

2402 forum, Swiss Network with Ukraine, UASAZ
Zurich, 2 October 2024

Response to the Zurich Film Festival's September 26th Statement¹:

1. We call on the Zurich Film Festival (ZFF) to *remove* "Russians at War" from its competition and program.
2. We call on the ZFF to engage in a dialogue with Ukrainian civil society in Switzerland, rather than undermining their valid concerns by citing unsubstantiated threats.

Point 1: Remove "Russians at War" from ZFF Documentary Competition

To justify screening "Russians at War" in the international film festival circuit over the objections of Ukrainian civil society groups and their allies, film festival organizers and members of the press have referred repeatedly to the need to stimulate discussion by giving the stage to different perspectives.² We would like to address this argument directly.

As a propaganda film, "Russians at War" disseminates misleading information in order to achieve certain political goals.³ As such, it attempts to discredit well-established facts about Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the film – parading as an independent feature made without the support of the Russian government – is in fact *an attack on the free exchange of ideas that the ZFF claims to protect. If there is no allegiance to objective fact, then there can be no fair and free exchange of ideas.* By giving such propaganda an elevated spot in the cultural sphere, *the ZFF is implicit in preventing the free exchange of ideas.*

How might allowing "Russians at War" to screen in the ZFF's documentary competition prevent the free exchange of ideas?

To answer this question, let us focus on one of the documentary's important points, repeated by the director during the film's press conference at the Venice Film Festival: casting doubt on the existence of Russian war crimes against Ukrainians.⁴

The United Nations' Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine continues to report, as recently as Monday, September 23rd, 2024, "common patterns of torture by Russian authorities against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war in occupied Ukrainian territories and

¹**Statement from the ZFF, issued 26/9/2024:** The Zurich Film Festival (ZFF) has decided not to screen the Canadian French documentary film "RUSSIANS AT WAR" publicly, due to safety reasons. For the ZFF, the safety of its audience, guests, partners as well as the staff is the top priority. The film, which has already been presented at other international festivals, will remain in the Documentary Film Competition of the ZFF. In view of the current situation, the director Anastasia Trofimova will not be traveling to Zurich. Any tickets that have already been purchased will be refunded.

²www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/sicherheitsbedenken-das-zurich-film-festival-sagt-russians-at-war-ab-ld.1850212

³www.oed.com/dictionary/propaganda_n?tl=true

⁴www.euronews.com/culture/2024/09/06/sympathetic-view-of-russian-soldiers-creates-controversy-at-venice-film-festival;
<https://deadline.com/2024/09/director-russians-at-war-bats-back-suggestions-whitewashing-1236078633/>;
www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/wir-blenden-nichts-aus-russians-at-war-zeigt-soldaten-an-der-front-ld.1847536

in the Russian Federation” such as sexual violence; “attacks with explosive weapons affecting civilian objects in populated areas with devastating consequences,” such as attacks on hospitals, residential buildings, and supermarkets; and attacks on “Ukraine’s energy infrastructure” which have resulted in power outages affecting the health of Ukraine’s civilian population.⁵ The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants related to the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children and targeted strikes on civilian objects in Ukraine.⁶ Switzerland is a member of the United Nations and a signatory to the ICC.

By amplifying voices claiming that Russians commit “no” war crimes,⁷ and by casting doubt on the existence of war crimes herself, Trofimova’s film and ensuing statements in support of the film, bring potential harm to the Ukrainian people and their ability to express themselves on the global stage. Casting doubt on the commission of war crimes through cinematic art spreads the dangerous message that testimonies and evidence of violent criminal acts are not to be believed. It increases the possibility that soldiers, military officers, ministers, and politicians will not be held accountable for their crimes. It is especially dangerous when established, physical facts are characterized as untrue; this all but ensures the miscarriage of justice worldwide. Once this false doubt is planted in people’s minds through the use of propaganda, Ukrainians’ testimonies about war crimes, no matter what evidence supports them, are less likely to be believed. This severely limits the ability – or the *freedom* – of war victims and their allies to speak.

Point 2: We call on the ZFF to engage in a dialogue with Ukrainian civil society in Switzerland, rather than undermining their valid concerns by citing unsubstantiated threats.

The Zurich Film Festival’s recent decision to pull “Russians at War” from public screening without offering a clear explanation suggests that the ZFF wants to avoid a public discussion. Moreover, simply citing “safety reasons” leaves filmmakers, audiences, and the broader community in the dark about the actual threats or concerns that influenced this move. The Zurich City Police (“Stadtpolizei Zürich”) posted the following on X in response to the ZFF’s statement: “We are not aware of any specific threats.” (“Uns sind keine konkreten Bedrohungen bekannt.”)⁸.

By vaguely citing security threats in their September 26th statement, the ZFF implies that Ukrainians and their Swiss and international allies who have expressed concerns about this film are violent and dangerous. In particular, the Ukrainian refugee community in Switzerland should not be accused of threatening violence, even implicitly; many have fled horrific, violent conditions in their home country for the safety of Switzerland. If there are significant threats of

⁵www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/09/un-commission-inquiry-ukraine-finds-additional-evidence-common-patterns

⁶www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and-sergei-kuzhugetovich-shoigu-and-sergei-ivanovich-kobylash-and

⁷<https://kyivindependent.com/is-russians-at-war-propaganda-we-asked-7-people-in-film-who-saw-it/>

⁸https://x.com/StadtpolizeiZH/status/1839659660632100959?t=Rm6_3YEIGCvUIJYe-Jf2oQ&s=19

violence against ZFF staff, participants, and audience members, the ZFF must take care *not to attribute these threats to protesters in general* – to do so is dangerous and irresponsible.

The signatories also deeply regret that, to our knowledge, no attempts were made by the ZFF to engage with our community or any associated Ukrainian civil society groups in Zurich.

Above all, we strongly encourage the ZFF to issue a statement demonstrating tolerance and respect for the Ukrainian civil society groups and their allies who have protested against the inclusion of “Russians at War” in the festival competition. In Switzerland, the right to protest is part of our national identity. Conversely, the ZFF is endangering the safety of a vulnerable protester population through its unclear and misleading statements. Resolving this could not only build trust but also ensures that the festival remains a true platform for diverse and meaningful cinematic voices.

Respectfully,

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