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.
The mission of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk (ICFR) is to 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.

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 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

Contact ICFR contact@icfr.international
IDFA’S ORWA NYRABIA: ‘WE CANNOT STAND ASIDE’

By Nick Cunningham

Back in 2002, he co-founded Proaction Films, the first independent Syrian film production and distribution company, which worked on features including DOLLS: A WOMAN FROM DAMASCUS (2007) by Diana El Jeiroudi. After his release in 2012, productions included RETURN TO HOMS by Talal Derki, which opened IDFA in 2013, and SILVERED WATER, SYRIA SELF-PORTRAIT (2014), directed by Ossama Mohammed and Wiam Simav Bedirxan.

Not surprisingly, the same dogged determination applies to Nyrabia’s work for the Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, which he formed with Bero Beyer (then director of IFFR, and who has since moved on to head up the Netherlands Film Fund) and the European Film Academy.

“What is new is the fact that the number of cases is growing beyond the capacity of our three organisations, and the many others around the world who care,” Nyrabia warns. “More and more filmmakers are being threatened, prosecuted, detained, exiled, and even killed around the world every year now. We cannot stand aside, and we cannot accommodate for the quality work needed to respond. A coalition, and a dedicated structure, became necessary.”

Both IDFA and IFFR have long been at the forefront of change in devising mechanisms to fund and support filmmakers from less developed industries; and in supporting filmmakers in times of personal danger.

“IDFA has always been part of the film community’s efforts to advocate for fellow filmmakers in such situations. This translated, and will always translate, into raising our voice, making use of the organisation’s visibility in Europe and around the world, in lobbying filmmakers and relevant organisations and festivals around a case, communicating with relevant authorities to raise the profile of a case,” Nyrabia says.

“However, it has always been an improvised effort, no matter how committed we were. Now, we would like to make sure there is a process, a mechanism with the right instruments to harness the power of the global film community for the benefit of a fellow film person who needs it.”

The three institutions are high enough profile to make a noise within their sectors or spheres of interest, and their respective heads are articulate advocates who will never shy away from espousing a true and necessary cause. But the Coalition will always need more voices to maintain momentum. Nyrabia expects other institutions, festivals and national bodies to join the cause.

“Many, if not most, of the international film bodies expressed their deep interest and commitment,” he adds. “When we started the Coalition with these three founding partners, we were only spearheading the process and trying to make sure it becomes quickly viable and sustainable.
“Measuring success in such an endeavour is very difficult,” he notes. “One can say, ‘Imagine how Orwa Nyrabia would still be in detention, or might even be dead by now, if not for the film community’s efforts over three weeks in 2012’. I believe a lot of the impact will be difficult to measure. However, despotic governments everywhere will start to think twice before harassing a filmmaker, once they realize that it is not going to be in the news [just] for a couple of hours and falling off after that. This is about all of us coming together to raise the profile of the filmmaker, any filmmaker, in this more and more brutal global reality. We can see how such behaviour is not [only] limited to countries like Syria, Iran or China.”

And even as the world suffers a global pandemic, Nyrabia underlines the need for even more vigilance. “With the COVID-19 crisis we can see how the trend is moving fast and how some governments even in Europe are equipping themselves with the laws and regulations to suppress critical voices,” he concludes. “Filmmakers are, generally, critical people.”

Nick Cunningham is publisher and editor of online documentary news platform Business Doc Europe.

“WITH THE COVID-19 CRISIS WE CAN SEE HOW THE TREND IS MOVING FAST AND HOW SOME GOVERNMENTS EVEN IN EUROPE ARE EQUIPPING THEMSELVES WITH THE LAWS AND REGULATIONS TO SUPPRESS CRITICAL VOICES.”

Orwa Nyrabia
IFFR’S VANJA KALUDJERCIC: “THE FESTIVAL GIVES US A GREAT PODIUM TO GENERATE AWARENESS ON A LARGE SCALE”

By Wendy Mitchell

The International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) is one of the founding partners of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk. Former festival head Bero Beyer, who recently joined the Netherlands Film Fund, has handed the baton of the festival and the Coalition partnership to new IFFR director Vanja Kaludjercic.

Kaludjercic takes the reins of IFFR in an exciting time, as the festival plans its 50th edition to kick off (health precautions permitting) in January 2021. Kaludjercic, born in Croatia, was previously head of IFFR Talks from 2016 to 2018. Since studying Comparative Literature and Cultural Sociology Studies at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, Kaludjercic has held acquisitions posts at both Co-production Office in Paris and at Slovenia-based distribution company Demiurg. She has worked with Les Arcs European Film Festival, Holland Film Meeting, Sarajevo Film Festival, Cinéma du réel and CPH:DOX, and before joining IFFR was director of acquisitions at MUBI.

Why is an international coalition the best way to help filmmakers at risk?

What we learned from the campaign to secure the release of Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov from his five-year detention is that there is a strong passion and dedication from film professionals worldwide to set in motion various activities to make a difference for filmmakers under threat. Through this, it also became apparent that what might be lacking to create an even greater impact is a permanent body within the film industry to streamline these various initiatives. Which means that every time a film professional who is imprisoned, or facing prosecution or censorship of their work or views, is completely reliant on the benevolent initiatives of individuals and organisations that are started from scratch again and again. While other cultural or societal bodies may exist to help their peers, the film industry seemed to lack the lobbying network that would channel dispersed yet genuine expressions of support.

Joining forces together with EFA and IDFA to create the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk enables us to find funding to support all filmmakers facing political persecution for their work on a year-round basis. Each of our organisations is able to address wide and qualitative outreach that will help generate awareness and secure additional partners.
Why is IFFR in particular so interested in this work?

At IFFR we have always felt strongly about representing the many and diverse voices that together make great cinema. We support filmmakers from all corners of the world, quite often from countries where they have little to no support whatsoever. This is why we started the Hubert Bals Fund (HBF) more than 30 years ago. Also to help filmmakers who are being censored, and in some cases whose lives are being threatened. With so much oppression happening in various countries lately, we feel it is critical for a coalition like this to exist. So we can take the next step in offering our help, for example through legal support.

What has IFFR done to support filmmakers at risk in the past?

Over the years we have done various things to bring the precarious situations of filmmakers to the attention of both the public and industry members alike. The festival gives us a great podium to generate awareness on a large scale. An example of this is the Mohammad Rasoulof and Jafar Panahi photo campaign back in 2011 to protest against their imprisonment. All festival visitors were invited to have their portrait taken with the names of Panahi and Rasoulof at the main festival location. Both filmmakers at that point were already very much part of the IFFR family and had visited Rotterdam as filmmakers, producers and jury members over the years, so their convictions came as a great shock. We feel it is our obligation to have an activist approach and bring situations like this to the attention of the widest possible audience. In addition, we organise a Freedom lecture each year to discuss the importance of democracy, freedom and the constitutional state. And we organise panels and talks to be a platform for filmmakers whose voices have difficulty being heard such as the Rojava Film Commune lecture during IFFR 2020. This is in addition to the HBF support to selected projects throughout the year.

What do you think is the responsibility of film festivals in general to protect filmmakers and artists?

Film festivals and curators, in general, are not only gatekeepers but also very much custodians of the diverse and unique voices that together comprise great cinema. We all have a great responsibility to protect this diversity and make sure that their voices are being heard, no matter what dire circumstances the makers and artists are facing. Each of us has outreach and impact potential that can really act as a catalyst for change.

Are you worried about these challenging times of the pandemic that civil liberties and artistic freedoms could be eroded further?

Well, it’s safe to assume at this point in time that the world and society will not be the same as before the pandemic. If the new situation will be more challenging and difficult in regards to artistic freedom is difficult to say. Undoubtedly, filmmakers from territories that are already struggling will encounter even more difficulties. At the same time, this whole situation also forces a change in perhaps a more positive way. With some festivals not being able to take place in their usual shape, this has led for example to a move towards the digital realm, which leads to a more democratic access of audiences. We are already seeing the first few results of festivals that mention their audience is now much broader than before because people unable to travel to festivals now can actually access this great breadth of work online. So, the silver lining might be that a much bigger audience awareness is created, which is a nice building block for the future.

How can the wider film industry gain more awareness and help filmmakers at risk?

By combining forces and through more knowledge exchange we can achieve a massive outreach. In the current situation, you already see this happening with lots of festivals sharing how they are dealing with the current disruptions. This can be in online sessions or hyper-local initiatives. This industry and all the people who are part of it are incredibly resourceful and full of determination. By coming together as a network, the possibilities of what we can achieve are endless.

We also have a duty towards the creators that make our festivals possible; we are in the powerful position to help filmmakers at risk, raise the public’s attention and ply authorities’ consideration towards individuals whose sole crime may have been to express themselves through the art of cinema.

UK-based Wendy Mitchell is editor of EFA Close-Up, contributing editor at Screen International and a consultant for the San Sebastian, Rotterdam and Zunch film festivals. Her website is filmwendy.com.
HELEN MIRREN: ‘A GREAT FILM UNIFIES US’

By Wendy Mitchell

Growing up in England with a Russian father, Helen Mirren was engaged at an early age with the big issues of the world. “Dinner was a time to throw an idea out there and discuss it. Sometimes it would be, ‘Do human beings have a soul?’ It was very heavy. It took me time to learn how to have a light conversation!” she recalls now with a laugh.

One such discussion at the family dinner table was “what is the notion of freedom of speech?” That is one reason she was keen to be closely involved as an ambassador of the new International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk.

Mirren says, “I have been involved with the European Film Academy for a long time now so when they came to me saying they want to organise a coalition for filmmakers who are being persecuted around the world, obviously I felt that was an incredibly important initiative that I wanted to be part of.”

She continues, “When high-profile directors are imprisoned you can find filmmakers coming together. I’ve signed petitions for a long time. But there hasn’t been a centralized organisation where this kind of support can be encouraged and the information can be dissipated.”

She has conflicting feelings about Russia today. “I love Russia in the sense of the history of Russia, the courage of Russia, the vastness of Russia. But I think what’s happening in Russia is really terrifying. Russia has always had a czar and it still has a czar; Stalin was a czar, now Putin is a czar. It has such a history of literature and art and poetry and with those things has to come freedom of speech.”

Just some of the charities she supports are the UN Refugee Agency, Refuge and Freedom from Torture. And filmmakers’ voices in particular are important to protect, she explains. “Film is visceral, it’s such an incredible way of learning about other cultures, other countries. Of course the one thing we learn from film is that we are humans together no matter how disparate our culture is. That’s the great thing about a great film, it unifies us. That’s what maybe terrifies the Iranians, or the Turkish [governments] who imprison artists’ voices. Film is going to be with us for generations and generations to come.”

Mirren has a long legacy with her own film career. She started acting in 1967 on stage and later in films such as THE LONG GOOD FRIDAY, THE MADNESS OF KING GEORGE, GOSFORD PARK, THE QUEEN, THE LAST STATION, RED and THE GOOD LIAR and in TV hits including PRIME SUSPECT and CATHERINE THE GREAT.
Mirren has seen Hollywood success of course, but says she is grounded by European films. "European films are my go-to movies. I find the richness and the variety that’s available in European film just so exciting. It was European film that first opened my eyes to what filmmaking could be, not pure entertainment, a real reflection of ourselves and the world around us. It’s been wonderful to be part of the European Film Academy to see these films that I wouldn’t otherwise see."

UK-based Wendy Mitchell is editor of EFA Close-Up, contributing editor at Screen International and a consultant for the San Sebastian, Rotterdam and Zurich film festivals. Her website is filmwendy.com

She has personally seen how film can divide people. She starred in SOME MOTHER’S SON (1996), as the mother of a hunger striker during the Troubles. "It was a very human story, but it was challenged politically. An interviewer asked me, "Why did you do a film supporting terrorism?" She hadn’t seen the film. It does not support terrorism. It humanises the story, we’re all human beings together.”

After collecting the honorary Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale in February, Mirren has been safe during the pandemic in the US, alongside her director husband Taylor Hackford. Her next film, Roger Michell’s THE DUKE, is now in post-production. She stars alongside Jim Broadbent, Fionn Whitehead, Matthew Goode and Anna Maxwell Martin in the true story of a taxi driver who stole a Goya from the National Gallery in London.

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“FILM IS VISCERAL, IT’S SUCH AN INCREDIBLE WAY OF LEARNING ABOUT OTHER CULTURES, OTHER COUNTRIES.”

Helen Mirren
From the moment the Kremlin’s “Little Green Men” appeared in Crimea, Oleg Sentsov was a marked man. Russian president Vladimir Putin’s invasion of the Ukrainian peninsula by stealth in May 2014 threw most international observers. Where did those troops in khaki-green camouflage combat fatigues come from? The groups of masked and armed soldiers carried no national – let alone divisional or unit – markings as they spread out across the largely Russophone territory that had been part of Ukrainian territory since Ukrainian-born Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev ceded it to the then Soviet republic in 1954.

But with combat already breaking out in Ukraine’s eastern provinces, covertly Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass and Luhansk were already clashing with Ukrainian nationalist and military units.

Sentsov, a 37-year-old filmmaker, was working on his second feature RHINO and gaining international attention and some traction in the film world after his debut feature GAMER had screened at festivals including Rotterdam and São Paulo. Critics were won over by the film’s realistic depiction of a young computer games player who wants to succeed in the virtual world – regardless of the demands of school, his mother and the “real” world.

But Sentsov, a single father of two, was also on the radar of other, sinister, forces. As a teenager growing up as the Soviet Union fell apart at the seams, and a young man during Ukraine’s bitter days of economic and social collapse in the ’90s, he had had run-ins with the police. More recently, with Ukraine ruled by a Russian-leaning president, Viktor Yanukovych, national tensions were pulling the country apart. Sentsov’s fervent nationalism did not go unnoticed in Crimea, where most people – like the filmmaker himself – were ethnically Russian. Unlike Sentsov, many welcomed Russian intervention, hoping it would bring economic and social benefits.

As soon as Putin had secured Russia’s strategically important naval base in Sevastopol and the peninsular territory was secured, Oleg and some of his nationalist friends in Simferopol were picked up by Russian secret service agents, illegally rendered to Russia and charged with plotting a terrorist act – plotting to blow up a statue of Lenin, power lines and transport facilities.

Absurd as the charges were, Sentsov’s conviction – by a military court in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don in the summer of 2015 – was a foregone conclusion.

International film industry solidarity was another foregone conclusion: the moment Sentsov’s plight became known, the European Film Academy and leading filmmakers, writers and even top actors such as Johnny Depp and Stellan Skarsgård, made ensuring his freedom a top priority.

Sentsov’s feature debut was not political, but he had an international profile and was deemed dangerous by the Kremlin, not knowing how its Crimean gamble would play out.

Within days of Sentsov’s arrest becoming public knowledge, acclaimed directors including then EFA Chairwoman Agnieszka Holland and President Wim Wenders were calling for his “immediate release.”

Dmitry Dinze, the Moscow-based lawyer who had defended Russian feminist punk agitprop band Pussy Riot after their notorious protest gig in Moscow’s Christ the Saviour Cathedral in 2012, was a seasoned and courageous upholder of human rights in a country where they had long been under attack.
The campaign never flagged, supporting Sentsov through legal appeals and his high-profile hunger strike, which only ended after 145 days in May 2018 following appeals from supporters fearing for his health.

Sentsov’s fate was raised with Putin by French president Emmanuel Macron at a time when Russia was keen to play the good guy as it hosted the FIFA World Cup, and the European Union made Sentsov an honoree of its prestigious human rights prize, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Dinze says all of these combined efforts contributed to Sentsov’s freedom – he was finally released in September 2019 as part of a dramatic Russian-Ukrainian prisoner swap.

“The campaign in support of Oleg was very useful, as it constantly kept up the intensity of public opinion,” Dinze says. “For example, in prison, Oleg was treated very cautiously, which helped to avoid unpleasant and clearly illegal actions on the part of law enforcement agencies, and also drew attention to his fate, life and family.”

His inclusion in the prisoner swap, when he was amongst a group of 35 detainees given their freedom, was no accident, Dinze adds. “In Sentsov’s case, the government and state structures pretended not to pay any attention to the campaign, but in the prisons and prison colonies where Oleg was held, law enforcement agencies knew that the international community was behind him, and everyone was watching what was happening.

“The campaign in support of Oleg was very useful, as it constantly kept up the intensity of public opinion,” Dinze says. “For example, in prison, Oleg was treated very cautiously, which helped to avoid unpleasant and clearly illegal actions on the part of law enforcement agencies, and also drew attention to his fate, life and family.”
Dinze welcomes the creation of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, which he says will be very relevant with the issues in contemporary Russia. “As long as United Russian [the country’s ruling party] and Putin are in power, people will be jailed for any social and political activity that criticizes the authorities. There will only be more politically motivated cases in Russia,” he says.

Nick Holdsworth is a Moscow-based foreign correspondent, writer and broadcaster. An expert on the Russian, Central Asian and Eastern European film industries, Nick has been a consultant, moderator and juror at film festivals that include Berlin, Cannes, Almaty, Sarajevo, Yakutsk and many others. He is author of Moscow: The Beautiful and the Damned and co-author of The Russian Patriot.

The huge and unrelenting international campaign certainly helped Sentsov’s case, Dinze says, although he feels it may have made the lawyer’s own work, which he has often conducted under the radar, harder. “Working on Oleg’s case means people associate me now as a lawyer who deals with terrorist cases and terrorists, which is not very welcome in Russia and my professional environment.”

Dinze has also represented artist and activist Pavel Pavlenksy, and is currently defending a group of young Russian anarchists who were initially charged with terrorism, but now face allegations of extremism, in a case that seems entirely built upon a conspiracy in the minds of prosecutors. He explains, “I try to be careful and constantly find myself under some kind of pressure…I have to constantly monitor my words and deeds.”

Sentsov was met by his children – and the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky – when his freedom flight landed in Kyiv. He is now living in Ukraine, where Dinze says he is “engaged in creativity and his children, and he also runs public campaigns to support Ukrainian citizens who are in prison in Russia.”

Sentsov’s latest film, dystopian story NUMBERS, premiered in the Berlinale’s Special programme in February, after his collaborators adapted Sentsov’s 2011 stage play while he was still in prison (he communicated with them via letters, email, and photos that Dinze could show him during visits). Now, he’s back to work on the script of RHINO, a crime drama, which could shoot later in 2020.

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“I TRY TO BE CAREFUL AND CONSTANTLY FIND MYSELF UNDER SOME KIND OF PRESSURE…I HAVE TO CONSTANTLY MONITOR MY WORDS AND DEEDS.”

Dmitry Dinze, Oleg Sentsov’s lawyer
You could easily think that Iranian cinema is in the midst of a prolonged golden age. Mohammad Rasoulof won the Golden Bear at the 2020 Berlinale for THERE IS NO EVIL, a few weeks after Massoud Bakhshi’s YALDA, A NIGHT FOR FORGIVENESS won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic at Sundance. Asghar Farhadi’s A SEPARATION (2012) and THE SALESMAN (2016) won a slew of prizes. Jafar Panahi won multiple awards in Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Locarno. Samira and Hana Makhmalbaf, daughters of the revered Mohsen Makhmalbaf, were acclaimed as young prodigies on the international festival circuit. The former won the Jury Prizes at Cannes for BLACKBOARDS in 2000 and for AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON in 2003; the latter made documentary JOY OF MADNESS (2003) when she was only 14. Bahman Ghobadi won the Camera d’Or at Cannes for his debut feature, A TIME FOR DRUNKEN HORSES (2000). Abbas Kiarostami, who died in 2016, is regarded as one of the towering figures of world cinema, and was a Palme d’Or winner.

What that list of international successes achieved by Iranian auteurs does not reveal, however, is the circumstances in which their films have often been made. Many of the country’s best known directors have faced censorship, travel bans, harassment and imprisonment. Several – the Makhmalbafs, Ghobadi and Amir Naderi among them – are now living and working in exile.

Currently, because of international sanctions against Iran, and the COVID-19 crisis, public support for the film sector is drying up. Not that that support would find its way to dissident filmmakers like Rasoulof and Panahi, anyway.

Rasoulof’s recent experiences provide a potent example of the predicament some directors face. He was prevented by the authorities from attending the Berlinale this year. Shortly after winning his Golden Bear, he was given the summons to serve the one-year jail sentence that the Iranian Revolutionary Court imposed on him (along with a two-year ban on travel). “I have not complied due to the outbreak of the coronavirus. The current situation is utterly vague,” the director tells EFAs Close-Up in early May.

The local media “renounced the artistic value of the Golden Bear and politicised the award.” Only on social media was his achievement acknowledged in Iran.
As Rasoulof explains, the circumstances in which he made THERE IS NO EVIL were also Kafkaesque in the extreme. “The situation is so unpredictable. The system I am confronted with is so irrational that you can never foresee what is going to happen to you next.”

The diversity of Iranian filmmaking voices

Iran-born filmmaker Marjane Satrapi is frustrated about the preconceptions that international audiences can still have about Iranian cinema.

“The Westerners, they love, ‘Oh, this is this little girl. She is so spiritual and she is holding an apple and she is on the back of a donkey,’” Satrapi caricatures a folkloric style of Iranian filmmaking tailored to appeal to festival programmers’ tastes.

“It’s not that because we’re Iranian, that means we only have three subjects to talk about and can’t talk about anything else.”

Satrapi expounds that Asghar Farhadi’s A SEPARATION “is a John Cassavetes film. Something is going wrong in a relationship between a couple. How do they deal with it? You forget they’re actually in Iran. That’s what I really love about his cinema.”

In her own career, Satrapi has deliberately made films like American serial killer drama THE VOICES and 2020’s Marie Curie biopic RADIOACTIVE that have nothing to do with her Iranian background.

Satrapi first left Iran when she was 14, going to Vienna to study, and then she left her country for good when she was 24. Her experiences and those of her family are chronicled in her graphic novel and film PERSEPOLIS.

Under Iranian law, women are treated as being worth half a man. Satrapi’s reaction to such overt sexism was to make sure she worked twice as hard.

“When you live in a country where you’re considered half of a man, then you have to try two times harder and become louder…you have to be bold, you cannot be scared,” she explains.

Westerners only know Iranian films from after the Islamic revolution in 1979. This was a period when cinema enjoyed an unlikely boom, ironically partly because of the censorship. “Anything that is forbidden becomes extremely appealing,” Satrapi remembers. “We had people coming like drug dealers with bags full of VHS films. We could choose our films, like choosing cocaine or ecstasy. We saw all the films coming out. That was our way of keeping up with what was going (on) in the world. With a government that wanted to close the country, that was our way of escape.”

The Iranians who left the country after 1979 were often highly educated. They were not poor economic migrants. “Obviously, when you have the education, it is easier to reach things like art and cinema,” Satrapi explains why so many among the diaspora have become successful artists and filmmakers.

Alongside so many powerful diaspora voices also including Babak Anvari, Al Abbasi and Anahita Ghazvinizadeh, there are the second and third generations of Iranian immigrants like Maryam Keshavarz, Ramin Bahrani, Shirin Neshat and Ana Lily Amirpour who have made exceptional movies everywhere from Scandinavia and the UK to the US.
Working in or out of the system

As Tehran-based producer and sales agent Mohammad Atebbai, founder of Iranian Independents, points out, several different kinds of filmmakers are active in Iran.

There are the so-called “circle of insiders” who make propaganda and neutral films, always staying on the right side of the authorities in order to secure state funding. They don’t get into trouble with the authorities and “grow fat” on the economic favours bestowed on them by both government and non-government sources. When public financing is available, they are first in the queue.

Then there are the mainstream commercial directors who make populist movies, generally comedies, aimed at local audiences.

Leading a much more precarious existence, are the independent filmmakers who try to make films through the official channels. Often from the younger generation, they face daunting challenges in securing permits and approval for their scripts. The best of them, though, have achieved significant success at home and abroad. They include Farhadi, Pfahshin Bani-Etemad, Saeed Roustaie, Shahram Mokri, Nina Javidi, Behnam Behzadi, Ida Panahandeh and Reza Dormishian. These filmmakers tend to look for financing from the private sector.

Also continuing to work, often in the face of enormous obstacles, are the underground filmmakers like Panahi and Rasoulof. On one level, these directors have an advantage over their colleagues. Operating outside the official system means they do not always need permits. As Rasoulof explains, independents have benefitted hugely from the move from celluloid to digital shooting.

The government has a monopoly over 35mm production and directors formerly struggled to find the cameras, the film stock or the labs to make their films without “coming under the absolute control and influence of this censorship apparatus,” Rasoulof says. Now, though, they can often shoot on lightweight digital cameras and edit their movies on computers at home.

“Yet these filmmakers will not really have the chance to connect directly and widely with an Iranian audience,” Rasoulof acknowledges.

Life after imprisonment

In 2015, Iranian director Keywan Karimi’s documentary WRITING ON THE CITY, looking at graffiti in Tehran, landed him a prison term for “insulting the holy sanctities.” His case became a cause celebre, with organisations like PEN and Amnesty International campaigning for his release (which came in 2017).

Speaking from Paris, the filmmaker is philosophical about his experiences behind bars. “I have a different understanding about freedom of speech, about censorship, about everything,” he says.

Karimi had faced problems with his earlier films. From 2013 onward, he had been forbidden to travel, his passport had been taken away and he had been under house arrest.

“I know Iran. I grew up in this country. I grew up in this system,” he says. Karimi realised his documentary’s references to the political protests of the green movement might anger the authorities but did not expect a six-year sentence. Five years were eventually suspended. He was sent to Evin Prison in late 2016 and was released the following year.

One of the director’s toughest challenges was coping with the lack of support after his release.

“When you are in prison, you are a case of human rights. Everybody pays attention, everybody calls you and everybody is writing about you,” he notes. “When you come out of prison, that’s the time you need attention.”

The international interest in his case helped secure his release but, in 2017, once he was out of jail, that interest quickly dwindled. Invitations to festivals dried up.

Karimi came to Paris in 2018 for a two-year residency and is re-building his career, taking bar jobs when he needs extra money. He has an official visa and will eventually return to Tehran but is currently working on a new project, DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT OMID?, which is part of the prestigious La Fabrique Cinéma 2020 programme.

Showing resilience

Most Iranian directors – with the exception of Farhadi, Panahi, Rasoulof and one or two others – struggle to sell their films internationally. And if they fall foul of local censors, they have limited chances of reaching Iranian audiences.

As the coronavirus continues to rage in spring 2020, the situation for the sector looks bleak. “There is no support by the government, all the cinemas are closed and all the projects are cancelled. The future seems very frightening,” Atebbai warns.

However, Iranian filmmakers show extraordinary resilience. They persevere, whatever harassment or censorship they have faced. Rasoulof is the perfect example of this. At the end of one project, he always asks himself how he will be able to make another.

“To be honest, I have found a solution in my mind for the next film. This mental idea comforts me. I am optimistic and hopeful for the future,” the defiant Golden Bear winner declares.


“When you are in prison, you are a case of human rights. Everybody pays attention, everybody calls you and everybody is writing about you. When you come out of prison, that’s the time you need attention.”

Keywan Karimi
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: FILMMAKERS ARE AN IMPORTANT PILLAR TO AN OPEN SOCIETY

By Kaleem Aftab

Amnesty International is a non-governmental organisation focused on fighting human rights abuses, bringing torturers to justice, changing oppressive laws and freeing people jailed just for voicing their opinion. Founded in 1961 with its headquarters in the United Kingdom, the global movement has sections in more than 60 countries and more than seven million members.

Markus N. Beeko is the Secretary General of the German Amnesty Section. The German human rights activist has been working for Amnesty International in managerial functions in Germany and internationally since 2004. He has regularly been a member of the jury for the Amnesty International Film Award at the Berlinale. The award, presented since 2005, went this year to David France’s WELCOME TO CHECHNYA.

Why is it essential to help filmmakers around the world?

I want to acknowledge and pay respect to filmmakers in particular and artists in general. Amnesty, as a human rights organisation and as a movement, is very much aware of the value and the progress filmmakers who are speaking truth to power bring to societies. They take risks when highlighting human rights issues to the public. Filmmakers act to get stories about human beings and human rights across in a way we wouldn’t be able to do with a report. Filmmakers tell stories about people we can’t imagine, or wouldn’t ordinarily identify with, and make us realise that while we are all different, we are all human beings. That bridges a lot of prejudice and is an important pillar to an open society.

Filmmakers, like journalists, and other artists, dare to say or show things which those in power might not like raised. They look behind the curtain. They know what it means to exercise that freedom of expression – article 19 [of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights]. It’s why often in societies when human rights are challenged, artists are targeted first.

How do you go about helping filmmakers?

Amnesty was founded around supporting prisoners of conscience; people jailed because they speak up and defend human rights, exercising their rights peacefully. Be it a musician, filmmaker, journalist or trade unionist – we generally don’t separate – when someone is prosecuted for defending human rights and expressing themselves, we step up. Amnesty focuses a lens on artists whose rights are being violated, who are detained or tortured, presenting what is happening to them. We get active on their behalf when we get knowledge of a case.

What action can you take?

We have urgent actions that we raise if somebody is under immediate threat to be executed or tortured or has forcefully disappeared. An urgent action means people across the globe who are with Amnesty or follow Amnesty get a call to action. In most cases, they will get active on behalf of the person in danger, raising the issue with the authorities who are responsible for the human rights violation.

Then, at the same time, we as an organisation can use our channels to protest. Right now, I’m in Berlin, when an Iranian filmmaker in Tehran is being prosecuted or is at risk, I get in touch with the Iranian Embassy to raise this, and I would also get in touch with the German government. If the German government has a delegation meeting with the Iranian government or they are doing a state visit, we would inform them about people who are at risk so they can take this up with the Iranian government.

So, these are different ways of raising awareness. One method is information and public awareness, and another is behind-the-scenes – silent diplomacy. We can also help by making sure detainees get legal support and by supporting the family because if somebody is detained, it is probably the person making the financial income.

How did Amnesty get involved in the case of Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov?

For people detained for a more extended period, we also encourage our supporters to reach out to the person who is in prison or to their family. We did this for Oleg Sentsov, the Ukrainian filmmaker, who was detained in 2014 and was released in September 2019. Upon release, he wrote us a letter, which we shared with people active on his behalf writing to the authorities, and to the many people who wrote to him. He left prison carrying a suitcase full of letters. Sentsov thanked people in his message and said it was so crucial for him to know that people are aware of what was going on. They were giving him faith and hope.
How do you work with film organisations?

We also communicate with groups like the European Film Academy or the German Film Academy, and this also helps to exchange information with colleagues who would know when a filmmaker is in trouble. Across the globe, we support the Human Rights Film Festival (in Hong Kong), and at the Berlinale we also present the Amnesty International Film Award. So, we try to interact with filmmakers; we do screenings of films that raise human rights issues and also, from time to time, we create educational material around films for work in schools. We also try to use screenings to create information events. For instance, at the Berlinale, we, together with the festival, have often used the opportunity to stage protests or create petitions. We did this for Oleg Sentsov and some Iranian filmmakers. It’s good to reach out to the filmmaking community, to those viewing films and a larger group of society. Together we are stronger.

Why do you think forming the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is a good idea? How will Amnesty work with the Coalition?

We see across the globe that governments oppressing fundamental rights and freedom of expression are more and more targeting anybody who dares to speak up or raise their voice in a way those in power dislike. And filmmakers, like other artists or journalists are therefore increasingly at risk. That’s why this Coalition is so important. Amnesty is looking forward to raising our joint voices for filmmakers and standing in solidarity with them and their families.

Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.

When can Amnesty become active in a case?

Amnesty only gets active if we are in touch with the family or relatives or the person or their lawyers to make sure that anything we do is with consent and that the person concerned believes it to be for their good.

Before we get active and we call a government, or we ask people to get active, we need number one to make sure that we have the facts right. One thing is to get the information from lawyers of the people, and we have sources where we could double-check.

It is different depending on the circumstances. People get in touch with us because they receive death threats. Sometimes, someone might be taken into custody for a day or two and questioned, or part of their family is interviewed and then released. If there are filmmakers and their movies are being censored, we generally publish a report about censorship and freedom of expression in the country. Still, we wouldn’t be able to get actively involved with single films. In Iran or China, for instance, filmmakers are not arrested, but the authorities try to build pressure by questioning them or trying to prevent them from working and making films. They keep their passports or make it difficult for foreign financing to help with their projects. They can be stigmatised. This is also enough for us to get involved if they get in touch with us.

How do people get in touch?

There are many ways how people can get in touch with us at our regional offices. Of course, in countries like China or Iran or North Korea, where we cannot have an office, our researchers are in touch with people in the civil society there, with lawyers, with journalists, with other organisations which are on the ground. And people can call them anytime.
FERA: DIRECTORS MAKING NOISE IN BRUSSELS AND BEYOND

By Melanie Goodfellow

The Federation of European Film Directors (FERA) was launched in 1980 to represent the creative and economic interests of its filmmakers at a national and European level and today brings together 47 national associations in 35 countries and some 20,000 individual members.

Its founders hadn’t envisaged that the group’s activities would extend some 35 years later to protecting the personal and creative freedom of directors in Europe too.

FERA got involved in this work when it joined the five-year, European Film Academy-led campaign demanding justice and freedom for Ukrainian director Oleg Sentsov after he was arrested by Russian authorities in 2014 in his home in Crimea, following the annexation of the disputed territory by Russia that year (more on the Sentsov case on page 9).

“It was a learning-by-doing kind of process in which we were all trying to figure out the right approach and level of intervention and it was in the process of doing this that we started to understand what FERA could do as a network,” says Slovenian director Klemen Dvornik, who is chair of the group’s executive committee. “It was very interesting because we had never done this type of work before.”

In Brussels, the team at the FERA’s head office started tapping into their network to raise awareness about Sentsov’s plight at a European Parliament level.

“Our one level, we tried to make some noise here in Brussels with the institutions, European Parliament and representatives of each member state. We sent letters to everybody, asking them to contact their prime ministers, presidents, or whoever was in charge, about the case,” explains FERA’s Brussels-based CEO Pauline Durand-Vialle.

“We also worked closely with the European Parliament, getting it to pass motions raising awareness and calling on EU member states to contact the Russian authorities.”

FERA also lobbied for Sentsov to be honoured with the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, named after Soviet physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov, and aimed at individuals and organisations defending human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The director was feted with the prize in his absence in 2018 and finally picked up the award in person in late 2019, following his release in September 2019.

Beyond Brussels, FERA also called its member organisations to action, asking them to contact their local authorities about the case too.

“We approached it through the top European institutions and then through the networks of our member bodies at a national level,” says Durand-Vialle.

On the basis of its experiences on the Sentsov case, FERA is now an enthusiastic partner on the new International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, having officially joined the initiative just before the Berlinale in February.

“We’d expect to play pretty much the same role as for Oleg’s case but it would be great to have a system in place under which assigned tasks are centralised through one co-ordination point,” says Durand-Vialle.

“Although everything ended up going well, talking about it among the various parties involved after Oleg was released we all realised it would be good to have a plan of action in place for the future.”

Particular areas where FERA thinks more co-ordination will help are in the pooling of intelligence, when a potential case of a filmmaker at risk comes to light, and decision-making for deciding next steps, when campaigning on behalf of a director.

“When we get news of a new case, the first thing we have to do is figure out if the information we’re getting is accurate or not, before we even start asking ourselves whether we should intervene or not. This can be very tricky because often you’re getting this information from people who know people who know people,” says Durand-Vialle.

“And then it can be tricky knowing when and how to proceed and exert pressure. There are times when it makes sense to make noise and other times when you need to wait for the diplomatic channels do what they have to do.”

Dvornik adds that it makes sense that film festivals, the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) have played a leading role in getting the coalition off the ground, alongside the EFA.

“Often, the first place you hear about these artistic freedom cases in our sector is at the festivals. When a filmmaker is in trouble, they will reach out to the people closest to them, but if they’re in trouble locally, their producers are often in trouble, too, so they have to turn to the international community instead. Festivals with their international networks are often the first port of call,” he says.

Looking to the future, Dvornik fears that cases like that of Sentsov could become more common within Europe.

“We’re seeing the rise of cultural tensions here and there and we fear we could start seeing similar cases in Europe. Maybe they won’t be as brutal as the awful cases of Oleg Sentsov or Mohammad Rasoulof, which come up every few years outside of Europe, but it’s something we’re concerned about nonetheless. Initiatives like the coalition could become more and more handy in the years to come.”

Melanie Goodfellow is Screen International’s senior correspondent for Europe and the Middle East. She has covered the film and TV industry in Europe and the Middle East for more than twenty years, out of Rome, Brussels, Tokyo, Jerusalem and Paris and is currently based in London.
The scope of the NGO Front Line Defenders is an extensive one. Founded in 2001, with headquarters in Dublin but a global reach, the organisation has one aim: to support people who engage with human rights in one way or another – Front Line Defenders refers to them using the umbrella term “Human Rights Defenders” – when they are facing risks because of that engagement. But in practice, the nature of the human rights engagement, the risks entailed and the support offered by Front Line Defenders can vary widely.

Deputy director Andrea Rocca explains, “We use the term ‘Human Rights Defenders’ in the broadest possible sense. It can be someone working in a human rights NGO, but can also be journalist writing about human rights issues, it could be lawyers taking on human rights cases, it could be people who are in filmmaking.” Over the course of each year, the majority of people that are assisted would be human rights lawyers or would work with NGOs; a much smaller percentage would be connected to the arts.

Rocca gives two recent examples of film-related cases: Lena Hendry, the Malaysia-based former programme co-ordinator for Pusat KOMAS, a human rights organisation, was targeted for screening a documentary on the Sri Lankan civil war; and David Sheen, a journalist and filmmaker based in Israel, whose work on racial discrimination has led to a civil suit filed against him.

The risks facing Human Rights Defenders include criminal charges and imprisonment. “There are also physical threats: death threats, threats of physical harm or threats targeted at family members. There is a whole range of risks within the digital sphere – risks of monitoring or surveillance. But also, broader risks in terms of stigmatization, smear campaigns and defamation, which may seem less grave, but very often are only the first step before more serious risks. And unfortunately some are killed as well.”

Rocca adds that the organisation also tries to offer emotional support. “For people who work for a very long time under that type of pressure, that obviously has an impact on their emotional well-being.”

Support offered by Front Line Defenders can be divided into two approaches: one is reactive to an incident or situation, the other is preventative and aims to coach Human Rights Defenders in order to better manage risks and security, both in the physical sphere and in the digital one.

Rocca elaborates, “We can offer practical support through funding. We have a grant programme which, for example, can pay for a lawyer if someone has been arrested or charged. Also medical care, if a person can’t otherwise access it. It can pay for security measures for the office or an NGO or the home of an activist. And also, through this programme, where there are very immediate and serious risks, we can support people who are basically going into hiding or relocating.

“Another element is advocacy work, trying to do public campaigns and mobilising people who can influence a particular case. For us, that means sometimes working with European embassies in the country concerned, working with the UN and other international human rights organisations and working directly with the authorities in the country concerned.”

In both of the film-related cases that Rocca cites, the approach was tailored to react to a legal challenge. In the case of Hendry, “There was a risk of a prison sentence of up to three years and a fine. This went on for two years, which obviously means that your other work is heavily affected. You have to devote your resources to fighting a criminal charge. We supported her through public advocacy. The final outcome, after an appeal, was a fine, but it was smaller than feared and there was no detention, which was a positive outcome.” Sheen’s case, meanwhile, is still ongoing.

Rocca sees much potential in the newly formed International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, “Increasingly, in many societies, dissent is crushed, whether it is expressed through the arts by filmmakers, musicians or writers; or through political mobilisation by grassroots protest movements; or through documentation of violations by human rights workers. It is imperative that we support and protect those people. Unfortunately the scale of the challenge is huge, and any new initiative like the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is going to strengthen the existing collective system for protection and solidarity.”

He adds, “I think there could be different areas of collaboration between Front Line Defenders and the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, from reactive work in in relation to specific cases of individuals at risk to exchanging expertise and supporting each other’s work.”

Front Line Defenders, which is funded in part by governments and in part by private philanthropic foundations, can be approached directly by Human Rights Defenders in need of assistance. Alternatively, cases can be referrals and recommendations from a network of other organisations.

Like many other organisations, Front Line Defenders is on high alert due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “Obviously there are concerns about the human rights implications of the restrictions which have been introduced in many countries. The biggest worry for us is that in some countries, the pandemic has offered opportunities for governments which are already undemocratic to have more powers by passing emergency legislation.”

Rocca adds that they have already encountered instances of targeted actions against human rights activists, and of journalists penalised because of their reporting of the crisis. In Colombia, the collapse of state protection mechanisms has resulted in the deaths of community leaders. Now, more than ever, organisations like Front Line Defenders are providing essential support even though, as Rocca admits, “Maintaining our organisation remotely is a logistical challenge.”

“My priority is to provide support whenever and wherever possible. We now have a team of seven people working full-time on the International Coalition, but we need to have a larger team of people who can take on as many cases as possible.”

Wendy Ide is a film critic and feature writer who works for The Observer, Screen International and Ekko, among others. She has also served as a programme advisor for several film festivals.

“I THINK THERE COULD BE DIFFERENT AREAS OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN FRONT LINE DEFENDERS AND THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION FOR FILMMAKERS AT RISK.”

Andrea Rocca
FREEMUSE: NATIONALISM IS BREEDING INTOLERANCE FOR ARTISTS’ VOICES

By Wendy Mitchell

When we think of oppressive regimes that suppress artists’ voices, we tend to think of them as remote outposts, not in the heart of Europe.

But the 2020 State of Artistic Freedom report from Freemuse found that the global region that puts artists in prison the most is Europe. Spain had 14 artists in prison in 2019, mostly rappers jailed for terrorism-associated charges or charged with insulting the Spanish royal family. Turkey and Russia are other dark spots in Europe in terms of artists’ rights.

“We have to respond to the worsening situation in Europe,” says Dr. Srirak Plipat, Executive Director of Freemuse. “It’s worrying that we are not swinging back to the right direction [with censorship]. We’re going further in the wrong direction.”

He explains, “A few years back, we started to see that artistic freedom has hit a new low. The traditional authoritarian regimes haven’t shown improvement, and then Trump came into America and sent a message of nationalism, and silenced people. In Europe, more conservative nationalist politicians have gained seats in 14 countries. This nationalism politics has led to intolerance growing.”

Roots in protecting musicians

This annual report is only one activity for Freemuse, a Copenhagen-headquartered independent international organisation advocating for and defending freedom of artistic expression. Freemuse tries to work with individual cases and also with “systemic work” including addressing national censorship boards in many countries; it wants to look at “root causes not just symptoms.”

Freemuse now advocates for all kinds of artists, having grown out of an initial idea in 1998 to protect musicians from censorship, and expanded to other art forms in 2011. Also in 2011, Freemuse created its Advocacy and Campaign Guide to suggest practical actions that organisations and individuals can take to support artists at risk (https://freemuse.org/advocacy/advocacy-campaign-guide/).

Freemuse works to protect the right to artistic expression, as guaranteed by international human rights conventions, is respected around the globe. Freemuse also ensures that violations are monitored and violators are held accountable.

Some of Freemuse’s work is public – some examples include the Let Women Sing initiative and supporting campaigns to free Pussy Riot or Oleg Sentsov – but some endeavours happen without fanfare. “We go public when we think it can be effective,” Plipat explains. “There are cases when you do advocacy behind the scenes.”

“Many governments want to save face publicly,” he adds. For instance, in Iran, Freemuse advocated for two musician brothers, Mehdi and Hossein Rajabian, to be released from prison in 2017. The government freed the brothers but “said they had never been in prison, saying they were ‘in hospital’. We can live with that as long as they are out.”

Plipat worries things could get worse for artists’ rights because of governmental power grab during 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic. “I think the initial indication has shown that after the pandemic, the world will go back even stronger on nationalism. Governments are telling companies and citizens what to do – and this is beyond the protection of public health in some places, Hungary for example… That will eventually come down to artists, who are told when they can or cannot express certain feelings.”

Censorship on social media is another worrying trend, and Freemuse is “asking social media companies to be more transparent. We want to know how many artworks and films are being taken down, and what content is targeted and why.” In just one example from 2019, Myanmar sentenced film director and film festival organiser Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi to one year in prison because of Facebook posts critical of the military and the 2008 Constitution.

Freemuse has met with the partners of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk and is currently “discussing how best to collaborate… it’s great to have the Coalition off the ground,” Plipat says. He says the film world can learn from how the music industry has organised itself. “Musicians have had a longer tradition to organise themselves fighting for the rights of musicians, like with the International Music Council [set up in 1949].”

Freemuse of course works with many partners already, such as the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, Icorn, freeDimensional, PEN International, Artists at Risk Connection, Index on Censorship, Article 19, Arterial Network and Freedom Now, plus many local research and advocacy partners around the globe.

Plipat, in addition to being a former director at Amnesty International, is a former documentary film producer and writer. Film is a unique art form that needs protecting in unique ways, he notes. “Filmmaking is a longer process when you compare it to other forms of art. When you tell a story on film, you tell it exactly how you want the audience to hear it. That’s what makes film so powerful.

He continues, “You don’t just listen for a few minutes, film allows people to think and have that change process of transformation, that’s what makes film very special and a very powerful tool. That’s why filmmakers can get in trouble. When filmmakers use films to ask questions about society, LGBTI rights for instance, in some places, society is not ready to have that debate. It shows how powerful films can be speaking to their audience. Films can change how people view the world.”

UK-based Wendy Mitchell is editor of EFA Close-Up, contributing editor at Screen International and a consultant for the San Sebastian, Rotterdam and Zurich film festivals. Her website is filmwendy.com
FREEMUSE’S STATE OF ARTISTIC FREEDOM 2020 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Across all art forms
- 57 artists persecuted in 20 countries
- 44 artists threatened/harassed in 22 countries
- 28 artworks and venues destroyed/damaged in 15 countries
- 22 artists received travel bans in 11 countries
- 10 artists abducted, 9 in China and 1 in Zimbabwe
- 6 artists and audience members attacked in 4 countries
- 4 artists sanctioned/fined in 2 countries
- 352 acts of censorship in 73 countries
- 71 artists who were imprisoned in 2019 in 16 countries
- 85 artists detained in 27 countries

Film specific states
- 107 documented cases of film censorship in 31 countries
- 105 registered acts of artistic freedom violations against filmmakers and their works
- 62% of film cases where violators were government authorities

Censorship of filmmakers and films in regions
- Asia & Pacific: 33% (top 3 countries: China, India, Malaysia)
- Europe: 23%
- Middle East & North Africa: 23%
- North & South America: 16%

Main rationales for violations in film
- politics: 38%
- indecency: 13%
- religion: 12%
- LGBTI: 11%
- conflict: 9%

How filmmakers and their works were violated:
- censored: 73
- persecuted: 10
- imprisoned: 8
- threatened/harassed: 7
- prosecuted: 4
- detained: 2

LGBTQI+ CENSORSHIP PARTICULARLY IMPACTED FILM IN 2019

**ROCKETMAN**, the biopic of musician and gay icon Elton John, was censored or banned in several countries in 2019. In June 2019, the film was banned outright in Samoa and Egypt. The film was released in Russia and Malaysia in 2019, but several of its scenes depicting kissing and sex between men were deleted.

ICORN: SHELTER AND SANCTUARY IN SAFE CITIES AROUND THE WORLD

By Nick Cunningham

The number of filmmakers who have received shelter and support from The International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) may be small (in 2019 they numbered just six out of a total of 138 applicants), but their impact is significant, says the institution’s Protection Manager Marianne Wulfsberg Hovdan.

She cites such examples as Ali Al-Ibrahim (Syria, director of ONE DAY IN ALEPPO), Andrei Nekrasov (Russia, REBELLION: THE LITVINENKO CASE) and producer/filmmaker/freedom fighter Prudence Uniri (Zimbabwe) who were offered both sanctuary and the opportunity to work without restraints in the host cities of Jönköping, Sweden, and Haugesund and Lillehammer, Norway, respectively.

“But I think there is probably a need for us to get better known in the film world,” Wulfsberg Hovdan concedes.

ICORN is a network of more than 70 cities and regions that offers shelter to writers, artists and filmmakers at risk, in the form of two-year residencies. These are creatives who are particularly vulnerable to censorship, harassment, imprisonment and even vulnerable to death, simply because of their chosen vocation and/or their decision to speak out when freedom of speech is threatened.

The majority of the ICORN residencies are in Europe (particularly strong in the Nordics), with a smattering across the US and Latin America. It is a city-led organisation, which means that funding for the residencies is sourced locally, whether from local government support or through private donations or even crowdfunding. Norwegian cities can apply to join the network through a partnership with the Norwegian PEN organisation, Wulfsberg Hovdan points out.

Every member city, irrespective of size, be it Paris or Piteå, has an equal vote on the ICORN board, which meets for a general assembly every two years. The organisation is run out of Stavanger in Norway with a permanent staff of six. All applications for residencies are submitted to that head office.

When the residency is agreed, the local co-ordinator will help the guest find their feet and solidify their professional base. “They help the resident to build a network, find the people in the city that they need to get to know in order to best continue their work,” says Wulfsberg Hovdan. “So for filmmakers that would mean finding a studio, finding colleagues, or if they need translation [services], getting publicity, hooking them up with media, all kinds of things like that.”

So, are the residents safe in exile, and how does ICORN seek to guarantee this? “Of course it depends on the person,” says Wulfsberg Hovdan. “The majority are safe once they are taken away from where the immediate threats are. But it depends also on [whether] it is the regime that is the problem or smaller groups or individuals that are threatening. We do an assessment together with the local police of the threats and needs for safety and the procedures to put in place even before arrival, if it is a really serious case.”

“And if there is a person who is not comfortable being public or using their real name, we will of course make sure that it is possible for them to remain anonymous. We don’t expect a resident to do events if the need is for them to be safe and in secret for two years, that’s totally fine.”

Nor is there any requirement that the residents publish from their safe houses. “We of course hope that that is a goal, but we don’t have any [stipulations] that they have to produce, because we see that many of them come from years of being persecuted and threatened, and sometimes survival is what they have to do first.”

“But what we do see is that most of them want to work,” Wulfsberg Hovdan adds, “and also that working and being active and continuing to do what actually caused them to get into trouble is a way of surviving and coping.”

Nick Cunningham is publisher and editor of online documentary news platform Business Doc Europe.
Martín Roth Initiative: Offering Safe Haven in Germany and Beyond

By Kaleem Aftab

The Martin Roth Initiative is a relocation and protection programme. The mandate is to support artists and people from the cultural field who are at risk because of the artistic work they do, who are denied freedom of expression. We help them by organising scholarships or a stipend so that they can either come to Germany or go to a safe state near their country of origin.

What is the Martin Roth Initiative?

The Martin Roth Initiative is a relocation and protection programme. We always work with host organisations. The idea is that we provide a safe space so people can take a breath and recharge batteries and we facilitate intercultural and cultural exchange between the artist-at-risk and the cultural scene of the safe state country. In Germany, we are working with institutions from the cultural field and, usually, the artist-at-risk stays for up to 12 months. At the end of a year, we can see if it’s possible to prolong and do a follow-up project for another 12 months. The maximum stay is 24 months in Germany. For the safe stay within their region, it is a shorter period from three to six months.

How do these scholarships, grants and stipends work?

The stipends and support depend on where the people are based, the specific situation and the host organisation. We always work with host organisations. The idea is that we provide a safe space so people can take a breath and recharge batteries and we facilitate intercultural and cultural exchange between the artist-at-risk and the cultural scene of the safe state country. In Germany, we are working with institutions from the cultural field and, usually, the artist-at-risk stays for up to 12 months. At the end of a year, we can see if it’s possible to prolong and do a follow-up project for another 12 months. The maximum stay is 24 months in Germany. For the safe stay within their region, it is a shorter period from three to six months.

How do you assess if a filmmaker is at risk?

In general, we work with artists from almost all art and cultural fields. So far, we have supported 56 people, 12 of them are filmmakers – directors, producers, screenwriters. We usually get contacted via our networks of partners, such as our partner the Goethe-Institut, which has many offices all over the world, or civil society organisations or organisations like the European Film Academy, which has partners across the globe. They contact us, or individuals artists contact us via email. What we usually do is try to verify the cases via a network of supporting organisations that are focused on human rights and freedom of expression. We try to connect with these people so that they can verify if the person who is contacting us is actually, for example, a director and then to see if there’s a risk situation involved. Within this verification process, we also do our own research.

How have you helped filmmakers, specifically?

These 12 persons from the film world contacted us, or partners of ours contacted us. We searched for host organisations or, in some cases, a host organisation came to us and said they would be willing to host this person. We recommend or consult with the person and with the host organisation, helping them to create a project which is the basis for the scholarship application. Then we provide funds for the person-at-risk and for the host organisation so that they jointly can implement a joint project during that time. Host organisations can be a film festival, an organisation like the European Film Academy, or any kind of legally constituted organisation that’s able to process money with a capacity to support the artist-at-risk. Importantly, the organisations must have the capacity to link the person to the film world within the country where the person is going.

How many of the filmmakers you’ve helped so far have come to Germany?

Most of them came to Germany or are about to come to Germany after we get past the Coronavirus travel ban situation. We had two cases where we provided a safe space within the region. We had several people from Turkey, from Iran, somebody from Afghanistan, Yemen, and Belarus. With requests from Iran, Syria and Turkey it’s very difficult to find neighbouring countries that are safe for the filmmakers-at-risk to stay.

And how tricky is it for you to get visas to bring them to Germany?

The Martin Roth-Initiative was started as a joint project by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and the Goethe-Institut and it’s 100% funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, we have political support. They help us as well with getting the visas. In some cases, obtaining a visa took more time than we thought, but in general, it’s going well. Not everything depends on the Federal Government – we also need the support of local authorities and the different entities within the different countries.

What ongoing support do you give an artist after the bursary ends?

We are looking at the issue of supporting safe return. We have a very young programme. We started in 2018. Our first focus was to develop all the processes and get our work started supporting people. Only now do we begin to build up the support for people to return. At an early stage, with the scholarship holders and the host organisations, we enter into communication about the issue of return. If it’s not possible to return, then people can use the time during the scholarship to create networks of support and opportunities so that after the scholarship, they can stay. The follow-up support is something we are currently looking at, but which doesn’t currently exist.

Obviously we’re living in a very strange time with the pandemic. How is Covid-19 impacting your work?

We have several projects that we wanted to start in March, April and May which have been impacted by the travel ban. There are networking events on hold as people work from home. Our programme is affected. As yet, we have not cancelled any project, and we are looking at ways to allow those receiving supporting from us to continue to receive support.

Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.
Freedom of speech. For many of us, it’s something to be taken for granted. A right, rather than a privilege. But for others, speaking out is a risky business. The written word can be a powerful weapon when deployed against injustice, abuses of power and social imbalances. But words alone can’t defend the writers who find themselves targeted by those – individuals, organisations or governments – whose actions they call to account. That’s where PEN International comes in.

Founded in 1921, in the aftermath of WWI, by British poet, playwright and peace activist Catherine Dawson-Scott, PEN is a global writers and freedom of expression organisation. It abides by a charter which states that literature knows no frontiers; that at all times, but particularly during times of conflict, writers and artists should be able to express their ideas without national or political interference or pressure. In practice, this means offering a range of emergency support to any writers who find themselves oppressed or endangered because of their words.

Cathy McCann, manager of PEN's Writers At Risk protection team, explains that the organisation has “a very broad understanding of the term writer. It can mean creative writer but also journalists, bloggers, academics. Also musicians – people who are targeted for their lyrics.” PEN is unique, she explains, in that it deals with both press freedoms and artistic freedoms, effectively straddling two worlds. The mandate covers playwrights, poets, novelists, literary translators, screenwriters, publishers, cartoonists and filmmakers.

“My team is responsible for providing direct assistance for individual cases of writers at risk. That can include anything from small grants to trying to facilitate temporary relocation. The main campaigning side of the work is advocacy which is the framework within which our protection work happens. We work very closely with ICORN, the International Cities of Refuge Network (see page 21). They provide long-term temporary placements for writers and artists in need of protection who have to flee either their country or their region. Or who have already fled due to persecution. And we do all the research and verification of applications to ICORN.”

PEN has been involved in the world of film most recently with the most high-profile case of Ukrainian writer and filmmaker Oleg Sentsov (see page 9). PEN members mobilised and campaigned for his release; when Sentsov was freed in September 2019, PEN co-hosted an event for him in London shortly after his release.

PEN also has recently campaigned for Turkish journalist and documentary filmmaker Can Dündar; the founder of the production company Eye for Africa, Prudence Uriri; and the Iranian visual artist and filmmaker Elahe Rahroiny, all of whom are now living in exile.

The foundation of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is, agrees McCann, a positive step. “Filmmakers, particularly documentary filmmakers, frequently face persecution for their work in various parts of the world, and yet there are very few dedicated organisations to support them.” She anticipates natural collaborations between PEN and the Coalition. “PEN may be able to offer support with research and verification of cases of filmmakers at risk, take part in joint advocacy, advise on good practice and share information about the Coalition with our networks.”

And with the new challenges facing human rights organisations because of the pandemic, support and collaboration between like-minded organisations is all the more crucial. “In the immediate,” says McCann of COVID-19, “it is impacting through borders being closed. So therefore people who might have been en route to a protective placement or who need to flee can’t. There are people whose source of income has dried up. We have had several requests now for emergency funding. There’s also been the positive outcome in that those who have been seeking asylum, especially in western countries, have basically had their cases knocked into the long grass. The Home Office in the UK and I think in many countries are just not processing asylum applications. A little reprieve.”

“But also, we are getting reports of local organisations that are facing closure because their funding has dried up. The lack of monitoring of the emergency legislation that has been brought in in many countries is very open to abuse. The shutting down of the internet; Iran and Bangladesh, for example, have been trying to restrict access to information relating to COVID.”

Wendy Ide is a film critic and feature writer who works for The Observer, Screen International and Ekko, among others. She has also served as a programme advisor for several film festivals.
DIRECTORS’ FORTNIGHT:
CHAMPIONING DISSIDENT VOICES SINCE 1969

By Michael Rosser

Filmmakers are looking at creative ways to tell stories from their own homes during the pandemic lockdown. But for Iranian director Jafar Panahi, making films while under house arrest has been a reality for close to a decade.

In spite of being convicted by Iran’s Islamic republic of “making propaganda against the system” and placed under house arrest, film festivals around the world have celebrated his work and championed his cause.

Festivals have long proven to be a key part of raising awareness and campaigning for persecuted filmmakers, from Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov to Myanmar director Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi and Iran’s Mohammad Rasoulof, winner of this year’s Golden Bear at the Berlinale for THERE IS NO EVIL.

Christophe Leparc, managing director of Directors’ Fortnight, recalls how the Cannes sidebar launched in 1969 to support such voices.

“At that time, every country had to present a film to the Cannes selection through their own ministry of culture,” he says. “If you were an independent director like Tarkovsky or a dissident artist that wasn’t supported by their own government, you couldn’t access the festival. So the Fortnight was launched to break that rule.”

The sidebar would go on to support filmmakers like Panahi, who was awarded the section’s Carrosse d’Or prize in 2011 and whose absence was marked by an empty chair on stage. Asked about the importance of festival support for such directors, Leparc says: “It’s important, first and foremost, because artists need to be free to do their work and if they have problems creating films, we need to get behind them.

“Second, festivals give the opportunity for mass communication. There are so many journalists at Cannes every year that it provides a major opportunity to support these directors.”

With EFA, IDFA and IFFR joining forces to create the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk, Leparc welcomes the opportunity to maintain visibility of persecuted directors year-round. “If you make a declaration at Rotterdam in January, raise it again at Berlin in February and so on, we can keep these issues alive all year and not let governments sleep on the difficult situations of these directors,” he adds.

**“IT’S IMPORTANT THAT FILM FESTIVALS TAKE SIDES”**

EFA Close-up spoke with festival directors from around the globe to get their views on helping filmmakers at risk.

**Alberto Barbera, Director, Venice Film Festival**

“Alongside everybody in the cultural world, I am extremely worried about the increasing level of censorship in many countries that put at risk the freedom of expression for a lot of filmmakers. Even worse than that, there is the political and social persecution against some directors who are in jail or had to spend a long period of time in prison, due to their ideals and beliefs, without being able to express themselves as all artists should do, sometimes risking not only their freedom but also their own life.

“I think that it is very important that film festivals take sides and make every possible effort to support filmmakers in danger. Raising our voice in defence of these directors, and the ones who will find themselves in a similar situation in future, is a moral obligation. Using the stage of a festival to focus the attention of the media on these cases, spreading news about the filmmakers’ situation and increasing the level of awareness can help to force our own governments to make political steps in their defence. Very often, the most brutal regimes fear the consequences of negative public opinion that can affect their image.”

**Cecilia Barrionuevo, Artistic Director, and Fernando Juan Lima, President, Mar del Plata International Film Festival**

“A film festival is and should be a place of freedom and diversity. Argentina’s history teaches us that only with the rule of law in full force for our personal rights to be upheld.

“The fact that the Mar del Plata International Film Festival has not been able to be held every year is a sign of its incompatibility with censorship (regardless of the reasons used in those years to try to justify this). “Our history and its essence has compelled us to give a special place in our programme to the work of directors under threat, those persecuted for political, social or religious reasons, for their life choices or even for simply exercising their freedom.”

**Lili Hinstin, Artistic Director, Locarno Film Festival**

“If cinema can be considered as a country where freedom is the most important rule, then film festivals are platforms where the filmmakers’ freedom of expression has to be guaranteed. Locarno Film Festival has always stood for freedom in all its forms and will continue to support the integrity of those filmmakers who find themselves at risk because of the images they create and the ideas they convey.”
Cintia Gil, Festival Director, Sheffield Doc/Fest

“A film festival is a safe space for defending freedom and has a very important and effective power; a public voice. Therefore, a fundamental task for any festival is to stand-up for filmmakers at risk, bringing them to the attention of the international community and spreading an unequivocal message against violence and oppression against artists.

“We will definitely continue to stand for filmmakers at risk, not only individually but also in circumstances where the very practice of cinema is threatened by authoritarian governments, as we see happening in Brazil, Iran, Turkey, and many others.”

Carlo Chatrian, Artistic Director, Berlin International Film Festival

“Throughout their history, film festivals have helped filmmakers raise their voices, especially when their work is going against the mainstream or touching on itchy topics. I’m thinking about the role played by film festivals with neo-realism in the aftermath of WWII, or with Eastern European countries during the Cold War.

“In the 21st century, we have the illusion that the world is an open book. In reality, without the presence and the commitments of artists, much of the diversity we have knowledge of would be lost or not recognized enough.

“The Berlinale has a long tradition in supporting daring films, independent voices, and unconventional filmmaking, as well as films that come from countries where artists must work underground in order to speak truth to power such as Iran or China. I believe this is quite natural for a film festival that takes place in a town that has endured and survived very adverse situations.

“To me the political background of Berlinale is directly connected with the history of the city over the past century and the political and moral awareness that the inhabitants have developed. Berliners can embrace the political side of a film much better than any professional audience. The mix of press and ‘normal’ viewers is something unique that we probably don’t acknowledge enough. Luckily, films and their success at the festival remind us of that.”

Tabitha Jackson, Director, Sundance Film Festival

“Freedom of expression and the free movement of artists and their work is a vital component of any healthy society, but in this moment, filmmakers are facing increased risks to themselves and their work: financial harm, physical harm, imprisonment, censorship and the most insidious of all, self-censorship.

“Film festivals can play a vital role in challenging at least some of those countervailing forces. They can form an alternative distribution system – a network for the circulation of ideas expressed in cinematic form.

“They are also gathering places, protective spaces and catalytic sites of both solidarity and meaning-making. Cultural revolutions can be seeded.

“For some film teams, publicity provides a layer of protective visibility. For others, quiet and behind-the-scenes support is best. And, of course, it not just the filmmakers who are at risk. This year, we also provided additional support and measures to protect the identities of the subjects of SAUDI RUNAWAY and WELCOME TO CHECHNYA.

“Sundance Institute is also part of the Safe+Secure initiative, which is aimed at the independent documentary film community and focused on production, but much of the guidelines and protocol apply to distribution and release.”

Karel Och, Artistic Director, and Krystof Mucha, Executive Director, Karlovy Vary International Film Festival

“Ever since the rebirth of the Karlovy Vary IFF in the early 1990s, Vaclav Havel, a key figure in Czech culture and politics, was a friend and supporter of the festival. With a patron of such immense influence, who himself spent several years in prison during the communist era, we simply could not remain indifferent towards limitations on artistic expression of any kind, nor on an artist’s personal freedom.

“KVIFF considers it a duty not only to support filmmakers at risk but also to facilitate their communication with the audience on the other side of any “fence” that is limiting an artist’s freedom.”

(In 2013, KVIFF enabled Jafar Panahi to introduce his film CLOSED CURTAIN via Skype while under house arrest.)

José Luis Rebordinos, Director, San Sebastian Film Festival

“It is very important that film festivals support filmmakers who are persecuted for their ideologies. There are many filmmakers in the world who use their films to try to transform the realities in which they live. Many of them are prevented from practising their profession or are imprisoned. Film festivals can show their work and give them visibility so that their repression does not go unpunished.”

Albert Wiederspiel, Festival Director, Filmfest Hamburg

“I don’t think film festivals are just about watching good films in a nice atmosphere. Festivals are precisely curated programmes that have the unique opportunity to emphasize different aspects of filmmaking.

“Filmfest Hamburg has chosen to show many politically relevant films so it is a matter of course that we engage ourselves with films and filmmakers from countries where freedom of expression is not given. In the case of Mohammad Rasoulof, we offered him and his family a residence in Hamburg.

“But small gestures also generate important attention. For several years, we have stopped giving flowers to our guests and instead donate the money to a filmmaker at risk, for which each guest receives a certificate of the donation in their name. This not only collects urgently needed money for the filmmaker’s family or legal advisors but also reminds the audience and the media of their fate.”

Michael Rosser is a London-based writer and editor specialising in the UK and international film industry. He regularly contributes to Screen International, previously worked at IMDb and Broadcast, and moderates at screenings, events and film festivals
FURTHER RESOURCES

**International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk**
Contact
contact@icfr.international
EFA
europeanfilmacademy.org
IDFA
idfa.nl
IFFR
iff.com

**Artist Protection Fund**
ie.org/Programs/Artist-Protection-Fund

**Artists at Risk Connection**
artistsatriskconnection.org

**Center for Media and Social Impact**
cmsimpact.org/r

**Committee to Protect Journalists**
cpj.org

**Culture Action Europe**
cultureactioneurope.org

**Dangerous Documentaries: Reducing Risk when Telling Truth to Power** (report)
cmsimpact.org/resource/dangerous-documentaries-reducing-risk-when-telling-truth-to-power

**FERA**
filmdirectors.eu

**Freemuse**
freemuse.org

**Freemuse: Advocacy & Campaign Guide**
freemuse.org/advocacy/advocacy-campaign-guide

**Freemuse: State of Artistic Freedom Report 2020**
freemuse.org/news/the-state-of-artistic-freedom-2020

**Front Line Defenders**
frontlinedefenders.org

**Human Rights Documentary Film Festival (Hong Kong)**
hrfilm.amnesty.org.hk

**Human Rights Film Network**
humanrightsfilmnetwork.org

**Human Rights Watch**
hrw.org

**Human Rights Watch Film Festival**
ff.hrw.org

**IFEX**
ifex.org

**Index on Censorship**
indexoncensorship.org

**International Arts Rights Advisors (IARA)**
aira.live/about/

**International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN)**
icorn.org

**Martin Roth Initiative**
martin-roth-initiative.de

**Movies That Matter Film Festival**
moviesthatmatter.nl

**PEN America**
pen.org

**Pen International Writers at Risk**
pen-international.org/protecting-writers-at-risk

**Protect Defenders**
protectdefenders.eu/en/index.html

**Reporters Without Borders**
rsf.org/en

**Safe + Secure**
safeandsecure.film

**Take One Action**
takeoneaction.org.uk

**United Nations Human Rights Council**
chchr.org

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**EFA CLOSE-UP**

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