

Russian President Putin advocates ban on headscarves in schools

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Last Thursday Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly spoke out in favor of a ban on headscarves in Russian schools. To this end he intends to introduce legislation laying down guidelines for school uniforms.

Putin's announcement came after a months-long official campaign promoting nationalism and orthodox Christianity aimed at diverting attention away from the increasing social tensions in the country. About 20 million of the 143 million people living in Russia are Muslims.

The immediate reason for Putin's comment was an incident at a school in the southern Russian region of Stavropol. On October 3 the local school board banned girl students wearing headscarves from attending class. The girls' parents then lodged a protest against the action of the school board.

According to the Mufti Council of Stavropol, a series of similar incidents have occurred in the region, especially in cities and areas with a large Muslim population. The Stavropol region is predominantly populated by orthodox Christians, but is also a focal point for Muslim refugees from the nearby Caucasus, which has been devastated and reduced to abject poverty by wars waged by the Kremlin.

The Culture Ministry in Stavropol sided with the school management, declaring that every school has the right to introduce school uniforms on their own initiative. The Russian culture minister then criticized this decision, prompting Putin to speak out on the issue and personally support the head teacher at a press conference. Putin stated: "We must assume we are a secular state. We are a multinational state, but the church is separated from the state."

Putin said that Russia must take other European countries—including France, Belgium and Denmark—as role models. All of these countries have approved

school bans on headscarves. Such a ban would take place in Russia by introducing a standardized school uniform, to be defined and applied in Russia's various regions.

Putin's argument that Russia is a "secular state" is specious and cynical. The French and Belgian governments have used exactly the same argument to defend their reactionary ban on the wearing of headscarves in schools and burqas in public.

The separation of church and state means that the church has no influence on the state, which, for its part, does not interfere in personal religious matters. The wearing of the veil, which is an intrinsic element of their faith for many Muslim women, does not violate such a separation. Quite the contrary, it is the ban on headscarves that constitutes an attack on democratic rights and freedom of belief.

Putin's argument that Russia is a secular state was already undermined by the recent trial of the punk band Pussy Riot. The jailing of the singers for protesting against Putin in the Moscow Church of the Redeemer was preceded by a months-long campaign to promote the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Kremlin has long maintained close relations with the Church, which in turn publicly supports Putin and is an important prop for his rule.

Putin's initiative is part of a nationalist campaign that the Kremlin has pursued with renewed energy since the emergence of a protest movement of the urban middle classes in the winter of 2011-2012. This campaign aims to distract from the growing social tensions in Russia, while mobilizing right-wing and backward layers in support of Putin.

During the presidential elections in March, nationalist sentiments were deliberately inflamed. In June Putin passed a new law, making it significantly harder for

people to emigrate to Russia. Those seeking to do so must take numerous tests, including in Russian and history. These obstacles for immigrants are aimed first and foremost against low-skilled workers, primarily those attempting to enter Russia from Central Asia.

The campaign to promote orthodox Christianity, which ran from April to September to coincide with the Pussy Riot trial, was hitherto unprecedented in scale. Numerous television programs, radio broadcasts and newspaper commentaries discussed such issues as the national characteristics of the Slavs, or the Russian nation and its links to orthodox Christianity. Now this campaign is continuing, as the media discusses the proposed headscarf ban.

The incitement of national tensions is an important instrument for the Kremlin to keep the explosive social situation under control and divide the working class. A headscarf ban is an attack on basic democratic rights, in line with the right-wing campaign propagated by the Kremlin. On this issue, it can count on the support of all organized political forces.

As might be expected, Putin's initiative was greeted in nationalist circles with great enthusiasm. The ultra-right writer Alexander Prokhanov, one of Russia's leading nationalists and anti-Semites, also spoke out for a headscarf ban. The head of the Moscow Helsinki Group and former liberal dissident Lyudmila Alexeyeva, who has frequently criticized Putin's authoritarian regime, also backed the president on this issue.

No principled opposition to a ban can be expected from Russia's so-called left, which has yet to take up a position on the issue. Pseudo-left groups like the Russian Socialist Movement and the "Left Front" led by Sergei Udaltsov have marched in demonstrations alongside ultra-right-wing elements, sitting with them on a joint "Organizing Committee." They also support the Stalinist, ultra-nationalist Communist Party, which in turn works with the banned, racist Movement Against Illegal Immigration.



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