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Vodka Brand Stands With Lesbians and Gays Against the Government

By The Moscow Times

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WASHINGTON — Stolichnaya, one of the most popular vodkas in the U.S., came out swinging at the Russian government last week with a message of support for the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender community worldwide.

"Stolichnaya Premium Vodka stands strong and proud with the global LGBT community against the actions and beliefs of the Russian government," the company said on its Facebook page.

President Vladimir Putin signed a controversial law last month banning the promotion of "nontraditional relationships" toward minors, a move critics say is part of a broader crackdown on the gay community.

Four Dutch tourists shooting a film about gay rights in Russia were arrested earlier this month outside the northern city of Murmansk, the first foreigners to be detained under

the new law.

Stolichnaya said its message was in response to recent calls in the U.S. by gay and lesbian groups for a boycott of Russian products, including Stolichnaya and other vodkas. Gay rights groups including RUSA LGBT, made up of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Russian-Americans in New York, are claiming an early victory in what may be a lengthy battle.

"I think it was great. It was definitely unexpected because the Stoli ties with Russia are strong," said Nina Long, co-president of RUSA LGBT.

"If the news traveled to Russia that Stoli was so vocal in their support, with such a strong statement, that would be an example that you don't have to take the stand of the Russian government. You can say, 'No, I don't think so. I am for equality and that can be the policy of my company,'" she added.

U.S. author and gay rights activist Dan Savage called for a boycott of Stolichnaya and other Russian products in a blog this week, and RUSA LGBT followed up with a social media campaign.

In addition to the Facebook posting, Val Mendeleev, Stolichnaya's chief executive office, issued an open letter to the LGBT community late last week, in which he said the "recent dreadful actions taken by the Russian Government limiting the rights of the LGBT community and the passionate reaction of the community" had prompted the letter.

Mendeleev said Stolichnaya was "upset and angry" and "has always been, and continues to be a fervent supporter and friend to the LGBT community."

He listed a number of programs and campaigns Stolichnaya has launched in support of the LGBT community and appeared to be backing away from the company's long-established connection to Russia.

"The Russian government has no ownership interest or control over the Stoli brand that is privately owned by SPI Group, headquartered in Luxembourg in the heart of Western Europe," he wrote, adding, "Stoli's production process involves both Russia and Latvia. Stoli is made from Russian ingredients — wheat, rye and raw alcohol — blended with pure artesian well water at our historic distillery and bottling facility in Riga, Latvia."

Stolichnaya has long been listed among the top-selling vodkas in the U.S.

"This is real vodka, Russian vodka, vodka that burns all the way down and lights a fire in your chest. This is the vodka supplied to the Kremlin and rationed to Soviet soldiers as they held back the Nazis at Stalingrad," Ask Men magazine said in a poll listing top U.S. vodkas.

"Stoli is a Russian vodka," Savage wrote. "Do not drink Russian vodka. Do not buy Russian vodka. Ask your bartender at your favorite bar — gay or otherwise — to dump Stoli and dump Russian vodka."

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