



# CLOSE-UP

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## MANAGING THE RISK TOGETHER

By Mike Downey



EFA Chairman Mike Downey with Oleg Sentsov on stage at the European Film Awards in Berlin, December 7, 2019. (Picture: EFA/Christian Schulz)

When Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov stepped off the plane as a free man in Kyiv in September 2019, the director had been incarcerated for more than five years, in Moscow's notorious Lefortovo jail and Siberia's prison colony No 8 (aka Polar Bear), after having been (improperly) sentenced to 20 years behind bars.

His sudden release – as part of a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine – caused the entire international film industry and swathes of human rights groups working with artists at risk to breathe a huge collective sigh of relief. His appearance onstage to rapturous, cathartic applause at the 2019 European Film Awards brought him physically, for the first time, into the heart of the organisation that had campaigned relentlessly from the very first days of his arrest and imprisonment in Simferopol back in May 2014.

We kicked off the campaign in Cannes 2014 to draw attention to his wrongful arrest; to amplify the ongoing appeals to politicians, ambassadors, journalists across the world. A fund was established to support his family and cover legal costs. Soon after, there was a visible campaign of 'empty chairs' at film festivals around the world to mark Sentsov's absence. EFA took part in letter-writing campaigns,

the collaborations between human rights organisations, notably PEN, and more lobbying alongside every new court appearance. Finally, we sought to bring public consciousness to the bravery and nobility of his 145-day hunger strike.

To say we were 'learning on the job' would be something of an understatement. The European Film Academy is a members' organisation for professionals in the film industry, and we started this new area of work spontaneously in May 2014. We were amateurs in the human rights arena, trying to help a filmmaker who was not only at risk, but who had been already falsely accused, beaten and was on the way to being convicted by a legal system that ultimately demonstrated some of the worst excesses of the Stalinist show trials. This was not really our metier.

However, more than five years down the line, alongside Sentsov, the Academy also emerged, older, wiser, more versed in the ways and mores of how the international human rights sphere worked. We very clearly understand that should something like this happen in the future, we would need to be prepared, ready and able to react in a way that is professional, co-ordinated, expeditious, resourced, and which knows enough to help and not make a bad situation already worse.

We were not alone in this need for exchange of expertise: So when Bero Beyer, erstwhile IFFR honcho, and Orwa Nyrabia, the current IDFA boss (and former filmmaker at risk himself), came to Marion Döring and myself to explore ideas to establish a fledgling organisation to deal with cases of filmmakers who fall foul of regimes, and whose lives and the lives of whose families are put seriously at risk, we immediately agreed on joining forces. EFA, IDFA and IFFR have a long history of campaigning for filmmakers at risk. IDFA and IFFR also supported Sentsov and had recently put out calls for the release of Myanmar filmmaker Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, imprisoned by the Nay Pyi Taw regime.

It was the great writer and activist Anna Politkovskaya who said, "We survive under great difficulties. And sometimes we do not survive."

Filmmakers, writers and artists are especially high-risk candidates for censorship, intimidation, imprisonment, persecution and in extreme cases, death. Tragically, we have just learned of the death of Shady Habash, the filmmaker who had been imprisoned without trial in Egypt for more than two years. Habash's last letter from prison read: "Prison doesn't kill, loneliness does. I need your support not to die."

The International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk (ICFR) is a body that will advocate for film professionals who have been imprisoned, face prosecution or censorship for their work and views. Across the world, there are directors, producers, actresses and actors, screenwriters and other film professionals who are persecuted because of their work, for its content and what it addresses, conveys or triggers – and for their artistic expression. We need to address this. If their personal safety is at risk, we need to help them. We know from our many conversations with film associations, institutions, festivals and individual filmmakers that the Coalition can count on their support already. And we need your support, as well.

We don't know who the next "Oleg Sentsov" or "Jafar Panahi" will be – but when a repressive regime makes any filmmaker a target of politically motivated threats, we will be ready.

*Mike Downey, chairman of EFA.*

## INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR FILMMAKERS AT RISK – MISSION

The mission of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is to advocate for and to act in solidarity with filmmakers at risk. The Coalition will respond to cases of persecution or threats to the personal safety or liberty of these filmmakers as a result of their work and will defend their right to continue their work, by mobilizing the international film community. Activities will include:

- **Advocacy:** campaigning for filmmakers at risk by mobilizing the international film community or by seeking public support through ways of diplomacy.
- **Emergency funding:** providing small grants of maximum 1.500 Euro for immediate emergency response actions to filmmakers in critical situations.
- **Accessing the support system:** connecting filmmakers in peril to international support networks active in the fields of human rights, culture and legal assistance.
- **Monitoring and observatory:** On a mid-term perspective the Coalition shall also develop competences for serving as an observatory for the situation of filmmakers at risk.

The Coalition is a joint collaboration between three founding partners:

- **European Film Academy**
- **International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam**
- **International Film Festival Rotterdam**

The Coalition will closely collaborate with an international network of strategic partners:

- **International film networks**
- **Affiliated NGOs**
- **International human rights networks**
- **Ambassadors**
- **Film Festivals**

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