

# *Mr. Nobody Against Putin*: A portrait of Russian working class life, but in the service of NATO

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Since winning the 2026 Oscar for best documentary alongside co-director David Borenstein, Russian filmmaker Pavel Talankin has been hailed as a hero of oppositional art. His film, *Mr. Nobody Against Putin* continues to be promoted widely. While the Kremlin has said little about the content of the documentary, in late March, Talankin was designated a “foreign agent” in Russia and the film banned.

Under the cover of a generally humane portrayal of the impact of the Ukraine war on a beat-up working class Russian town, *Mr. Nobody Against Putin*, at its core, promotes typical US-NATO anti-Putin politics. Produced by the BBC in collaboration German and European public broadcasting firms, it does what it was intended to do. The frightened response of the Kremlin to *Mr. Nobody Against Putin* is not so much a testament to the power of the film, but the weakness of the regime.

The award-winning documentary was shot by Talankin while he was working as the videographer at a school in Karabash, Russia, a town of 10,000 in the Ural Mountains. The city, among the most polluted on the planet and with an average life expectancy below 40, is the site of a major copper smelting operation. While the film does not take this up, Karabash was one of the earliest centers of metallurgy in Russia and a center of working class struggle. It was the site of a brutal massacre of workers and revolutionary soldiers in 1918 at the hands of pro-monarchist and pro-capitalist forces.

Talankin, who presents himself as something of a peacenik and says he was hostile to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine from the outset, was responsible for filming school events. Once the war broke out in February 2022, he was tasked with documenting the school’s government-ordered, pro-war propaganda efforts.

While officially fulfilling his duties, Talankin was actually gathering the footage in order to expose the idiocies of the Kremlin’s attempts to promote Russian nationalism in the educational system and the vulnerability of children to the government’s aims. As he was doing this work, Talankin also shot video of everyday life in Karabash, focusing his eye particularly on the youth—their joys and struggles as they

confront a world now dominated by war. He and co-director Borenstein incorporate this material into the documentary.

The strongest elements of *Mr. Nobody Against Putin* lie here, with Russians generally portrayed as kind-hearted, ordinary people whose lives are as rich and valuable as anyone else’s. Kids, neatly dressed in their uniforms, sing off-key in the school chorus, recite their lessons (not always well), and eat their midday meal served in the school cafeteria by a crabby lunch lady. They are, like all children, adorable. Teenagers carouse, act silly, laugh and love—at a stage in life whose features are universally recognizable.

Caring teachers worry about their students’ deteriorating performance, as they are made to implement a new federal patriotic educational policy that is intellectually deadening and crowds out real learning. Many are, if not opposed, exasperated by it. One teacher, who seems to both a victim and perpetrator of the Kremlin’s virulently nationalist, pro-Stalinist agenda, enthusiastically spouts the government’s admixture of lies, half-truths and motherland pride.

While some individuals featured in the film are highlighted as examples of “brainwashed” people who have bought the Kremlin’s line, even they are treated largely with sympathy. Only a twisted person or a bloodthirsty imperialist could watch these scenes of everyday life in Karabash and think, “I hope they all die.”

Indeed, some of the documentary’s most moving scenes are the farewell parties that friends hold for each other as they go off to war. It’s not always entirely clear why they’re going—whether by will, by conscription or by financial necessity. Regardless, there is a sense that something disastrous awaits.

“You are my brother. Not by blood, but by soul,” one young man tells his friend the night before he departs. In another scene, disaster having struck, a mother wails as she buries her son. It is illegal to film funerals of the Russian war dead, Talankin explains in a voiceover, so we see only a black screen.

This footage is worthwhile and gives the viewer a glimpse into what the war has done to working class Russia.

But lying just beneath the surface of this passive, humanistic,

documentarian approach are very right-wing politics. Talankin, who portrays himself in the film as an accidental historical subject—a “nobody” transformed into a “somebody” solely by virtue of a profound sense of right and wrong—has a definite political outlook, even if he does not state it outright. It comports entirely with NATO’s anti-Putin propaganda campaign, which is why the film was crafted and has been lauded in the US and Europe by both governments and Hollywood.

*Mr. Nobody Against Putin* is an autobiographical documentary, in that the account of the war’s impact on Karabash is told through Talankin’s personal evolution from school videographer to opponent of the Kremlin.

It is essentially built around a series of, to be blunt, rather self-absorbed “I” statements—what happened to Talankin, what he did or didn’t do, what he wanted or did not want. Despite this narcissism, he says virtually nothing about his political views, apart from expressing general opposition to the war and the Russian government. The latter is simply assumed to be monstrous and the Ukraine war nothing but the outcome of this monstrousness.

In contrast, the implication is that America and Europe are the antithesis. Thus, we learn, the filmmaker swapped out the Russian national anthem for Lady Gaga singing the Star-Spangled Banner at one school event. He took down the Zs, a pro-war Russian symbol, that had been put up on the school’s windows, and affixed Xs in their place.

These stunts, while threatening to a government whose support within the population is not very deep, are some combination of politically vacuous and pathetic. Lady Gaga and masking tape on windows are hardly daring statements of opposition. What lies behind them is uncritical support for NATO’s war against Russia and the right-wing regime in Kiev functioning as its proxy.

Throughout the documentary, the filmmaker, who has a peace flag hanging in his office, issues not a single statement about the Ukrainian government or Ukrainian nationalism, much less NATO. We see images of Russian kids being made to do military marches and hear a Russian school teacher declare his support for Stalin’s most brutal henchmen, but Ukraine’s elevation of fascists to the level of state heroes and brutalization of its own population evoke not a peep (much less US aggression and militarism in every corner of the globe). Watching *Mr. Nobody Against Putin*, one might assume that Russia was the sole inventor and perpetrator of state-promoted militarist nationalism.

The documentary contains extensive footage of Russian kids and teenagers. It was shot without their or their parents’ consent and with some degree of deception. People thought Talankin was filming for official purposes. Because of this dubious approach, the film has been criticized from various corners as unethical.

In an effort to deflect criticisms that the filmmakers played

fast and loose with the words of vulnerable populations, co-director Borenstein has explained in interviews that the documentary was closely scrutinized by BBC producers and scrubbed of clips that would reveal peoples’ opinions about the war, thereby protecting them from government reprisal.

That may be the case, but it is also quite convenient. Having removed anything that documents what ordinary Russians explicitly think and why—no doubt a mass of complex and contradictory views—Talankin avoids having to deal with anything other than his own ideas. The only voice we hear is his, which is really that of the European press agencies that made the film.

The efforts to hide the political outlook and social forces behind *Mr. Nobody Against Putin* extend to the making of the film itself. One of the strangest elements of the documentary is the fact that it gives no serious account of how Talankin went from being a “Mr. Nobody” to winning an Oscar. We learn that he responded to a post on an unnamed social media site asking people to reach out with accounts of the impact of the war on Russian society. This then somehow resulted in a call from American filmmaker David Borenstein. By the end of it all, Talankin is fleeing Russia.

Interviews given by Borenstein and Talankin reveal, however, that the making of the film was an operation organized in London. Early on, the BBC took on the production of the documentary. Once he was commissioned to shoot the footage, Talankin was in regular contact with Borenstein, and the two reportedly discussed every aspect of his work. In addition, early on in the shooting process, Talankin was guaranteed safe passage out of Russia once he was done. The efforts made in the documentary to portray him as a lonely hero, bravely laboring alone against all odds, don’t stack up to reality.

Talankin is now comfortably settled in the Czech Republic, where he was granted asylum with the aid of Czech supporters, who also helped him secure an income. These are privileges that could only have been granted him through high-level government intervention.

Such an outcome is unimaginable for any of the Karabash youth Talankin filmed. They remain stuck in an industrial wasteland, awaiting an early death from constant exposure to a toxic miasma or orders sending them to the front. No one is welcoming them to or paying for them to set up shop in Prague.



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