



## **To Russia With Love:**

A San Francisco Town Hall in Support of Russian LGBT People

*The Jewish Community Relations Council in Conjunction with the San Francisco LGBT Community Center Hold Event to Raise Awareness and Take Action in Response to Oppressive Russian Legislation and Activities Against LGBT people.*

Nearly 30 leaders from the human rights and LGBT communities came together for a productive and empowering town hall on Wednesday, August 28, to discuss proactive ways to support and help LGBT people in Russia who are facing state-sponsored oppression and to shape an organizing strategy. The meeting, convened by the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Relations Council and hosted by the San Francisco LGBT Community Center, was held in response to the horrific and oppressive legislation and vigilante attacks against the Russian LGBT community.

The meeting began with remarks from Rabbi Doug Kahn, Executive Director of the JCRC, and David Waksberg, CEO of Jewish Learning Works, San Francisco's Bureau of Jewish Education and the former director of the Bay Area Council on Soviet Jews. Both were at the forefront of the Soviet Jewry Freedom Movement in San Francisco in the 70s and 80s, holding rallies, mobilizing activists and staging protests in a bid to pressure the Soviet government into ending their oppressive policies against Jews. Many of these tactics may prove useful in fighting oppressive anti-LGBT policies in Russia today, providing a blueprint for activism from afar.

Doug spoke first, providing eight key points that he believed were particularly helpful during the Soviet Jewry Freedom Movement and remain relevant for activism today:

1. Personalize the movement: Make the movement about individuals with personal stories and lives that are directly affected by oppressive legislation and acts.
2. Maintain the flow of information: Ensure that there is a steady stream of news about what is happening on the ground in Russia.
3. Create a lifeline continuously into Russia: One of the best ways to stay energized and show support is to actually visit Russia, meet with members of the LGBT community and witness the reality firsthand.
4. Develop one main slogan that resonates: During the Soviet Jewry movement, the slogan was "Let My People Go".
5. Capitalize on Russian Consulate events: Use them as an opportunity to shift the focus to the LGBT cause.

6. Target your calls to action: Make sure that boycotts or other activities requiring mass support will actually make a difference, and are aimed at influencing those making policy.
7. Avoid anti-Russian sentiments: Activism should be about ending an oppressive policy, not about restarting the Cold War and antagonizing ordinary Russian people.
8. Utilize visits by formal Russian delegations as a platform for action: Russian political, cultural or economic visits should be utilized to stage clever protests or request meetings with key figures.

David then went on to highlight the three main guiding principles of the Soviet Jewry Freedom Movement:

1. The importance of direct aid: The Soviet Jewry Freedom Movement was a support movement geared toward alleviating the plight of Jews in the former USSR. The oppression was happening on the ground in Russia, and the movement in San Francisco strove to be attuned to the needs and priorities of the activists in the USSR. It was important to proceed in the spirit of partnership, not paternalism.
2. The strength of political activity: The Soviet government was sensitive to political threats and took great pains to maintain its relationship with Western Governments. Talking to elected officials and finding creative ways to threaten Soviet political interest was crucial toward making legislative headway.
3. The power of the press: "It was our pen against their sword". Public pressure and increased media exposure were hugely instrumental in embarrassing the Soviet government and building public support and political pressure, all of which contributed to compelling the Soviet government to changing its policies. With the advent of social media, this is all the more powerful.

David closed with a moving statement from a former Soviet dissident: "We can't know the impact of what we do, but we can be sure of the impact if we do nothing."

After Doug and David concluded their remarks with a short Q&A, Cleve Jones, LGBT activist and conceiver of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, led an open discussion about best practices and various ways to take action on this important cause. Key takeaways included:

- Expand the boycott of Russian goods.
- Travel to Russia to witness the reality on the ground and provide in-person assistance.
- Be attuned to Russian LGBT people's needs; act as a support.
- Keep abreast of LGBT community activism in Russia by following the [Russian LGBT Network](#) or visiting the [Council for Global Equality website](#).
- Send images of activities in San Francisco in support of the Russian LGBT community to activists in Russia.
- Be smart. Russian officials are well versed in their rhetoric; we must provide salient, well-thought-out arguments.
- Back national and local legislation in support of Russian LGBT people – national movements in the Senate and House should be seen in mid-September, and Senator Mark Leno has already created [Resolution SR18](#).

- Keep elected officials abreast of latest developments and oppression of Russian LGBT people and bring LGBT issues to the forefront when Russian delegations come to visit.
- Take part in September 3 protests surrounding the G20, which is being led by Russia.
- Be patient. There is a lot going on internally in Russia right now, and while activists appreciate and need outside support, their first priority must be organizing themselves before providing outside directives.
- Use social media to show support for Russian LGBT people.
- Reach out to the local Russian community and offer/enlist their help.
- Be organized. Determine long-term and short-term goals.
- Help those who wish to emigrate make it to the U.S., and provide them with a sustainable escape route; i.e. a place to live, employment opportunities, etc.
- Garner media exposure for vigilante activities and oppressive legislation as it happens.
- Maintain direct contact with activists in Russia.
- Stage local demonstrations in San Francisco and in front of the Russian Consulate and create a calendar of events for demonstrations online.
- Put pressure on the International Olympic Committee and various Olympics sponsors.
- Ensure that LGBT athletes taking part in the Winter Olympics are protected.

The meeting ended on a proactive and positive note, with participants committing to continue working on behalf of Russian LGBT people, and create an ad-hoc committee to convene again soon. Doug and David reiterated their offer to continue providing insights and support to the movement and all were encouraged to reach out to their personal networks and get as many people – even those without a track-record of social or political activism – to take action in support of the Russian LGBT community toward effecting real and positive change.

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