

Initiatives to prevent radicalisation in Spanish and French educational establishments

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Abstract

The radicalisation of young people leading to extremism is considered a serious security challenge in Europe. As the case of the foiled attack at the Taylor Swift concert in Vienna shows, this phenomenon can occur anywhere. In response to this challenge, Western European countries have developed a number of prevention projects targeting young people. This article presents and analyses the main educational initiatives implemented in France and Spain designed to reduce the risk of children and young people being radicalised and influenced by extremist ideologies. The data necessary for the preparation of this text were collected during study visits to France (Paris) and Spain (Madrid, Salamanca, Barcelona, and Malaga), which took place between 2020 and 2023. During the visits, we carried out numerous queries and in-depth interviews with French and Spanish experts dealing with the issues analysed. The article points out the importance of cooperation among state security institutions, the educational sector, and families at risk of radicalisation as well as the need for the coordination of various preventive measures. Due to the differences in the political systems of France and Spain, the former adopted a strategy of developing and implementing deradicalisation and prevention activities at the central level, while in Spain, preference was given to the regional and local levels for the execution of such projects.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In response to the catastrophic activities of extremist movements, including terrorist attacks, many states have launched and expanded radicalisation prevention programmes in recent years. The discursive forms of jihadist currents have highlighted that mechanisms to contain the impact of ideologies calling for violence should be an essential component of prevention efforts. In this regard, a particular concern relates to children and young people, who are so often the target of the recruitment efforts of subversive organisations. Educational institutions have a major responsibility to develop the most far-reaching ways of containing radicalisation or responding to signs of it.

Spain and France are European countries that have been struggling with the terrorist threat for decades. They have vast experience in this area and for over a decade have been strongly focusing on “soft” forms of dealing with the radicalisation of a part of their populations, including communities with immigrants originating from North Africa. Both countries are located in the Mediterranean basin and have experienced serious terrorist attacks in the 21st century. In this respect, only Great Britain has gone through a similar experience, but in its case, the serious terrorist threat comes from a different geographical direction, which may complicate the comparative aspect. France and Spain have different internal administration systems—the former is a unitary state, while the latter has a federal system. Also, Spain consists of 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities located in North Africa, which is an interesting differentiator. Therefore, the analysis of the preventive actions undertaken by the authorities of these two states with similar terrorist threat levels may reveal interesting similarities and differences in tackling the radicalisation menace.

Due to the current threats in Spain generated by jihadist terrorism, which were directly manifested during the Madrid attacks in 2004 and in Catalonia in 2017, a number of prevention projects have been undertaken, targeting different environments and sectors. In France also, the country’s authorities realised, particularly after the attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, that the fight against terrorism based on detecting terrorist plots and arresting extremists was not sufficient to curb the problem of “home-grown” extremism. Therefore, they concluded that measures known as Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) were needed to effectively limit the recruitment of new individuals into French terrorist networks. The main rationale behind prevention actions is to bridge intercultural antagonisms and counter the spread of narratives propagated by groups driven by religious, ethnic, and political hatred. Particularly since 2015, these programmes have included an increasingly wide range of activities implemented at many institutional levels, including prisons, community centres, schools, and other educational centres.

This article presents the main initiatives carried out in the French and Spanish education sectors in response to the risk of children and young people being radicalised and adopting the ideology spread by subversive organisations, particularly those with a Salafist profile. The present reflections emphasise the relevance of educational projects to prevention strategies, which are one of the pillars of the fight against terrorism. In addition, this study highlights the need for training of professionals in this field to make capable of effectively identifying the manifestations of vulnerability to integralist slogans. The main premise of this study is that in France and Spain in particular, since 2015, a number of multifaceted initiatives have been launched to counter the ideological impact of extremism, including prevention programmes aimed at educational establishments.

The following research questions were identified in this analysis:

1. What role do actions implemented in the education sector play in terms of efforts aimed at preventing radicalisation among young people?
2. What are the main directions of the actions taken in Spain and France in response to this problem?
3. Are these initiatives similar or do they show significant differences?

The essence of radicalisation and the spectrum of challenges associated with it have been elaborated on in numerous studies. Based on these reflections, radicalisation is

(...) defined as a process characterised by the gradual internalisation of extreme beliefs and an extremist worldview that justifies the use of violence. It includes cognitive aspects (ideas, values, [and] judgements) and behavioural aspects, manifested through specific acts, although it should be noted that the internalisation of extreme ideas does not always find a continuum in violent acts. The process is gradual and multifaceted, involving socialisation mechanisms built through contacts with already radicalised individuals, (self-)indoctrination, and identity formation on the pillar of an extreme worldview (Bolechów, 2012, pp. 104–133; Cano Paños, 2021, pp. 19–25; Hafez and Mullins, 2015, p. 960; Kosmynka, 2022, pp. 116–117; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2008; Wiktorowicz, 2005, pp. 17–24).

The data necessary for the preparation of this text was collected during study visits to France (Paris) and Spain (Madrid, Salamanca, Barcelona, and Malaga), which took place between 2020 and 2023, during which we carried out numerous queries and in-depth interviews with French and Spanish experts dealing with the issues analysed.¹

We conducted our research using qualitative content analysis of non-classified documents and in-depth expert interviews. Special attention was given to official reports from various executive and parliamentary commissions that evaluated actions and policies in response to terrorist crises. In-depth interviews were conducted involving 32 respondents from expert, academic, and government sectors as well as counter-terrorism services in the two studied countries. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample based on the respondents' role in the analysis of deradicalisation activities in both countries studied. Some of the people we contacted refused to take part in the study, others requested anonymity, but the majority of respondents did not. The study adhered to ethical guidelines ensuring transparency and respect for all contributors. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The sample included individuals with the following characteristics:

- Age range: 28–78 years.
- Gender distribution: twenty-eight men and four women.

¹In November 2022, at the Elcano Royal Institute (Real Instituto Elcano), the International Observatory on Terrorism Studies (Observatorio Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo) in Madrid, and in July 2022, in Malaga at the UN-affiliated International Training Centre for Authorities and Leaders (Centro Internacional de Formación de Autoridades y Líderes [CIFAL]), among others.

- Occupation: seven government officials, sixteen academic workers, six think-tank experts and journalists, and three military, police, and special services members.

All interviews were conducted in person, averaging 45–75 minutes in duration. Open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on all relevant themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for in-depth analysis. In line with the sociological tradition, the analysis centred on key excerpts that clearly expressed participants' perspectives and contributed significantly to the research questions.

In France and Spain, the issues of jihadist radicalisation, terrorist violence, and the prevention strategies introduced at many levels in various institutions are present in the publications of authors from both countries. They reveal the broad spectrum of initiatives launched in these countries over the last few years in various areas and the evolving shape of security threats.²

The importance of the education sector in preventing radicalisation

By learning about the mechanisms of radicalisation and analysing the profile of those experiencing this process in many parts of the world, including the countries of the Old Continent, the critical role of programmes aimed at young people came to the fore. These initiatives take the form of both general projects developed at the institutional level and personalised solutions targeted at groups or individuals deemed particularly vulnerable to extremist ideas of various undertones. It is impossible not to mention the helpful experience of educational programmes that have been developed in various countries to minimise the risk of young people joining criminal subcultures, for example, urban gangs (Kosmynka, 2021, pp. 1–18; Howell, 2010; O'Connor and Waddell, 2015). Antisocial attitudes and attitudes that threaten order are a breeding ground for subversive movements, including terrorist groups; hence, the reference to the aforementioned experiences is valuable for the development of educational initiatives in the spheres of both radicalisation prevention and deradicalisation. Over the past several years, many countries (e.g. the United Kingdom, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, and Australia) have implemented a broader package of classes focused on the foundations of civil society, tolerance, pluralism of world-views, and intercultural dialogue in various educational fields (Aly *et al.*, 2014, p. 370). These classes also include content on the dangers of an ideology that legitimises terrorism and other forms of violence.

Young people with a migrant background have been the target audience for many initiatives aimed at social inclusion and integration, creating opportunities to participate in various components of social life and encouraging active involvement. Studies undertaken in numerous countries indicate a high level of social acceptance not only for the development and implementation of a range of preventive measures in cities (more police patrols, expansion of the control system for specific facilities and gatherings, monitoring of urban spaces, placement of vehicle barriers in mass areas, etc.) but also for efforts aimed at protecting young people from recruitment into extremist groups (Daalgard-Nielsen *et al.*, 2014, p. 7).

Aly *et al.* (2014, p. 375) have identified seven main areas of prevention initiatives that should occupy key positions in the coordination of school–family cooperation and, at the same time, determine the direction of workshops as well as pedagogical and psychological support for children and young people:

1. Anger control and emotion management, the formation of empathy and the acquisition of conciliatory problem-solving and conflict resolution competencies.
2. Care, counseling, and assistance aimed, in particular, at people who have had collisions with the law.
3. Educational programmes, including lessons on the consequences of violence, membership of criminal and subversive groups, ethnic and racial hatred, etc.
4. Peer involvement and mediation in workshops on peaceful conflict resolution.
5. Classes for parents and carers on the correct diagnosis of a child's behaviour.
6. Expanding the formula and range of extracurricular activities.
7. Measures to facilitate access to education and employment.

It has been noted that young people in particular are at risk of succumbing to extreme ideologies, often facing an identity crisis, contesting the existing social order, and longing for a sense of acceptance and belonging. The mechanisms of young people's susceptibility to the influence of extremism of various origins are increasingly being analysed in academic studies ([Tamayo Sáez *et al.*, 2021](#), pp. 119–130). The period of rebellion, that is, the search for ways to define oneself, is a stage when it is relatively easy to exert influence and use tools of manipulation, which happens in many environments—subcultures, sects, criminal groups, or extremist organisations ([Özerdem and Podder, 2011](#), pp. 63–64). At the same time, many psychologists agree that it is not possible to point to a single source that is responsible for the radicalisation process and the sometimes resulting behavioural component—the use of violence, including of a terrorist nature ([Borum, 2011](#), pp. 37–62; [Horgan, 2021](#); [Post, 1998](#)). It tends to be the outcome of a combination of different elements, both personal and situational, as discussed further on. In addition, we cannot ignore the correlation of certain age categories with the impact of information and communication technologies, through which ideological influence is so often achieved. [Kłodkowski and Siewierska-Chmaj \(2019, p. 223\)](#) aptly draw attention to the need to analyse “the phenomenon of radicalisation through the prism of the generational specificity of generation Y and the influence of the internet and new media, [thus] avoiding the trap lurking for those ready to identify radicalisation with Islam or any other religion.”

In attempting to take a multifaceted view of these mechanisms, one should bear in mind the importance of personal experiences, that is, the influence of social and psychological factors responsible for the tendency to internalise a dichotomous and ultimatum-based narrative that explains reality in a simplistic way and fuels various resentments ([Aly *et al.*, 2014](#), p. 376). It is difficult to point to one specific risk profile; it is more appropriate to see the association of multilayered factors behind succumbing to radicalisation. [Izquierdo Alberca \(2017, pp. 4–5\)](#) details a set of catalysts associated with the potential likelihood of this process occurring in relation to young people's behaviour, the specificity and nature of their interaction with the environment, the type of activity in virtual spaces, etc. Their occurrence should be a signal that initiates preventive action. These factors include the following: (1) the use of symbols and images affirming violence; (2) a change in behaviour towards family members, peers, acquaintances (e.g. avoiding contact with them); (3) the proclamation of radical beliefs and ideas taken from the propaganda of extremist currents; (4) inability to conduct dialogue, and lack of empathy; (5) a tendency to give in to outbursts of anger and aggression; and (6) spending a lot of time in cyberspace and

being exposed to subversive material, which results in absorbing and repeating forms and discursive content found therein.

A set of economic and psychosocial conditions, such as a sense of uprooting, material instability, a lack of strong bonds with loved ones, and a readiness to assume social roles, are sometimes exploited by radical circles in an attempt to attract and recruit new sympathisers to their movement. Adolescence, in particular, is a period of susceptibility to ideological influences of various kinds. In this respect, it is once again important to note the similarity to the previously mentioned mechanisms that define submission to sects and subcultures. Of particular concern is the process of moral disengagement, resulting in a weakening of internal control mechanisms and moral imperatives, sometimes resulting in the justification of the use of violence, the shifting of blame to others, and the dehumanisation of victims ([Aly et al., 2014](#), p. 376). Therefore, deradicalisation programmes *en bloc* must be an integral part of the demythologisation of the jihadist narrative and a psychological impact that allows for a mindset shift: away from the conviction of the validity of self-sacrifice seen in the category of martyrdom within the framework of peculiarly conceived religious principles.

Analysing the rationale behind the Radicalisation Prevention Education Project, launched in Australia following the October 2002 Bali attack, [Aly et al. \(2014, p. 378\)](#) point to the need to develop internal mechanisms inoculating youths against the influence of ideas that legitimise terrorist violence. These include the following:

- Shaping the belief that extremism ought to be stigmatised from a moral perspective.
- Fostering empathy towards the victims of terrorist attacks by presenting concrete examples and incidents.
- Raising awareness of the potential consequences of radical attitudes.
- Strengthening self-esteem and confidence in one's subjectivity, agency, and abilities.

It should, of course, be emphasised that the above points can only be achieved if comprehensive psychological and pedagogical programmes are set up, enabling a cadre of specialists to be trained and relevant activities to be carried out in educational institutions. The above-mentioned issues define the areas of action that are key to reducing the danger of adopting extreme beliefs and condoning violence. This is evidenced by a number of studies carried out among young people struggling with internal problems and identity crises, and participating in psychological training and workshops ([Feddes et al., 2015](#)).

Preventing radicalisation in the Spanish education system

Research by [García-Calvo and Reinares \(2013, pp. 3–5\)](#) shows that as many as 97% of those convicted of terrorist activities in Spain between 1995 and 2012 were young: aged 16–37, most of whom were under the age of 30 years ([Izquierdo Alberca, 2017, p. 2](#)). This trend also continued in subsequent years, given the increasingly younger age of militant Salafist sympathisers, recruited through face-to-face and online contacts. Their radicalisation was in many cases rapid, even “express,” and had the hallmarks of a very cursory assimilation of jihadist ideas, usually slogans and catchphrases. This, therefore, illustrates how important it is to monitor young people's behaviour and the content they encounter primarily, but not exclusively, in virtual spaces. The “significant others” play

a special role here, similar to educational institutions and establishments. Emphasising that the problem of radicalisation particularly affects young people, [Tamayo Sáez *et al.* \(2021\)](#) point out, in this context, the need to implement efforts to identify individuals who are particularly exposed to the risk of accepting violence and to neutralise the circumstances that facilitate the implementation of such acts. The educational sector has a special responsibility in this context. In other words, from the perspective of limiting the challenges indicated here in the long term, the importance of preventive measures is emphasised instead of expanding repressive instruments, as many other Spanish experts also write about ([Gil Gil, 2021](#), pp. 111–117).

In Spain, the key role of implementing tasks related to the broadly understood fight against terrorism at the national level is played by the Intelligence Centre for Combating Terrorism and Organised Crime (Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y Crimen Organizado [CITCO]), which is part of the Ministry of Interior and coordinates many important initiatives. In this regard, the Spanish National Strategic Plan to Fight Radicalisation (Plan Estratégico Nacional de Lucha Contra la Radicalización Violenta [PEN-LCRV]), adopted in January 2015, and its updated version from 2019: National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Fight against Radicalisation (Plan Estratégico Nacional de Prevención y Lucha Contra la Radicalización Violenta [PENCRAV]), envisaged comprehensive integrated actions in the education sector and prisons as well as religious, social, and cultural centres. The aim of this project was to reduce the risk of the impact of ideologies that call for violence, with a particular focus on jihadism. It is on the shoulders of teachers and educators, among others, that major responsibility lies in spotting the symptoms of radicalisation and taking the appropriate countermeasures or informing the relevant institutions and bodies of the risks involved. This, of course, requires continuous training of educational staff and equipping them with the necessary competencies for an effective diagnosis of the problem, which is also dictated by the desire to make educational establishments a space for dialogue and intercultural conviviality, free of integralism. This view was expressed, among other things, in the document encapsulating the 2015 meeting of representatives of the European Union (EU) education sector in Manchester, entitled “Manifesto for Education – Empowering Educators and Schools” ([European Association of History Educators \[EuroClio\], 2015](#)). The document aimed to raise awareness among central and local authorities on the need to set aside sufficient resources for the training of professionals and to create preventive mechanisms to offset the impact of extreme ideologies. Emphasis was placed on the importance of providing the necessary psychological support for children and young people from different, often culturally dissimilar, backgrounds who are facing a variety of difficulties. The practice of conversion to jihadism has repeatedly demonstrated how family problems, economic challenges, and feelings of alienation are often exploited by “apostles of the holy war” carrying out agitation and recruitment activities.

In this context, a number of studies point to the importance of mentoring, provided by educators, psychologists, and social workers, targeted especially at young people experiencing educational deficits ([Alarcón Galindo and Prieto Flores, 2019](#), pp. 97–98). To be effective, it should be based on close ties and trust. In such a situation, the mentor becomes not only an authority but, at the same time, a friend and advisor, who helps to make decisions and face problems of various kinds. Projects of this type have been introduced in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, among others, as a response to the high rates of delinquency among adolescents and young adults ([Alarcón Galindo and Prieto Flores, 2019](#), pp. 98–99). Needless to say, they can also prove relevant in preventing radicalisation and implementing deradicalisation, as evidenced, for example, by initiatives in Denmark.

In Spain, mentoring programmes, usually lasting from 8 months to a year, aimed at supporting people with an immigrant background, play a special role in this regard. Important objectives include the following: to promote integration with peers and to counteract social exclusion, alienation, and the experience of dangerous “intercultural suspension.” As of 2015, such programmes have been launched in Navarre, Barcelona, Gerona, and Tarragona, among others. Clearly, these projects have been widely applied within Catalonia. With regard to the prevention of radicalisation, mentoring is characterised by the following two pillars ([Alarcón Galindo and Prieto Flores, 2019](#), p. 106):

1. Creating a network of contacts with families, facilitating their dialogue with children and young people, and sensitising them to their needs, emotions, and fears.
2. Directing professionals, who are familiar with the narratives and methods of extremist currents, to work with 15–24-year olds already affected by the radicalisation process in order to initiate a change of mindset.

The September 2020 document, entitled “Counter-Terrorism and Prevention of Radicalisation” (*Política de Prevención del Extremismo y de la Radicalización*; [Colegio Europeo de Madrid, 2020](#)), emphasises the great importance of educational establishments in addressing the challenges discussed here ([Colegio Europeo de Madrid, 2020](#)). Their role in responding to problems of this nature is also highlighted. Let us add that the regulations adopted in Spain on 1 July 2015 require schools to implement efforts to prevent terrorist organisations from influencing young people. In this regard, initiatives have been implemented at central and local levels to evaluate the degree of risk of these processes occurring and the methods of applying recommendations to address these challenges. Particular attention has been paid to the virtual environment, which, as we know, is often an area of contact with extremist content. However, monitoring the materials contained therein in terms of its impact on young people is extremely difficult and often ineffective. The Radicalisation Information Coordination Centre (*Centro de Coordinación de Información sobre Radicalización [CCIR]*), established within CITCO, plays an important role in signalling the risk of extreme attitudes and beliefs. As part of this project, it is possible to respond to potential cases of radicalisation through various communication channels (including the [stop-radicalismos.es](#) website, the app, e-mail, and telephone contact).

The broad spectrum of initiatives, mainly aimed at young people and staff of educational institutions, is also evidenced by several projects involving various actors, including numerous non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and academic institutions. The main rationale for the initiatives mentioned include ensuring social inclusion, seeking to develop dialogue between representatives of different cultures, integrating immigrant communities, promoting an interpretation of Islam that is free from extremism as well as countering stigma, discrimination, racism, and other prejudices. Here are some of such projects ([Salguero Montaña, 2021](#)):

1. Launched in 2017 in and around Madrid and Valladolid by the Mercy-Migration Foundation (*Fundación La Merced Migraciones*), the project “Salam: promoting intercultural and interfaith conviviality and protecting against religiously motivated intolerance” is targeted at vulnerable young people of immigrant origin.
2. The project “In YourHands: countering the spread of hate online and strengthening inclusive discourse” was implemented in 2020 in Murcia and Alicante by the Columbares Association.

3. Running from 2013 to 2018 in Madrid, Valencia, Zaragoza, Murcia, Melilla, and Ceuta, the “Muslim Youth Education” programme was funded by the Foundation for Pluralism and Conviviality (Fundación Pluralismo y Convivencia) with the involvement of organisations representing the Islamic communities in Spain.
4. Training projects for young Muslims to acquire social competencies and qualifications useful in the labour market were launched in 2017 in and around Madrid, with several editions.
5. Launched in February 2020 in Malaga, the “Violent Radicalisation in Urban Settings” workshop within the MINDb4ACT Project was run by the Elcano Royal Institute, resulting in the following manual: *Good practice: tools for the early detection of cases of violent radicalisation in minors and training of professionals for their implementation*.

It is impossible not to notice that many of the initiatives implemented in Spain in recent years were intertwined with the main assumptions of immigration policy in the context of activities targeted at foreigners. These assumptions were dictated by the need to ensure integration and social inclusion. Many of them were reflected, for example, in the solutions adopted in November 2024 as part of the migration policy reform package (Reforma del Reglamento de Extranjería). Projects aimed at young people are within the scope of the issues discussed. It should be also emphasised that in Spain, due to the specificity of the country’s system—a high degree of decentralisation and the functioning of autonomous regions—a large part of the competencies in the field of counter-radicalisation remain with local authorities. Relevant recommendations come from central institutions, but the shape of specific undertakings in the discussed field depends on local administrations and NGOs. It cannot be overlooked that the threat posed by jihadist extremism is unevenly distributed in Spain; in some regions, it has been highly visible for years (Catalonia, the capital district, Castile and Leon, Andalusia, Valencia, Ceuta, and Melilla), while in others, it is practically absent (García-Calvo and Reinares, 2013, pp. 9–11). Understandably, therefore, the need to intensify preventive initiatives is particularly evident in relation to the regions marked by activities of jihadist cells.

One of these is the aforementioned Catalonia, where terrorist attacks were carried out in August 2017 and where Salafist networks have been uncovered, resulting in the detention of many of their members (Kosmynka 2015, pp. 129–141). The region is a home to numerous communities with different immigrant backgrounds, exemplified by the Barcelona neighbourhood of Raval. This raises a particular need to implement projects for cultural conviviality and conflict prevention. In 2014, the Catalan Department of Education, in consultation and close cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior and law enforcement units (Mossos d’Esquadra), developed a specific protocol for the prevention, investigation, and response to cases of Islamist radicalisation in educational establishments (Protocolo de prevención, detección, intervención de procesos de radicalización islamista—Proderai). It contained instructions on how to prevent and diagnose incidents of hatred on ethnic, religious, and cultural grounds, among others, and how to intervene when they occur. Updated in July 2016, the regulations provide for training and workshops for teachers and students, consultation with parents and guardians, cooperation with police officers, educators, and other professionals, and a broad package of intervention activities (SINDIC, El Defensor de las Personas, 2017, pp. 10–11). By May 2017, these solutions had been introduced at the institutional level in Barcelona. They included, among other things, training and workshops for managers of primary and secondary schools while taking into account procedures for evaluating the actions taken; the evaluation is implemented by, among others, the management and evaluation committee (Comité de Dirección y Evaluación). The initiators of these solutions were aware

of the great diversity of factors responsible for the radicalisation process and the need to integrate and diversify preventive instruments.

It is noteworthy that while most efforts have been concentrated on countering the impact of jihadism on schoolchildren, projects to raise awareness on Islamophobia and xenophobic attitudes in general, which often lead to hatred and violence, and disrupt the conviviality of culturally different communities, have not been neglected.

Following the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils on 17 August 2017, there was an intensification and expansion of activities exposing the real face of militant Salafism and pointing out the consequences of internalising radical discourse. Such activities were age-profiled for children and young people, both of Spanish origin and immigrant backgrounds. They were often carried out in collaboration with various social organisations organising activities of an inclusive nature, such as the Bofill Foundation (Fundación Bofill). It must be remembered that the rates of educational dropout, social exclusion, and unemployment are consistently higher for immigrant communities ([SINDIC, El Defensor de las Personas, 2017](#), p. 17). Therefore, integration programmes seek to level the playing field and provide the necessary instruments to become active in the labour market, such as language teaching. After the 2017 attack, recommendations from the Catalan Department of Education were simultaneously sent to school establishments on how to care for students in terms of the following factors ([SINDIC, El Defensor de las Personas, 2017](#), p. 15):

- Diagnosing the sense of threat of a terrorist attack
- Responding to any attempt to justify violence
- Providing a sense of security while alleviating anxiety and anger
- Preventing intercultural and interfaith divisions in classrooms;
- Responding (in consultation with families and relevant experts) to expressions of aggression and manifestations of sadness, introversion, and alienation.

Therefore, it is evident that a high level of importance has been attached not only to issues of worldview, as these remain malleable with regard to very young people, but also to the affective sphere. It is the emotional aspect that tends to be managed and, thereafter, channelled appropriately by the promoters of radical ideas, hence the importance of taking appropriate action in this field. Of course, it is important to be aware that the effectiveness of these efforts depends to a large extent on the proper preparation of professionals who are on the front line of intervening in crisis situations. Psychologists, educators, teachers, and social workers should be equipped with the right competencies to not only recognise the problem but also be able to deal with it.³

With respect to the projects implemented in Andalusia, it is difficult not to mention the programmes carried out in Malaga, especially the one launched in March 2017: The First Cross-Cutting Plan for Conviviality and Prevention of Violent Radicalisation 2017–2020

³Awareness on the importance of these activities is reflected in the scholarly symposia and trainings organised in Spain in recent years, such as the conference in Granada in April 2021 entitled “The education sector’s response to the problem of radicalisation” (*Respuesta de educación ante la radicalización violenta*). It discussed, among other things, the importance of training courses, such as the virtually conducted “Psychoeducational models of school response. Classes on the prevention of radicalisation through education” (*Modelos psicoeducativos de la intervención en el aula: Curso para la prevención de la radicalización a través de la educación*).

(Andrade Ruiz and Sarabia García, 2017). This project included a series of guidelines, as set out by the National Strategic Plan to Fight Radicalisation. It is important to add that Malaga is in the vanguard of Spanish cities in terms of outlining and implementing programmes of intercultural conviviality, integrating communities with different origins and backgrounds, and reducing the risk of the development of radicalisation processes. The aforementioned plan consisted of nine segments containing comprehensive multifaceted actions involving representatives of numerous organisations. In view of the issues at stake, it is important to highlight its seventh segment, which encompassed educational and integration initiatives aimed at young people: organisation of leisure activities, assistance with labour market activation, and psychological and psychotherapeutic support (Andrade Ruiz and Sarabia García, 2017, pp. 44–49).

Initiatives aimed at levelling the endogenous catalysts associated with the development of these threats have become visible in other Spanish regions and cities marked by the activities of jihadist networks. At the beginning of 2018, Ceuta—a city that has witnessed numerous arrests of extremists over the years—hosted a conference entitled “Educational Actions for the Prevention of Youth Radicalisation” (Acciones educativas para la prevención de la radicalización de los jóvenes a través de la educación), which was attended by a wide range of experts and representatives of many organisations and institutions, including the CITCO (Solano, 2018). During the presentations, the critical role of efforts devoted to social inclusion and building intercultural dialogue was pointed out. Furthermore, the city has adopted the European Commission’s “Role Models” project on the promotion of specific models in the educational sphere (including through the Erasmus+ Academic Exchange Programme), that is, diversity, multiculturalism, peaceful coexistence, and pluralism of world views.

Another example of initiatives relating to the issues discussed was the forum on the scale of radicalisation in Spain organised in the autumn of 2021 in the capital district at Francisco de Vitoria University. It brought together officials of law enforcement agencies, academic experts, and representatives of a wide range of institutions. The *Manual for the prevention and detection of radicalisation* (*Manual para la prevención y detección de radicalización*; Universidad Francisco de Vitoria [UFV], 2021) produced through inter-institutional cooperation and with the involvement of the Victims of Terrorism Foundation (Fundación de Víctimas del Terrorismo), which funds the project, was presented there. It takes the form of an information bulletin that identifies the risk factors determining the likelihood of this process occurring as well as a range of remedial instruments. These include efforts by educators and psychologists to ensure that children and young people are protected as much as possible from the impact of ideologies of all kinds (ethnonationalism, extreme political movements of various hues or jihadism) that explain reality dichotomously, trigger negative emotions, and affirm the use of violence (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria [UFV], 2021).

The document details the areas where the need to implement prevention efforts are strongest. In this context, the education sector receives a package of pedagogical instructions that are useful for working with students of different age groups. The instructions emphasise the following (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria [UFV], 2021):

- The need to adjust the content to the age and, thus, to the level of emotional and intellectual development.
- Combining conversations about threats with messages affirming the values of a democratic state, such as freedom, respect, tolerance, solidarity, and peaceful conviviality.
- Strengthening the sense of safety.

- Encouraging entering into a dialogue, asking questions and being ready to talk openly with children and young people.
- Adopting the principle of continuity of activities, lectures, workshops, etc. regarding the risks discussed as well as demonstrating a willingness to discuss with young people their concerns, worrying situations or incidents.

In 2019, workshops and training sessions targeted at teachers and educational directorates were launched in Madrid. The aim of these actions was to equip school staff with the skills to diagnose and respond to the signs of a radicalisation process in students. An important element of these classes was showing the security mechanisms, so to speak, thereby “inoculating” young people against the impact of extremism. Relevant work in this regard was also undertaken in the centres for the assistance of unaccompanied minors (*Centros de protección de menores no acompañados*) in order to prevent their recruitment into terrorist cells. Thus, an important objective of the aforementioned projects is to provide educators and psychologists with the necessary knowledge of radicalisation processes, in which skills, such as therapeutic instruction, control of anger and other emotions, conflict resolution, and strengthening intercultural dialogue, play a vital role.

Preventing radicalisation in the French education system

The prevention of radicalisation in France, understood as the application of soft prevention measures by the civilian institutions of the French state, has a history dating back to only less than a decade. Prior to 2014, French counter-terrorism efforts were based on strictly punitive measures, and the fight against terrorism was the exclusive domain of the institutions responsible for state security. Although the need for preventive actions, understood as PCVE, was already mentioned in *Livre blanc* ([Ministry of the Interior, Paris, 2006](#)), and the topic was developed further in the so-called [Jounot \(2013\)](#) report, the first plans for real, albeit limited, action in France in this area were not taken until the announcement of the *Plan de Lutte contre la Radicalization Violente* (PLAT) in April 2014. However, primacy was still given to “hard” counter-terrorism activities geared towards detecting terrorist plots and individuals already involved in terrorist activities. The turning point for the intensification of French PCVE activities came at the end of 2015, following the attacks in Paris on 7–9 January 2015 and then on 13 November 2015.

The development of a “soft” approach to countering extremism, involving active prevention, was also influenced by the first returns of French jihadists and their family members, including children, from the areas under Daesh control. France was the European country with the highest number of citizens who left their country to the so-called Islamic State. With the withdrawal of the Islamists from the territories under their control as a result of the counter-offensive of the Syrian and Iraqi government forces, the possibility of the return of fighters of French origin to their country, including women and children, was anticipated. It was, therefore, necessary to develop measures that did not simply involve putting everyone in prisons and detention centres, as this would require obtaining definitive evidence of their crimes. For obvious reasons, the punitive approach could not apply to minors, especially children of a few years of age, who could in no way be held responsible for the behaviour of their parents. Using “soft” methods would also help to prevent the rising tide of radicalisation evident in certain sectors of French society. Therefore, the second *Plan d'Action contre la Radicalization et le Terrorisme* (PART—Action plan against radicalisation and terrorism), announced on 9 May 2016, was much more elaborate in

its preventive part and based on seven so-called “axes” divided into 80 “measures.” The aims of some of these measures were to detect early signs of radicalisation among adolescents and strengthen “social resilience” while raising awareness of terrorist threat. By this time, government organisations had begun to realise that counter-terrorism efforts should include a social component, directed not only at detecting attitudes and views leading to extremist actions, through surveillance of high-risk environments, but also at limiting the scale and potency of radical ideas on young minds.

On 23 February 2018, the Prime Minister published a new inter-ministerial instruction on the issue of the care of minors upon their return from the areas of terrorist groups, which replaced the previous specifications of 23 March 2017 (SG-CIPDR, 2018a). The instruction provides guidelines for caring for minors upon their return from the Iraqi-Syrian zone by air, sea, or land, including by clandestine means, and it outlines specific support adapted to their age and individual situation. The system is largely based on customary law, which makes it possible to mobilise all state services connected with the matter, thereby improving their coordination with the departmental councils responsible for the care of these children in order to provide the most appropriate support for the situation and status of these minors. The instruction sets out the conditions for the care of these children after their return to France, in particular the conditions for the assessment of their health and psychological state as well as a system for monitoring them. Under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Solidarity and Health, a committee was set up to monitor the system, with the support of the General Secretariat of the Inter-Ministerial Committee against Crime and Radicalisation (CPRAF). CPRAF took charge of 2,500 people (of whom 55% were minors and 40% women), and 700 families were accompanied. There was a systematic presence of regional health agencies (ARS) in each CPRAF, and mental health support was present in 50% of cases. Twenty-three departments took charge of ninety-five child returnees from Syria and Iraq (83% aged less than 10 years). Of these ninety-five minors, eighty-eight received educational assistance procedure, while 271 adult returnees (192 men and 79 women) were followed up and carefully monitored.

The above approach, but with the treatment of adolescents included, was expressed by a second national plan against Islamic radicalisation, le Plan National de Prévention de la Radicalization (PNPR: the National Radicalisation Prevention Plan), adopted on 23 April 2018, termed “prevent to protect.” It was the first inter-ministerial plan exclusively dedicated to preventing radicalisation. The execution of this plan was assigned to twenty ministerial departments, local authorities, and NGOs. It was based on five “axes” and sixty “measures”; the axes were as follows: (1) protecting minds against radicalisation; (2) completing the detection/prevention network; (3) understanding and anticipating the evolution of radicalisation; (4) professionalisation of local actors and evaluation practices; and (5) tailoring disengagement schemes (SG-CIPDR, 2018b).

Axis 1 was focused on defending the values of the republican school system, early detection, and guidance of young people at risk of radicalisation in schools as well as the training and education of teachers, law enforcement personnel, and local civil servants in recognition of early signs of radicalisation. The essential aim was to develop counter-narratives against content likely to encourage radicalisation. Axis 5 focused on reintegrating child returnees from the areas of terrorist groups’ operations. The deradicalisation activities carried out in the French school system, starting from primary school and continuing through to higher education, became a very important element of PNPR.

On 11 April 2019, in Strasbourg (French inter-ministerial office responsible for coordination of preventive countermeasures) (Le Secrétariat général du Comité interministériel de prévention de la délinquance et de la radicalization; SG-CIPDR, 2019) (presented a

detailed report containing an “assessment” of 1 year of work and progress of the PNPR, highlighting the implementation of the sixty “measures” of the Plan. According to the press release (SG-CIPDR, 2019), 350 people nationwide were mobilised to the “republican values” teams assigned to each regional educational authority, and a *Guide to the handling of young people at school in the process of radicalisation* was distributed to 20,000 supervisory staff in the national education system. Moreover, 1,061 violations of the principle of *laïcité* called for interventions by teams from the regional educational authorities. Also, two tools to support national education officials, in the form of specially created “Vademecum ‘Laïcité at school’” and a booklet *Preventing the radicalisation of young people*, were circulated among all personnel in the national education system. In addition, 4 million students from 18,420 schools participated in the “Press and media week at school” initiative, with 1,800 media partners. Three hundred and fifty thousand pupils watched ten theatrical plays, which put radicalisation at the centre stage (their titles were: “After Jihad”; “Gehenna”; “Letters to Nour”; “Born on October 17”; “On the Wire”; “Easy Prey”; “Wave of Tears”; “Don’t Let Anyone Steal the Words”; “A Good Little Soldier,” and “Out of Equilibrium”). At fifty French universities and research institutes, radicalisation contact officers were employed to provide first contact with at-risk students and staff. Furthermore, five doctoral grants for projects focused on radicalisation were funded every year. Finally, the French state established the Scientific Council on Radicalization Processes (COSPRAD; the scientific committee on the prevention of radicalisation) in April 2019.

The prevention of political radicalism through the use of the general education system in France has remained closely linked to the republican and secular nature of the French state and its institutions. Apart from the family, it is the main institution for the socialisation of the youth, and its role and tasks are clearly defined by the French constitution and subordinate legislation, requiring that the learning process be based on the founding ideas of the French Republic. As Romain Seze notes, the “great mobilisation” of French educational institutions that followed the 2015 Paris attacks was based on four “axes”: (1) the transmission of republican and secular values, as opposed to the totalitarian and quasi-religious ideas characteristic of “radical Islam”; (2) the development of a culture of “engaged citizenship” and the development of social competences among students so that they are able to understand and promote republican ideas; (3) the fight against social inequalities and the promotion of cultural diversity and tolerance of otherness; and (4) support for research initiatives aimed at understanding the process of radicalisation and trying to find strategies to counter the spread of extremist attitudes (Seze, 2019, pp. 126–129).

Schools, as a place of contact between French civil servants, teachers, and the country’s young citizens, have become an important element of the system introduced by the French state to not only detect early signs of radicalisation but also counter it by applying an individual approach to each case. Adolescents who had returned from Daesh-controlled areas of Syria/Iraq were also being brought into schools, and it required a great deal of attention and tact to deal with them. Of course, French teachers could not act alone—they became part of a complex system of countering homegrown extremism, cooperating with and having the support of welfare officials, psychologists and psychotherapists, and, understandably, police and security officers. The so-called Departmental Cells for the Fight against Islamism and Community Withdrawal (les Cellules départementales de lutte contre l’islamisme et le repli communautaire [CLIRs]), established on 27 November 2019, became a bureaucratic but functional vehicle for interactions between all institutions interested and involved in anti-extremist activities. CLIRs are multidisciplinary teams whose main goal was to coordinate the actions of all those likely to contribute to the fight against radicalism. They are placed under the authority of the department prefect and are located in each of the 101 metropolitan departments. They consist of the prefectural body; the

departmental directorate for national education services; the departmental directorate for social cohesion; the departmental directorate for population protection; the departmental directorate for public finances; the regional unit directorates for business, competition, labour, and employment, and internal security forces (national gendarmerie, police, and intelligence services); the judicial authority; and the employment centre. They carry out several thousand inspections, recommending intervention measures in justified cases where the risk of radicalisation was identified.

The need to “return the Republic to where it has somehow abdicated” was emphasised by President Macron in his powerful “Separatism” speech in Mulhouse on 18 February 2020 (Macron, 2020a). Also, on 2 October 2020, in Les Mureaux, near Paris, the French President proposed his new strategy entitled “The Republic in Action.” This new “strategy” was based on six “axes,” and “Axis 4” was entirely devoted to French schools and their role in “fighting separatism,” that is, deradicalisation efforts (Macron, 2020b). The legal basis for emerging actions of the French state resulting from these two presidential speeches was the so-called “anti-separatism law,” accepted by the French Parliament in August 2021 (Légifrance, 2021). However, the dedication of French teachers to promote republican and secular values was, unfortunately, not without casualties. Only two weeks after President Macron’s speech, on 16 October 2020, a school teacher, Samuel Paty, was killed in a suburb of Paris close to the school where he taught. He was beheaded by Abdoullakh Abouyezidovich Anzorov, an 18-year-old immigrant and Russian citizen of Chechen descent. Before his death, Paty had shown his students a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad during a lesson on freedom of speech as he taught the Moral and Civic Education course. His behaviour was considered to be an offence to some Muslim students and provoked their harsh reactions on social media. This extreme case demonstrates the scale of the risk present in taking the actions outlined in state strategies to combat the radicalisation of children and young people. French efforts in this area are determined by the extremely centralised nature of the French state. The state creates structures of cooperation between the various departments of state bureaucracy, under the local supervision of prefects, who are responsible for coordinating the actions taken by the various departments of the central and local administrations. As the scale of the threat of radicalisation varies territorially, different levels of attention are paid to deradicalisation activities in different departments. Invariably, this is the responsibility of state institutions because of the relatively weak role played by French NGOs. Non-public schools are subject to scrutiny in this regard by state bodies, which have the tools to influence the teaching process, including the removal of those carrying out activities aimed at spreading extremist views among young people. It is difficult to assess the absolute effectiveness of the measures taken by the state in this area, as the evaluation procedures are not systemic and are still in an experimental phase.

Discussion and conclusions

In light of the above-cited examples, it is important to note that the authorities in France and Spain are fully aware of the critical role of the education sector in tackling the risk of youth radicalisation leading to violence. In Spain, a turning point in this respect was the adoption of PEN-LCRV in 2015, which outlined and identified key areas of action crucial to minimising the risk of the impact of content affirming hate ideology. In France, on the other hand, the breakthrough came through the PNPR, adopted in 2018, resulting in consecutive actions of the French state aimed at lowering the risk of radicalisation of minors. Hence, in both states, actions implemented in the education sector are considered to be of foremost importance in terms of efforts aimed at preventing radicalisation among young people.

In the administrative spheres of France and Spain, both at the central and regional levels as well as in the activities of NGOs in recent years, there has been a proliferation of projects investing in the implementation of countermeasures in schools, universities, and other educational centres, in response to the ever-present likelihood of radicalisation of the youth. The differences in action are due to the different internal political systems of the two countries. Spain is a highly decentralised kingdom, while France is a deeply centralised republic emphasising its secularism, so the coordination and application of deradicalisation measures look different in each of these countries. The effectiveness of these initiatives is largely dependent on their sustainability and the implementation of evaluation activities to adapt to dynamically evolving challenges as well as integration with other prevention and counter-terrorism instruments. In France, individual plans, containing instructions for actions that the French education sector must undertake, are implemented by bureaucratic institutions created in each of the prefectures, with close cooperation between educational institutions, security services, and state social welfare, supported by local NGOs. These are actions introduced uniformly throughout the country, although the scope of action depends on the local level of the threat of radicalisation among young people. In Spain, on the other hand, many plans and projects are often created and implemented independent of each other by autonomous communities, so they may differ significantly from each other; also, the authorities of autonomous regions may attach different levels of importance to such actions. General initiatives, such as PEN-LCRV/PENCRAV, contain the most important assumptions, strategies, and directions of action, and their practical implementation is often the responsibility of local authorities, who may or may not address the issues raised here.

In recent years, it is often possible, thanks to the reaction of educational staff and other people, to identify the manifestations of minors' fascination with jihadist ideology. This has led to the launch of appropriate remedial procedures, preventing the process from deepening and often preventing the minors from reaching those responsible for carrying out agitation and recruitment activities. Mentoring, as noted earlier, plays a major role in this respect. It involves individual work with the mentees and their appropriate formation and orientation, in terms of transmitting the values of a democratic society. The community interview and cooperation with the family are also of great importance here, not only in relation to individuals with an immigrant background.

It should be emphasised that significant challenges persist. Above all, the lack of national programmes to prepare professionals for this type of work, which was constantly highlighted during interviews with experts on the subject, must be singled out. There is also a lack of sufficient resources for their training. Moreover, years of backlog in predicting the structure of these challenges are reflected in the obstacles faced by local authorities and various institutions in France and Spain. In recent years, NGOs and academia, among others, have undertaken more initiatives, including symposia and debates on the mechanisms of internalisation of extremist attitudes and the appropriate courses of action to minimise the risk of developing such attitudes. Emphasising the power that extremist trends can have on young people, they point to the value of the educational space as a key area for preventive steps.

At the same time, it is worth noting that assessing the tendency to target certain groups deemed susceptible to the narrative of terrorist organisations is ambiguous. In this context, followers of Islam are an example of such groups, especially young Muslims serving sentences in penitentiary institutions ([Kosmynka, 2022](#)), although initiatives to prevent radicalisation do not only concern immigrant communities. Many studies emphasise the danger of stigmatising these communities and unintentionally reinforcing their experience of discrimination, prejudice, and xenophobia ([Aly *et al.*, 2014](#), p. 380). While such

opinions are valid, nevertheless, it seems necessary to continue implementing programmes that will, at least partially, reduce the risk of any type of threat generated by radicalised individuals or groups. Naturally, such work requires insight and sensitivity; in this regard, the involvement of representatives of (post)immigrant communities, acting as psychologists or social workers, plays a major role.

The demand for proper transmission of religious values and principles, free from interpretations that promote integralism, is legitimate, and the call for control of the religious teaching process is, therefore, valid. However, the specificity of Islam in this respect should not be forgotten. Thus, representatives of moderate Muslim circles, who are active in educational establishments, cultural centres, places of worship, etc., should be involved in this mission as widely as possible. Equipped with the appropriate competencies, they are able to reach individuals who are particularly vulnerable to the message of subversive currents most effectively. Their work with children and young people provides an opportunity to reduce the potential risk of succumbing to Salafist ideology.

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