The so-called lover boy method entails the recruitment of a victim by establishing a fake romantic relationship between one of the members of the criminal network and a targeted potential victim of trafficking. Once the victim has fallen in love, the deception/involvement of the victim into criminal activity is much easier. When the victims of trafficking are young girls, the younger traffickers are mainly male and applying the lover boy method to recruit the victims.

A large network exploiting young Romanian women was dismantled in Spain, Romania and the Czech Republic in a priority operation supported by Europol. The investigation involved law enforcement authorities from the Czech Republic, Romania, Spain and other European countries.

The operation resulted in the arrests of 14 suspects (7 in Romania and 7 in Spain), the safeguard of 10 victims and the seizures of cash, jewellery, high-end cars and digital equipment. During the coordinated operation, 16 house searches were carried out in the Czech Republic, Romania and Spain.

Romanian members of the criminal network, using the "lover boy" method, were seducing young women and, creating a dependant manipulative relationship between victim and exploiter, forcing them into prostitution. Once under their influence, the victims were often drugged, threatened, abused and trafficked among the members of the network for up to €6,000 each. The women were also regularly moved from one location to another and one country to another as a strategy to minimise the risks of detection from law enforcement. Investigations are still on-going in other European countries where this network is believed to have been working together with another one. More than 40 more women have already been identified as victims of sexual exploitation of the two criminal networks.

The criminal network was then laundering the money through the purchase of real estate, expensive jewellery and vehicles. The profit from the sexual exploitation was also used to create active checking accounts for drug use and gambling.

Europol facilitated the information exchange between the participating countries, provided coordination support and analysed operational information against Europol's databases to give leads to investigators. Europol conducted a financial analysis based on the information provided which highlighted the extension of the criminal activity of the group and the presence and flow of illicit profits to other jurisdictions.

Europol also provided on-the-spot operational support by deploying analysts to Spain and Romania, to provide real-time analytical support during the search and arrest phase of the operation.

Watch the video 🎥
In 2010 the European Union set up a four-year Policy Cycle to ensure greater continuity in the fight against serious international and organised crime. In 2017 the Council of the EU decided to continue the EU Policy Cycle for the 2018 - 2021 period. It aims to tackle the most significant threats posed by organised and serious international crime to the EU. This is achieved by improving and strengthening cooperation between the relevant services of EU Member States, institutions and agencies, as well as non-EU countries and organisations, including the private sector where relevant. Trafficking in human beings is one of the priorities for the Policy Cycle.