



From role-model to terrorist

A small case questioning who can be radicalised
and how radicalisation can take place

The story of a group of young people radicalized in the
small town of Ripoll in Catalonia Spain - resulting in the
terrorist attack in Barcelona August 2017



INTRODUCTION

In August 2017 yet another terrorist attack in a major European city, this time Barcelona.
Several people killed, many more injured.

The investigations following the attack partly revealed and shed some light on the lives and profiles of the group of terrorists: a group of young Muslims.

It turned out that the profiles of the lead terrorists systematically failed all traditional radicalisation profile indicators.

The lead terrorists were everything else but “typical terrorists” according to our stereotypes. They were in fact role-models in the community.

The “case” is therefore of considerable interest to European initiatives trying to find out what schools or after-school contexts can do to prevent the development of radicalisation potential.

Also because the roles of the schools are moving high up on the agenda in different European countries forced to take new forms of action against new and imminent forms of radicalisation.

/JG

Mireia Masgrau tells:

FROM ROLE-MODEL TO TERRORIST

These days they have been the most hunted fugitives of the country.
“They” are a group of young people between 17 and 28 years old, some of them with Moroccan nationality, others Spanish and all of them residents in Ripoll and all of them with no criminal record.

Ripoll is in the north of Catalonia. It is located very close to the Pyrenees and the French border. The population is 10.000, around 10% migrants, mostly Maghreb, who arrived in the village with the economic boom of the late 1990s.

The young people from Ripoll seem to represent a very different profile than the ones we are used to imagine when we think of people capable of committing terrorist attacks. Because of this, we are writing this small story, with the aim to describe these young people - or at least to indicate how their profiles are contradicting our stereotypes.

After the attack in Barcelona, Ripoll, the town of these youth, was absolutely shocked, trying to understand and explain how some young people - who studied, played football and grew up as well-functioning Catalans - are today in the tragic news.

Who were they?

They were a group of eleven friends. All of them grew up in Ripoll. They studied in public schools, attended after-school activities in the youth center of Ripoll, played football in the club, etc.

We will not describe them one by one, and we will not give them names because it is not necessary and also because all of them can be described by the same characteristics. What we will do is make comments using the words from the people who knew them well: teachers, educators, trainers, neighbors, friends... now are telling to everybody how surprised they are and how little they understand...

As we said above, their parents arrived to Catalonia more or less 25 years ago and according the neighbors' these boys were perfectly integrated in the town.

As we also said they were attending the public school, first primary school and also high school and all of them "crazy" about football in the Ripoll football club.

"They were very normal kids, some of them a little bit shy, sometimes so shy that I had to push them to play with enthusiasm".

"They had never shown any interest in religion", explained a football club director member.

Two other women, who have identified themselves as the mother and sister of one of the lead terrorists, explained that they are all "broken in pain" and that "the world has fallen upon them", because they suspected "absolutely nothing", never.

They were very normal guys, said both women, who have explained that sometimes they went to Barcelona, "like all young people at this age", and they never expected any serious problems from them.

A woman, after a long conversation with two old muslims, says: "They were good people, good people."

"All of them finished high school and even one was selected representative of the class." One of their teachers says that they never had problems; on the contrary, they were very calm and never got into trouble.

Moreover, one of the teachers remembers them as very warm and loving people - and as far as he remembers they never went to the mosque to pray.

One of the educators of the Ripoll Youth Center also remembers them and she cannot believe what happened.

She says: "When they were younger, they were making a lot of future plans like other kids; one wanted to be a pilot, the other a teacher, another a doctor and one travel and work in an NGO".

All of them were already working and even two had bought two big motorcycles. Almost all of them had a girlfriend.

A 27 year old man known by the Islamic community of Ripoll, and who knew very well the group of young people, says "I would never have expected something like this from them".

He also explained that "neither the young nor the imam had ever shown any kind of radicalization, since if the imam wished to promote a radical

speech he would not have been allowed by the community, no one would accept him."



Nobody in the town knows who to blame for the radicalization of these boys, but many things to the imam. It seems that the local imam recruited and indoctrinated the young Muslims - and was trained especially to do so.

Nobody in Ripoll can explain why they did it and when and what triggered the actions of these boys. Nobody can understand how a group of friends, apparently perfectly integrated into the life of the community, turned into today's terrorists in the headlines of global news.

And it is now, after the attacks, when the mothers of these boys try to understand and tie up ends.

And what the experts say about radicalization...

Radicalization, in the case of young people, is often a phenomenon linked to poverty, unemployment and lack of expectations. "People who are radicalized seem to have suffered a kind of brainwashing, which in psychology is known as a conversion process." Almost all of these radicalisms, whether political or religious, "are generated in later adolescence.

Experts say that at such ages a young person may experience a sudden change of belief, in a process usually accompanied by feelings of humiliation or injustice, and begins to become aware of a new identity, often influenced by their peers, their friends, by people same age. To all this is usually added "an intense need for belonging to a group".

And how is integration measured?

This is precisely one of the characteristics of what sociologists call the alterity or index of integration. "It is an indicator that serves to evaluate the immersion of a person in the civic culture, in this case the Catalan, and takes into account several factors, including the sense of belonging to the population or the host country, the use that that young person makes of public services, if he/she participates in entities or in local associations, what his/her ideology is or if he speaks, in this case Catalan", etc.

Well, about the young boys in Ripoll... and according to a neighbor of one of them: "One of them signed up three days ago for the Youth Guarantee Plan of the Youth Office to find another job".

Another neighbour explains that one of the young people was going very often with one of his friends to Punt Òmnia, a center of social services to avoid the social exclusion of minors, to do voluntary social work - and that there was never the slightest problem, on the contrary.

So, this is the story of these young people prior to the attack.

Although the young people of Ripoll involved in the attacks showed all the signs of solid integration, *was the intervention of the imam enough to drag them into extremism and extremist acting out?*

At what point does a (radicalized) person decide to take the final step and become a terrorist?

It is not a linear action, nor clear, although it may look like that. There may be many radicals, but there are much fewer people willing to kill, and even to die for the sake of certain ideas than the many terrorist actions might make us think...

Researchers around the world are trying to find answers to all these questions, but they do not seem all that successful.

Yes, we know the indicators, on the one hand: the lack of opportunities, feelings of marginalization, uprooting, the search for a ready-made and idealized identity; And, on the other hand the recruitment strategies: the use of hatred as the engine of manipulation, the offer of an ultimate end, the false promise to make history, to become heroes

Nevertheless, things seem to be much more complicated, and as we know from many countries, de-radicalization and prevention programs have been launched, but with quite poor results, it seems.

As the responsible for the youth center in Ripoll says: “We must work on prevention in schools, open spaces, families, among our children ... Of course, to reach them, in often marginalized communities, is not simple, and it is slow”.

People in Ripoll are asking many questions now, and so are we:

What are we doing wrong?

What are we missing?

What are we not seeing?

What is the nature of our blindness?

To be continued...



CONCLUSIONS

The “Ripoll Case” certainly does not make radicalisation prevention easier - whether in schools or in other contexts...

When well-functioning young role-models are radicalised through short and simple interventions, as it seems in this case, what are we supposed to do in our prevention efforts? What should we be looking for? What should we be “preventing”?

Our European projects are concerned with radicalisation and extremism among young people in general, covering such collective fields as political/religious radicalisation, sport-related radicalisation and organised crime recruitment - along with what we might call “individual radicalisation”.

Can we at least link typical profiles to each of these forms of radicalisation, by the way?

What brings together the rather different forms of radicalisation is what state of the art radicalisation research concludes:

“The majority of extremist narratives offer three simple modes of engagement and understanding:

- A sense of **identity**
- A sense of **belonging**
- A sense of **loyalty/duty/mission**”

RAN Collection, European Commission, 2016

The problem is that in the Ripoll case, the young people already seemed to have developed **robust, meaningful and life-long identities, belonging and duties!**

Once again, our traditional radicalisation indicator system is questioned - and in this case the indicators system is *questioned basically*: not only were the lead terrorists doing well according to most human and social parameters, they were even role-models for other young people in the community.

So, and this is the link to the CHRIS project and also to PRIDE: if one of the key radicalisation prevention roles of schools is to spot, identify and report on young people demonstrating some form of radicalisation potential or behaviour... - *there would be no reason for the school and the cultural organisations in Ripoll to report anything at all in this case!*

This is one of the reasons that the CHRIS project takes radicalisation prevention in school to a didactic level: not primarily focusing on reporting or measures for individual students with so-called “radicalisation potential”, but asking the following didactic questions, re-triggered by the Ripoll case:

(In this context we define “didactics” as the ways in which learning is organised, contrary to pedagogical techniques linked to the learning of content)



To what extent can schools be engaged in radicalisation prevention beyond simple reporting based on questionable indicators?



To what extent can schools be engaged in radicalisation prevention beyond content discussions on radicalisation and extremism?



To what extent can schools be engaged in radicalisation prevention at the level of responding to attractive and powerful radicalisation narratives, as described by the RAN Collection?



To what extent can innovative didactics help build robust identity and life-wide narratives with the potential to respond to powerful radicalisation narratives or make these redundant?



What kinds of “(micro)-energies” is “radicalisation potential” made of, including what is called “double identities linked to social mobility complexes”? How is such radicalisation potential energy produced in school and how can this be prevented?



What kinds of “(micro)-energies” is “radicalisation potential” made of in the families and in social life? To what extent can schools interfere or interact with such radicalisation potential energies produced in the families and in social life?



What kind of didactics can help build “(micro)-energies” countering the production of radicalisation energies?



To what extent can schools, in the pursuit of radicalisation preventive didactics, create open spaces to address the taboos that still might exist behind the “well-functioning”, such as the “double identities complex”: young people being embarrassed by their migrant, unemployed or alcoholic families, but still emotionally attached to these families?

/JG

