The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Oppose Wearing of Muslim Hijab in Schools – Poll

By Anna Dolgov

June 30, 2015



About 18 percent of Russians believe that Muslim women should have the right to wear religious headscarves to schools.

Three out of four Russians are against allowing Muslim students to wear hijab head coverings in schools and universities, and the opposition is even higher in Moscow, where 91 percent of inhabitants oppose the practice, a poll released Tuesday indicates.

About 18 percent of Russians believe that Muslim women should have the right to wear religious headscarves to schools, while 74 percent are against it, the poll by the independent Levada Center showed.

The poll comes amid reports of a number of Russian students converting to radical Islam and traveling to Turkey in an attempt to cross the border into Syria and join the Islamic State terrorist group. The reports have prompted Russian politicians, including lawmakers and children's rights ombudsman Pavel Astakhov, to call for educational policies that would

dissuade students from adopting radical views.

A sociologist at the Levada Center, Karina Pipiya, said that Russians' dislike of hijabs stems from fears of violence spilling over from turbulent predominantly Muslim parts of the North Caucasus, and should be countered by educating the nation about the more peaceful aspects of Islam, Izvestia reported.

“Islam is very varied, but in the media, Islamists are practically equated with terrorists, because the news focuses more frequently on terror attacks than on any positive things,” Pipiya was quoted as saying. “Perhaps if there were more historical broadcasts, showing Muslims from a different side, the [poll] numbers would be different.”

In Moscow, opposition to hijabs in schools reached 91 percent, compared to the 74 percent national average, according to the poll. Opposition was also the strongest in Russians over the age of 40, among whom the proportion of those opposed to hijabs rose to 76 percent.

Previous Levada Center polls have also indicated that Russians harbor negative feelings toward natives of the North Caucasus region, Pipiya was quoted as saying. The region saw two wars in Chechnya over the past decades, and neighboring Dagestan is plagued by violent insurgencies by Islamist militants.

But Russians' dislike has shifted to perceived foreign foes amid the country's standoff with the West following Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, she was quoted as saying. Another Levada Center poll released this week indicated that 66 percent of Russians believe that Western sanctions applied against the country over the Ukraine conflict are aimed at “weakening and humiliating” it.

“In 2014, in the context of the Ukraine crisis, the focus of internal dislikes and fears linked to Muslims shifted to external political enemies,” Pipiya was quoted as saying, adding, however, that the shift had “not significantly affected” the results of the latest poll, which was conducted among 800 adults around the country and had a margin of error not exceeding 4.1 percent.

In a much-debated ruling earlier this year, Russia's Supreme Court upheld a ban on religious headwear in schools in the republic of Moldova.

The region's top Muslim leader, grand mufti Fagim Shafiyev, criticized the ban, saying it violated the Russian Constitution and infringed on freedom of religion, according to media reports.

Russian Education Minister Dmitry Livanov also argued earlier this year that students should wear “secular” clothes to school, Izvestia reported.

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Original url:
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oll-a47772