

## PRESS KIT

made in copenhagen presents  
in co-production with Pink

# Mr. Nobody against Putin

a film by David Borenstein and Pavel Talankin



NOMINATED AS BEST DOCUMENTARY 2026

DENMARK'S OSCAR CANDIDATE FOR BEST INTERNATIONAL  
FEATURE 2026

WORLD PREMIERE & WINNER OF SPECIAL JURY AWARD  
WORLD CINEMA DOCUMENTARY AT SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL  
2025

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## **INDEX**

Page 2:	Film synopsis
Page 3:	Logline & Director's statement by David Borenstein
Page 4:	Director's statement by Pavel Talankin
Page 5:	Regarding security & Fact sheet
Page 8:	Short bios
Page 9:	About made in copenhagen & Pink
Page 9:	With support from

## **FILM SYNOPSIS**

Pasha Talankin is an unlikely hero—a beloved Russian primary school teacher, known as a mentor and prankster who offers students a safe haven in his office. After Russia invades Ukraine, Pasha's role in the school changes dramatically as he is reluctantly drawn into Putin's propaganda machine. Forced to promote state-sanctioned messages and horrified by the transformation of his school and community, he struggles with guilt and a sense of powerlessness, leading him to become an international whistleblower.

As the school's videographer, Pasha documents intimate and revealing footage of Putin's regime, capturing the rise of militarized children's groups, repressive laws, fervent nationalism, and the recruitment of graduating students to fight in the war. When he learns his own life may be at risk, Pasha is forced to plan a dangerous escape from Russia.

Directed by David Borenstein and Pasha Talankin, this uniquely collaborative film is as captivating and joyful as it is eye-opening and sobering. *Mr. Nobody Against Putin* showcases rare footage that reveals the profound impact of Putin's regime on the lives of everyday Russians, particularly its children.

## **LOGLINE:**

As Russia launches its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, primary schools across Russia are transformed into recruitment stages for the war. Facing the ethical dilemma of working in a system defined by propaganda and violence, a brave teacher films what's really happening in his own school.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

***By David Borenstein***

*"In March 2022, I entered into the most unique creative partnership I've ever experienced. A Russian colleague introduced me to Pavel "Pasha" Talankin, a teacher from the small town of Karabash, Russia. He wasn't the typical person you'd expect to be making an independent documentary. Yet he was bold and passionate, with countless things to say about Russia's current situation—especially Putin's militarization of the school system.*

*Within weeks of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Pasha and I established an encrypted line of communication and a secure way to transfer video files. Our creative roles developed naturally: Pasha filmed whatever resonated with him, sharing themes and ideas he cared about, while I edited the material into a story shaped by his vision and experience.*

*The collaboration was exhilarating. For more than two years, Pasha and I spoke weekly over encrypted phone calls. Through these conversations, we built a deep friendship, navigating countless setbacks, insecurities, and moments when it felt like all was lost.*

*We set out to create a film that captured the reality of life for ordinary people during this extraordinary moment in Russian history. We wanted to show how the war traumatizes communities, but more than that, we aimed to celebrate the joy and beauty Pasha cultivated at his school. By depicting this life in Karabash, we could convey the true devastation of Russia's all-encompassing militarization. Pasha as a whistleblower is showing us something really important. He's giving us an unprecedented inside look into Russia's full-scale militarization that has occurred since 2022.*

*There's more and more voices, including from the incoming US administration, for an "end to the war in Ukraine." But this film shows how naive this is. Putin is greatly expanding the military, creating a hitler youth style organization in all schools, and cultivating a nationwide curriculum centered around war and empire. If we watch this film and take what Russia is telling its own children seriously — and I think we have every reason to do so — then it is clear that Russia warfare on the European continent is only just beginning.*

*While Pasha had much to say about Russia, I became most captivated by him as a person. He is one of the bravest people I've ever met, yet also reckless, wounded, and something of an enigma. What drove him to take such extraordinary risks in filming? Why did he so fully embrace dancing on the edge of the abyss? And why would he be willing to leave his life behind to make this film with me?*

*As I got to know him better, I convinced Pasha that this film should center on his story and perspective. With my experience, I aimed to craft a narrative that reflects the psychological tolls of being an outsider in such a repressive regime. I also wanted to illuminate Pasha's personal transformation. When we first met, he was haunted by feelings of powerlessness and impotence. Over the years, this changed in ways I suspected would be the basis for a compelling main storyline for a film.*

*In the end, I believe we have made a timeless tale about what it means to be an outsider in the most suffocating of circumstances. How do we react when the walls are closing in on us from all sides? When everything you have worked for is on the edge of annihilation? Pasha's story provides a timeless answer to this question – and one that has been my great privilege to put on screen.”*

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

***By Pavel Talankin***

*“In my childhood, my grandmother told me a legend about a massive stone that blocked the road. It was so big that travelers had no choice but to go around it. Everyone hated it—it brought nothing but inconvenience. Then one day, a skilled man came along and threw the stone high into the sky. And that's how the moon appeared.*

*I'm not that kind of master. I can't remove the stones in our path, but I can point to them. This film is about one such stone—a monstrous one—from which blood flows and whose stench poisons everything around it. It's about propaganda, spreading through schools, cities, the entire country. It's about how people are handed pieces of this stone whether they want them or not, passing them along until everyone collapses under the weight, obedient and numb, accepting absurdity as truth.*

*The film is about Russia. About how its history has tangled itself so deeply into the lives of its people that it feels like they've already lived countless lives and that this one is just something to endure — a little more time spent doing things you hate. It's about love, too — love for your city, your people, your country. But it's also about death: the death of rights, freedoms, laws, the education system, and even hope. The death of humanity itself.*

*For me, this film is a way to show the world what's happening around me. To point to the problem. Maybe some day, it will help Russians to look back, face their mistakes, and prevent this from happening again. But the stone keeps sinking deeper, embedding itself in the minds and hearts of ordinary people.*

*I don't know exactly why I decided to make this film. One evening, after filming another propaganda lesson for the Ministry of Education, I asked myself: "Do I have the moral right to*

*delete this footage?" And I decided no. This dictatorship, with all its lies and absurdities, won't last forever. Some day, people will need to know how it all happened. Maybe we will have to work through the mistakes, maybe this footage will help people create a new film about "ordinary fascism."*

*By chance, David, a foreign director, found this topic compelling — the intertwining of war and propaganda, how death becomes part of life. Since he wasn't Russian, we could show the world what's happening now: how propaganda crushes schoolchildren, how it fuels war.*

*Working on the project was dangerous. One wrong move — a phone call, a hint of suspicion — and I could be facing 15–20 years in prison. To stay safe, I slowed down, kept quiet, and avoided overt criticism. Imagine this: a guy in Russia, working on a major project with foreigners, is caught for saying "Putin is a dickhead."*

*At a staff meeting, the teachers asked, "When will we actually teach? All we do is march and sing." The answer was simple: "This is the time we live in. March, sing, film it, post it—if we don't, we're all in trouble." Everyone was exhausted, but the orders kept coming: film it, post it. "Film it and post it". Well, I filmed it, and I posted it. Now, watch."*

## **REGARDING SECURITY**

One of the greatest challenges throughout the project has been ensuring the safety of everyone involved. We consulted a wide range of experts, including international correspondents, security agencies, and Russians in exile, to gain their perspectives on the potential risks to those participating in the film. It became clear that, while there are always risks as a citizen of Russia, there was an acceptable and secure way to make this film.

The primary political risk for individuals in Russia today is criticizing the military and the war in Ukraine. In our film, Pasha is the only person who crosses this red line. All other on-camera participants are, both practically and legally, considered law-abiding citizens in the eyes of the Russian state.

We also explored the possibility of reprisals in Russia against innocent bystanders or family members of dissidents like Pasha. There is no precedent for the Russian state targeting random participants or family members of even high-profile dissidents (e.g., Navalny's mother) with reprisals. Moreover, Pavel's mother is portrayed in the film as a strong supporter of the regime.

As for the team behind the camera, everyone except Pasha chose to remain anonymous. Pavel is now safely residing in Europe.

## **FACT SHEET**

Russian Educational System

- In the Russian Federation, the following levels of general education [are established](#): 1) Preschool education; 2) Primary general education (Grades 1-4); 3) Basic general education (Grades 5-9); 4) Secondary general education (Grades 10-11).
- Students [can have](#) complete and incomplete general education. Incomplete general education ends in 9th grade, complete – in 11th. Basic general education in school, according to Article 43 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, is mandatory for everyone.
- According to modern rules, first grade students are [admitted](#) if they are six and a half years old by September 1 of the admission year, meaning children who turned 6 by March 1 of the admission year. At the time of admission to the first grade, students are usually between 6 and 8 years old.
- The composition of a class [remains](#) constant throughout the school year and often throughout all the years of schooling, but there can be withdrawals and new students due to family relocations, transfers from other schools, and other reasons. The number of students in a single class ranges from a few to 30-40 people. According to regulations in Russia, the maximum class size is determined based on the area per student (> 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> per student for traditional classroom arrangements).
- In Autumn 2022 the first *Conversations about Important Things* [happened](#). The Russian government has defended Important Conversations, claiming that it promotes "national unity, patriotism and traditional values". However, many teachers and parents have resisted the initiative as an attempt by the Russian government to introduce political propaganda and militarism into the education system. In response, teachers and students (along with their parents) have faced reprisals for not participating in Important Conversations lessons, in the context of the ongoing crackdown on protests against the full-scale invasion.
- A fighter from the private military company Wagner [has attended](#) an Important Conversations lesson for third graders in a Krasnodar region school, the news is shared on the school's website; in it, he is called a "guest of honour".
- Since the start of the war in Ukraine, employees of Prosveshcheniye, Russia's leading educational publishing house, [have been asked](#) to remove mentions of Ukraine and Kyiv from Russian schoolbooks
- Almost 200,000 teachers [have resigned](#) from schools in Russia in 2023: the highest level for seven years.
- The Movement of the First is a youth movement in Russia [created](#) on 18 December 2022 at the initiative of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Its stated goal is to organize leisure activities for youth and form a worldview "based on traditional Russian spiritual and moral goals". The movement is modeled after the Soviet Union's Young Pioneers youth movement, and is for youths beginning at the age of six until they finish school.
- Russian Defence Ministry [backs](#) introduction of basic military training in schools
- Russian teacher [arrested](#) in terrorism justification case over Crimean Bridge blast social media post
- A schoolboy who [wrote](#) an anti-Putin leaflet has become Russia's youngest political prisoner
- Russian schools are [to offer](#) a course in "family studies" to teenage students from the new academic year starting in September

- Russian drone manufacturer Geoscan has partnered with Russian educational publishing house Prosveshcheniye to [publish](#) the first textbook on Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) — better known as drones — for school children, according to a press release issued by Geoscan on Tuesday. The textbook, which is aimed at school children in the eighth and ninth grades (aged 14–15), will be used as part of technology lessons in Russian high schools, which have been introduced starting this academic year, Geoscan said.
- Schools and kindergartens across Russia [have been holding](#) “patriotic flash mobs” to mark Vladimir Putin’s 72nd birthday
- At least 100 Russian kindergartens [introduce](#) propaganda lessons in single week
- [The final statment](#) of a teacher who is going to prison for a post about Vladimir Putin and the Crimean bridge explosion
- Russian school children [threatened](#) with expulsion for refusing to attend ‘Important Conversations’
- Designed to [instil values](#) such as sexual abstinence before marriage and a patriotic commitment to having as many children as possible afterwards, an optional new subject on the Russian school curriculum euphemistically named Family Studies appeared to coincide with the beginning of the academic year earlier this month.

### Military Service

- All men in Russia are required to do a year-long military service, or equivalent training during higher education, from the age of 18 until the age of 30.
- In July Russia’s lower house of parliament [voted to raise](#) the maximum age at which men can be conscripted to 30 from 27. The new legislation came into effect on Jan. 1, 2024.
- In Russia there are several ways one can end up on the frontlines:
  - **Contract Military Service:** Since the spring of 2023, Russia’s Armed Forces [have carried out](#) a mass campaign to promote contract service. Experts describe the drive as an attempt to address the military’s growing manpower shortage in Ukraine while also trying to avoid any public backlash that would likely arise from a new round of mobilization. In October, former president Dmitry Medvedev said 305,000 men had signed military contracts and 80,000 had enlisted as volunteer fighters. New Russian bill [allows](#) criminal suspects, defendants, and convicts to sign army contracts to avoid prison time
  - **Partial Mobilization:** Despite repeated assurances to the Russian public made by both the Defence Ministry and multiple Kremlin officials that the “special military operation” in Ukraine would not require a military draft, in a televised address on 21 September 2022, Vladimir Putin [announced](#) the “partial mobilisation” of approximately 300,000 reservists, prompting thousands of draft-age men to flee the country before they could be tracked down by enlistment offices.
  - **Private military company:** For instance, through Wagner group. Yevgeny Prigozhin said he founded Wagner in 2014. Although mercenary forces are technically illegal in Russia, Wagner [registered](#) as a “private military company” in 2022. Wagner troops were heavily involved in the battle for Bakhmut, in eastern Ukraine, which they captured for Russia in May 2023. In June 2023, some 5,000 Wagner fighters staged a mutiny. They occupied the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, and marched on

Moscow, with the stated aim of ousting Russia's army chief, Valery Gerasimov, and defense minister, Sergei Shoigu.

– **Conscription:** Despite [Putin's assurance](#) there have been a [growing number](#) of media reports of conscripts being sent into combat in Russia's southwestern Kursk region to tackle the Ukrainian army's ongoing incursion there, some of whom have been captured and are being held as prisoners of war by Ukraine. One of the biggest incidents involving conscripts during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine [was](#) the sinking of the missile cruiser Moskva in April 2022. According to independent Russian media, up to 500 personnel were serving on the flagship, two-thirds of whom may have been conscripts. At least 129 Russian conscripts are missing, [captured or killed](#) in Kursk region. Conscripts are [increasingly forced](#) to sign contracts with the Russian Military. Recently, there has been a case of a Russian conscript killed in Ukraine who reportedly [had contract signed for him](#) by a commanding officer.

- If you do not appear at military registration and enlistment office after receiving military conscription notice can result in administrative offenses or criminal liability: Criminal Liability, Article 328, applies to intentional evasion, such as avoiding medical exams or falsifying exemptions. Penalties include fines, compulsory labor, or imprisonment for up to two years, depending on the severity of the offense. If the whereabouts of conscripts, against whom a criminal case has been opened, are unknown, they will be put on a wanted list. The information will be sent to the relevant law enforcement divisions.
- Evading the draft has been relatively easy in Russia until now. All those who wanted to avoid military service needed to do was avoid receiving a paper draft notice. The new laws introduced in July 2024 [closed](#) that loophole as the draft notice will be considered served a week after it has been posted online on a government website. From November draft notices will be filed online and will be considered as delivered even if recipients do not have access to the internet or have not seen the notice. People who have had a draft notice issued online will be banned from crossing border.
- Russia [suffers](#) 75,000 military deaths in Ukraine war by the end of 2023.
- Wives and mothers of [mobilised](#) Russian soldiers protest outside Defence Ministry
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## SHORT BIOS

### David Borenstein, director & producer

David Borenstein is a filmmaker based in Copenhagen. His award-winning films include *Can't Feel Nothing* (CPH: DOX 2024), *Love Factory* (NYTimes 2021), and *Dream Empire* (IDFA 2016). In addition to his feature work, David has produced and directed television for countless international broadcasters, earning him the broadcast equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.

#### Filmography:

Can't Feel Nothing (CPH:DOX 2024)

Love Factory (NYTimes OpDoc 2022)

Race for the Vaccine (CNN Films 2021)

Decoding Covid-19 (PBS 2020)

Dream Empire (IDFA 2016)

Rent-A-Foreigner in China (NYTimes OpDoc 2015)

**Pavel “Pasha” Talankin, director**

Until recently, Pavel Talankin was a teacher-organizer at Karabash Primary School #1 in Karabash, Russia. As part of his job, he served as school videographer and instructed children in shooting and editing video. Mr. Nobody Against Putin is his first film. He now lives in Europe.

**Helle Faber, producer, Denmark**

Producer Helle Faber is behind a bunch of International acclaimed documentary films, among them; Theatre of Violence (2023), The Chocolate War (2022), Lost Warrior (2017), The Stranger (2017), Motley's Law (2015), Warriors from the North (2014), Putin's Kiss (2011), Enemies of Happiness (2011).

Faber's work has been awarded on Sundance FF, Idfa, Hot Docs, CPH:DOX, Cinema For Peace, DOCNYC and many other places.

**Radovan Šibrť & Alžběta Karásková, producers, Czech Republic**

Radovan and Alžběta are Czech producers who have produced or co-produced several award-winning films, including the Berlinale Panorama Dokumente opening film When the War Comes (2018, directed by Jan Gebert), the Berlinale Golden Bear-winning feature Touch Me Not (2018, directed by Adina Pintilie), and Blix Not Bombs (2023, directed by Greta Stocklassa). In addition, they have been behind the Czech versions of several successful TV formats such as Hell's Kitchen and MasterChef, as well as the local adaptation of Ramsay's Best Restaurant.

**ABOUT made in copenhagen**

The acclaimed Danish production company made in copenhagen works with a strong mix of experienced directors and new talents. The production company has won numerous awards in Denmark and internationally, amongst others the main awards at IDFA, Sundance FF, Hotdocs, Chicago IFF, DOC NYC and many others. made in copenhagen was founded in 2010 by producer Helle Faber.

**ABOUT PINK**

PINK is a Prague-based independent production company dedicated to creating and promoting innovative cinema and filmmakers with strong personal perspectives on contemporary reality. Founded in 2009, its films have been distributed worldwide and selected or awarded by major international film festivals and renowned cultural institutions, including Berlinale IFF, Sundance, Hot Docs IFF, BFI London FF, IDFA, CPH:DOX, DOK Leipzig, Visions du Réel, DOK.fest München, and many others.

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