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Issue brings out new political voice

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SUMMARY: Immigrants | Young people from Ukrainian and Russian churches organize in response to gay rights bills

Twice in the past two weeks, hundreds of Russian-speaking Christians from Portland and Salem flocked to the state Capitol to protest efforts to bolster gay rights. They arrived by the busload, jamming hearing rooms, singing hymns under the rotunda and providing testimony.

The protests were organized in only a few days by Russian-speakers calling themselves The Voice of Oregon Youth. They pulled it off by using laptops, e-mail and phone calls to the tight network of Russian and Ukrainian churches in the area. Legislators estimated about 1,000 people showed up for a public hearing April 9, with 662 signing up to testify.

"We just went for it, no stopping," said Anna Zaichenko, 19, of Salem, a rally organizer. "I saw how passionate a lot of people became."

The sheer numbers at the rallies, which included a second one last week, and the organizing skill involved caught many observers off-guard. It was one of the first times the Russian-speaking Christian community, usually isolated in its churches and rarely civilly involved, has engaged in political action. And it was more notable because of who led the effort: youths.

"The rallies showed me that the younger Russian-speaking generation is more aware politically and not afraid to stand up for certain things," said Alex Gudev, youth pastor at Voice of Hope Christian Church in Southeast Portland, who attended the first rally with about 50 people from his church.

Although some celebrated the involvement of Russians in politics, others expressed concern that the public would perceive the entire community as homophobic.

"There isn't such a thing as one Russian community here," said community activist Anya Valsamakis. "Not everybody who is Slavic or Eastern European shares their views."

Five days to plan

The rallies --which mimic similar ones held by Russians in Sacramento the past 18 months --came together faster than anyone expected. Zaichenko, who came to the U.S. when she was 2 years old and speaks perfect English, said she got a phone call five days before the Monday, April 9, hearing. She and three others from the Slavic Christian Church of Salem youth group e-mailed and called dozens of churches. The next day they got a rally permit and met with pastors and youth leaders in Portland.

The Voice of Oregon Youth got advice from former Republican state Sen. Marilyn Shannon and the Oregon Family Council, though Zaichenko said the Russian Christians --most of whom are evangelicals --are not affiliated with any American groups. She said they tried contacting non-Russian churches but "a surprising number of them said they don't get involved in politics."

The protests haven't had significant effect on the legislation. One bill, banning discrimination in housing and employment based on sexual orientation, was approved. The other, the subject of a Senate hearing today, would allow domestic partnerships for same-sex couples.

Organizers say they don't plan to attend today's session because they have made their point with lawmakers.

"It's very disappointing that (the law) passed and the legislators did not react to our opposition," Zaichenko said.

She said Russian-speaking Christian youths now want to help other, more-experienced groups. The group had hoped to help the Oregon Family Council pursue a ballot measure against the gay-discrimination bill, but the council has backed out, saying it needs to direct its efforts elsewhere. So the youths plan to pursue it on their own.

Many of the young protesters said they feel like being born or raised in America gave them the ability to take a stand, unlike their parents.

"We grew up over here, so our attitudes are different than our parents, who come from a communist regime and did not have the power to get into politics," said Gudev, who arrived from the Caucasus as a 6-year-old. "But growing up here, politics is part of your life. We decided that, hey, we should stand up for what we believe and make a voice, and this was our opportunity."

Russian pastors said the rallies were a sign of the Russian community --estimated at 80,000 in the Portland area -- growing up and coming into its own.

"Our community has now been here for 10, 15 years. Lots of people are citizens and speak better English," said Pastor Il'ya Globak, who leads Ukrainian Bible Church. "I think next time we can prepare it more and make an even bigger protest."

Even American groups that oppose gay rights were surprised by the vigor and number of Russian youth protesters.

"The rapid pace in which they got involved in this issue, their enthusiasm and their numbers have been eye-opening," said Nick Graham, spokesman for the Oregon Family Council.

David Crowe, with Lake Oswego-based ministry Restore America, said he was pleasantly surprised and plans to meet with a Portland-based Russian pastor this week.

"If Russian and Slavic churches want that input from Americans, I'm available," he said. "I see them as a very hopeful, bright aspect to Oregon's culture and politics. Yeah, I think they can be a force."

Russian opinions differ

But some Russian-speaking Oregonians said they do not share the group's views, saying it's a belief issue, not one of nationality.

"By focusing on the immigrant status of this group, it's really missing the point that the group is very much organized around religious values and not so much around their ethnic identity," Valsamakis said.

Other critics pointed out a potential conflict in the Russians' stance.

"I'm happy to see this isolated community engaged politically," said Wade Fickler, policy director for the City Club of Portland. "But I think it's ironic and inconsistent to immigrate to a country on the grounds of persecution and then for many of these people their first act of civic engagement is to deny those rights to others.

"Our country was founded on the freedom to choose, and within it there's much choice," he said. "I don't think these laws infringe on their rights to practice their religion."

Zaichenko defended the protests.

"I don't see us as persecuting them," she said, "but we don't want (gay rights) to be set as normal."

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