

3 Russia-Themed, Anti-War Films Shortlisted for Oscars

By [Anna Smolchenko for AFP](#)

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From left: stills from "Extremist," "My Undesirable Friends" and "Mr. Nobody Against Putin." **The New Yorker / Film Forum / František Svatoš**

Three films about anti-Kremlin journalists and activists have been shortlisted for the Oscars in what film critics said sent a clear anti-war, anti-authoritarian message.

David Borenstein's "Mr. Nobody Against Putin," based on footage smuggled out of Russia, and "My Undesirable Friends: Part 1 — Last Air in Moscow," by U.S. filmmaker Julia Loktev, have been shortlisted in the Documentary Feature Film category.

Borenstein's film documents the abrupt militarization of a secondary school in Russia's Ural Mountains using footage shot by the school's event coordinator and videographer, Pavel Talankin.

Talankin fled Russia with the hard discs of what would become the documentary.

Borenstein said he was "shocked" and it felt "surreal."

"But I'm also grateful, especially for Pasha. He sacrificed so much to make this film and he deserves to make as big of an impact as possible," he said, referring to Talankin by his diminutive.

'Extraordinary acts'

Asked about the presence of Russian-themed films on the shortlist, Borenstein said: "Perhaps it's because dire situations inspire extraordinary acts?"

Related article: [‘Mr. Nobody Against Putin’: A Schoolteacher’s Stand Against Russia’s Child Indoctrination](#)

Russian-born Loktev's documentary — which entertainment news site Vulture said felt like a "5.5-hour-long panic attack" — tells the story of independent Russian women journalists in the winter of 2021-2022, in the build-up to Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Exiled Russian filmmaker Alexander Molochnikov's "Extremist," for which Hollywood's Ben Stiller acted as executive producer, has been shortlisted in the Live Action Short Film category.

The film was inspired by the story of 35-year-old Sasha Skochilenko, an artist and musician sentenced to seven years in prison in 2023 for swapping supermarket price tags for messages opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

After two years behind bars, she was released in 2024 as part of a historic prisoner exchange.

Molochnikov, one of Russia's most prominent young filmmakers, began his career at the Moscow Art Theater when he was 22 and later directed at the Bolshoi Theater.

The 17-minute film was 33-year-old Molochnikov's thesis project at Columbia University after he left Moscow following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Skochilenko praised the film and told AFP she was "glad" that "the issue of repression and political imprisonment in Russia is becoming more visible to people abroad."

Related article: [‘I Never Believed I Could Get on That Plane’: Freed Political Prisoner Sasha Skochilenko](#)

"This is incredibly important now, when some people in Western countries harbor illusions about the 'Russian world' and what good it might bring."

Skochilenko, who is gay, added it was her "dream" to one day see a TV series based on a story about her partner Sonia and her.

'Anti-dictatorial message'

In November, Stiller said on X he was honored to be part of the project, praising "the courage to stand up against authoritarian regimes (in any country)."

The inclusion of the Russia-themed films on the shortlist sends a powerful signal, film critic Anton Dolin said.

"It's an anti-war, anti-dictatorial message," he told AFP.

"This indicates that American cultural elites are paying increased attention to what is happening in Russia."

Yekaterina Barabash, another exiled film critic, said: "It's a big deal."

"2,000 Meters to Andriivka," directed by Ukrainian filmmaker and war correspondent Mstyslav Chernov, has also been shortlisted in the documentary feature category.

In 2024, Chernov's harrowing film "20 Days in Mariupol" won the Oscar in the same category.

Nominations for the Academy Awards will be announced on Jan. 22.

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