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Director Alexander Sokurov Expresses 'Sympathy' for Exiled Artists After Venice Event Canceled

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Alexander Sokurov. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

Acclaimed Russian film director Alexander Sokurov said Friday that he feels "sympathy" for exiled artists who signed an open letter opposing his scheduled appearance at the Venice Biennale, which was canceled this week.

Sokurov had been slated to speak at a pre-opening event titled "Dissent and Peace" on Wednesday and Thursday. Organizers scrapped the appearances of both Sokurov and Palestinian architect Suad Amiry, citing "last-minute unavailability."

The cancellation follows a backlash from Russian and Italian artists who questioned the invitation in an open letter to Biennale chairman Pietrangelo Buttafuoco.

"This is not about a person, but a principle: can dissent be represented by those who circulate risk-free between the halls of power and international acclaim, while others face prison, exile

or death for the very same actions?" the letter's authors wrote.

The authors of the letter also include a list of artists imprisoned for their anti-war views, acts of protest and other forms of dissent, as well as those who have died in law enforcement custody.

"These are the voices that must be represented and heard," the letter reads.

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Sokurov, the director of "Russian Ark" and the Golden Lion-winning "Faust," remains a rare yet cautiously critical voice within Russia. He is among the few remaining members of the Kremlin's Council for Civil Society and Human Rights to openly challenge government policy during the ongoing crackdown on dissent.

The director has famously sparred with President Vladimir Putin during televised government meetings. More recently, Sokurov has expressed dismay to the president over mounting government censorship in the arts, including restrictions placed on his own films.

Sokurov also attended the trial of artist Sasha Skochilenko as a show of support before she was imprisoned in 2023. Skochilenko, who was later released and now lives in exile abroad, was among the signatories of the open letter opposing his appearance at the Biennale.

"Whatever they write about me, however they may curse me, or however they may demonstrate their hatred, I am full of sympathy for these people," Sokurov told the St. Petersburg news outlet Rotunda on Friday in response to the letter.

"Russia will forever remain, if not their Fatherland, then their Motherland. Both for them and for me," he said.

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In March, organizers of the 2026 Biennale drew condemnation for allowing the Russian national pavilion to reopen for the first time since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The European Union responded by threatening to pull 2 million euros ($2.3 million) in funding.

Under a compromise, the pavilion will remain closed to the public for the duration of the show, which runs May 9 to Nov. 22, though recorded musical performances from the press preview will be projected on outdoor screens.

The event has been further destabilized by the resignation of the Biennale jury last week. The walkout followed a decision by jurors to disqualify Russian and Israeli artists from the prestigious Golden and Silver Lion awards, citing war crime charges at the International Criminal Court.

Russian protest group Pussy Riot, whose co-founder Nadya Tolokonnikova signed the letter against Sokurov's appearance in Venice, held demonstrations in front of the Russian Pavilion

earlier this week.

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