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Soviet gays hope to recoup their identities

Activist leader one
of few willing to be
open and face
possible arrest

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MOSCOW — The whereabouts of the gay and lesbian movement's headquarters in the Soviet Union is a closely guarded secret — even after last week's stride toward democracy.

High visibility for gay activism isn't a safe strategy in a country where homosexuality is constitutionally forbidden,

where citizens commonly consider it a sickness and many believe it should be dealt with through capital punishment.

Nevertheless, Roman Kalinin is out in the open. As president of the Moscow Union of Lesbians and

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Soviet gays hope for better days

Gay Men, Kalinin, 24, is the leader of the Soviet Union's fledgling gay movement.

He works out of a working-class apartment building, up seven flights. There, armed with a Macintosh LC, a copy machine and a laser printer, Kalinin conducts his battles — with more than a little help from friends in San Francisco and elsewhere.

As last week's coup unfolded, things looked to get even worse than they already are for Kalinin and other gays here. The hard-liners who had taken control promised to purge the nation of "immoral elements."

Tom Boellstorff, 22, a former Stanford student and Queer Nation activist from the Bay Area who now lives in Moscow, moved Kalinin out of his apartment because the Soviet gay leader faced possible arrest by the KGB.

Then Boellstorff and other gay activists worked to continue to publish Kalinin's gay newsletter, Tema.

The tiny core of Soviet activists, most highly secretive about their sexual orientation, stood watch at the barricades outside the Russian Parliament building and helped run a sophisticated covert news publishing center, aggressively distributing information about coup resistance.

Their efforts, partially funded by the San Francisco-based International Gay and Lesbian Rights Organization, helped maintain what has become a lonely beacon of hope for gays and lesbians in the Soviet Union.

'I knew all my life'

Kalinin has a soft-spoken manner that belies his focused resolve to build a gay-rights movement.

The product of a middle-class family and son of an engineer, Kalinin says, "I knew all my life I was gay."

His parents didn't know, he says, until the KGB, which broke into his apartment after repeatedly spying on his activities, told them.

"All the bad things that could happen to me (for being gay) did happen," he says, sitting at the kitchen table and chain-smoking. "I was put in a psychiatric institute. In the Soviet Union, being gay is considered an illness, a psychiatric problem."

It could have been worse, he says.

Within five years of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet officials began regulating the sex lives of citizens. These laws, passed between 1922 and 1926, defined homosexuality as a "crime against nature" and specifically outlawed oral sex.

The 1925 Marriage Law set forth the official view that sex was something that happened between men and women within the family framework. To make the official view perfectly clear, Article 121 of the Russian Constitution outlawed homosexuality.

The general Soviet attitude toward gays was illustrated in a recent poll on the subject published before the coup. Even in "cosmopolitan" Moscow, 30 percent of respondents thought homosexuals should be killed, another 30 percent recommended imprisonment, and 30 percent suggested psychiatric confinement. Only 10 percent said they believed that gays should be free to follow their own lifestyle.

"In rural areas," says Boellstorff, "nearly 85 percent (of the respondents) were in favor of the death

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Gay activists *Tom Boellstorf and Roman Kalinin chat in their apartment on the outskirts of Moscow.*

penalty for homosexuality."

"The only place gay people can meet here is parks, baths and toilets," says Kalinin. Economic difficulties make privacy a rare commodity. Even grown men and women must live with their parents, because it's so difficult to get an apartment.

And even when they do have their own residences, friends and lovers must be careful.

Working for change

Despite the difficulties, Kalinin refused to pretend he was straight, and last year he began publishing *Tema*.

"That was the beginning of the movement here," he says. "I got letters from everywhere, so I knew there were other people with my problems."

The magazine features articles on safe sex, gay life and history, and personal viewpoints. It has 2,000 subscribers from as far away as Siberia and draws classified ads from all over the world. It is produced on the Macintosh and distributed widely in the secretive gay community.

Boellstorf, accustomed to San Francisco's liberal attitude toward gays, says he is appalled at the repression in the Soviet Union.

"Roman is the only person who is 'out' to his parents," he says. "There's a real worry about being blackmailed or jailed. I know someone who was in a relationship for a year and never gave his lover his last name. It's very much a double life, and trust is in very short supply."

But Kalinin and Boellstorf say they hope to change that. Their first order of business now, in the post-coup period, is to appeal to Russian President Boris Yeltsin and other Soviet leaders to repeal the article in the Soviet constitution that outlaws homosexuality.

They say their gay rights group will urge San Francisco Mayor Agnos and other civic leaders in the United States to make their own calls to Soviet officials to urge gay equality as a human rights issue.

"All we are asking for is the right to be happy, the right to have freedoms that gay people know in the West," Kalinin says.