



## Author Info

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# Hidden in plain sight

The invisible victims and the human traffickers around us

Have you ever seen a human trafficking victim? How about a real human trafficker? Do you think they wear different clothes or make-up, or wear face masks and live in poor, far away countries? They actually live just like you, shop where you shop, drive cars, make tiktok videos, have an instagram account and live their lives just like you do. Just by you knowing this it makes them a little more exposed. Let's find out more about them and take their power away.

## Synopsis

Human trafficking is a sordid crime, cultivated with creativity by criminals and backed up by the precarious balance of ethical perspectives.

**Hidden in plain sight** is an investigative documentary that brings to light six situations of organised crime in the European world, one of supposedly common values but different laws and benefits for each country.

How does a middle-class girl in The Netherlands end up working the streets? Where are the members of an organised crime group, based in Switzerland, three years after the murder of one of their sex-workers? Should a political scandal involving drugs and prostitutes in Spain shake future elections? Can a mother rescue her daughter from prostituting in Germany? Where is the line between right and wrong when a British influencer is accused of organised crime? How do people become trafficking victims and how can they recover?

What all these questions have in common is not only the horrible crime of human trafficking but the main protagonists: the criminals and the victims, as essential patterns in the crime chain. The answers to these questions are real life stories, all hidden in plain sight. The purpose of this film is to make them visible.



## Treatment

Human trafficking is a highly lucrative business with a lower risk of detection for perpetrators than many other forms of crime. Globally, traffickers make **estimated profits of €29.4 billion in a single year**. In the past decade, law enforcement authorities in the EU have witnessed a considerable increase in intra-EU trafficking. In 2014, for example, the majority of human trafficking victims (71%) registered in Europol's database were EU citizens.

Gangs, seemingly legitimate companies, recruitment agencies and even the victims' relatives engage in this crime. They not only have a thousand faces but also change their schemes quicker than the authorities manage to up their game and investigation methods.

Trafficking human beings is often hidden from view and the distinction between it and other crimes, such as extortion, money laundering and drug trafficking can be blurred, meaning it is hard for investigators to pick up on it.

As a result, a significant number of cases of human trafficking, often involving multiple forms of exploitation, remains unrecorded. It is estimated that there are **five to ten times more victims** within the EU than reported.

The purpose of this investigative documentary is to bring some of the hidden faces of human traffickers out in the open and to give a voice to the unrecognised victims. Only with awareness can this atrocious crime be restrained.

The film is divided into six chapters, each story revealing a unique facet of human trafficking in different EU countries and diverse social contexts. The stories tackle the most relevant but also surprising aspects of this crime through encounters with victims, perpetrators, activists and law enforcement officials. The six chapters tie together a complex image of the reality of human trafficking around us that hides in plain sight.

### 1. The child and the loverboy

**Merel van Groningen**, aus der Niederlande, war nur 15 Jahre alt, jung und naiv, mit Problemen zu Hause als sie über ihre Freundin, den 11 Jahre älteren Mike kennen lernt. Dieser ist ein cooler Typ, und sofort von Merel angetan. Mike ist geschieden, lebt mit Freundin Karen und seinen Kinder zusammen und ihm eilt der Ruf ein eher ungemütlicher Geselle zu sein voraus. Er ist von Merel sofort angetan, sie hingegen findet ihn nur als Typ cool und es dauert bis sie sich auf ihn einlässt. Der Mann umgarnt das Kind und gibt ihr das Gefühl die Einzige zu sein. Er zeigt ihr recht



schnell seine aggressive Seite doch sie ist jung, nimmt ihn immer in Schutz, sucht die Schuld bei sich. Sie bricht komplett mit zuhause, zieht aus dem Internat in dem es ihr richtig gut ging aus und zieht zu Mike, der ihr verspricht für sie zu sorgen. Das einzige was er aber kann ist Bier und Kaffee mit dem Geld vom Sozialamt zu kaufen. Merel muss sehen woher sie essen bekommt und wenn es nur das Futter vom Hund ist, was zur Folge hat das sie unterernährt ist. Er ist ihr gegenüber immer mehr Gewalt bereit und letztendlich zwingt er sie auf den Strich für ihn zu gehen, im Rotlichtviertel in Den Haag.

All the authorities were involved, the police and child protection but nobody could offer her a safe place and take her away from there. An investigation by child protection takes six months. That was much too long, according to her mother. The only option was to take parental responsibility away from her and refer her case to the children's judge. Following the judge's decision to put Merel in care, the police were able to take the girl to a safe place after three months of forced prostitution.

Merel is one of thousands of victims of 'loverboys', the name given in the Netherlands to the pimps who use seductive skills to exploit young girls as prostitutes. She is one of the lucky ones, who didn't return to that life. In 2020 she set up the Merel van Groningen Foundation, that trains ex-victims using recognised practices that they have developed themselves. The victims learn a bit about criminal law from the police and lawyers and with this knowledge they support new victims aged between 12 and 30. The foundation develops its own practices, tools and other programs based on victims 'first-hand experience.

## 2. The clan and the murder

**Mihaela Miloiu**, 18 Jahre, Rumänin. Der Leichnam wurde im Wald des französischen Dorfes Frasnais aufgefunden. Die Leiche war unbedeckt. Auf sie wurde 26 Mal eingestochen, zum Tod führten jedoch schwere Verletzungen im Gesicht. Der Täter hatte sie derart heftig geschlagen, dass ihre Gesichtszüge nicht mehr erkennbar waren. Die prostituierte Frau hatte sich in der Region Lausanne aufgehalten, war seit Monaten jedoch nicht mehr gesehen worden.

After four years and a meticulous and fierce investigation, a French border worker, Alexandre Verdure, was sentenced to 20 years of criminal imprisonment by the Assize Court of Doubs for her savage murder. Alexandre Verdure, who was living with his wife and son in Mouthe (Doubs) at the time of the events, has always denied having killed this 18-year-old Romanian that November night in Sullens (Switzerland). His relatives unanimously said they were dumbfounded by the accusations against him, describing a former young firefighter and reservist constable "nice", "helpful", with "his heart on his hand".

But Mihaela's terrible story starts when she was 15 and went to high-school in a small Romanian town where she fell in love with 18 year-old Dafinel Boceanu, a member of the Boceanu clan, known



as loan sharks, racketeers and human traffickers. Also acting as a loverboy, Dafinel has her fall under his control. Romanian authorities investigate the clan in 2016 and Mihaela testifies against them. However, she is not considered a victim although she is underage. Not long after that she is taken to Switzerland, where she is forced to work for them as a prostitute until her death, months later.

The Romanian network was responsible for recruiting young women from Romania and forcing them into prostitution in the Swiss city of Lausanne on Lake Geneva. Most of them had also been forced into prostitution in other European countries (Italy, Germany and Norway). They were made to work seven days a week, without rest.

In a joint investigation, eleven searches were carried out in Lausanne and Romania, which helped to identify nine perpetrators and 15 victims of human trafficking in the two countries. Four Romanians were arrested and European arrest warrants were subsequently issued for five other suspects, including the alleged leader of the network. The 35-year-old kingpin was also arrested later in Germany and extradited to Romania. The assets of the trafficking network, adding up to several million Swiss francs and including five houses, were confiscated.

### 3. Coruptie in politica

In Spania, statul aflat pe primul loc la consumul de prostitutie din Europa, cu 4 din 10 barbati care apeleaza la prostituie, un scandal politic avand aceasta tema pare sa miste putin apele aparent linistite.

Droguri, prostitutie si mita: o sordida afacere de coruptie in care sunt implicati politicieni socialisti spanioli pune in dificultate partidul premierului Pedro Sanchez, la inceputul unui an electoral cu perspective care deja erau slabe pentru aceasta formatiune.

“Un teanc de 60.000 de euro ascuns in cutii de pantofi de un general al jandarmeriei pensionat, o petrecere intr-un bordel din Madrid, plus alte nopti de distractie intr-un hotel de lux presarate cu cocaina si Viagra impreuna cu prostituate alese dintr-un catalog”. Spania traieste din luna februarie 2023 in ritmul unor astfel de dezvaluiri aparute in presa, ilustrate cu fotografii si inregistrari video ale scandalului ce a primit numele de „Mediator” (Mediatorul), in care sunt implicati oameni de afaceri si in special alesi ai Partidului Socialist Muncitoresc Spaniol (PSOE) al premierului Pedro Sanchez.

In centrul anchetei il regasim pe Juan Bernardo Fuentes, alias ”Tito Berni”, deputat socialist din Insulele Canare si fortat de partidul sau sa demisioneze dupa ce a fost retinut pe 14 februarie 2023 impreuna cu nepotul sau si cu noua oameni de afaceri.

Allegedly, the corruption plot offered businessmen and entrepreneurs in the Canary Islands preferential treatment for the procurement of public contracts, but also extorted them in exchange for favourable treatment during inspections and access to European aid funds.



These backroom deals were put together and celebrated at lavish parties with prostitutes, alcohol and cocaine, some of which were during the Covid-19 pandemic 'state of alarm.' Dezvaluirile au agitat apele in interiorul partidului socialist, care cauta acum sa limiteze pagubele, inaintea alegerilor municipale si regionale din 28 mai si a celor legislative care vor avea loc la sfarsitul anului.

#### 4. The wife and her pimp

**Daniela** is 55 years old and lives in Romania. Nine years ago she lost track of her daughter, who was 21 at that time. Her daughter, Simona, met Ionut in high-school. He seemed like a nice, decent boy to her parents but it turns out he was a gambler and hanging out with dubious crowds. Simona went to university and studied Finance and her life seemed to be going great with this young man until everything fell apart. He needed money so he persuaded her to make sex videos for him to sell online. Her parents helped her escape Ionut and tried to keep her safe at home but one evening, when they were away, she disappeared. Ionut took her to another city and in one week time took her out of the country, to Germany. Her parents efforts to get to her were in vain and once she was out of the country they were hopeless. When they managed to get the money to go look for her and tracked her down, it was too late. Simona was married to Ionut and was working as a prostitute in Nürnberg, along his sister, who has been doing the same job in Germany for many years. The authorities had their hands tight. She was 21, married and practiced prostitution, which is legal in Germany. When asked, Simona did not have anything to say. Daniela never managed to speak to her again, only to her husband and pimp who threatens her every time she tries to make contact. But the years have passed and Simona divorced Ionut. He currently has another wife in Baden Wurtemberg, who works for him as a prostitute. Simona is now is 30 years old and still lives in Nürnberg. She is married to Florin, who is also her pimp. She seems happy and content. Her Facebook profile shows that they have enough money to afford beautiful clothes and expensive cars. They are surrounded by a wonderful big family, his family and friends, all in the same business.

#### 5. From sportsman to businessman to influencer to trafficker

**Andrew Tate**, 36, UK citizen, is currently being held in prison in Romania, accused of human trafficking, forming an organised crime group and rape. Romanian police allege that the group coerced victims into creating paid pornography for social media. His story made the news all over the world, partly because he made his lifestyle public and also because many seem to share and support his moral views. He is no ordinary criminal but a character with loud convictions about life and women and men. His power is to make his crimes seem like rational and justifiable choices.



Born in USA, raised in England, Tate began practicing kickboxing in 2005 and won his first championship in 2009. He attracted wider attention in 2016, when he appeared on the British reality show *Big Brother* and was removed after his comments on social media attracted controversy. He began offering paid courses and memberships through his website and rose to fame as an internet celebrity, promoting an "ultra-masculine, ultra-luxurious lifestyle". A self-described misogynist, Tate's controversial comments have resulted in his suspension from several social media platforms.

Tate's website offers training courses on accumulating wealth and "male-female interactions". He also operated a webcam studio using his girlfriends as employees. Andrew and his brother Tristan started the webcam business, employing as many as 75 webcam models to sell "fake sob stories" to male callers, claiming to have made millions of dollars doing so.

Tate also operates a private network called "The War Room" which is advertised as a "global network in which exemplars of individualism work to free the modern man from socially induced incarceration."

In 2017, Tate moved from the United Kingdom to Romania. He said that he moved because he liked "living in countries where corruption is accessible for everybody" and believed that it would be less likely to face rape charges in Romania. On December 29, 2022, the police arrested both Tate brothers and two women. Romanian authorities seized 29 assets, including 15 cars and more than 10 properties, as well as watches and sums of money, that belonged to the Tate brothers or their companies, totalling to almost \$4 million.

According to *The Guardian* in February 2023, Tate is popular among teenage boys, who mimic his phrases and philosophy, and reported that "virtually every parent in Britain" had heard of him. Parents and schoolteachers expressed concern that he was influencing boys to exhibit misogynistic and aggressive behaviour. A 2023 survey conducted by Hope not Hate advocacy group found that eight in ten British boys aged 16-17 had consumed Tate's content and that 45% of British men aged 16-24 had a positive view of him, compared to only 1% of British women aged 16-17 who held a positive view of Tate.

## 6. The rescuer and the victims

At one time driven from her country, **Iana Matei** returned in the late 1990s only to discover a problem lurking in the shadows: modern-day slavery. Dedicating her time, her money, her effort, she operated for many years what was the only shelter in Romania for victims of human trafficking. It was by a chance phone call from the police that she came across several teenage girls who had been sold into sex slavery. She took them to the hospital. They were terrified, freezing, and didn't know what to do. She rented an apartment that they stayed at after they were released from the hospital. Then, shortly



after that, the IOM contacted her about other young women who needed a place to stay. So she rented another apartment. After that, she began working tirelessly to help free those who were in sex slavery, and provide housing and counselling for the survivors.

She founded **Reaching Out Romania**, an organisation that runs several shelters, and regularly engages young women on the streets in outreach attempts to those who may be enslaved. The work that they do in aftercare is essential to the recovery process for the young women they have rescued or who have been directed to their door. They continue to provide support for as long as they can, and keep in touch with the survivors while they attempt to re-integrate into the world. Many of the girls that Ms. Matei works with are Romanian girls who have been trafficked abroad, often to places such as Italy or Spain. She followed over 470 stories of children and women who became the prey of traffickers and has come to know them and the criminals as closely as it gets.

Through her, we meet children trafficked by their families, girls under the spell of their 40 years older loverboys, children as young as 12, who are abused and forced to prostitute, who cannot return to a normal life again after years spent this way.

This film joins and supports Iana Matei's fight to bring awareness, change laws and make the incredible and terrifying situations that she came across more visible to the citizens of Europe.

