

Who is crazy?

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Just before Christmas our advice was to stop with the execution of maintenance and plan new investments. We said that because according to the Mayans, the world would end and the work would be pointless. With a weird cap on our heads we went on a mountain in France, because we understood that this would be the only place on earth where salvation was possible.

A few days passed but the world still turned around. In our last column of last year you could read that we could see people with straitjackets and large needles. We did not only see these people..... These people worked for the local authorities. They came to us and thought we were dangerous lunatics. It took us quite some effort to convince the local authorities that we were just harmless lunatics. After quite a few days we were released.

We decided to go back to the Netherlands. That was easier said than done. Because of a strike, we could not rent a car. So we headed towards an airport. A snowstorm caused the aircraft to ground and thus a logical alternative was the train. To reach the station with the snow was already a challenge, but when we got there the trains did not leave because of snow on the tracks. After a few days we could catch the French high speed train 'TGV' to the north. The TGV is a great asset which took us quickly to the border with Belgium. But Berlusconi's influence appeared to go beyond Italy. Do not ask us why, but it took a while before we had crossed the border. Once we arrived in the Belgian city of Antwerp, we had another obstacle to cross. The new Fyra-train, taken into service to connect the capitals of Belgium and the Netherlands, was out of service. 'That can happen', we said and with a considerable delay we took an overcrowded commuter train to the Dutch border town of Roosendaal, where we arrived a few days ago.

When we arrived in Roosendaal, we again had coverage on our PDAs and so we read the news which we had lacked. Then we found out that the delay with the Fyra was not incidental. The journey from Amsterdam to Brussels regularly takes up to four hours instead of the planned one and a half hours. Also we learned that Lance Armstrong announced that he had used doping. And on top of it, we read that plastic surgeons in the Netherlands had operated over 40 victims around New Year's Day with serious injuries, against about 25 last year¹. Now who's crazy? Are we, or are the people in the Netherlands mad because we lit so many fireworks ourselves?

With the professional deformation that we have, we immediately searched for more background. The fireworks victims mainly have hand injuries, injuries to the face and burns. The plastic surgeons have counted how many hands they amputated and made clear that all victims, just like last year, are men without exception. Of these, 45% are minors. Another notable figure is that in 64% of the injuries illegal fireworks were involved. In about 62% of the cases the fireworks were lit by others.

Various measures to counter the incidents are proposed. The Dutch Society for Plastic Surgery (NVPC) and the Ophthalmological Society (NOG) want to forbid the sale of fireworks². Elsewhere we saw the NVPC also calls for more attention to the danger of (illegal) fireworks and wants to tighten controls, especially now that the government has stopped to give information on the danger of fireworks.

When someone lights a firework himself, that person can choose how it is lit (at least for an adult, although the use of alcohol could make that choice difficult). A reasonable person would not choose to be seriously injured on purpose. However someone who is injured because of another person, will certainly not choose for it.

¹ <http://www.gezondheidskrant.nl/50417/plastisch-chirurgen-melden-stijgend-aantal-vuurwerkslachtoffers/>

² <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/01/06/consumentenvuurwerk-moet-verboden-worden/> (in Dutch)

In the event that the government decides to ban fireworks, people will be limited in choice. In the U.S. this is very controversial. Think of gun licenses (the right to protect yourself, that is even fixed in the constitution) and health insurance. However, in the Netherlands it will be not so controversial. Does such a measure make sense? If the sale of legal fireworks will be restricted, this will prevent up to 36% of the incidents. The number of fatalities in traffic in the Netherlands were 661 in 2011³. In traffic alone about 20.000 serious injuries occur per year⁴, so per day significantly more than the 40 because of the fireworks. If there would be a ban, there is the risk that people who now legally buy fireworks, change to illegal fireworks (which can be ordered abroad via the internet or can be purchased just across the border). From that perspective, this is not a very good measure.

If we look at fireworks from the perspective of environmental pollution, then we find out that very small particles are released by fireworks. These particles often contain heavy metals and penetrate deep into the lungs. Especially during the first 2 hours of the new year, the level of these particles is up to 40 times higher than normal. But air pollution caused by fireworks is temporary. Over the whole year, fireworks cause 0,4 percent of the total emissions of small particles⁵. From the perspective of the environment measures can better be taken in other areas. On the other hand, any improvement is one.

Which conclusions can we draw? Our own risk analysis on the end of the world was not correct. In retrospect, we could have known because so far all predictions on the end of the world were wrong. Looking at the risk analysis of the plastic surgeons, it was pretty well executed. Although only serious injuries are recorded, the effects of the risk are described and a decomposition is made into different elements (gender, age, type of fireworks, who lit it). Also specific mitigation measures are proposed. So thorough work. Now that the number of victims rises since the government has stopped the fireworks information campaign is striking. It seems better that this campaign will be restarted.

Since the world has not perished, we believe that the execution of maintenance and planning new investments should be continued. We also continue our regular job. People may believe we have put ourselves to shame, but that is not so bad. We might come back to the Fyra train subject. We however still wonder: who is crazy?

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³ <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/verkeersveiligheid/verkeersveiligheid-tot-2020> (in Dutch)

⁴ www.swov.nl/rapport/Factsheets/.../Factsheet_Verkeersslachtoffers.pdf (in Dutch)

⁵ <http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/vuurwerk/vraag-en-antwoord/waarom-wordt-vuurwerk-niet-verboden.html> (in Dutch)