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Current case study

## Civic education and defensive republicanism in France after the assassination of Samuel Paty

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**Keywords:** Citizenship; France; Civic Education; Educational Politics; Terrorism; Radicalization; Republicanism; Securitization

**Highlights:** The assassination of Samuel Paty is an exceptional event that allows for multiple readings, but this presupposes that the facts and political processes surrounding the case are properly reconstructed. As presented, the study can be used as a starting point for further discussion and analysis around the question of educational governance of civic education in societies under stress.

**Purpose:** The Samuel Paty murder has generated a great response from the professional community and the world of education and schools in Europe and worldwide. In a unique way, civic educators expressed horror, sorrow, and solidarity with the family and with their French colleagues. The article is dedicated to Samuel Paty and the question of whether and how we as a community of international civic educators can learn from this terrible event.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The article presents a case reconstruction using press and public documents attempting to disentangle the actors' positions, their stated intentions and contexts, and the following political intricacies of the case.

**Findings:** The murder of Samuel Paty provoked a series of educational policy reactions that have paradoxical effects on civic education in schools, seen its intentions of political-social inclusion into a citizenship model. The case analysis documents the pitfalls of the instrumentalization of civic education for the securitization of societies.

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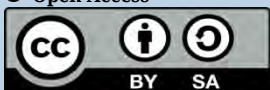
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

On 16 October 2020 a young terrorist tracked down the history teacher Samuel Paty (1973-2020) near his Collège in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a small suburban town near Paris. More than two years after the attack the public debate in France is still intense and divides French society around the issues of secularism, education, and social cohesion in a multicultural society. Doubts about the republican model and elites play a particular role. The perceived deficits of the school are a highly significant starting point of France's discussion of the problems with today's citizenship and democratic inclusion (Table 1). After the assassination, which is read as an attack on the French model of integration, the question of state education for the values of the Republic and social cohesion has come to a head anew. Finally, the fragmentation of the party system since 2017 and the experience with a reform-oriented new rallying party, "République en Marche" (since September 2022 renamed "Renaissance") have intensified the disillusionment of the French people regarding their country's ability to renew itself. During the 2022 presidential and parliamentary campaigns, the political landscape was even more polarized than before and incentives for political entrepreneurs to profit from this situation and make political capital out of value conflicts are still high (Portier 2021).

In the following, the specific new context of the continuing crisis will be considered from the perspective of democracy policies, with a special focus on civic education after the Samuel Paty assassination (2). The measures decreed thereafter, especially the so-called Separatism Law (passed as the "Law of 24 August 2021 on Strengthening Respect for Republican Principles"), aim to further strengthen a defensive republicanism (3). With the teaching of a democratic secularism, a specific mode of domestic governance is continued in schools in the aftermath of the assassination, which over-burdens schools in terms of democracy policies, particularly in relation to the professional value dilemmas involved (4).

## 2 TERRORISM AND THE "VIVRE ENSEMBLE": THE ASSASSINATION OF SAMUEL PATY IN THE CONTEXT OF A NARRATIVE OF DIVISION

The attack on Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020 is considered to be the temporary culmination of a threat situation that extends very far into society, neighborhoods and school communities, such as the one in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, the scene of the crime near Paris. Paradoxically, however, recent empirical findings on attitudes in the French population indicate that despite this, the terrorist threat is seen as less serious than it was in 2018. Changes, on the other hand, are evident above all in the country's self-description as torn and 'under pressure' from immigration and multiculturalism. The tension between groups in society is rated as considerable (see Table 1). In this context, 'communitarianism', which is often addressed, is seen as a counter-design to secularism and to the understanding of a united French republic that is blind to religions and other private convictions (Airiau 2004; Baubérot 2021; Almeida 2016).

**Table 1**  
**IPSOS survey (2018-2021) France's perceived weaknesses**

Question: In your opinion, what are France's greatest weaknesses today? (three first mentions)	2021	2018
<b>1 Excessive immigration</b>	47%	44%
<b>2 Reform weaknesses</b>	36%	31%
3 Weaknesses of the school and the education system	35%	35%
4 High unemployment	32%	52%
<b>5 Rise of communitarianism, social tensions between groups</b>	31%	25%
6 Debt per capita	29%	32%
<b>7 Encrustation of the political class</b>	27%	17%
8 Threat of terrorism	23%	27%
9 French people's lack of confidence in their country's capabilities	21%	27%
10 Lack of room for manoeuvre within the EU	18%	17%

IPSOS 2021, emphasis AS.

Numerous new facts about the attack are now available and can be reconstructed based on the reporting of the national quality press (in addition to official statements, this also included the results of investigations by the State Security Service). The brutal act is embedded in an extremely complex case mechanism and the investigations have not been concluded to date and it will be years before a trial is opened (Le Monde 2021).

Up to this point, the following facts can be considered relatively certain: On 5 and 6 October 2020, the teacher Samuel Paty at a Collège in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine worked with two Mohammed caricatures from the magazine Charlie Hebdo in lessons he held in the eighth grade - as he had frequently done before. These show typical blasphemous caricatures of religion, which are also usually used in France in the subject EMC (*Enseignement Moral et Civique*) to deal with the topic of freedom of expression in democracy. Since such depictions can hurt the religious feelings of pupils, the teacher offers to look the other way on 6 October or to leave the room. A note from the Yvelines State Protection Service states that "this episode provoked a fierce controversy among some parents of Muslim faith" (Libération 2020). The father of a pupil, Brahim Chnina, reacted indignantly to a (as it turned out afterwards twisted) report by his daughter (who wanted to conceal her absenteeism), spread the word on the Internet, announced a demonstration in front of the school because of the unequal treatment of Muslim pupils in the classroom and finally filed a complaint against the teacher for showing pornography. The school initially answered in an appeasing manner. Samuel Paty was self-critical of his actions in front of his colleagues, but an immediate school inspection is sent on 9 October. One of the inspector's tasks is to check whether the teacher has behaved impeccably and neutrally towards all pupils. Samuel Paty offers a conversation; at a hearing in the local police station, he also rejects Brahim Chnina's accusations. The father

and the well-known Islamist Sefriouri, who now goes with the father, refuse contact and escalate the situation by spreading two hate videos on social media (FB) in which they call for action against the teacher: "You have the teacher's address and name to say STOP". However, the father and Sefriouri fail to mobilise the local Muslim community against the school, nor does the association CCIF (Collective against Islamophobia in France, now banned) want to activate itself in this matter (Le Point 2020). The school's parents' council also refuses to intervene. Samuel Paty, for his part, turns to the authorities in view of the increasing threatening nature of the situation and files a complaint for defamation. Threatening phone calls are received at the school and the colleagues worry about the safety of the history teacher.

The 18-year-old assassin, Abdoullakh Anzorov, a Russian citizen of Chechen descent with refugee status, is remotely radicalised but without an entry in the extremism register. He is reconstructed as being directed by, among others, a Russian-speaking Islamist from Idlib and possibly a woman from Nîmes (Le Monde 2020a). His radicalisation happened quickly and probably unnoticed by his parents, he had already shown radical tendencies on social media before. On 16 October, Anzorov tracked down Samuel Paty near the Collège, brutally murdered him by decapitation and was then shot dead by a police officer.

Remarkably, the assassination is later discussed mainly as a state of escalation of a social divide. The context of the attack, however, does not allow for the interpretation as an attack on republican values at school. The highly complex context corresponds to a 'normal', admittedly conflictual, multicultural coexistence between family(ies), school, neighborhoods, communities and associations with typical fractures and tensions. Within the family of the father who exposes the teacher in social media, there is an educational problem. Nevertheless, a one-sided interpretation of the events is gaining ever greater acceptance, the town appears to be a place of communitarian radicalisation in a tense relationship with the local school. In the politically charged context, this reading overlapped the interpretation as a terrorist event. On the part of the school, however, the organisational mechanisms took effect at short notice: an inspection was instantly sent, the actors involved were given the opportunity to comment on the matter and to clear up mutual misunderstandings (Le Monde 2020b).

The connection to a representative of a radical Islamist group under surveillance by the State Security Service comes about through the dissemination of hateful accusations against Samuel Paty on Facebook. It is only through this connection that the teacher Samuel Paty, and with him the entire situation at the Collège, is exposed in the digital space and becomes part of the target horizon of the radicalised perpetrator led by jihadists, whose terrorist radicalisation is completely outside this setting and undoubtedly unconnected to the actions of those involved at the school in Conflans. It can only indirectly be interpreted as a failure of educational institutions and is undoubtedly unconnected to the actors involved in the school in Conflans. As a case of radicalisation, Anzorov is a typical remote-controlled jihadist who is brought into action by the targeting strategies of Islamist cyberterrorism (Clemmov et al. 2020).

The linking of radicalised ‘communities’ with local school worlds or an individual teacher is a reading of the event that is only correct insofar as a radical group targets a vulnerable, integrist father, supports him and further radicalises him. The assassination event can thus be read as a digitally driven combination of terrorist threats and global jihad with local situations, which are conflict-laden on different levels and in different contexts, yet it does not depict a socially conflictual attack on the values of the French republic in school. On the contrary, the parents’ protest against the original teaching actually refers to republican values as they address a possible discrimination and exclusion of Muslim pupils from EMC classes, which then becomes the starting point for a regular school inspection. Only through the narrative accumulation of further situations and descriptions of problems of the republican school and its representatives in the multicultural society does the political dynamic develop through which - derived from the assassination of Samuel Paty - the handling of the terrorist threat situation that has lasted for years enters a new phase: an escalated conflict about democracy and the values of the republic itself.

### **3 THE REPUBLICAN VALUES ACT**

The conversation about life in the banlieues has shaped France's social imaginary for many decades (Horvath/ Carpenter 2015). In his speech of 2 October 2020, the President of the Republic stresses that suburban separatism and political Islam pose a threat to social cohesion and thus legitimises the project of a great law for strengthening the Republic (E. Macron, speech of 2 October 2020). After the attack of 16 October, the dispositive is also explicitly directed against terrorism, with Prime Minister Castex stressing that the "enemy of the Republic is the political ideology of radical Islamism" (Le Monde 2020d). Olivier Roy and others criticise this exclusive orientation of the law towards this threat. They stress that the attacks on the Bataclan club and on the editorial office of Charlie Hebdo magazine did not originate in French Salafism and the situation in ‘the’ cities. The law addresses a religious and especially Muslim separatism, although none of the attackers belonged to a Muslim Brotherhood, but all of them, like Samuel Paty's murderer, were radicalised as jihadists (Roy 2019). French radicalisation researchers like Roy therefore clearly reject the strategy of targeting religious ecosystems operationalised in the law (La Vie 2021). The legislative project is thus also characterised by some fractures. This concerns above all the dispositions on the legislation on associations as well as on the regulation of religious freedom. The provisions on possible closures of places of worship as well as the promotion of the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) to an exclusive contact of the French state and other provisions even call the Catholic Church into action because the space for religions in France is clearly shrinking. The constitutional lawyer Stephanie Hennette-Vauchez warns against cuts in the possibilities of a pluralistic organisation of French Muslims (Hennette-Vauchez 2020). In the civil society sphere, the new regulations of the law will lead to a remodeling of state-society relations. This concerns above all the situation of associations. In its decision of 13 August 2021, the Constitutional Council

accordingly states that the extensive possibilities for state intervention in associations and unions created by the law constitute a disproportionate public intervention in the freedom of association (Conseil Constitutionnel 2021).

Hennette-Vauchez and others discuss the provisions of the law as an escalation of a "culture war" between universalism and multiculturalism and a defensive republicanism. The historian of secularism F. Baubérot warns of a counterproductive effect of the law, as "the government claims to strengthen secularism even as it undermines the separation of religions and the state" (Le Monde 2020c). Fregosi, referring to Portier, speaks of a securitised laicism; he himself classifies the new religious policy arrangements as "authoritarian" (Fregosi 2021).

The legal provisions in the area of schooling further imply a stricter regulation of home schooling and protective provisions for public servants. At the same time, however, the school is framed as a place for the transmission of those republican-secular values that are at stake in the legislative package. The governance in this field is attached to the Ministry of Education and is implemented into school curricula in subjects such as history and EMC.

#### **4 CIVIC EDUCATION AND VALUE CONFLICTS**

In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the then school minister presented a program "For the great mobilisation of the school in favor of republican values". It is based on the reform of the new "Enseignement Moral et Civique" program, which has already been underway since 2013, with the setting of the 300-hour civic education course throughout the entire school career. This connection of governmental political control for a resilient democracy to the field of education dramatizes the role of schools for social cohesion quite extraordinarily (Szukala 2020). Douniès describes the reform as an excessive demand on schools (Douniès 2021). The civics programs within history/geography, economics and social sciences, which have so far been more oriented towards academic judgement and framed in disciplinary terms, to which these modules have so far been attached, are developing into a mixed program that has features of the subject formats of philosophy, social studies and law, and religious education/ethics lessons. The history and civics curriculum is replaced by a values education with strong focus on dilemmas, decision-making issues and a subject-related clarification of 'appropriate' attitudes (Szukala 2020, 37). This was also the approach of Samuel Paty in the lesson conducted with cartoons ("Are you Charlie? Yes or No?"). The strict orientation towards disciplinarity, especially of French secondary school teachers, who undergo a very focused training in only one subject, is softened and is didactically burdened with new moral perspectives. In addition to the strict laicism, the pedagogical program is also oriented towards the social cohesion in a multicultural republic: Teachers offer diversity-oriented approaches, especially when it comes to dealing with the 'fait religieux' in the classroom. This pragmatic vision of secularism is now being negotiated in schools in an increasingly contentious manner. While a certain smoothness in the implementation of

the programs has been reported earlier (Bozec 2016), newer research indicates that the securitized policy tightening of the school curriculum after 2015 increasingly triggers resistance among learners. The Observatory for the Situation of Teaching Staff, which regularly analyses the situation in schools (see the study commissioned by the Jean Jaurès Foundation 2018-2021/IFOP), shows that 'disturbances' in schools are now becoming more frequent in the very subjects in which the school program of laicism is to be implemented (Table 2).

**Table 2 Classroom disruptions reported by teachers by subject (2018-2021)**

Question: Protests or refusal of pupils to participate in lessons or specific school activities happen...?	2021	2018
<b>during physical education</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>35%</b>
in memorial hours (e.g. after the attacks in 2015)	35%	-
in history and geography lessons	34%	38%
<b>during the lessons on secularism</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>during civic-moral education</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>19%</b>
during science lessons	29%	23%
on the topic of gender diversity	19%	23%
during literature or philosophy lessons	15%	17%
during art lessons	7%	12%
during handicraft lessons and vocational preparation	4%	9%

IFOP 2021a, 20; emphasis AS.

Finding compromises is now made more difficult by the strict enforcement of laicism policies in school organisation. The classroom conflicts that arise from this overburden the actors. Lorcerie and Moignard report that teachers also find it increasingly difficult to convince students that republicanism is not just "propaganda" (Lorcerie/Moignard 2017). In the field of civic education, it is evident that teachers experience the controversial work with these values catalogues as challenging, also with regard to dealing with their own attitudes and role definitions as French citizens, civic educators, social scientists and historians. On the other hand, students are increasingly willing to be open about their personal beliefs. Recent research also suggests that it is not only religious young people who have just taken a different approach to diversity (Table 3).

This brings teachers into considerable conflict. Officially, there is a growing convergence with the multicultural model of the Anglo-American world, which irritates the French view of secularism. Given the very strong anticlerical tradition inherent in French republicanism and its public sector representatives, assessments of this "normalisation" of the role of religion are extremely polarised (Portier 2021). Researchers who, like many in public opinion and among the younger generation, see France as a multicultural nation are sometimes even brought close to Islamism, according to Kahn in

a commentary on the Jaurès Foundation survey (Tab. 3): "It is the victory of an Anglo-Saxon or even Islamist view of things. Religion is no longer seen as a set of values we believe in, but as an integral part of identity." (Le Point 2021).

**Table 3 Attitudes of students to secularism and freedom of the press**

Question: In France, the law on freedom of the press of July 1881 allows the expression of criticism of a religious faith, symbol or dogma, including invective. Are you personally in favour of this right to criticise a religious faith, symbol or dogma, even if it is done in an insulting manner?

	Totally agree	Agree rather	Rather not agree	Do not agree at all
Total	16%	32%	31%	21%
Muslim	0%	22%	31%	47%

IFOP 2021b. Research conducted online from 15 to 20 January 2021 on a nationally representative sample of 1006 upper secondary school students aged 15 and over.

Although the militant version of secularism is perceived by more and more students as ideology and although classroom disruptions are on the rise, a reform of teacher education is being sought in the wake of the 'Republic Values Act' to perpetuate and reinforce these new policies: The teaching staff is to be better prepared for situations in schools, especially with regard to values education. Planning in the Ministry of Education is based on the Obin report on in-service training for secularism from June 2021 (Education Nationale 2021). Legitimised by the murder of Samuel Paty, measures are proposed to anchor secularism in teacher education, starting from the initial assessments. In doing so, the report takes a very critical look at universities' teacher education and its supposed academic "ideologisation": "The well-known ideological aberrations affecting some humanities departments at universities have also penetrated some institutes, as certain practices and model projects show. As a training on secularism, students are sometimes forced into lectures or theses on the "deconstruction" of the official discourse on secularism, claiming to expose the "systemic racism" of a "postcolonial" and "Islamophobic" state. (Education Nationale 2021, 12). The author condemns these readings as signs of "naivety, incompetence and complacency" (Education Nationale 2021, 5). 'Appropriate' modules are being planned by the ministry for all teaching professions, but also for the accompanying pedagogical staff. Teachers' representatives denounce the new training program's encroachment on the autonomy of universities. They also fear a "witch hunt" and an increasing alienation of schools and students. Finally, they plead for a pedagogisation of values education instead of a censorship of "wrong thinking" in schools and the reporting of classroom events to higher instances (Lorcerie/Moignard 2017, 19). With the appointment of a new education minister in PM Borne's cabinet after the 2022 election, Pap Ndiaye, the firm focus on defensive Republicanism has weakened. To be sure, reporting rules and ministerial adherence to the education for a French secularism will stay. But there are growing doubts about the willingness of teachers to systematically document and report events. The reasons for this reluctance may be manifold and not



only due to the self-censorship analyzed by IFOP and the following observations from the French media (IFOP 2022). For the aforementioned reasons, young teachers in particular are no longer adhering to strict secular norms and are becoming increasingly sensitive to diversity (Ibid.).

## 5 CONCLUSION

French school's engagement with values framed as secular and republican is full of ambiguity. The actors are constantly entangled in the display of diversity dimensions to which the state always reasserts its blindness, while at the same time constantly addressing them. This performative contradiction when negotiating 'difference' affects not only the values of the Republic of France, but also the debates in other educational systems. With a laicism- instead of a diversity-orientation (as stated in the French EMC program) a diversity-blindness is asserted, which for the addressees can be perceived as the enforcement of a false picture of a homogeneous society. Because of the fault line and seeming incompatibility between democratic cohesion and belonging and religion the citizenship model dramatizes ethnic demarcations that are reproduced again and again, which deeply challenge the public imaginary of the voluntaristic concept of belonging. The debates within the teaching profession, above all in the civics and history domain, and in the political sphere reflect these paradoxes and the problems of teaching citizenship, when a multicultural society is perceived as potentially threatening and the quality of "le vivre ensemble" (social cohesion) in France is negatively addressed when it comes to religion and civil society.

Finally, the tragic assassination of Samuel Paty has also shown that there is a powerful and functioning system of interest mediation of religious groups that strongly oppose islamophobic tendencies in society and the appeals of religious extremists. At the same time, school inspections work effectively to accompany the implementation of religion-blind republicanism in everyday school life. Teachers question their didactical strategies in diverse classrooms. And yet: the murderous lone perpetrator, who is largely radicalised from afar, is able to damage all these good preconditions for a certainly conflict-ridden, yet democratic social togetherness and to activate an institutional regression that negatively triggers the state-society relations and the diversity-openness of the educational domain. The conclusion seems possible that international terrorism can succeed in dividing societies at their breaking points and that the curricular securitization of school is certainly not the best strategy to actually strengthen their resilience.

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