

MY UNDESIRABLE FRIENDS: PART I — LAST AIR IN MOSCOW

director: Julia Loktev

producer: Julia Loktev

cinematographer: Julia Loktev

editors: Julia Loktev and Michael Taylor, ACE

co-director: Anna Nemzer

total running time: 324 min (screened with intermissions)

year: 2024

production country: U.S.

language: Russian w/ English subtitles

shooting format: iPhone

chapters: chapter 1: The Lives of Foreign Agents (80:33 min)

chapter 2: The Town Crazies (61:47 min)

chapter 3: The Holiday Special (55:58 min)

chapter 4: The Expected Impossible (56:33 min)

chapter 5: Don't Say War (69:06 min)

SYNOPSIS:

Soviet-born American filmmaker Julia Loktev (*The Loneliest Planet*, *Day Night Day Night*) came to Moscow in 2021 to make a film about independent journalists being declared “foreign agents” by Putin’s regime — as it turns out, just four months before Russia started a full-scale war in Ukraine. With her friend Anna Nemzer, a talk show host at TV Rain, Russia’s last remaining independent news channel, Loktev brings us into a community of sharp, warm and funny young women speaking truth to power as they face increasing threats. Loktev filmed in Moscow during the first week of the full-scale invasion, as the journalists tried to counter Russian propaganda and report the truth on the war, until all independent media was shut down and they were forced to flee the country. Structured in five chapters, feeling like a cross between a Russian novel and a reality show about frighteningly real reality, Loktev’s film is an extraordinary historic record of a country on the verge of fascism and an immersive and intimate inside view of the opposition in an authoritarian society, which becomes all the more globally relevant every day.

LOGLINE:

What begins as an intimate portrait of Russian independent journalists facing persecution by Putin’s regime takes a drastic turn when Russia starts a full-scale war in Ukraine and they are all forced into exile. The film offers a front row seat to how authoritarianism works and the lives of those who resist, which becomes all the more globally relevant every day.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES:

a world on the verge of extinction, a nation on verge of fascism and full-scale war

This is a film that could not be made today. The world it depicts — a vibrant community of journalists and activists fiercely and vocally opposed to Putin's regime — no longer exists in Moscow, and it's hard to imagine that it actually existed just a few months before Russia started a full-scale war in Ukraine. Almost all the people you see in the film have been forced into exile. One million people have left Russia since the start of its full scale-war.

You could say I was in the right place at the right time, or the wrong place at the wrong time, but when I started making the film, I had no idea I would be capturing history. I started shooting in October 2021, when no one knew a full-scale war was around the corner. It was still more than four months away. As the characters in the film regularly remind us, Russia had been waging a war in Ukraine for almost 8 years since it invaded Donbas and occupied Crimea in 2014 — a war all our characters opposed, though some were still schoolkids then — but it was a level of war the world seemed to barely notice and strangely found “acceptable” enough to even let Russia host a World Cup. A full-scale war seemed inconceivable — to our characters and to the rest of the world.

I started out making a feature film about journalists being named “foreign agents.” Then history took over, and it became a multi-chapter documentary epic shot on an extremely intimate scale. “Part I - Last Air in Moscow” is the first half. We're now editing “Part II — Exile,” which follows the characters across 12 countries and counting.

seed of film

In August 2021, I read a story in the *New York Times* about Russian independent journalists being declared “foreign agents” by the Putin regime and fighting back with dark humor. I admit part of what drew me in was a photo of two cool-looking young women who seemed like I might run into them in Brooklyn, except they'd just been declared “foreign agents” — Sonya (Sonya Groysman) and Olya (Olga Churakova). When the government banned the media where they worked and they lost their jobs, they started a podcast, “Hi, You're a Foreign Agent” to try to make sense of their new reality.

my backstory

I listened to the podcast and found it fascinating and funny, but I was only able to listen to it because I speak native Russian. I was born in the Soviet Union, in St. Petersburg — though I only lived there when it was called “Leningrad” — and immigrated to the U.S. with my family when I was 9 years old. We were stripped of our Soviet citizenship upon leaving, and I've never been a citizen of the Russian Federation. (Like many people in Russia, I had a grandma and grandpa from Ukraine, and my mom was living in Ukraine when WWII started. But there are many such stories in Russia, and it did not stop Russia from invading Ukraine.) I hadn't lived in Russia since 1978 and had no family left there, but I went to visit every few years as an adult and made friends who were part of a community of journalists and activists. My insider/outsider perspective is what allowed me to tell this story.

“foreign agents” and “fuckery”

The foreign agent law had been on the books since 2012, but it had only been used against a handful of NGOs. In late summer 2021, something new and disturbing started happening. Russia began naming independent journalists — both media and individual journalists — “foreign agents.”

Back then there were only 25 individual “foreign agents.” (Now there are hundreds.) It was something very new. But the list was growing fast, with the government announcing new “foreign agents,” perversely, on most Friday nights. The list seemed random — there were a couple of prominent journalists, but the majority were not particularly well known. Many were very young women, some as young as 22. For terror to work, it must be unpredictable — you have to feel it could happen to you.

If you were personally declared a “foreign agent,” you were obligated to do three things — failure to do them would result in fines and, after two strikes, prison:

You had to register yourself as a legal entity, in effect, de-humanizing yourself.

You had to mark everything you put out in public with this disclaimer: “THIS MESSAGE (MATERIAL) HAS BEEN CREATED AND (OR) DISSEMINATED BY A FOREIGN SOURCE OF MASS MEDIA SERVING THE FUNCTION OF A FOREIGN AGENT AND (OR) A RUSSIAN LEGAL ENTITY SERVING THE FUNCTION OF A FOREIGN AGENT.” The Russian independent media all quickly dubbed this disclaimer “the fuckery.” Like Hollywood star credits, it was stipulated that the disclaimer must be in a font bigger than anything else on the page. You had to put it not just on all your articles or broadcasts, immediately marking them as somehow suspect, but also on your Instagram cat pics or comments on your friends’ baby photos on Facebook. On the podcast, Sonya and Olya wondered aloud whether you had to put it on your Tinder profile.

You had to submit quarterly reports of all your personal expenses to the government, which could make them public, since whatever coffee, candy bar, or underwear you bought was technically supporting the operation of a “foreign agent.”

Anytime anyone mentioned you in public, they also had to state that you are a “foreign agent.” Absurdity and dark humor aside, what truly drew me to this story was a society starting to force people to mark themselves as Other, as “not one of us” — it was hard not to think about an obvious historic precedent.

tv rain

I contacted my friend Anya (Anna Nemzer), a talk show host at TV Rain, Russia’s last remaining independent news channel, and suggested we try to make a film about this.

Launched as a youth channel in 2010, TV Rain became a central node of opposition life when Russia was swept by protests in 2011-2012 after Putin circumvented term limits and returned as President, having switched places with Dmitry Medvedev and served one term as Prime Minister. The protests led to a crackdown, and the promise of relative freedom Russians enjoyed gradually eroded — especially after Russia invaded Donbas and occupied Crimea in Ukraine in 2014.

Still, Rain and other independent media continued to survive. By the fall of 2021, Rain had been kicked off cable, abandoned by all advertisers for being too politically vocal, and had recently been named a “foreign agent,” but in the fall of 2021, it was still allowed to operate online with subscriber-only content. During breaking news and special broadcasts, Rain made their shows openly available on YouTube.

If you were a young — or not-so-young — Russian opposed to the Putin regime, Rain was the first place you tuned in to when something was happening and you wanted to hear the truth, not the propaganda shown on all other Russian TV channels. Rain was where, at the start of 2021, you watched live in real time Navalny’s journey back to Russia and his arrest at the airport. In the Navalny documentary, the Russian TV footage is from Rain, and there’s even a shot of one of our supporting characters Edik (Eduard Burmistrov) being hauled away by police while reporting at the airport. Rain was where you watched the mass protests that followed Navalny’s arrest — and the mass police crackdown that followed the protests..

In addition to news and political analysis, Rain stayed true to its spirit as a youth channel and regularly featured independent musicians from Russia’s opposition community. On Rain, you could hear Joker James rapping, “I’m a national traitor. I’m the fifth column. My Russia exists autonomously from yours. You throw people in jail and you start wars. Remember we have an army, too, and this army is huge” — so they all dreamed. You could hear Pornofilmy singing, “My Russia is sitting in jail. This will pass... Yesterday’s dictator is now a dead old man.” Street protests were practically wiped out by the fall of 2021, but Rain and other independent media continued to exist as a space of protest and dissent, which is absolutely unimaginable now.

anya (anna nemzer) and activists

Anya hosted two shows on TV Rain, a political talk show, “Politics: Direct Line,” and a new show she launched in the summer of 2021 right before Rain was declared a “foreign agent,” called “Who’s Got the Power?” It profiled activists trying to imagine and build a better society, a Russia with respect for human rights — the rights of political prisoners, domestic violence survivors, migrants, people with disabilities, the homeless, the LGBTQ population. As Russia slid further and further into totalitarianism, all of them were still tirelessly working to make it more just and humane. All of them thought they could and must do something. For Anya, creating this show and working at TV Rain was her way of doing something.

community and context

The activists and independent journalists lived as part of a tightly interconnected community — if people didn’t know each other directly, they were usually only one degree of separation apart.

In the fall of 2021, they were all still working and fighting, but a looming sense of crackdown gave them the sense their days were numbered. They were all trying to stay and work in Russia as long as possible. They wondered if the time to leave will be tomorrow — or was it yesterday.

They expected the monster to eat them soon. They did not expect the monster would invade the neighboring country.

shooting approach

While I was waiting for a visa, Anya quickly gathered a group of “foreign agents” and other journalists on a Zoom call. I thought of them as colleagues in a sense, fellow storytellers, so it was important they have a sense of ownership of the process. I remember saying to them, “If I knew what the film was, there would be no reason to make it.” I suspect they thought I was a little strange, but they agreed to see where it goes. Most of the main characters in the film were on that call.

I had no idea what I wanted the film to look like or what shape it would take. I knew I didn’t want to make a conventional documentary with talking heads, b-roll, voiceover, emotive music, etc. My first feature was a doc, but my most recent films were fiction. I think of both just as movies. I’m drawn to story, characters, emotions, human contractions, the texture of life, and the moments of humor that inappropriately sneak into the most dramatic events.

I jumped on a plane the day after I got the visa. I thought of it as kind of an initial research trip. I figured I’d meet some of our potential characters, try out working with a couple of cinematographers. I arrived October 8, 2021. Coincidentally, while I was on the plane, Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov, editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, received the Nobel Peace Prize, a subject of much heated conversation when I arrived.

That first night, Anya was having friends over for dinner, and I had lined up a well-known doc cinematographer to come film it. But then Anya said, “You’re our friend, and we’d feel more comfortable with just you around. Can’t you just borrow his camera?” He kindly let me. Guests were arriving, but I still couldn’t figure out the settings on his pro camera. I put it down, grabbed my old iPhone X, a few models behind the times and badly in need of an upgrade, borrowed a mic from Anya’s husband, a top podcast producer, and started shooting. I never looked back.

Everything in the film happened organically like that. I worked on instinct. The next day, Anya and I were driving to Rain. Moscow has terrible traffic, so I picked up my phone and started shooting Anya talking since we were stuck in the car anyway. What I thought was a week-long research trip turned into Chapter 1 of the film. There was so much happening then.

Shooting alone without a crew on my phone allowed an incredible intimacy and immediacy that I would’ve never gotten with a larger camera or even one other crew member present. For Chapter 2, I upgraded to the latest iPhone model, got a small external lens and an array of microphones. Shooting this way both forced me to be physically very close to the characters and allowed me to disappear. I could film invisibly in streets and public spaces, squeeze into tiny kitchens, melt into conversations over dinner and drinks, capture intimate moments. After making fiction films where each shot was precisely visually composed, this felt like a cleansing of everything I thought was important in making a movie, and I loved it. I just had to shut up, listen, and watch, pay intense attention, and respond with the camera (and try not to trip while walking).

friends of friends

Anya took me around to meet the other journalists — most she knew personally, and the others were that one degree of separation away. I filmed them from the start. Maybe because I speak native

Russian and feel familiar, because I was introduced by someone in the community, and because of my way of shooting, there was an instant ease. I'm amazed by, and grateful for, how open they were from the get-go.

My voice is sometimes present in the film and the characters talk to me directly, but I didn't want to center myself. In the context of the story, I'm not so interesting. I hope the "I," the camera, feels like a stand-in for you, the viewer. I hope it feels like you've come to Moscow to visit your brilliant friend, and she brings you into her community and introduces you to people who become your friends, and, as Russia turns to full-on fascism, you live through these dramatic events with these smart, brave, funny young women.

In addition to Sonya and Olya, the podcast hosts, we meet two other "foreign agents," Ira (Irina Dolinina) and Alesya (Alesya Marokhovskaya), two journalists at a small investigative media outlet, *Important Stories*, whose offices had already been searched by the FSB and whose editor had been forced to flee the country due to a trumped up criminal case. We meet Lena (Elena Kostyuchenko), one of Russia's most prominent opposition journalists and an out lesbian in a country that increasingly criminalized and targeted queer people. We figured Lena would land on the foreign agent list soon enough. (Despite criminal charges and threats on her life, Lena is still not a "foreign agent" as of this writing. For terror to work, it must be unpredictable.) And we meet Ksyusha (Ksenia Mironova), a 23-year-old Rain reporter, whose journalist fiancé Ivan Safronov has been jailed on charges of "treason." Other journalists constantly mention Ivan Safronov's case as something that could happen to them — which is the whole idea.

I did film a few other characters early on, including some men, but the main characters who felt most compelling to keep following were women. Two are queer, remarkable in a country that has increasingly targeted LGBTQ people and has, since, declared the "international LGBT movement" an "extremist terrorist organization." Most are very young. When we started shooting, Putin had been in power 22 years. For many of our characters, who were in their early or mid 20s, this was almost their whole lifetime. They're steeped in Western culture, watch Netflix, talk about *Gossip Girl*, Taylor Swift, and *Emily in Paris*, and constantly use Mordor and Harry Potter as a framework for understanding current Russia.

holding out for miracle

Everyone senses the foreign agent thing is just the first step, they just don't know to what. As journalists, they all want to stay in their country and continue working to give Russians an alternative to state propaganda as long as they possibly can, even as they face increasing threats. In addition to the "foreign agent" designation, media could be declared "undesirable organizations," a kind of next level — the media is immediately shut down and even reposting its stories becomes a crime. Many journalists have been searched and had their devices seized. And then there's the ultimate fear and it's not irrational — there's a long history of journalists being murdered in Russia.

Through the fall and winter, the screws keep tightening. The foreign agent list keeps growing most Friday nights, so that by New Year's Eve, it seems like every other sentence on TV Rain is, "We must remind you that so-and-so is a foreign agent." Russia's oldest human rights organization, Memorial, which documents political repression from Stalin's gulags to the present, is shut down for failing to mark its publications with the foreign agent disclaimer. Still they all keep working and try to

hold on to hope. Olya and Sonya record a video of activists and journalists as an alternative to Putin's annual New Year's address which most of the country watches. Ira and Alesya toast wishing for a "new year without Putin." As Anya explains, New Year's Eve is Russia's most significant holiday, taking on almost religious meaning, when everyone hopes for a miracle.

first week of full-scale war

Even as Putin was giving NATO ultimatums and gathering troops at the Ukrainian border, even the night before it happened, a full-scale war was absolutely unimaginable, until it happened. Our characters are in complete shock and horror. You could say they should have expected it, but then again, you could say that about all of us — we didn't. The whole world thought it was unimaginable. Russia had been waging a war in Ukraine for 8 years, a war the world got too used to ignoring, but bombing Kyiv seemed impossible, until it happened.

On February 24, 2022 Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, bombing civilians and committing war crimes, a war that is now going almost three years.

Russian state propaganda — which is what most Russians watch day in day out — call it a "special military operation" and paint the invasion as a liberation of Ukraine from so-called "Nazis" and NATO influence. They tell the Russian public that Ukrainians will welcome them with flowers and open arms.

Our characters try to report the truth about the war, which they see as shameful and horrific. Lena immediately goes to Ukraine. She is one of the few Russian journalists able to get into Ukraine. Ira is followed and detained by the FSB while reporting near the Ukrainian border. TV Rain issues a statement against the war, regularly reports news from Ukrainian sources, and gives voice to Ukrainian guests on the air, politicians, journalists, and ordinary people who describe hiding in bomb shelters and Ukrainian resistance to the war.

But the Russian government makes reporting the truth impossible, introducing a system of military censorship. The Communications Authority issues a decree that journalists must use only information provided by the Russian Ministry of Defense — Sonya says, "This is fascism!" — and the Russian Ministry of Defense insists it is not bombing civilian targets. So after every video and report of Russians bombing apartment buildings, TV Rain hosts are forced to constantly parrot the words, "The Russian Ministry of Defense has not confirmed this," and "The Russian Ministry of Defense insists it is not bombing civilian targets," — contrary to what everyone can see and hear in the reports. The Russian government even bans using the word "war." Rain tries to find ways around the restrictions so they can stay on the air, changing the headline from "WAR IN UKRAINE" to "WHAT'S GOING ON IN UKRAINE," hoping this will allow them to continue reporting the truth a few more days, saying things like, "We continue to follow what's happening in Ukraine, what the Russian side calls a special military operation, and what the international community calls a war, an invasion of Ukraine, Russian aggression."

an irrelevant note about safety

I stayed and continued to film as the U.S. embassy was telling Americans to leave the country and as flights between Russia and the U.S. and Europe were canceled. By that time, you could only fly to

a few countries like Turkey, Mongolia, Armenia, and tickets were going fast, as hundreds of thousands of Russians opposed to the war were fleeing. Every time I left my hotel, I had to walk past a wall of helmeted riot police and giant vans waiting to haul away potential protestors. I kept my head down and kept walking. This was a year before Evan Gershkovich was arrested. Brittney Griner had been arrested a few days earlier, but I figured I wasn't famous enough to be of interest to anyone. So I just tried to keep a low profile and mostly film in private. I was most worried when I was with my characters. Whatever risks I took feel negligible compared to the risks they take every day in their work (not to mention the risks regular Ukrainians face every day the war goes on). I stayed until I had nobody left to film in Russia.

leaving

One by one that week, our characters left the country. Each day, journalism became more and more impossible. Russia threatened to charge anyone helping Ukrainians with treason (an American citizen is now in Russian prison for sending \$50 to a Ukrainian humanitarian organization). The government introduced new laws — the so-called “discreditation of the army” and “fake news” laws — making reporting the truth about the war a criminal offense punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Rain held on one week into the full-scale war, until on the night of March 1, 2022, the authorities shut it down, and they were tipped off they were about to be raided. Most people who worked there scrambled to buy whatever airline tickets they could get and headed for the airport. Most of our characters left with a few hours' notice, a carry-on suitcase, and no idea where they were going next.

They thought they could do more good as journalists working from outside the country than they could sitting inside a jail cell and not reporting at all.

exile

None of our characters can imagine going back to Russia as long as Putin remains in power — they would likely be arrested if they return. Putin recently started his fifth 6-year term, making him the longest serving Russian or Soviet leader since Stalin.

The only one who has been back is Ksyusha, who took the risk and went for a few days so she could be at her fiancé Ivan Safronov's trial — he was sentenced to 22 years for “treason.” He was left out of the recent prisoner exchange, and Ksyusha continues to fight for his release.

We are now editing “MY UNDESIRABLE FRIENDS: PART II — EXILE,” which picks up with the characters immediately after they leave Russia, and follows them as they bounce from country to country — I've filmed in 12 countries and counting — as they struggle with shame and accountability for a war they all oppose, and as they keep working. They know that unlike in the Joker James song, their Russia does not really exist autonomously. Like in the Pornofilmy song, their Russia is sitting in jail — or living in exile. Important Stories is based in Prague. Rain moved countries several times and is now based in Amsterdam. Both Rain and Important Stories were declared “undesirable organizations,” making giving them an interview or reposting their stories a crime in Russia. But they can still be accessed by VPN, and their videos can still be seen on YouTube in Russia, which has so far not been blocked.

All our characters continue to work as journalists in exile. Their work serves an important role for Russians who remain in the country. Hannah Arendt said that totalitarianism feeds off loneliness. If you're living in Russia and are opposed to the war, you can't talk to your neighbors about it, your children can't mention it in school (there have been cases of parents arrested for this). But you can watch TV Rain on YouTube or read *Important Stories* or listen to Olya and Sonya's podcast and know that you are not crazy and you are not alone, that there are many people who oppose this war.

As they all continue working, they've been smeared by Russian propaganda channels, followed by Russian agents, have received death threats, and in one case, been poisoned, but they all continue to do their job, and they all dream of the day Russia will be held accountable for war crimes.

One million people have left Russia since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including most independent journalists and most of civil society, the people who were trying to make Russia a more humane society. As Russia continues waging a brutal war in Ukraine, it continues jailing journalists and activists, criminalizing independent media, educational institutions and NGOs, including the World Wildlife Fund and Greenpeace, as "undesirable organizations" and, increasingly, as "extremists and terrorists." Meanwhile, the list of "foreign agents" keeps growing most Friday nights.

Because I happened to start filming months before the full-scale war, I was able to capture a rare record of history in real time — the moment between when Russia was an oppressive country where many people were still living and working to make it a better society, to when Russia turned fully to fascism and the people who were trying to make it better had to leave. None of our characters wanted to leave their country — they were forced to.

hitting increasingly close to home

Since I made the film, it has come to hit closer and closer to home. When I was shooting, I felt like I was making a film about people who make sense to me — who feel so familiar to me — in a world that doesn't make sense to me, or to them.

Now in 2025, as an American, this is how I increasingly feel about my own life. Things that felt unimaginable only a few days ago keep happening, and before you have a chance to absorb the shock, a new unimaginable thing happens. My friends and colleagues still all make sense to me, they oppose what is happening, and yet we are all not sure what can be done to stop it, and for now we have not managed to stop it. Meanwhile life on the streets around us continues to appear not so different from before. This is how autocracy works.

As we were editing, Michael Taylor and I organized a screening club to watch chapters as we finished them. We wanted to make sure the film worked for people who didn't know or care much about Russia. It being New York, many people were originally from elsewhere. We were struck by how many of them — friends from Iran, a friend who grew up under military dictatorship in Argentina, an acquaintance from Tunisia — said they'd never seen something that so accurately depicted what it was like to live under a totalitarian or authoritarian regime, that the story was also about them.

Now for many people in the U.S. — and maybe soon in Europe as many countries take a rightward turn — the story feels like it may also be about us.

CHARACTERS: (note: Bios are written from the timeframe of the film. To find out more you'll have to see Part II: Exile, which we are now editing and which will be finished later this year.)

ANYA (Anna Nemzer)

Anya is a documentary filmmaker and a senior host at TV Rain, hosting a political talk show, "Politics: Direct Line," and a new show called "Who's Got the Power?" focusing on activists trying to create a better society even as Russia becomes more and more oppressive. When Anya was 11, her mom and stepdad, both academics, emigrated, eventually settling in the U.S. Anya made a decision to stay in Russia, living with her grandparents. When we meet Anya, she still lives in the apartment she grew up in, sharing it with her own family now, including her 10-year old daughter Lilka, and a pet chinchilla. A regular cast of friends are always hanging out in the kitchen, a tight community of journalists and activists.

KSYUSHA (Ksenia Mironova)

When we meet her, Ksyusha is a 23-year-old reporter at TV Rain and at the center of a group of young journalists. She works for several shows, including a feminist show called "Women on Top." Her fiancé Ivan Safronov has been jailed on charges of "treason." When we meet her, he's been awaiting trial over a year, and the government still has provided no information about the charges. Other journalists constantly mention Ivan Safronov, worrying it could happen to them, which is exactly the point. He will eventually be sentenced to 22 years in prison.

LENA (Elena Kostyuchenko)

Widely considered to be Russia's best living long-form journalist, its Joan Didion, Lena worked at *Novaya Gazeta*, headed by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dmitry Muratov, since she was 18. The newspaper is her home in the world. In addition to writing extensively on vulnerable populations in Russia, she reported from the 2014 Russian invasion in Ukraine and from international hot spots. An out lesbian in a country where that's a crime, she has been arrested at protests many times. When Russia starts a full-scale war, Lena immediately goes to Ukraine. She is one of the only Russian reporters able to get into the country. (Spoiler alert: Lena's book, "I Love Russia," about Russia's turn to fascism, was one of New Yorker's Top 10 Books of 2023 and a NYTimes recommended read.)

SONYA (Sonya Groysman) & OLYA (Olga Churakova)

When she was in high school in Siberia, Sonya kept a notebook of things she learned from TV Rain. She started journalism school during the 2012 protests, when people flooded the streets chanting, "Russia Will Be Free!" and she believed it would be. Olya used to be in the presidential press pool, back when they allowed independent media — it's impossible to imagine now. When the investigative news outlet where they both worked was shut down as an "undesirable organization," and Olya and Sonya became among the first journalists declared "foreign agents," they started a podcast called "Hi, You're a Foreign Agent!" On New Year's Eve, they record an inspiring alternative to Putin's annual greeting, starring many "foreign agent" journalists and activists. At the start of the year, Sonya starts a new job at TV Rain, where she had worked before. Her second video report is on the gathering of troops near the Ukrainian border. It comes out two days before the full-scale war. Olya also returns from a freelance assignment reporting on gathering troops at the border.

ALESYA (Alesya Marokhovskaya) & IRA (Irina Dolinina)

Ira and Alesya have worked together and been best friends since they lived together in a college dorm. When we meet them, they're holding down the fort at the Moscow office of a small investigative media outlet, *Important Stories*, where they worked on the Pandora Papers. The office has been searched already and they know it's bugged, and their editor Roman Anin has been forced to leave Russia after being searched in a trumped up criminal case. He works remotely from Prague, while the rest of the team tries to stay and work from Russia as long as they can. Ira and Alesya are also among the first journalists to be named "foreign agents." They go to court to appeal the decision, hoping to at least get some answers as to why the government singled them out. Alesya's girlfriend, whom she met on Tinder, also dreams of being an investigative journalist. On the first day of the full-scale invasion, Ira is detained by the FSB while reporting near the Ukraine border. A few days later they close up the office and leave for Prague too.

BIOS

Julia Loktev (director, producer, cinematographer, editor)

Julia Loktev was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and immigrated to the U.S. at age 9. She has made both fiction and documentary. *THE LONELIEST PLANET* starring Gael Garcia Bernal, screened at the New York Film Festival, received the Grand Jury Prize at the AFI Film Festival, nominations for Best Director at Independent Spirit Awards, and Best Feature at Gotham Awards, and was chosen by Indiewire as one of the "100 Best Films of Last Decade." *DAY NIGHT DAY NIGHT* premiered at Cannes in Directors' Fortnight, received two Gotham Awards nominations, and earned the Someone to Watch Award at Independent Spirit Awards. Her documentary *MOMENT OF IMPACT* won the Sundance Film Festival Documentary Directing Award and the Grand Prize at Cinéma du Réel, screened in New Directors/New Films at MoMA, and was an Independent Spirit Awards Truer Than Fiction nominee. Julia is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Emerging Icons Award from the George Eastman Museum.

Michael Taylor, ACE (editor)

Michael Taylor edits fiction and non-fiction films. He edited Julia's fiction features *THE LONELIEST PLANET* and *DAY NIGHT DAY NIGHT*, as well as Lulu Wang's *THE FAREWELL*, winner Best Film, 2020 Spirit Awards; Edson Oda's *NINE DAYS*, winner Waldo Salt Award for Best Screenplay, Sundance Film Festival 2020; Rick Alverson's *THE MOUNTAIN*, Venice Film Festival Competition, 2018; Jake Mahaffy's *FREE IN DEED*, winner Best Film, Orizzonti section, Venice, 2015, Holly Morris's *THE BABUSHKAS OF CHERNOBYL*, winner Best Editing, Woodstock Film Festival, 2014; Margaret Brown's *THE ORDER OF MYTHS*, winner, Peabody Award, 2010, Mitch McCabe's *YOUTH KNOWS NO PAIN*, HBO Documentary Films, 2009; Margaret Brown's *BE HERE TO LOVE ME: A FILM ABOUT TOWNES VAN ZANDT*, Toronto Film Festival, 2004.

Anna Nemzer (co-director) — see bio above under characters

In addition to what we learn about her in the film, Anna Nemzer is now based in New York and is the cofounder of the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA), which preserves Russian independent media from the entire history of Putin's rule, most of which have been closed. The archive aims to create an incontrovertible historical record of Putin's regime that can be used as evidence. The archive also functions as a model for other countries where independent media are at risk.