



6 February 2025

Antenna Documentary Film Festival sponsor

Dear Sponsor,

My name is Kateryna Argyrou. I am the Co-Chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO). The AFUO is the peak body representing 22 national community organisations, acting as a voice on matters important to the Ukrainian community in Australia.

We understand that Goethe-Institut Australia was previously listed as a Cultural Partner of the Antenna Documentary Film Festival which starts today and runs to 16 February 2025. The Antenna Festival is a well-regarded cultural institution that has brought global documentaries to Sydney for more than 13 years. While the Festival has previously been a strong supporter of Ukraine, **the Festival's choice to screen the film *Russians at War* as part of this year's program is a dangerous mistake.**

Directed by Anastasia Trofimova, the film has faced wide-spread criticism for its one-sided view of the invasion of Ukraine, portraying Russian soldiers as 'regular people' and 'victims' of the war while omitting any context or facts about the truth of the Russian invasion and the Russian military's war crimes. According to official [data](#) of the General Prosecutor Office of Ukraine, Russian soldiers have committed more than [140,500 war crimes](#), while the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has [reported](#) that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has resulted in violations of international humanitarian law which have led to thousands of civilian casualties and the destruction and damage of civilian objects, including hospitals and cultural property. **Despite this, the film fails to explore, mention or even hint at this reality.** Would we tolerate a documentary on Nazi soldiers that omitted the Holocaust? Of course not.

In unchallenged interviews, Russian soldiers — who have signed up to fight in Ukraine for three times the average Russian wage — repeat many of the standard narratives disseminated by the Russian state about its war against Ukraine, for example Ukrainians are 'Nazis', the 2014 Maidan Revolution was a US-led coup, Russians have invaded Ukraine to protect their motherland etc. **To be clear, the film is Kremlin-aligned propaganda.**

In Russian language media, Trofimova has referred to Russian soldiers active in Ukraine as "heroes", and claimed that Russia "hasn't participated in wars for many years," — neatly 'forgetting' Russia's wars & occupations in her lifetime, namely Transnistria (1992-93), Abkhazia (1994-96), Chechnya (1999-2009), Georgia (2008) & Syria (2015-2022), and annexation of Ukrainian Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine (2014). **Trofimova's allegiances and biases are as clear as day.**

Trofimova claims the film was made without the consent of the Kremlin, however she spent seven months embedded with a Russian army unit in occupied Ukraine. It is ludicrous and insulting to suggest that Trofimova was able to film Russian soldiers without the permission, knowledge and direct oversight of Russia's Ministry of Defense and intelligence agencies — the FSB and GRU. This is not how Russia works, as

we know from the many documentarians and creatives who have been imprisoned for their work and opinions.

Antenna's view remains that this film remains an "existential critique" of war. However, the screening of this film is deeply upsetting and troubling on many fronts, namely as the festival team appear to have failed to complete due diligence on the film's director, the film's origins, and key narratives which overtly ignore the horrific reality of Russia's war against Ukraine.

**Art is not only a tool for expression, it's often weaponised by authoritarian governments, like the Kremlin, to promote their interests. Films such as *Russians at War* seek to inject doubt, create false moral equivalence, and sap the will of democratic societies to stand with Ukraine. Russia's war is not just fought with missiles and tanks — it is fought through information warfare, winning over the hearts and minds of citizens in democratic countries.**

Despite open objection and direct engagement from the Ukrainian Ambassador to Australia, Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO), the Ukrainian Council of NSW (UCNSW), and various members of the strong and resilient Australian-Ukrainian community, the festival organisers have chosen to continue with plans to air the film.

We note the September 2024 report of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee on *Australian Support for Ukraine* recommended that:

*"...the Australian Government ensure relevant agencies are appropriately resourced to identify and address foreign interference and disinformation activities in Australia, including from Russian actors, and to respond to community and diaspora concerns regarding these activities."*

Given the facts outlined in this letter, we hold deep concerns about this film being aired in Australia, particularly at a time when Australian man Oscar Jenkins is being held in Russian captivity as a POW.

Since facts about the film were shared with Antenna's partners as part of a community campaign launched on Sunday, we have noted that the Goethe-Institut Australia's logo has disappeared from the Antenna website, as has that of Screen Australia. However, the film remains on the program.

**We call on Goethe-Institut Australia to stand with Ukraine against pro-Russian propaganda by using your powerful voice to have this film pulled from the program. If it is not, we encourage Goethe-Institut Australia to withdraw support for the Antenna Documentary Film Festival 2025.** To not act now is to align Goethe-Institut Australia with narratives sympathetic to and supportive of the Kremlin.

I have included some additional facts on the film overleaf for your reference. Thank you for your compassion and consideration. Please feel free to reach out to me directly with any questions.

Sincerely,

Kateryna Argyrou  
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## ***Russians at War: Facts on the film***

- *Russians at War* is a 2024 film, directed by Russian-Canadian Anastasia Trofimova. The film offers to take viewers “beyond the headlines”, and focuses on the perspectives of Russians who are fighting in the invasion of Ukraine, hoping to paint a picture of the ‘human stories’ within war.
- **Trofimova was a producer for the Russian state-controlled media “RT”, and over 7 years produced 11 films** for an outlet that has been sanctioned for its role in spreading propaganda, and disinformation (since 2022 by the UK, EU, US, and Canada; as well as banned from broadcasting and restricted online in Australia and other countries). A number of RT employees have been indicted by the US Department of Justice.
- **In a Russian-language interview, Trofimova has been quoted calling Russian soldiers “heroes.”** This is far from the dispassionate even-handed treatment you would expect from a documentarian – instead, it directly echoes Kremlin talking points. There is nothing heroic about the 140,000+ recorded war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity being perpetrated by the Russian military. She has not made this comment in any English-language media or in any collateral related to the documentary.
- **The film was made under highly questionable circumstances.** Trofimova claims it was recorded without the consent of the Russian Government, however after passing through the occupied territories, she describes the authorities as “very nice” and “funny”. Trofimova is being investigated by Ukrainian authorities for illegally entering occupied Ukrainian territories. It is not possible to record the Russian military for 7 months without the permission, knowledge and direct oversight of Russia’s Ministry of Defense and intelligence agencies – FSB and GRU. Trofimova said she wants to work in Russia after the film's release.
- Russia would never allow “discrediting” footage that criticises its forces or the war, to be recorded and released to the public. This is evident in the fact that Russian anti-war documentarians have been sentenced and jailed for their work. Russian law states imprisonment for 7 years, however, there has been no comment or action from the Kremlin on “Russians at War”. In short, only documentaries that fit pro-Kremlin narratives are granted front-line access to soldiers and facilitation support from the Russian military.
- Most of the Russian soldiers interviewed were stationed in occupied Bakhmut. **Trofimova claimed she did not see or hear about any war crimes**, yet the battles and invasion of Bakhmut constituted countless well-documented, horrendous and systematic war crimes and atrocities. The film selectively omits crucial aspects of Russia’s recruitment, such as the use of violent criminals and forcibly conscripted foreigners, and ethnic minorities who are used as cannon fodder in their assaults.