force cooperate with security officers in their effort to tackle domestic burglary, and reports of suspicious vehicles (Vermeersch, 2015).

## **4 Policing the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results**

### ***4.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic: Background***

The initial outbreak of a novel coronavirus was reported in China near the end of 2019. The first European cases of a novel coronavirus were reported in France and Germany on 24th and 28th January, and by the 22nd February, Italy had reported several clusters of cases in Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto (WHO, 2 March 2020). In the following weeks, the number of cases of COVID-19 outside China increased 13-fold and cases were reported in several other European countries. On 11th March 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that COVID-19 could be characterized as a pandemic; the COVID-19 outbreaks that followed, posed significant implications for public health, while causing huge economic and societal disruptions.

### ***4.2 Impact of COVID-19 on the Private Security Sector***

Evidence suggests that the international trends that saw national governments increasingly turn toward the private security sector to deliver essential services, was a notable feature of the COVID-19 crisis. In regions such as Europe (CoESS, 2020d), North America (NASCO, 2020), Latin America (DCAF, 2020), Asia (Chen, 2020) and India (Financial Express, 2020), the security industry has been increasingly relied upon to respond to, and then manage, the crisis. In the first weeks of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe, the exact impact of the crisis on the industry, and

its particular role in policing the public health crisis and lockdown measures, was unclear. Nonetheless, representatives of the security sector projected a set of possible challenges and tendencies, such as staff shortages and significant shifts in the demand for security personnel from their clients (Leloup & Cools, 2022). On European and national levels, the private security sector highlighted its particular function in access control, guarding locations, perimeter control, and to secure “*the transport of critical goods, such as protection gear or other medical goods*” (CoESS, 2020a). In the meantime, the European Commission, and some European countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK, recognized private security as “essential services”. This granted the industry with special ‘rights’, such as the free movement of workers and access to childcare services.

Altogether, the public health crisis had a considerable direct and indirect impact on the security industry and the services it offered; few of which can be considered as positive. Early in the crisis, there was an increase in demand for some of their services. In particular, specific health-security demands related to controlling the pandemic and the associated lockdown led to the emergence of new market segments, and the expansion of some existing ones (Leloup & Cools, 2022). In addition, the industry identified a growing public recognition for its engagement in countries such as Belgium, Germany and France (CoESS, 2020b). According to several of the industry’s representatives, the crisis had proven that private security can make a major contribution to the safety of society, and that its legitimacy in the eyes of society had increased: “The security industry was able to show what its worth during the coronavirus pandemic [...] and these efforts were certainly noticed within society. A lot of people have been to the COVID-19 vaccination centers and have spotted the security guard and his duties” (Interview Managing Director G4S, 14 February 2022).

Notwithstanding these perceived successes, the industry did encounter new and demanding challenges. For example, in some European countries the private security sector witnessed a decline of 25–30% of its overall business activity compared to 2019, while 75% of CoESS members reported a lack of liquidity (CoESS, 2020c; CoESS & UNI, 2020). In particular, the aviation and event security businesses were badly hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Similarly, increased public fear, and consequent restrictions in the use of cash payments, led to severe financial losses for the Cash-in-Transit business. Therefore, the security industry urged governments and central banks to boost trust in – and promote the use of – cash (CoESS & UNI, 2020, 3). Furthermore, the security industries in many countries experienced significant shortages of necessary personnel. Taken together, the private sector’s high expectations of increased public recognition, turned out to be lower than they had hoped for (White, 2022). The overall impact of the pandemic on the activities of the private security sector can be seen in the table below (Table 1).

Although the above effects would likely be replicated for any European countries where the private sector plays an important role in security provision, differences in economic emphasis and activities between countries can play a role. Thus, the economy in countries with a strong service-based industry built around tourism, cultural events and transportation, such as Spain, was more susceptible to the pandemic,

**Table 1** (economic) impact on private security industry

Economic impact	Negative	Positive
Direct	Staffing shortages due to illness and/or exhaustion among security personnel	New security areas (health security cf. control at entrance; vaccination centers)
Indirect	Lower turnover due to reduction of clients' economic activities (tourist sector; events industry; transport sector, cash-in-transit, ...) Lower turnover due to loss activities in favor of volunteers, ... (other non-state security providers)	Higher turnover due to increase clients' economic activities (health care institutions; supermarkets and shops; critical infrastructures...) Private security as an 'essential service' Growing public recognition and legitimacy

indirectly leading to the security industry bearing more negative consequences in instances of lockdown.

In the end, however, and notwithstanding early expectations that the public health crisis would lead to greater structural public-private cooperation, a few representatives of the security industry stated that the actual establishment of PPPs failed to materialize in many countries. One of them mentioned that “*although private security today has been increasingly seen as a partner by the police, it has not resulted in any real partnerships*” (Interview manager SERIS Belgium, 9 June 2020). Indeed, the crisis did lead to some forms of ad hoc partnerships, but without being fully institutionalized (Interview Director-General CoESS, 12 January 2022). In the following section, one particular case of cooperation is discussed in more detail: the protection of vaccination centers.

### 4.3 Case Study: Private Sector Involvement in the Protection of Vaccination Centers

Over the last few decades, variant crises have had the potential to increase private sector involvement and partnerships in security provision (Hlouchova, 2020; Phelps, 2021; Morriss, 2006). This begs the question of how far partnership approaches were used to police the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, in the domain of health security in general, and certainly the protection of vaccination centers in particular.

At the European level, CoESS indicated that “private security will help enforce many of the health and safety measures, which citizens will have to live with for the foreseeable future, in collaboration with or on behalf of public forces” (2020a). Likewise, national private security associations of several European countries, informed their governments that security firms were prepared to take a more prominent role in policing the lockdown and protecting the public health of their citizens (Leloup & Cools, 2022). In Germany, for example, security personnel took over the control of people flows in pedestrian zones due to a lack of police officers (Interview

Managing Director BDSW, 20 January 2022). In Norway, similar fears that COVID-19 would lead to staff shortages within the police, initiated monthly informative meetings between the National Police Directorate and the NHO, the Norwegian private security association. On these occasions, the industry informed the police of its available security guards, cars and other resources, that could support the police at times of emergency (Interview Managing Director NHO, 26 January 2022).

During the pandemic, the private security industry delivered a wide set of (health) protection services and products to prevent, detect and respond to COVID-19 threats. Besides installing fever detection systems, (automated) customer counting technology and applications, private security officers were trained to control compliance with physical distancing rules (Leloup & Cools, 2022).

In Belgium, industry representatives expressed their hope that the public health crisis could create additional opportunities to create new, or strengthen existing, public-private collaborations, while increasing the role of commercial actors in the provision of security (Interview Manager SERIS Belgium, 9 June 2020). Early in the pandemic, new formal and informal consultation structures between public and private security actors, were initiated to optimize inter-sectoral consultation in light of the crisis. For the first time in Belgian history, the private security industry were in direct communication with the national crisis management center (Interview representative BVBO, 30 March 2020). The sudden increased demand for hospital security in Belgium, and the consequent staff shortages, were covered by reductions to other private security activities and sectors (interview representative BVBO, 30 March 2020). According to the communication manager of one Belgian private security company, security guards helped with monitoring the implementation of and compliance with health measures (L'Avenir, 2020), whilst in the Netherlands, representatives of the Dutch security industry indicated that the crisis led to more consultation between police services and the private sector (Interview Managing Director G4S Netherlands, 14 February 2022).

While the corona-protests in Belgium remained peaceful, fiercer collective protests arose in the Netherlands, against the requirement to wear a mask, the prohibition of activities, gatherings and free movement, and the compliance with social distancing rules (Terpstra et al., 2021). Simultaneously, COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs acted as a barrier to the development of public support for health policies to address the pandemic (Earnshaw et al., 2020). Ultimately, when the vaccination program was launched in the second half of 2020, Dutch protesters also began to target vaccination centers. For instance, the testing facilities of the municipalities Urmond (Limburg province) and Urk (Flevoland province) were set on fire as one of the first in the Netherlands (e.g., AD, 2020; Het Parool, 2021; Leeuwarder Courant, 2021), and in addition, Dutch citizens suspected of involvement in planned terrorist activities against other vaccination centers, were arrested and put on trial (NH Nieuws, 2021). In an environment where vaccination centers, and the distribution and transportation of vaccines, became targets, public police forces lacked the capacity to impose nationwide protective measures. While there was a need to secure the transportation of vaccines to the medical provider and to the vaccination

centers, “*the Dutch government was not able to provide these services, [police] capacity was not available*” (Interview Director Government G4S Netherlands, 19 January 2022). As a result, and largely from 2021 onwards, governments increasingly began to appeal to the private security sector to secure public health facilities such as COVID-19 testing and vaccination centers in particular. In general, security guards were employed for the control of access, securing the perimeter of buildings, but also as escorts for the transport of critical and medical goods (CoESS, 2020a).

In the Netherlands, the government turned towards G4S, a company which – during the crisis – promoted its experience in setting up temporary infrastructures and monitoring critical infrastructures, while managing and controlling crowd flows (G4S, 2021). Given the unpredictable, and swift escalation of the crisis, the Dutch partnership was established on a very ad hoc basis. Under normal conditions, a wide range of very specific regulations and requirements steer the often lengthy process of setting up public-private security contracts. During this crisis, however, the agreement was sealed in a matter of days, leading to one of the largest outsourcing contracts in the history of G4S Netherlands. The private security sector thus emphasized the advantage and ability they could bring to situations where gaps in security services needed to be quickly filled. When the government was facing security issues, one G4S representative stated that the added value of the private sector was noticeable in its fast switching operations and moving quickly into action: “*on such occasions, one way or another, it is clear the private sector is able to act more quickly and in a more focused way*” (Interview Managing Director G4S Netherlands, 14 February 2022).

While the Dutch authorities mobilized the private security sector to protect their vaccination facilities, the situation in Belgium developed differently. To some degree, the authorities did rely on private security for the protection of testing and vaccination centers in the capital of Belgium, Brussels, and the southern part of Belgium, Wallonia, where private security companies engaged in functions related to securing vaccination centers. The security firm Protection Unit was present in 6 of the 49 facilities situated in Brussels and Wallonia. From February 2021 onwards, the company was responsible for one of the largest Belgian vaccination centers – with a daily number of 5000 visitors. Security officers provided access controls, managed queues and crowd flows within the center, and set-up a 24-hour surveillance of the vaccine storage area (Protection Unit, 2021). In Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, security personnel mostly undertook night patrols in some of the 94 existing facilities. In Bruges, Securitas provided surveillance through the use of a temporary Mobilecam, the which images from which were monitored in the control room. In addition, a security guard, who also provided support for guiding visitors, monitored the site 24/7 (Securitas, 2021). In general, however, private security was less engaged in keeping vaccination centers and vaccination transports safe, than was the case in the Netherlands. This can be explained by two principal reasons.

On the one hand, although surveys showed increases in (physical) aggression towards medical staff at such facilities throughout 2021 (Domus Medica, 2021), violent protest and acts of arson against coronavirus testing centers remained relatively low. On the other hand, securing critical infrastructures– as stated by some

representatives of the security industry – was seen as less of a priority for the Belgian authorities, even when acts of arson grew in neighboring countries like the Netherlands, Germany and France. In Belgium, local authorities largely appealed to the event industry to support the rapid construction and organization of vaccination locations and facilities. Although this industry had the necessary expertise to build accommodations which could handle high numbers of visitors, security needs were less catered for. According to a representative from the private security sector: “*When the planning of the ‘ideal type’ vaccination center was drawn out by the event industry, security itself was not taken into consideration*” (Interview representative BVBO, 27 May 2022).

At the same time, the decentralization of pandemic management toward regional levels, in particular the practical organization of vaccinations and building of related facilities, was seen as less favorable from a strict security perspective. This was unlike previous national crises which had mostly been met by the Department of Internal Affairs and the national crisis center, which collects and analyzes relevant information – such as instances of arson against foreign critical infrastructures. Throughout this public health crisis, however, responsibilities were shifted to the regions, which were – as stated by security industry actors, “*less involved with and informed about possible safety and security issues*” (Interview representative BVBO, 27 May 2022). In addition to this, both the public and private sector increasingly relied on other commercial security actors to enforce social distancing restrictions in testing and vaccination facilities, control access and inform visitors. Similar to strategies adopted in supermarket and shops (Leloup & Cools, 2022), those responsible began to rely on unpaid volunteers rather than security officers for such tasks.

## 5 Challenges and Requirements: Some Policy Recommendations

While often presented as a solution to a wide range of security challenges, scholars have identified a set of potential restraints to police forces successful implementing PPPs. Often, these relate to media scaremongering and public fears of privatization trends, cultural resistance from within the police, inexperience of the often-complex contracting-out processes, and staffing issues (Rogers, 2017, 52–54; White, 2014). Given that the benefits and necessities to form PPPs can be different in any situation, our research, and interviews with industry representatives, allows the identification of a range of challenges and requirements public-private cooperation in the field of security needs to overcome. These findings run parallel with earlier research on interprofessional cooperation in similar environments (e.g., Cools & Pashley, 2018; Loyens et al., 2021), and in other settings (e.g., Goldman & Xyrichis, 2020), which can help policy makers to create the appropriate framework. Most notably, these relate to the pursuit of a common goal, (working) experience with each other,

trust between the parties involved and willingness to share information – within the appropriate legal framework – and the necessity of respectable personal relations. Undeniably, overlap and mutual influence have some bearing between these factors.

Overall, stable societal and economic conditions need to be in place before the benefits of PPPs are likely to be recognized by the public sector. As earlier research has demonstrated, periods of economic crisis, (local) governments and police forces facing budgetary restrictions, and a pro-market government, are all pressures which can force the public sector to engage more rapidly with the private sector (Leloup & White, 2022). In that sense, and in more practical terms, the pursuit of a common goal between the sectors is also of vital importance. For instance, the private security sector often takes the initiative in promoting its existing services and products to its clients. While this supply-driven business strategy could work for non-state clients, it might be less efficient for state clientele. Adapting to the particular security needs of public authorities, and aiming at providing solutions for their needs, might be more beneficial. During the 1980s and 1990s in Belgium, false alarms placed a considerable strain on police capacity. At that time, privately run alarm centers from the security industry offered a solution by filtering (false) alarm signals, which ultimately left only 3% of alarms reaching the police. (Interview representative BVBO, 27 May 2022). Through this positive collaboration which saw the successful offering of a private solution to a public problem, the alarm system industry gained much more legitimacy.

Secondly, both parties should have had at least some experience of setting up and maintaining a public-private cooperation. In this regard, small-scale, informal and loose forms of cooperation between the police and the private security sector can act as valuable stepping-stones for future official and contractual partnerships. During COVID-19, private sector involvement in the Netherlands was partly attributed to the degree of prior consultation and cooperation, the professionalization of the sector and the awareness among police authorities that the private sector could support in policing the crisis (Interview Managing Director G4S Netherlands, 14 February 2022). Since 2015, Oslo has successfully used private security personnel alongside regular police in public places such as train stations and public parks, which has expanded to other police districts in Norway in recent years. In other words, positive experiences from partnerships that were established and successful during the pre-COVID-19 era, led to faster and more efficient cooperation during the pandemic (Interview Managing Director NHO, 26 January 2022).

Thirdly, trust between the actors involved is essential, both in setting up a partnership and throughout its implementation. Trust can be gained in several ways, for example through successful experiences, and satisfaction with, earlier, small-scale PPPs as noted above. Mutual knowledge about each other's organization, roles, powers, strengths and weaknesses, can also lead to greater levels of trust and recognition between those involved, hence the importance for a preparatory phase ahead of the actual formation of the collaboration (Cools & Pashley, 2018). This allows time to establish a strong, structural framework – accepted by all of the involved (security) partners – which elaborates and delineates their respective missions, roles, responsibilities and – of major importance – their legal and operational limits.



Expectations towards each other also have to be discussed and decided on in preparation for the partnership. Jointly sharing information about each of the security partners, their duties, tasks and the like, has often been identified as a crucial step. The professionalization of the security industry in general, and its training of security officers in particular, has also increased trust within the public sector to cooperate with private agents during the COVID-19 pandemic. While representatives of the industry acknowledged the importance of these trends in light of PPPs, earlier research came to similar results (Nalla & Hummer, 1999).

In the policing landscape, however, where debates regarding the balance between the state and the market has mainly centered around a broad range of opposing ideological positions, the establishment of PPPs is still largely steered by personal motives and relationships between several of the stakeholders (Interview Secretary-General APROSER, 9 January 2022). Personal and ideological differences between the public and private sector, as well as opposing objectives and perspectives towards security provision, have acted as barriers for the foundation of PPPs on various occasions (Interview representative BVBO, 30 March 2020). Often arising from public sector fears about the outsourcing and privatization of former police tasks, police departments are sometimes unwilling to leave the door open for cooperation. Among police officers, questions regarding the objectives and ethics of the security industry, the security training, and the degree of control to name just a few, are still raised (Waelput et al., 2021).

Finally, laws and regulations must provide the necessary framework in which PPPs could develop. Within the context of public-private cooperation, it is essential to facilitate the exchange of necessary data and information between the sectors, yet information exchange between the public and private sectors has been a longstanding issue over several decades (De Corte & Van Laethem, 1997), which became even more apparent since GDPR. Prohibitions regarding the disclosure of governmental information towards the private sector, challenge – according to some respondents – the effective operations of PPPs. Notwithstanding this, practical realities can sometimes stall ad hoc cooperation structures or limit the effectiveness of the foreseen public-private policing, certainly in the public domain. For instance, in controlling public conduct to the coronavirus measures, the lack of police powers hindered the daily operations of security personnel, who had no jurisdiction to instruct people to wear their masks or maintain social distance (Interview Managing Director BDSW, 20 January 2022).

As important as the availability of the legislation can be, the implementation of it is a significant matter. This is illustrated by the following example. When new private security regulations were introduced in Belgium in 2017,<sup>4</sup> the legislation provided authorities with the opportunity to rely on private security in the public domain, in case of an emergency. In such moments, security officers would be able to guard certain perimeters in order to prevent unauthorized entry into a particular

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<sup>4</sup>Law of 2 October 2017 regulating private and particular security.

area, and to protect the work of the emergency and police services.<sup>5</sup> However, Belgian authorities have been reluctant to use private security resources during such events. On 14–16 July 2021, eastern Belgium was hit by extreme rainfall leading to severe flooding along the river Meuse, resulting in 38 fatalities and damage to at least 38,000 buildings. In the immediate aftermath of the event, and regardless of police presence, looting took place in abandoned houses and shops. One interviewee noted that neither any public administration, neither any crisis center, called upon the private security sector to contribute to the security of the damaged areas: *“All the while the police lacked manpower to do so. In other words, the legal arsenal to initiate support from the private security sector is at their disposal, but it is not operationalized. It is not being utilized”* (Interview representative BVBO, 27 May 2022).

## 6 Conclusion

Despite continuous efforts, the extent to which the coronavirus pandemic has led to (contractual) PPPs in policing has been rather limited, although private security did provide health-related security services, such as for the protection of vaccination centers. That said, representatives from the European and national private security sector have indicated that, although the pandemic has undeniably confirmed the public role of the private sector, their increased visibility and function has not always led to a more fundamental recognition of the sector in practice, and the establishment of a significant number of structural partnerships between the private sector and police forces and (local) governments.

Several practices were highlighted, however, that could support the establishment and elaboration of such linkages in the future. For example, to succeed, the discussion and initiation of such partnerships need to take place within a clearly defined framework, in which the missions, objectives, roles, expectations and limits of all partners must be discussed and defined. Developing meaningful knowledge about each other, especially in sectors that sometimes indicate that they fundamentally do not know each other, is crucial. In countries where systematic meetings take place between the stakeholders, rather than through mere ad hoc consultations, the chances of success of PPPs increase significantly.

Knowledge exchange between the different stakeholders is also often highlighted as important, but albeit difficult to achieve due to the legislative constraints. In the private sector, therefore, interviewees often commented about one-way communication, with information flowing to the public sector but with little, if anything, coming back. When sharing publicly accessible information, speed is of the essence so that the private security industry can also move quickly in the event of a crisis. Moreover, the practical, organizational and legal frameworks within which

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<sup>5</sup>Art. 118, Law of 2 October 2017 regulating private and particular security.

partnerships are established, must be future-oriented if they are to be capable of responding appropriately to new crises.

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