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Russian Education Minister Defends Muslim Headscarf Ban

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Russia's Education Minister has defended schools' right to ban teachers and students from wearing Muslim headscarves.

Olga Vasilyeva told reporters on Tuesday that Russian education "should be secular."

"I don't think that true believers try to showcase their faith with items such as headscarves," she said.

Her words follow an ongoing row in the central Russian region of Mordovia, where school managers again ruled in December 2016 that staff and students would not be allowed to attend lessons while wearing hijab.

At least one teacher at the school in the Mordovian village of Belozerye, an area which is home to an ethnic Tatar majority, said that she would not attend classes if unable to wear a headscarf.

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The school's dress code, which applies to all educational institutions in the Mordovia region, also bans jeans, mini-skirts, and piercings, as well as other types of religious clothing.

The school's headteacher, Olga Liptova, told the gazeta.ru news outlet that the renewed dress code clampdown had been imposed by education officials in the regional capital of Saransk, who declared that the school imposed a "religious bias."

Mordovian schools formally adopted the dress code in May 2014, but staff and students in the area had been allowed to wear "light headscarves" after discussion with Tatar elders.

Teachers and students took the issue to Russia's Supreme Court in 2015, but judges ruled that there was no legal reason to drop the ban.

The place of religion in Russia's public school system has been under scrutiny in recent months, with some parents complaining of Orthodox Christian "propaganda" in children's textbooks.

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Other reports have claimed that classes on Orthodox Christian culture could soon appear in the Russian curriculum, including lessons on subjects such as "moral culture in the Orthodox family," "the Christian warrior," and "distorted Biblical texts used by sects."

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