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Stephen W Sawyer, Roman Zinigrad

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Civic Education Programs as Preventive Measures in France

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Stephen W. Sawyer, Roman Zinigrad – The American University of Paris, Center for Critical Democracy Studies



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at: ssawyer@aup.edu or rzinigrad@aup.edu.

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Executive Summary

This report provides an analysis of civic education-oriented deradicalization policies in France, aiming to understand their rationales, challenges, and prospects compared to alternative approaches. Civic education programs in France aim to address injustice, alienation, and polarizing narratives by improving community life and fostering democratic literacy, critical thinking, and active citizenship. The study focuses on three categories of civic education programs: those implemented by the French Ministry of Education, public-private partnerships complementing judicial and penitentiary mechanisms, and state-sponsored educational activities by a private association working with at-risk youth.

The report presents an overview of each category, followed by a detailed analysis of their structure, aims, and the lessons learned from their mechanisms. It concludes with preliminary recommendations for the future of educational deradicalization programs in France. Over the past decade, the French government has invested significant financial resources in programs targeting jihadist radicalization. The report examines representative activities in the public education system, as complementary elements to judicial and penal institutions, and as social welfare for at-risk youth. Lessons drawn from these initiatives and existing literature provide insights into their impact and potential pitfalls.

Approaching political violence through an educational agenda allows for de-escalation of social polarization and rebuilding trust between the government and the population. Recent programs by the French Ministry of Education, such as civic education initiatives, digital literacy curriculum, and training for educational staff on radicalization, indicate a shift towards prevention and rehabilitation. Government-initiated educational partnerships and support for disengagement activities demonstrate a maturation of the French approach to radical violence.

However, educational deradicalization programs come with risks for students and teachers. Expanding government control and supervision in the classroom beyond directly involved individuals poses challenges. The report highlights potential pitfalls, such as emphasizing laïcité principles as the key element of deradicalization and focusing primarily on jihadist violence.

In contrast, educational initiatives by the Groupe SOS and Itinéraires associations, which do not explicitly focus on radicalization motives, offer promising perspectives for disengagement from radical violence. Social reintegration, rebuilding networks, providing education and employment opportunities, and integrating individuals at risk of radicalization into democratic life appear to be more realistic and effective approaches.

In summary, the report emphasizes the importance of civic education-oriented deradicalization programs in France. While challenges exist, the shift towards prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration shows promise for fostering peace, security, social cohesion, and trust.

1. Introduction

This report describes and analyses types of civic-education-oriented deradicalisation policies in France with the aim of better understanding their rationales, challenges and prospects as compared to other alternatives. Through this, we aim to contribute to the design of existing and future participatory deradicalisation programmes. Civic education programmes aim to turn injustice frames, alienating dynamics and polarising narratives into campaigns to improve community life. They may involve different actors, in particular the youth sector, social workers, civil society organisations and the educational/pedagogical sector with the aim of fostering democratic literacy, critical thinking, pro-social resilience to radical ideologies, active citizenship and a shared sense of belonging in a constructive and non-conflictual way.

Our study comprises three categories of civic education: programmes designed by the French Ministry of Education and implemented in the school environment; public-private partnerships initiated by the government and executed by private organisations as a complementary element of the judicial and penitentiary mechanisms of deradicalisation; and state-sponsored educational activities designed and realised by a private association specialising in work with youth under risk. The report provides general information about each of these categories, followed by a detailed analysis of their structure and aims, and the lessons that can be drawn from their mechanisms. In the last part, we offer preliminary recommendations for the future of educational deradicalisation programmes in France.

2. National Education: Policy for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation

2.1 General info

The French Ministry of National Education is a major stakeholder in deradicalisation, on par with the French Ministries of the Interior, Justice, and Armed Forces. It employs a multidimensional plan of detection and prevention of radical violence through civic education and by other education-related means. The plan, or the “policy for the prevention of violent radicalisation in schools” (*politique de prévention de la radicalisation violente en milieu scolaire*) introduces a scheme of measures on the national level that applies to all schools in France. It is, however, important to keep in mind that these efforts of the Ministry of Education, as well as of the deradicalisation efforts of the French government as a whole, concern only jihadist radicalisation.

The Ministry’s scheme revolves around four main axes: prevention, identification and reporting, monitoring of youth undergoing radicalisation and training of staff. These deradicalisation efforts, coordinated by the Ministry of National Education, are prescribed by the PNPR, the national plan for the prevention of radicalisation (*plan national de la prévention de la radicalisation*). The PNPR “prevent to protect” programme consists of 5 axes of action and 60 pre-emptive measures. The first axis of the PNPR outlines ten measures to “protect minds against radicalisation” that must be implemented by the various stakeholders in the system of national education. These measures include underscoring the “values of the French Republic,” improving detection procedures, tightening the control over private educational institutions and home schooling, improving students’ online literacy, and increasing the qualifications of educational staff in the field of deradicalisation.

This policy is implemented by various national, regional, and local bodies operating under the auspices of the Ministry of National Education. It is also intertwined and coordinated with other measures targeting youth radicalisation that are employed by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, and other state agencies, such as the police, the French National Academy for Youth Protection and Juvenile Justice, or the French unemployment service (*Pôle emploi*).

2.2 Description and analysis

French schools play a central role in the government's deradicalisation strategy. The current "policy for the prevention of violent radicalisation" implemented by the Ministry of National Education is part of the National Radicalisation Prevention Plan (PNPR). The PNPR was rolled out by the French government in February 2018. It was developed and continues to be overseen by the General Secretariat of the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalisation (SG-CIPDR). The PNPR expresses the perception of the French government that education plays an essential role in the prevention of jihadist radicalisation. According to the Ministry of Education:

One of the central missions of schools is to promote the construction of a student citizen, who is able to understand the world around them and to make decisions that preserve their integrity while respecting that of others. Primary prevention, intended for all students, aims to develop student resilience and reduce the risk of new situations of radicalisation (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l'enseignement scolaire, 2022b).

Indeed, the PNPR's first ten measures, which seek to "protect the minds against radicalisation," position the system of national education in the forefront of the state's deradicalisation efforts. Notably, these prevention tools can be divided in two categories: educational and detection-oriented.

The educational approach is most reflected in measures 1-2 and 9-10. The first two measures, aiming to "defend the values of the Republican School" address the civic education curriculum in public schools. Measure 1 requires developing "support mechanisms for [implementation of the principle of] *laïcité*" and strengthen training of "republican values" for teachers and school staff. Measure 2 calls for improvement in students' media education during and after school. Likewise, measures 9 and 10, designed to "strengthen students' defences," instruct stakeholders to protect students from online radicalisation and conspiracy theories by "systematizing media and information education [and] developing their critical thinking and the culture of debate." They also prescribe the development of tools and resources for the pedagogical staff (« *Prévenir Pour Protéger* » *Plan national de prévention de la radicalisation*, 2018).¹

The Ministry of Education provides a wide and detailed array of such "practical tools" for students and teachers. They attempt to "make it possible to identify and deconstruct the process of radicalisation and to address specific themes related to radicalisation: conspiracy theories, recruitment of young people, radicalisation on the Internet." They also provide

¹ For an English translation of all measures, see (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021a).

curricular guidance by “making it possible to set up work sessions in class and to better understand the issues of violent radicalisation. Some materials relate to the phenomena of cognitive radicalisation leading to violence (cyber violence, cyber hatred and radicalisation) and cross disciplinary perspectives which thus allow the teacher to ensure genuine prevention through education and culture.” The outcome of these preventive efforts is evaluated by a variety of tasks that teachers are to implement in schools, such as an “essay, file, audiovisual documentary, artistic (literary, graphic, plastic, theatrical, cinematographic) production.” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2021).

For instance, students take a “civics course” in school, which consists of ethics and civics education, media and information literacy, the construction of critical thinking, and a “nuanced and objective approach to the history of ideas and religious facts.” Ethics and civics education “lays down the fundamental rules of life in a rule of law.” In lower grades, these sessions aim to nurture “respect to others”; “acquiring and sharing the values of the Republic”; and “building a civic culture.” In high school, they aim to develop the skills of “identifying and explaining the ethical values and civic principles at stake; mobilize required knowledge; develop personal expression, argumentation and critical thinking; get involved in teamwork” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2021). Media and information literacy instruction seeks to minimise the destructive potential of conspiracy theories and misinformation with informational videos and articles for students of all ages (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2022a). Developing critical analysis skills in students should “allow them to have a reflective attitude, which constitutes one of the essential levers for countering the propaganda of jihadist groups.” This is done with the help of such tools as the “handbook of intellectual self-defence” and resources for teachers that “develop young people’s critical thinking and resilience in the face of recruitment attempts” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2021; Réseau Canopé, *nd* b). Finally, “the objective” study of ideas and religious facts in both primary and secondary education is designed by the French Institute for the Study of Religion and *Laïcité* (IREL). IREL offers teachers “educational files which briefly present a subject and which are accompanied by historical references and a bibliography”; “reviews of works allowing to decipher the publications around the themes of the IREL”; and “Internet links selected for their interest in the fields of teaching religious facts and secularism” (Institut d’étude des religions et de la laïcité, *nd*).

Other programmes supported by the Ministry include courses that train youth above the age of eleven to become “civil security cadets” who would be “aware of preventive behaviour and develop a sense of civic responsibility,” and “safety assistants” who “learn how to react collectively in simulated dangerous situations and to intervene during evacuation or confinement exercises” (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2015; Réseau Canopé, no date a). Finally, the government creates or sponsors websites (e.g., the government-run <http://www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr/>) films and videos that provide additional sources of information on themes related to radicalisation (Ministère de l’Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l’enseignement scolaire, 2021).

These educational tools are complemented by measures oriented at securitising the system of education by training the school staff in detection of radicalisation and tightening their

relationship with the government's security agencies. These measures include extensive staff training to identify students at risk of radicalisation; creation of special inter-governmental bodies in charge of assessing the reports on students and monitoring "young people reported as being 'in the process of radicalisation' but not charged with 'terrorist acts'"; and instituting "multi-category watch units" in schools consisting of school officials together with social services and medical professionals and responsible for identifying situations that must be reported to government officials responsible for the prevention of radicalisation (*Ecole et radicalisation violente*, 2020; Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, Direction générale de l'enseignement scolaire, 2022b).

2.3 Lessons

The introduction of "deradicalising" contents and tools into the school curriculum and the securitisation of schools has raised multiple concerns on their efficacy, feasibility and democratic legitimacy. In the first place, the deradicalisation plan of the Ministry of Education, as well as all other mechanisms of deradicalisation, surveillance and counter-terrorism, target only jihadist radical violence and draw implicit links between violent attacks and radicalised religious beliefs. The series of legislative and executive reforms rolled out in the aftermath of several emblematic jihadist attacks in France in the years 2012-2020 sought to target radicalised Muslim communities who were supportive of jihadism. However, the legislation remained too vague on specific criteria and the lines between devout muslim religious practice, extremism, radicalisation and jihadism could unfortunately become blurred (Sawyer and Zinigrad, 2021b). The presentation of French "Republican values," and especially the value of secularism (*laïcité*), as educational tools to prevent radicalisation obviously portray jihadism as incompatible with a Republican (secular) project and hence, as a conceivable security risk. However, in some cases, there has been a blurring of the lines between what should be a strict focus on jihadism and fervent religious practice of Islam.

Consider, for instance, the findings of a survey of school social workers in the Parisian suburbs conducted in 2018, showing that jihadist terrorism "hystericalizes" the relationship of the school staff to Islam to the point of "confusing religious fervour and radicalisation." According to this study, "[r]eligious deculturation and a sometimes misguided approach to secularism, understood as a moral value or an instrument for combating religious ideologies, contribute to this embarrassment, which could be partly resolved by collective reflection and better education on religious facts in schools" (Verba, 2018). Although this study preceded the changes introduced by the PNPR reform, more recent data indicates that the new government policy has had limited success. A survey conducted in December 2022 among a representative national sample of 1,000 primary and secondary school teachers shows that *laïcité* and other religion-related topics are a source of tension and angst for both students and teachers, especially after the assassination of Samuel Paty, a public school teacher, in October 2020. More than half of the teachers admitted having censored themselves to avoid incidents related to religious questions (56%, compared to 36% before Paty's assassination) and to be afraid to the point of avoiding certain religious issues (52% on average, against 43% at the end of 2020). Nearly three-quarters of public-school teachers (71%) report having already observed at least one challenge to school rules based on the principle of *laïcité* (e.g., concerning clothing, food, and diversity) in the last two decades, and nearly half (47%) confronted with such contestation only since September 2021 (IFOP, 2022). This suggests

that there are real challenges to using schools as sites for civic education on religious questions in such a politically charged environment.

Beyond these pragmatic questions, there is the potential risk of blurring the line between education and surveillance, which could increase the risk of polarisation and tensions. First, using schools as sites for deradicalisation policy runs the risk of eroding the role of the school as a pedagogical and autonomy nurturing institution. Consider, for instance, cases of students who refused to observe a minute of silence or subscribe to the “I am Charlie” (*Je suis Charlie*) slogan after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 and were reported to the police as potential cases of radicalisation (*Le Monde.fr*, 2015; Michalon-Brodeur *et al.*, 2018, p. 239). Second, an empirical study of reports submitted by schools’ personnel to law enforcement has recently raised concerns about the risk of stigmatisation of Islam implicit in the government’s policy of deradicalisation. The study revealed the risk of “tending to conceptualise Muslim religiosity as potentially dangerous for minors” (Donnet, 2020). Finally, studies have also shown that in some cases, instead of reducing violence and radicalisation in schools, using schools as sites for deradicalization policy may actually have the inverse effect of pushing students to conceal their internal conflicts and violent plans for fear of being classified as “dangerous” (Michalon-Brodeur *et al.*, 2018, p. 238).

Finally, the very identification of radicalisation as a distinct educational challenge may exacerbate the phenomenon the French government is trying to eliminate. A recent comprehensive comparative study of deradicalisation policies in schools across the member states of the Council of Europe points toward a tendency of governments to inflate the concept of radicalisation. The study shows that such typical psychological or social issues as bullying, teenage relational problems with authority, search for group membership or discovery of political ideas are at times incorrectly diagnosed as a sign of radicalisation and may be met with exceptional, and often unnecessary, measures. According to this analysis, “the move to recast many of [these] problems in a language of counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation [...] is profoundly political.” As in France, the implementation of these policies in the Council of Europe bears a heavy toll on the protection of human rights and on social cohesion:

What permeates starkly through individual testimonies of students, families and educators as well as through statements of students and educators’ unions, is the unease with precisely this position, and in particular the effects of counter-radicalisation policies in schools in terms of both human rights and efficiency with regard to countering extremism. Not only are these policies perceived as questioning and possibly undermining the ethical and professional principles of educators - for example in terms of confidentiality, freedom of expression or simply consideration for the best interests of the child - they are also reported to generate counterproductive effects in terms of the two stated objectives of these policies: preventing radicalisation and ensuring social cohesion. In fact, in many respects, the policies appear as a movement of narrowing down the scope of education, reducing, through an instrumentalist perspective, the role of the education sector altogether (Ragazzi, 2018).

3. RIVE and PAIRS

3.1 General info

Alongside implementation of its policies through state educational institutions, the French government partakes in public-private partnerships (PPP) with organisations specialising in deradicalisation and social reintegration of persons involved in radical violence. Like the educational policies mentioned above, these partnerships target only individuals involved in jihadist radicalisation. The first government attempt cautiously estimated to have yielded successful results (or at least, to not have failed) in deradicalisation was the RIVE programme (*Recherche et intervention sur les violences extrémistes*: “Research and intervention on extremist violence”), initiated in 2016. Two years later, RIVE was replaced by a similar initiative, the PAIRS project (The Programme of Individualised Support and Social Reaffiliation/*Programme d’Accompagnement Individualisé et de Réaffiliation Sociale*), which still operates in four centres in France and is also positively evaluated by deradicalisation experts.

The RIVE programme is the French government’s first attempt at a public-private partnership in deradicalisation of persons accused or convicted of terrorism-related crimes. The pilot ran for two years (October 2016-November 2018) and was operated by *APCARS (Association de Politique Criminelle Appliquée et de Réinsertion Sociale*, Association for Applied Criminal Policy and Social Reintegration), an association specialising in the rehabilitation of criminal offenders. The programme targeted individuals already convicted of terror-related crimes, before or after serving their sentence. The participation did not require internment in a closed institution and included frequent and substantial encounters with social, religious and psychological mentors. In the two years of its operation, the programme took in 22 participants, none of whom has thus far relapsed into radical political violence (Hecker, 2021).

In 2020, the RIVE programme was cancelled and replaced with the PAIRS initiative, the tender for which was won by two partnering bodies, *Artemis*, an NGO specialising in youth radicalisation, and *Groupe SOS*, a social entrepreneurship association. PAIRS succeeded RIVE in 2018. The declared objective of PAIRS is “the disengagement” of persons convicted in terrorism “from violent radicalisation and the prevention of risk of a violent act while promoting social reintegration and the acquisition of the values of citizenship”. The programme accepts participants that attend it voluntarily or due to a court order. As of the end of September 2020, it has hosted 120 individuals in its four centres (Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Lille), including those ranking “high” on the “radicalisation spectrum”. To date, none of the participants has returned to terrorist activity (Hecker, 2021).

Each of the PAIRS centres is required to employ a multidisciplinary professional team of educators, social service assistants, professional integration counsellors, clinical psychologists, a temporary psychiatrist, and “specialists in contemporary Islam.” As disclosed by an official working for the Ministry of Justice, PAIRS accepts only participants whose radicalisation involves a religious dimension (Hecker, 2021).

3.2 Description and analysis

The origins, premises, and effectiveness of the RIVE and PAIRS programmes were recently examined in a comprehensive study by Marc Hecker, an expert on jihadist radicalisation at the French Institute of International Relations. According to Hecker’s report, the RIVE initiative was designed to address radicalisation among individuals “under judicial control” (PPSMJ,

personnes placées sous main de justice), i.e. under trial or already sentenced for crimes related to jihadist radical violence. The initiative took an integrative approach to deradicalisation and participation in the programme was compulsory. Its structure was outlined in a 2016 law, “strengthening the fight against organised crime, terrorism and their financing, and improving the effectiveness and guarantees of criminal procedure.” The law provides that magistrates conducting the investigative hearing that precedes a criminal trial, sentencing judges, and magistrates for custody and release, may order that the individual subject to their authority is required to “[r]espect the conditions for health, social, educational or psychological care, intended to allow their reintegration and the acquisition of the values of citizenship.” The law goes on to specify that such programmes of care “may, if necessary, take place within a suitable reception establishment in which the convict is required to reside” (*Code de procédure pénale*, no date, secs 132–45, 138).

3.2.1 RIVE

The RIVE programme was initiated by the French government in the aftermath of several failed attempts at erecting specialised centres of treatment for radicalised individuals, in response to the 2015-2016 jihadist attacks in Paris and Nice. The new scheme aimed to distance itself from these initial responses, which focused on radicalisation of youth, were based on voluntary participation, and were not founded in research. RIVE was designed to accommodate who were required to join the programme by a court order; it targeted “perpetrators who have been charged or convicted of terrorism or related offences, and who have been given a measure or a sentence in an open environment”; its main objective was treatment and not prevention of violence; it was set to be firmly based on scientific research, in particular the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model for risk-assessment and the Good Life Model (GLM), a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation; and be supervised by the prison administration to ensure measurable success (Herzog-Evans *et al.*, 2019). The long-term objective of RIVE was “to reduce the risk of recidivism by building social and psychological stability and encouraging a more peaceful understanding of religion” (Hecker, 2021, p. 32).

The public tender for the programme was won by *APCARS*, an association with “extensive experience, particularly in social and judicial monitoring, access to housing for prisoners and remand prisoners, and judicial supervision,” who was also the only one to apply for the PPP. *APCARS* operated one treatment centre in France, which was based on an ambulatory scheme. Participants in the programme “were not kept in a separate location away from their family and social environment. Individual meetings took place at the program premises in Paris, in a public place, or in the participants’ homes” (Hecker, 2021, p. 32; Herzog-Evans *et al.*, 2019).

To work on the programme, *APCARS* hired a group of experts that included “four educators, one Muslim chaplain, two part-time psychologists, one psychiatrist working as an independent contractor, one project leader, and one assistant.” This team was able to present each of the participants with three advisors, social, religious, and psychological, who worked “to enable participants to reintegrate into society by helping them become more independent in their daily life and thought processes” (Hecker, 2021, p. 32). Initially, RIVE was required to secure six weekly hours of work with each participant but, as Hecker finds, the number of hours decreased with time, so as to “to help the person become independent” (Hecker, 2021, p. 57)

During its operation, between October 2016 and September 2018, the RIVE programme took in 22 participants: “Thirteen awaiting trial (ten of whom had been remanded in custody) and

nine after trial (five of whom had been incarcerated).” Likewise, out of the 22 individuals, eighteen were “prosecuted for criminal conspiracy in connection with a terrorist enterprise, two for the preparation of terrorist acts in connection with an individual terrorist enterprise, one for the glorification of terrorism, and one ‘ordinary detainee at risk of radicalisation’” (Hecker, 2021, p. 32).

3.2.2 PAIRS

The PAIRS programme follows the same objectives that drove the RIVE initiative. The call for tenders for PAIRS, published in 2018, stated that the rehabilitation activity should seek “to achieve disengagement from violent radicalisation and prevent the risk of violence while encouraging social reintegration” (Hecker, 2021). Nevertheless, the new project differs from the RIVE programme in several important aspects: methodological approach, broader target audience, housing solutions, and length of the course.

First, the organisations applying for the 2018 tender were no longer required to use the RNR evaluation method that were mentioned as a precondition in the tender for RIVE. As a result, the *Artemis* and *Groupe SOS* organisations who won the new tenders for all four centres of care, were able to replace the risk-assessment system that predicts future recidivism based on the person’s previous criminal behaviour and is founded upon “vertical supervision,” with a more “horizontal approach” This scheme, otherwise known as “recovery”, is a model that “emphasizes individuals’ strengths and abilities and focuses on empowerment” (Hecker, 2021, p. 38).

Second, the participation in the programme is no longer limited to compulsory attendance following a court order. Like RIVE, PAIRS still accommodates individuals that are required to attend a programme of care by law due to their association with terrorism-related crimes or for being suspect in radicalisation while serving a sentence for other offenses. But the programme is also open to participants who may choose it voluntarily in exchange for a reduction in their sentence or as a form of voluntary post-sentence follow-up (Hecker, 2021). Although only a small share of the participants chooses to join PAIRS on their own initiative, Hecker emphasises that “voluntary participants willingly follow the program and see it as helpful” (Hecker, 2021, p. 40).

Third, unlike in the case of RIVE, the PAIRS programme requires that its participants have housing accommodations, which are arranged for by the prison authorities. Individuals who were ordered or voluntarily agreed to join the programme may qualify for a transitional housing solution if they have no accommodations at all, if they are prohibited from returning to their home because of the crime they committed, or if their family environment may compromise their process of deradicalisation (Hecker, 2021). Finally, PAIRS allows for three degrees of supervision – three, ten, or twenty hours per week – which are initially chosen by the Prison Integration and Probation Services (SPIP, *Services pénitentiaires d’insertion et de probation*) and can be later adjusted base on the participant’s progress (Hecker, 2021).

The participation in PAIRS begins with a series of interviews, conducted by the programme’s experts, that may be accompanied by social activities intended to establish trust and facilitate an open and intimate conversation, such as “sports sessions, trips to the countryside or the seaside, a visit to a museum” (Hecker, 2021, p. 58). The next steps of engagement with the participants includes helping them to resolve administrative affairs, learning about their civic duties and social rights, readjusting to life after incarceration (“taking public transport, shopping, cooking, managing a budget”), finding employment, forging new social ties,

engaging in volunteer work, professional training, cultural visits and other group activities, such as “news reports in collaboration with a specialist association”; “cosmetics creation workshop”; or interreligious debates with representatives of various religions (Hecker, 2021).

The four centres of the PAIRS programme in France can accommodate up to 125 participants (up from a maximum capacity of 80 participants, before 2019). According to Hecker, between October 2018 and September 2020, the centres took in 120 individuals of whom 26 were awaiting trial and 94 attended the programme after being convicted. More than three-quarters of the participants (92) were classified by the prison administration as Islamist terrorists, and the rest (28) were suspected to undergo a process of radicalisation while serving a punishment for non-terrorism related crimes (as of 2020, there were about 500 and 700 individuals identified for each of these two categories, respectively) (Hecker, 2021).

3.3 Lessons

Hecker’s analysis of the RIVE and PAIRS programmes offers an estimate of their efficacy and impact on deradicalisation, based on various assessment methods and empirical data obtained by him via interviews and evaluation reports of other experts. His study finds several strong indications that both projects have positive effect on rehabilitation and reintegration of individuals linked to jihadist radicalisation into society. At the same time, Hecker underscores that currently available data is inconclusive and insufficient to draw any definitive policy recommendations for future deradicalisation initiatives. The absence of compelling conclusions seems to be due to theoretical challenges as well as to their application. Quantifying personal changes in one’s attitude towards radical violence faces inherent methodological difficulties of designing and testing proper indicators that could measure levels of rehabilitation. In addition, the execution of evaluation procedures for both programmes turned out to be flawed due to personal and institutional missteps.

3.3.1 RIVE

One notable indication that RIVE may have had a positive impact on the rehabilitation of its participants is that as of February 2021, none of the twenty participants in the programme were found to engage in radicalisation or terrorism-related activity. While offering a measurable unit of potential efficacy, this statistic does not, in itself, establish any causal link between participation in the programme and successful social integration. Another positive evaluation of RIVE assessment was provided by an independent expert in social psychology who estimated that “APCARS had generally complied with the contract specifications and that RIVE could be described a ‘serious initiative’ by international standards.”

This conclusion is however compromised by the fact that the expert claimed to not have been “given access to the individualized support plans that would have allowed her to measure individuals’ progress in relation to personalized objectives” and have faced other “structural obstacles” in the evaluation (Hecker, 2021, p. 33). Similarly, an interdisciplinary team of experts suggested that the programme was considered a failure because of the practical inability to assess its success based on rigorous scientific criteria. This failure was claimed to be due to “the more prominent role given to social workers than psychologists, a lack of criminological expertise among the staff, and a lack of ongoing training that led to errors in the scoring system” (Hecker, 2021, p. 33). Presumably, the termination of the programme was related to the difficulties in assessing its impact. Notwithstanding the statement of the French

Minister of Justice in May 2018 that the programme is a “real success,” the French government discontinued the programme in 2020 (despite a substantial increase in the government’s demand for such rehabilitation centres), opted for a different preventive approach, and signed a new contract to work on PAIRS with a different organisation.

3.3.2 PAIRS

Assessment difficulties persist in the new programme. The PAIRS staff regularly submits reports on their activities but Hecker attests in his study being “struck by the absence of methodological tools that would enable objective evaluation” of the participants’ progress or risk of recidivism (Hecker, 2021, p. 64). Hecker observes that the reports include accounts of improvement in the participants’ social reintegration, such as finding a job or housing, and the PAIRS employees share participants’ testimonies about disengagement from radical violence. Yet, this data is not collected systematically, and the programme does not use any scientific tools to estimate the success of its deradicalisation efforts. Another criticism being voiced against the project by the penitentiary system, which questions the “need for a [private] service provider to deal with radicalised [individuals] given that the prison administration already employs radicalisation specialists on a contractual basis” (Hecker, 2021, p. 68).

Consequently, like in the case RIVE, the only tangible measure of success of PAIRS remains the recidivism meter. This indicator suggests that the programme has been a success: less than 10% (ten out of 106) of the participants in PAIRS were reincarcerated since October 2018, and none of these returned to prison for terrorism-related offenses. Yet, it is impossible to establish a clear causal link between the ostensible deradicalisation of individuals who joined the programme and the programme itself, not least because PAIRS does not accept high-risk offenders (Hecker, 2021).

4. Association *Itinéraires*

4.1 General info

The third programme examined in this report is run by the *Itinéraires* association in the north of France, which was, until recently, one of the regions most affected by jihadist radicalisation. *Itinéraires* (or: Itineraries) was founded in 1991 by a group of smaller organisations with expertise in social work and youth development. It offers services of “specialised prevention” in the form of counselling, support and social activities to youth and adults dealing with issues of school dropout, first employment, prostitution, and, since 2015, radicalisation (See *Figure 1*). Unlike the abovementioned initiatives, the activities of *Itinéraires* are not limited to jihadist violence. Since 2022, they aim to also tackle “non-religious” radicalisation (Itinéraires, 2021).

The association is run by 126 full and part-time employees, manages eight reception centres in the city of Lille and two neighbouring towns, and is affiliated with other organisations specialising in prevention and social integration (‘Association Itinéraires, prévention spécialisée Lille | L’organisation’, *nd*). Its official agenda underscores the importance of public interest work, innovation, expertise, quantitative and qualitative assessment, as well sound management and efficient administration (‘Association Itinéraires, prévention spécialisée Lille | Nos fondamentaux’, no date).



Figure 1: Activities of the *Itinéraires* association (Itinéraires, 2021)

4.2 Description and analysis

The activity of *Itinéraires* in the field of deradicalisation started in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks in France, upon a request of the Lille Prefecture to set up a mobile team “commissioned to assess the situation, and support young people aged 11 to 25 years and/or their entourage” who are reported to have been undergoing a process of radicalisation. Such reports reach the association primarily through the government “Stop Djihadisme” project offering a toll-free number and services of “listening, advice and guidance in the event of reports of radicalised people or those who appear to be radicalised” (*Stop djihadisme - N° vert du CNAPR - Prévention radicalisation - Sécurité - Actions de l’État - Les services de l’État dans le Cher*, no date). According to its report, the association’s activity has been extended to include support for older individuals (Itinéraires, 2021).

The *Itinéraires* deradicalisation team was established in September 2015 to cover the North department of France, and in September 2018, its activity was extended to the neighbouring department of Pas-de-Calais. It is made up of five professionals: a family therapist heading the educational service, a clinical psychologist, two social service assistants and a specialised educator. According to the association’s report, “the team works in pairs and is responsible for making contact with the person reporting the problem, offering a listening ear, assessing the risk of radicalisation, providing support (social, educational, psychological, etc.) to the young people reported and their families, and then organising referrals to the mainstream services. A report on this work is sent monthly to the office of the Prefect Delegate for Equal Opportunities” (Itinéraires, 2021). The team’s official mission includes evaluation, provision of support to families and referral to specialised care. It consists of six components: (1) Get in touch with the reporter and offer to listen; (2) Assess the risk of radicalisation; (3) Provide families with support aimed at resolving or limiting family and/or social dissension; (4) Engage in support (social, educational, psychological, etc.) for reported young people and their families, by seeking alternatives to the psychological influence of the group considered dangerous, in terms of social, educational and professional integration; (5) Direct the youth towards government relays (social services, care services, etc.) or more specialised services (association fighting against sectarian influence, etc.), depending on the problem observed; (6) Remain available to families or partners in order to provide insight or advice in relation to a risk of radicalisation. In recent years, the association’s work has been extended to primary prevention (‘Association Itinéraires, prévention spécialisée Lille | Prévention de la Radicalisation’, no date). According to its 2021 activity report, “[i]n the wake of the year 2020,

[*Itinéraires*] has stepped up its primary prevention activities, in conjunction with various partners. This work has made it possible to raise awareness of the ‘prevention of radicalisation’ theme and to become a resource for these different institutions.” The association’s “primary prevention” consists of “intervening before certain problems appear [and] addressing adolescents to prevent the risk of manipulation. The general objective is to awaken critical thinking and the ability to discern” (*Itinéraires*, 2021).

The “Intervention Protocol” of the deradicalisation team of *Itinéraires* “foresees to always contact the person(s) who reported the young person first, within 15 days. On average, [the] first contact with the person who reported the case is made within 7 days. This is always done by phone” (See *Figure 1*). The team does not aim “to replace the people who are already working with the youth. On the contrary, if the young person benefits from effective and adapted educational, social or psychological support, the interest of the [team] is to maintain and support the work and links already in place.” Additionally, the team carries out extensive interviews with the families of reported individuals, encouraging them “to find their own solutions and bring to light other difficulties that have become invisible in everyday life.” Another aim of the contact with the families is evaluating “the indoctrination process” of the reported youth and promoting collaboration with relevant government institutions (education, employment, care, social and educational structures, social centres, etc.) (*Itinéraires*, 2021).

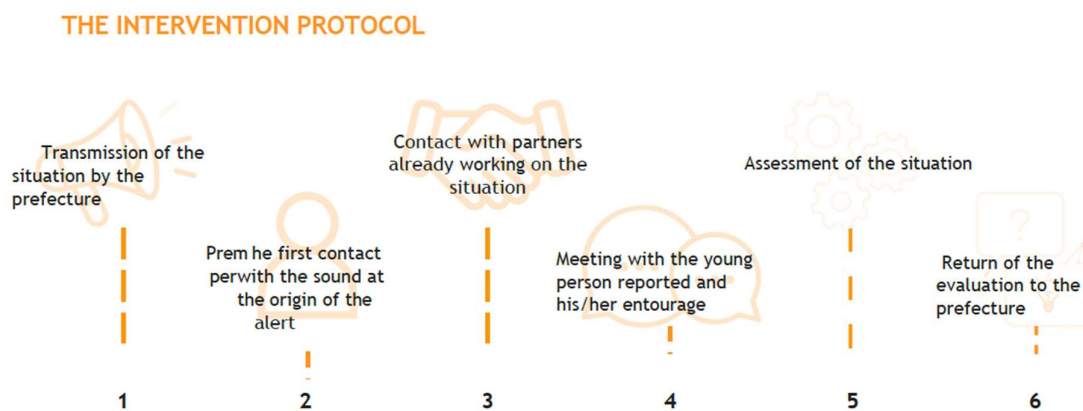


Figure 2: The “Intervention Protocol” of the *Itinéraires* deradicalisation “Mobile Unite” (*Itinéraires*, 2021)

In 2021, the *Itinéraires* team has accompanied 139 individuals and their family members. The average period of support is eight months. *Itinéraires* concludes that the “phenomenon of radicalisation or the process of conversion appears to be an expression of underlying personal problems.” The main factors identified in the association’s 2021 report as linked with radicalisation are: Spiritual or existential search around a religious practice; social issues (e.g., dropping out of school, professional integration, access to rights, social isolation of children, intellectual deficiencies, traumatic migratory paths); and psychological problems (e.g., personality disorders, psychiatric disorders, emotional deficiencies, traumas resulting from sexual, physical and/or verbal aggression, school bullying, bereavement, and abandonment during early childhood) (*Itinéraires*, 2021).

The “primary prevention” activities of *Itinéraires* in the field of deradicalisation in 2021 included an educational project, which consisted of “developing actions and workshops on republican values for young audiences and their families” with an emphasis on gender equality,

secularism (*laïcité*) and prevention of radicalisation; professional development workshops for municipal actors working with radicalised youth; sports activities, such as boxing sessions; and awareness-raising events for the youth on themes of “living together” and prevention of radicalisation (Itinéraires, 2021). The recent extension of the association’s activity into non-jihadist radicalisation included organising a conference on far-right radicalisation in December 2022 (Itinéraires, 2022).

4.3 Lessons

The work of the *Itinéraires* association in the field of deradicalisation focuses on preventive, cultural and educational activities with youth. The association’s small team responsible for prevention of radicalisation functions as an educational stakeholder working with and complementing the comprehensive deradicalisation infrastructure set up by the French Ministry of National Education and other government institutions. In this capacity, its impact and relative success are not measured in the number of “deradicalised” youths or in prevention of radical violence, but in its ability to forge collaborations between families and social services, in the number of youths and professionals they accompany, and in the feedback they provide.

On these terms, the association’s most recent report indicates that its activities contribute to the prevention of deradicalisation. In sheer numbers, according to the 2021 account of its activity, the deradicalisation team of *Itinéraires* has organised several “primary prevention” events, treated 86 reports and accompanied 139 individuals (youths and their family members), forged partnerships with other governmental and non-governmental institutions to better coordinate deradicalisation efforts, and – in what seems an extension of their activity beyond prevention among youth – organised 34 lectures on “citizenship” among nearly 200 individuals arrested for minor (non-terrorism related) crimes. These figures are illustrated by several individual testimonies about personal stories of successful social reintegration and by praise from other organisations. Hence, the report includes an account of a 29 year-old mother of five sentenced to a one-year suspended prison term and four years of judicial supervision for apology of terrorism. According to *Itinéraires*, “thanks to our support, she started a professional training and began the process of requesting a divorce. She is also involved in an association that aims to promote the emancipation of Muslim women, as she believes that faith should remain a support rather than an instrument of oppression.” Another cited example is the association’s work with a 16-year-old who became “involved in Islam in a very orthodox way.” The *Itinéraires* deradicalisation team “has been accompanying the family for more than a year with the aim of fostering a quality intra-family bond and enabling [the teenager] to make a safe journey in her faith. The fears present at the time of the report have been alleviated thanks to regular meetings with [her] father and mother, giving them a ‘decoding’ of their daughter’s practices” (Itinéraires, 2021). Likewise, the Director of Development and Innovation at the French government Service of Judicial Control and Investigation (*Service de Contrôle Judiciaire et d’Enquêtes*, SCJE) attested that the lectures given by *Itinéraires* to minor criminal offenders were “very complementary to our own interventions,” and confirmed that “the fact that the intervention is made by specialised educators is much more enlightening and impactful for [the trainees] because it allows them to deconstruct many preconceived ideas.” In the same vein, a policy officer at the Resource Centre for the Prevention of Social Radicalities (*Centre de Ressources pour la Prévention des Radicalités Sociales*, CRPRS) explained that the study days organized by *Itinéraires* team for professionals, “raise

awareness of radicalisation among those working in the field so that they can ask themselves the right questions and avoid falling into clichés” (Itinéraires, 2021).

These figures and individual statements of support are not objective estimates of the association’s success in youth deradicalisation. The importance of subjecting the preventive measures used by *Itinéraires* to scientific assessment is acknowledged in the “progress note on action-research” annexed to its 2021 activity report. In it, the association recognises “that it is necessary to know how to [...] evaluate [the tools for the prevention of radicalisation] in order to know the effects on the public under care.” It also lists, among its objectives, the need to understand “in a comprehensive and qualitative approach the phenomenon of radicalisation of the concerned individuals” and to produce “a study that respects academic scientific criteria.” The report does not provide information on such studies of the association’s activity, which makes it impossible to evaluate the success of the preventive measures it uses, in purely quantitative terms. That said, in our view, recidivism rates or other “objective” and quantifiable short-term parameters of deradicalisation programmes should not be counted as the only measures of their success, as we argue in the next section.

5. Conclusions

In the last decade, the French government has developed pioneering programmes tackling jihadist radicalisation. It invested extensive financial resources in public and private initiatives of radicalisation prevention among youth and incarcerated persons, and of deradicalisation and social reintegration of individuals identified as involved in jihadist radical violence. Among these efforts, most attention has been given to deradicalisation through formal and informal education. We have offered a glimpse into the most representative of these activities implemented in three different sectors: in the system of public education, as a complementary element to the functions of judicial and penal institutions, and as a form of social welfare for youth at risk. The rich experience of government and NGO bodies engaged in these initiatives, and the literature examining them, allows us to draw some preliminary lessons about their impact and potential pitfalls. Our conclusions concern the pros and cons of deradicalisation methods (in comparison with counter-terrorist or surveillance measures), the risk of not making a clear distinction between devout religious practice and radicalisation in school curricula, and the efficacy of deradicalisation efforts.

Approaching the issue of political violence with an educational agenda potentially allows for de-escalation of social polarisation and rebuilding of trust between the government and all segments of the French population. The introduction of civic education programmes in schools, digital literacy curriculum, informational sessions on fake news and misinformation, training of educational staff on radicalisation, and similar plans developed by the French Ministry of Education in recent years, indicate an interest in establishing a dialogue with those experiencing grievance or injustice against the state. These relatively recent programmes are indicative of the shift away from the “war on terror” paradigm (a term adopted by the French government after the attacks of November 2015, (Hecker, 2018)) towards an approach of prevention and rehabilitation. The RIVE and PAIRS educational partnerships initiated by the government to accompany and socially reintegrate individuals at risk of radicalisation, as well as the support of disengagement activities run by the *Itinéraires* association, are signs of maturation of the French attitude towards radical violence. They are by-products of the

realisation that surveillance and other punitive measures are at the very least insufficient to guarantee peace and security, let alone social cohesion and trust.

Yet, educational deradicalisation programmes bear certain risks for both students and teachers. Expanding the scope of government control and supervision beyond individuals immediately or even indirectly involved in political violence, to those politically siding with, sympathising, remotely sharing similar socio-political views those engaged in radical violence is challenging in the classroom. Highlighting the principles of *laïcité* as the key element of deradicalisation in French schools, as well as focusing the problem of radicalisation primarily on jihadist violence are the most conspicuous examples.

In this respect, the educational initiatives set up by the *Groupe SOS* and *Itinéraires* associations that do not focus explicitly on the motives of radicalisation seems to avoid the pitfalls encountered in the deradicalisation curriculum designed by the French Ministry of Education. Instead, the social reintegration of individuals at risk of succumbing to online radicalisation, being recruited by violent stakeholders, and more generally, becoming disenchanted with democratic politics, seems to be a more promising (and more realistic) perspective for disengagement from radical violence. Rebuilding family and social networks, securing opportunities for education and employment, and more generally, demonstrating the disposition to (re)integrate individuals in risk of radicalisation into the democratic life of the country is the future of deradicalisation.

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