

Local Russian Hijab Ban Puts Muslims in a Squeeze
By Ellen Barry, The New York Times
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LEVOPADINSKY, Russia — The girls of the Salikhov family live in frontier country. Their road is dirt, punctuated by puddles and sheep, and their house does not have plumbing or running water. They had been hoping this would be the year the local authorities got around to hooking up natural gas.

Instead, they found themselves at the center of an emerging debate over religion in Russia.

When local school officials in the sparsely populated far east of the Stavropol region announced that girls in hijabs, the Islamic head covering, would no longer be allowed in government schools, the Salikhovs had to make changes.

Raifat, a 15-year-old, wept at the news that she would be sent to neighboring Dagestan. Her niece Amina, 10, began having one-on-one sessions with a teacher instead of attending class at the regional elementary school. Amina's sister, Aisha, 5, does not know that her life has changed. On a recent morning she sat at the kitchen table and practiced coloring inside the lines.

Stavropol's ban on hijabs — the first broad restriction to be imposed by a region in the Russian federation — will face its first court challenge on Thursday. The move came amid rising ethnic tensions that have confronted the Kremlin with a problem: President Vladimir V. Putin succeeded in curbing separatist violence in the North Caucasus in part by granting subsidies and broad autonomy to its predominantly Muslim regions. But now the Kremlin must cope with growing resentment in mostly ethnic Russian regions like Stavropol, which lies at the edge of the Caucasus mountain range.

When a stern Russian schoolmistress in one of these poor villages said she would no longer admit girls in hijabs, she became a hero to many in Stavropol. The region's leaders backed her up by introducing a uniform that does not allow girls to wear head coverings at all — a restriction that affects a population of around 2.7 million. Official statistics say around 10 percent of those residents are Muslim, though the real number may be double that because of unregistered migration, the International Crisis Group has reported.

Ali Salikhov, Amina's father, said he would not be cowed into relaxing his views on the hijab.

"If they think that because something will happen with my daughter I will forget my religion — I say, no, religion is the goal of my life," he said. "For 70 years they taught us that there was no God, but that passed, and this will also pass. In 20 years they will have forgotten that hijabs were ever forbidden in Russia."

There are influential people on Mr. Salikhov's side. A celebrity lawyer from neighboring Chechnya has agreed to represent four fathers of daughters now excluded from school, arguing that under Russian law only the federal authorities can curtail a citizen's constitutional right to freedom of religious practice.

The lawyer, Murad Musayev, said he saw the Stavropol ban as an attempt to stir up tensions between groups that have been living together peacefully, perhaps with the intent of establishing eastern Stavropol as an ethnic boundary.

"When we discussed the social aspect of the problem with hijabs, one of our opponents said, 'Let these people go back to their historical homeland, to their hijab homeland, and let them wear hijabs there,' " he said. "This is a pretty common opinion in Russia."

It is unusual to see hijabs in this region to begin with, which may explain why Marina Savchenko, the director of School No. 12 in the village of Kara-Tyube, decided to put her foot down.

Ethnic Russians have been leaving the steppe here for years, mainly for economic reasons, as have young people from the Nogay ethnic group, which practices a moderate form of Islam. The Dagestanis replacing them are more conservative, though only a handful of girls in a few villages wore hijabs to school.

Nevertheless, with conservative, pro-church sentiment surging in Russia, national news broadcasts highlighted the Stavropol story, showing an administrator guiding a child in a hijab back onto the school bus and sending her home.

"This is an institution. Secular attire should be worn here, business formal," Ms. Savchenko told one news crew. "That's all. This is not a subject for discussion."

She was cheered by officials in Stavropol, which is 81 percent ethnic Russian and is still considered traditional Cossack territory by many. When she reported receiving threatening phone calls from Dagestan, nationalist organizations offered to provide her with security. She left the village shortly thereafter.

But her stand had already taken on national proportions, so much so that Mr. Putin addressed it in his annual televised question-and-answer session in December. He took Ms. Savchenko's side.

"There are no hijabs in our culture, and when I say 'our,' I mean our traditional Islam," Mr. Putin said. "Authoritative statesmen in the Islamic world also say this should not be done. Shall we adopt alien traditions? Why would we do that?"

The decision has rippled through Muslim ethnic groups, including those that have never adopted the hijab. Anvar Suyunov, a Nogay from Kara-Tyube, said the edict touched on "a very tricky question of self-determination" and could prove dangerously divisive.

"It's a stupid idea, because they could tear the country apart," he said. "Every action has a reaction."

At the Salikhov house, men were debating it, too, sitting on pillows on the floor. Mr. Salikhov recalled the strange conversations that took place in the fall, when administrators said the ban was a safety precaution. They said that if someone grabbed Amina's hijab, for instance, she could be strangled.

Mr. Salikhov, whose parents moved to the village during the late Soviet period, said he did not consider "excess knowledge" necessary for a Muslim woman, who ultimately "will be a housewife for her husband." But he felt sour about sending his 15-year-old sister, Raifat, to Dagestan, where hijabs are allowed but the quality of education is lower. His sister had won a local academic Olympiad, he said.

"She didn't want to leave," said his wife, Maryam Salikhova, in the kitchen. "She was sad, and the other girls were sad. They said, 'Stay here with us.' But she was already grown up. She could not take it off even at home." Ms. Salikhova sighed.

Outside, the spring thaw had turned the road into a sloppy, unnavigable mess. Ms. Salikhova said that some years ago the school bus had stopped bothering to drive down the road, even to the point where the concrete ended, so the children had to tramp a quarter mile through the mud and snow.

Mr. Salikhov said he was beginning to get the feeling that the authorities were creating problems in the village in the hope that he and his family would leave, returning across the Dagestani border and off the territory of Stavropol.

“They should pass a law saying, ‘Don’t come here,’ ” he said. “At least then I would know I was breaking the law.”

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