

# **BUILDING TRUST AND DEFENDING THE TRUTH**

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**FOR RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE AUDIENCES**

**C****CONTENT**  

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**FUND**

**PLURALITY**  
EMPOWERMENT  
CONTENT LIBRARY  
**COACHING** MARKETING  
SUPPORTIVE NETWORK  
**TRUTH** CREDIBILITY **TRUST**  
**PRODUCTION** **ACQUISITION**  
DISTRIBUTION **AUDIENCES**  
**FUNDING** BALANCE  
WORKSHOPS  
**INDEPENDENT MEDIA**  
BEST PRACTICE  
**CREATIVITY** **INNOVATION**  
**STORYTELLING**  
**RUSSIAN LANGUAGE**

# ABOUT THE CONTENT FUND

**The Content Fund (full name Creative Content Support Fund) defends the right of Russian-language audiences to see their lives truthfully reflected by independent media. Its unique grant-making mechanism supports the production, acquisition and distribution of video, audio and TV content in the Russian language in the Eastern Partnership and beyond.**

The fund was set up in 2016 in response to the long-standing problem of disinformation emanating from Kremlin-backed media, twisting the truth and crowding out independent voices in the region. After years of unrestrained adventurism on the part of Russia, with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as its strongest demonstration to date, it is now abundantly clear that support for media can no longer be separated from the geopolitical context, security issues included.

Sharing genuine stories is the best way to promote mutual understanding and tolerance. Repressive control and manipulation of media content has the opposite effect, with devastating consequences for democracy, human rights and international security.

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**TOTAL AUDIENCE REACH:  
100+ MILLION VIEWS**

**(2016-2021)**



The Content Fund's pioneering model in support of independent media is audience-centred. It is premised on deep engagement media content that works through accessing deep human emotions, as a means of evoking universal human responses. These stories broaden minds and confirm reality, a necessary task when parallel realities are being created.

Thanks to Content Fund support, a new generation of independent media voices, ethical story-tellers, and content creators have been able to produce pluralistic and balanced content in Russian. With the support of the Content Fund's network of production executives, these media partners have enhanced their production and editorial skills and capacity.

Registered in Belgium and based in the region, the Content Fund has earned a strong reputation amongst its partner platforms and broadcasters as a reliable donor. Its association with the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) helped it build a presence through the inception phase, and since late 2019 the Content Fund has successfully operated as a separate entity. Today, the Content Fund makes it possible for many independent media organisations, often working in hostile environments, to approach the future with greater professional and financial confidence.

[www.contentfund.org](http://www.contentfund.org)

June 2022

## CHALLENGES



The media ecosystem in general is in trouble, with the existing business models broken, and too much finance on the side of disinformation. Big tech amplifies the negative effects of this phenomenon.

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In the territories the Content Fund supports, independent media is in dire straits, deprived of functioning media markets for self-financing and sustainability, silenced by repressive measures and crowded out by media operators loyal to autocrats. All this against the background of the mass production of Kremlin-aligned disinformation.

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The prevalence of falsehoods, confusion and mistrust leads to the fracturing of audiences into self-selecting groups, known as filter bubbles or echo chambers, and leaves others indifferent, making traditional media assistance ineffective.

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There are no limits to this cynical game, especially in the Russian-language media space. Whatever will serve the purpose will be used, to the point of full-scale war.

## HOW WE HELP



To compensate for the lack of an enabling environment for independent media, the Content Fund provides **funding** for Russian-language content creation, acquisition, marketing, distribution and capacity building.

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The fund creates a **community** of independent media and creators that can share ideas together. With the help of its supportive network, the partnership base grows stronger.

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The simple instrument through which the Content Fund works is **storytelling**, local, authentic and thus credible. This key skill at the heart of audio-visual content creation offers an effective way of connecting with and impacting audiences.

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**Deep engagement media** is a way of accessing universal human emotions. It can reach across a divide – or into an information filter bubble – because it inherently works through our common humanity and ability to empathise.

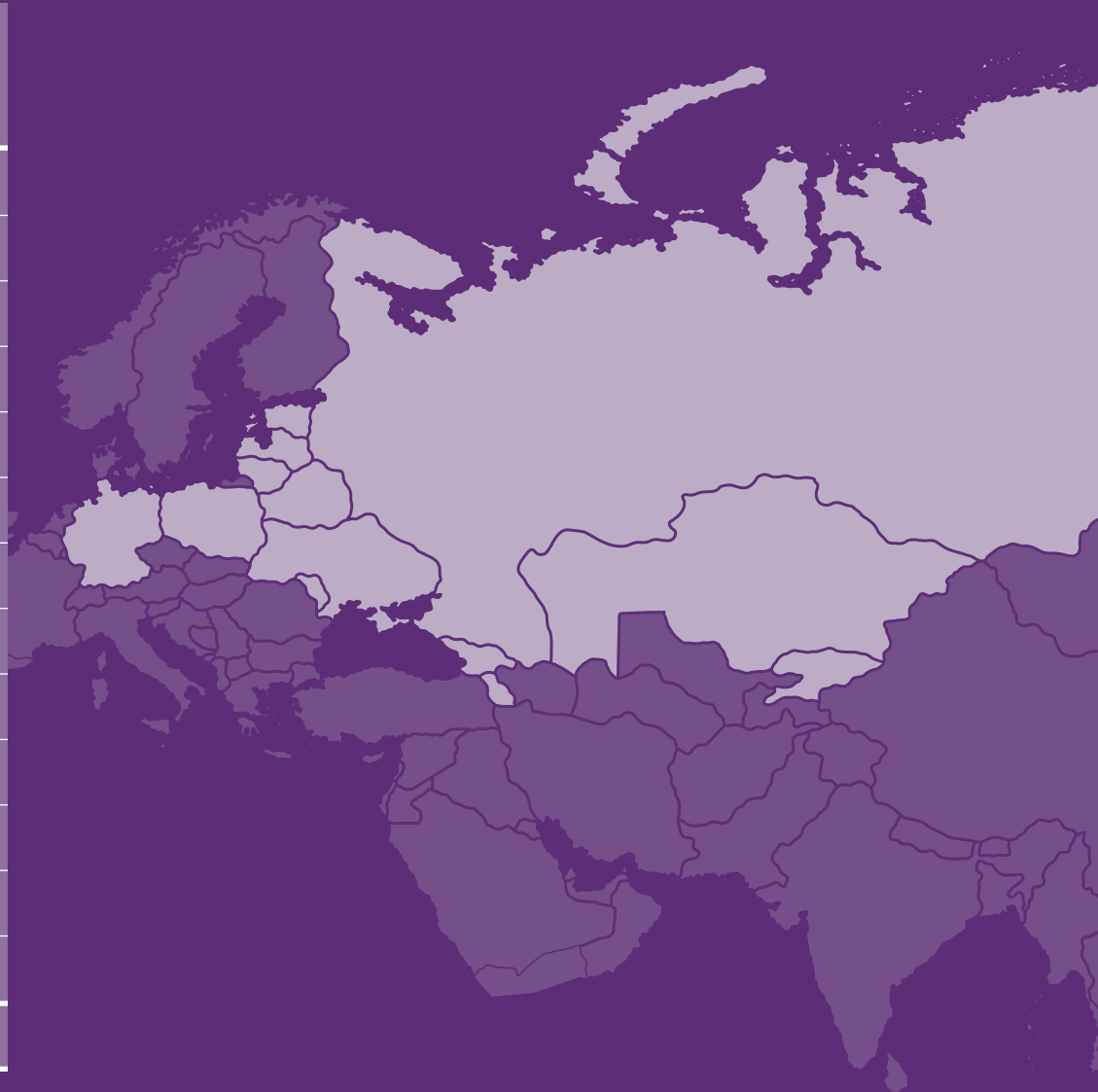
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By building a relationship with audiences based on **truth and trust** the Content Fund can reach vulnerable and captured audiences and provide an effective response to the disinformation problem.

# RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE AUDIENCES

COUNTRY	RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE AUDIENCE Approx. Size
Armenia	300,000
Belarus	7,000,000
Estonia	400,000
Georgia	100,000
Germany	3,000,000
Kazakhstan	10,000,000
Kyrgyzstan	1,800,000
Latvia	700,000
Lithuania	300,000
Moldova	1,000,000
Poland	500,000
Russia	145,000,000
Ukraine	18,000,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>188,100,000</b>





## TESTIMONIALS

“What the Content Fund has enabled us to do is that it has given us space, money and the ability to innovate and to experiment, to create what is essentially a very fresh, very new format.”

**Natalia Antelava, Coda Story, Georgia**

“Ukraine has lots of political reporting but little cultural, scientific or art journalism. Media that don’t cover politics in Ukraine struggle with good journalists and audiences. With the Content Fund’s support, they can continue reporting on less covered topics while also creating an environment that enables more versatile journalists to work and grow professionally.”

**Anna Filimonova, Mayak, Ukraine**

“In the Republic of Moldova, there are several TV channels that are rebroadcasting other channels from Russia. It’s more important to see a show that is filmed here in your own country, with your neighbours and friends, the people you can really see in Moldova. The programmes produced under the Content Fund are really different to what is produced in Russia, because they have this sense of local production. You can really feel that you belong to this country and the content is from here.”

**Christina Pohilenco, Jurnal TV, Moldova**



*Still Waters*, ETV+, Estonia

“On the part of the Content Fund and the Belsat channel, I felt I had a deep understanding of the topic and assistance in creating the film. I received constructive comments working on the project.”

**Andrei Kutsila, director of *When Flowers Are Not Silent* and *Strip and War*, Belsat TV, Poland**

“The funding for *Post-industrial Kids* was Sova’s first ever funding for non-news content creation, which led to our first ever production of this kind. The reception and recognition of the series was beyond our expectations. The project has become a milestone for Sova’s team. *Post-industrial Kids* has become a statement from Sova that we are not a small group of media enthusiasts, but a team of media professionals.”

**Marta Ardashelia, Sova News, Georgia**



# COMPREHENSIVE PRODUCTION SUPPORT

*Still Waters, ETV+, Estonia*

**One of the strengths of the Content Fund is the world-class expertise of its network of production experts. Its production executives and managers work directly with media partners, available to advise whenever needed, and travelling to them if necessary.**

The Content Fund production support base includes industry professionals who have run TV stations and production houses in Ukraine, Russia or the UK, as well as former commissioning editors, award-winning producers and documentary makers.

Beyond this core, the fund has access to dozens more producers, executives and academics with relevant media experience in the region. With this unique pool of expertise, it can help build capacity and introduce new storytelling and production techniques to our partners. All with the purpose of serving audiences with authentic content reflecting lived reality that resonates with them.

The Content Fund also has an independent jury to assess the productions applying for funding. This independent assessment of bids is provided by experts in the field. The selection process ensures fairness and encouragement, leading to the selection of the best ideas.

This competitive process drives creativity which is subsequently fostered with professional and technical support. This unique operational model is further enhanced through workshops that encourage best practice and network building.

The production base offers direct and timely feedback at all stages of the production process – from idea inception to output and marketing. With the help of the Content Fund, partners have developed many popular and award-winning productions.

Looking ahead, the fund is committed to nurturing local talents in these consultancy roles, so that local professionals can eventually guide and support productions on the same basis as its Western production experts.



# GENRES AND FORMATS

## GENRES

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Documentary



Explainers



Drama



Sitcom



History Productions



Entertainment



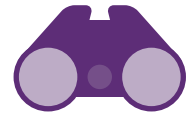
Reality (travel)



Interactive Anime



Mockumentary



Observational  
Documentary

## FORMATS

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Television



Digital or Online



Interactive



Podcasts



Radio

## THE CONTENT FUND



## CAPACITY BUILDING

**The Content Fund has been dependable in supporting Russian-speaking independent media in difficult places and in difficult times. Capacity building is an essential part of its mission. The fund invests in current and future independent voices and media outlets by upgrading their skills and competence in content production, storytelling and distribution.**

Empowering local voices to serve their audiences with authentic content is a strategic choice, which limits the share of Kremlin-backed and other toxic media. This direct investment in people will generate results for years to come, also by contributing to the security of the region.

Capacity building is about future proofing: you can't serve audiences with content from independent media if the independent media don't exist. Otherwise, donors are simply paying Western producers to make and deliver content into the region or paying oligarch channels to do it for them.

The Content Fund builds capacity through coaching and guidance before, during and after the production cycle. Its production executives offer creative and technical support. Through this mentoring system, it also boosts the strength of the media outlet. The more professional and accomplished their staff are, the better they can attract audiences and advertisers, and achieve sustainability.

The fund's unique intellectual property (IP) model ensures editorial control rests with the platform or associated producer, and that the reputational and financial benefits accrue back to the IP holder. When creators possess the IP rights, they can monetise their success.

This methodology of strategic support and capacity building delivers a longer-term impact for donor investment. Content Fund grantees become self-starters, with one production creating a pathway to the next.



## WORKSHOPS

**The Content Fund holds regular workshops for its media partners. This forum has proved to be an excellent way to get partners working together. Workshops ensure best and worst practice is shared for learning purposes, and successes and common interests emerge with an eye on co-productions.**

Through Content Fund workshops, content creators have the opportunity to learn about production, formats and storytelling techniques, how to draw out topics, and pitch and create original stories in the real world to make them shareable and universal. They have easy access to the fund's base of production experts who can work with them on boosting storytelling and production techniques.

Russian-language independent media in the Eastern Partnership and beyond have a lot in common. Many are working in repressive environments and in their work they all respond

to similar social, economic and political dynamics, with the unaddressed history of Russian imperialism casting a long shadow on societies.

Workshops are the principal mechanism by which the Content Fund encourages co-operation and co-production between media partners, and, where possible, independent producers.

The Content Fund is committed to supporting activities which facilitate collaboration between beneficiaries and other partners, and which enhance the sharing of content, resources, information, ideas, skills, talent and technology between them.

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**NUMBER OF PARTNERS SUPPORTED: 42** 



## Profile Creator Anna Filimonova

Ukrainian producer Anna Filimonova has given women in her country new platforms to speak about what matters to them. Her first media enterprise is Mayak, an Odesa-based online magazine that covers society, culture, science and controversial topics of the day. In addition to running Mayak, she co-authors @takpodcast, a series of talks on controversial problems in Ukraine and beyond.

“I think that collective problems people face in the modern world can be treated in the same way as individual problems — by talking,” Anna says in her introduction to the podcast.

Mayak’s stories reflect a similar philosophy. Its stories range from explainers on literature from Ukrainian writers to breastfeeding in public, racism in Ukraine and sexism in science. Most recently, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Content Fund awarded a grant to Mayak’s podcast series *Feel the War* as part of its ‘War Stories’ round of funding.

One of the most popular stories of the *Woman in the City* series, funded by the Content Fund, produced by Anna Filimonova, offers a detailed guide of how to leave an abuser. Tapping into solutions journalism, it explains abuse – physical, mental or financial – and gives advice from a professional therapist on where to seek help and how to prepare for the separation in a way that is safe for the victim.

Anna Filimonova’s background is in public relations and media. Apart from raising awareness and boosting women’s voices, her content is broadening the playing field in Ukraine and beyond. Through four grants, the Content Fund has helped establish a strong base for Mayak.

“Ukraine has lots of political reporting but little cultural, scientific or art journalism,” she points out. “I want to change that.” With Content Fund support, Anna Filimonova and other young media professionals can continue to shine a light on under-reported topics while also inspiring others to explore topics beyond politics.

**“UKRAINE HAS LOTS OF POLITICAL REPORTING BUT LITTLE CULTURAL, SCIENTIFIC OR ART JOURNALISM”**

Anna Filimonova, Mayak, Ukraine





Woman in the City, Mayak, Ukraine

## LIBRARY & DISTRIBUTION

**The Content Fund supports media partners by storing and sharing all productions and formats in a common library. Partners can use the resource for free to extract others' content for their own platforms as they wish. But the library also has utility in helping partners see the potential of productions. In this way they can learn about formats and storytelling techniques already in use, and find formats and approaches which can be adapted for their own territory. It acts as a long tail for the Content Fund, delivering a return beyond the immediate distribution of a production project on air or online.**

Since its inception the fund has delivered over 200 hours of original content and 1,038 hours of acquired content through 176 grants distributed to 42 media partners from 11 countries. The supported content has reached well over 100 million audience views and won more than half a dozen awards, at a cost of just EUR 9M.

Distribution and marketing support are also part of the Content Fund's model. It helps advise on the best platforms and channels for distribution, as well as mentoring content creators towards participation in festivals.

Through marketing grants, creators and outlets receive money to advertise their content, both online and offline.

The Content Fund provides guidance on the optimisation of content placement, such as the best time slots for TV, and the most suitable social media channels. The fund works on growing audience figures and engagement.

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**NUMBER OF GRANTS AWARDED: 176** 



## WAR STORIES

Exceptional times call for exceptional measures. The Content Fund launched a call for 'War Stories' in March 2022 in response to the tragic events unfolding in Ukraine following Russia's cynical and devastating invasion. The funding call was aimed at providing support to Russian-language independent media and content creators to allow them to continue their important work in support of the truth, as well as fostering a plurality of voices, both in the context of this war and beyond.

In particular, the call aimed to contribute to creating factual and trustworthy content to counterbalance the deluge of Kremlin-backed disinformation that followed the invasion.

Based on the feedback of an expert jury panel, the Content Fund Board approved for funding 15 submissions from 12 applying media partners.

A long-term partner of the Content Fund, TV8 from Moldova, was the clear overall winner, and was awarded the First Award of EUR 25,000. All other award winners – nine entries including six from Ukraine – were equal behind them and not ranked, and received awards of EUR 10,000 each. Five additional entries received smaller grants.

TV8 created an outstanding observational documentary in terms of content, access and filming. The jury found *Ukraine in Flames* an excellent and dynamic piece of rapid turnaround



documentary making. They also praised the professional work of the cameramen and editors, and storytelling that brings the reality of war to a wide audience.

*Ukraine in Flames* was shot by Viorica Tataru and Andrei Captarenco, the only Moldovan journalists who covered the invasion of Ukraine from the very first days of the war from different cities across Ukraine (Odesa, Mariupol, Lvov, Nikolaev and others). For nearly two weeks they witnessed through camera lenses the start of the war and its subsequent developments, capturing what the people of Ukraine felt and how they reacted to these terrible events.



# WORKING IN A REPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The last decade has seen an ongoing decline in global freedom with severe consequences for independent media. Governments in the Eastern Partnership and beyond present a mixed picture. Some countries, notably Belarus and Russia, have adopted new laws and practices in recent years to further reduce civic space and media freedom. The crackdowns on public protests have been brutal. Others, such as Moldova have moved in a more democratic direction, despite Russian meddling.

Now that war has been added to the mix, with the shocking Russian invasion of Ukraine, the destiny of the entire region is in question. One Content Fund partner from Russia described the war as a “moral catastrophe for the entire Russian society that needs to be analysed and processed”.

“That’s why we strongly believe that it is more crucial than ever to continue our work as journalists and serve the Russian audience with trustworthy information.”

Repression comes in various forms, all of which make it difficult or even impossible for independent media to operate. One effective tool is censorship, whether through blocking particular websites or social media channels, withdrawing licences to operate or banning certain groups or outlets from operating.

On an individual level, the security and legal apparatus of the state is used to target media professionals and make it unsafe for them to truthfully document what is happening in their societies. This intimidation can take the form of arrests, interrogations, trumped-up charges, detention, searches of homes, fines and other sanctions. For many, exile becomes the only way out.

The Content Fund has made it a priority to support independent voices in the region, whether they are working in their home country or in exile. Both settings are critical.

# STORIES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**At the heart of everything the Content Fund does are the needs of the diverse Russian-language audiences across the region. This selection of award-winning Content Fund productions that have found appreciation at home and abroad demonstrates the value of truth-based storytelling that reflects real life.**

## ***Tales of Soviet Repressions, Coda, Georgia***



With dignity and honesty, victims of the Gulag talk about their memories of Soviet repressions, their stories partly illustrated through animation. The series became the One World Media Finalist in the Digital Media Category and received an honouree mention at the Webby Awards.

## ***#IamCrazy, OstWest, Germany***

Four people, four mental disorders, one city, and one psychotherapist. The first Russian-language reality show about mental health set in Berlin, *#IamCrazy* broke the taboo of mental disorders, and went viral in the Runet. It won First Prize at the Moscow Docu-Mental Film Festival in 2020, and participated in a number of other festivals and competitions.

## ***Mom, Dad, Kids; How to talk about, Belarus***

A series of videos highlighting pressing issues about parenting in Belarus, which are also relevant to the whole region covered by the Content Fund. The series strongly resonated and inspired a meaningful debate about key but uncovered topics within Belarus. Received a diploma from the Belarusian Press Club at the annual Focus on the Future exhibition in Minsk.

## ***#WHO\_ARE\_U, Russia***

An interactive 'dramedy' web series which focuses on the story of a young human rights activist, who is learning to live, love, and defend human rights in today's Russia. The production received widespread critical acclaim, including the following: finalist of the Moscow Film Festival 2020; finalist of the Third Ceremony for Web Industry; nominee at Rio WebFest and selectee of the New Harvest Film Festival.

**HOURS OF ORIGINAL  
CONTENT PRODUCED:  
200 HOURS**



**HOURS OF ACQUIRED  
CONTENT:  
1,038 HOURS**





### *Strip and War, Belsat TV, Poland*

In a military town near Minsk, a young erotic dancer lives with his grandfather, a retired colonel. Their story is a universal reflection of the clash of generations, and of Belarus and the post-Soviet, pro-Russian world. The documentary participated in festivals in 15 countries and picked up several awards, including the Film Critic's Award, FIPRESCI Prize, at the Festival of Central and Eastern European Film.



#### ***When Flowers are not Silent, Belsat TV, Poland***

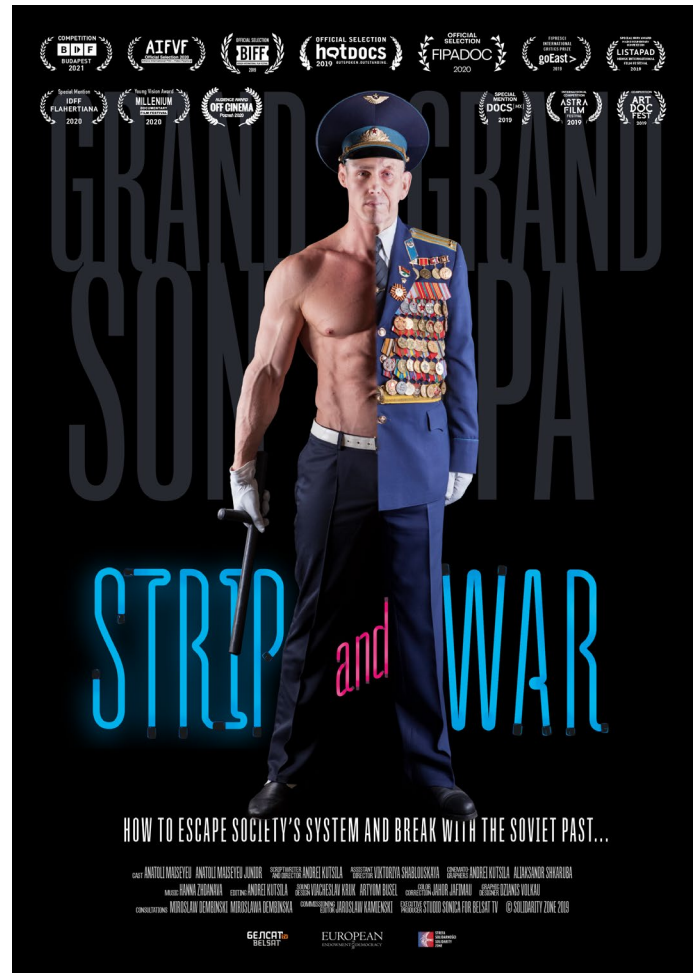
A 90-minute observational documentary about families caught up in the harsh security crackdown following the falsified election results of 2020 in Belarus. A deeply moving human story about

the hope for freedom. This film won Best Documentary Feature at the Warsaw Film Festival 2021 and continues to garner international awards and accolades.



#### ***Still Waters, ETV+, Estonia***

A drama covering the life of a small Estonian border town with its secrets, scandals and relations between parents and teenagers. A story of social significance, with important contemporary issues, such as depression and the dangers of the cyber world, with the family drama in the background. *Still Waters* was chosen as a nominee for the international television festival Input 2022.



**TOTAL NUMBER OF PRODUCTIONS SUPPORTED: 88** 

**PRODUCTIONS**

## MONITORING & EVALUATION

**The productions supported by the Content Fund gain meaning and value when they are viewed or listened to in private settings, even more so when they are shared with others and elicit a response from audiences.**

To understand who is accessing this content and what impact it has, the Content Fund relies on a range of monitoring and evaluation methods. With this knowledge, the fund can continue to support content of the highest international quality and build new audiences.

From the beginning, the Content Fund has obliged its partners to collate data on audiences as part of the grant agreements. Tools such as TV ratings, Google Analytics, YouTube Studio or Facebook Insights are mined for information as to who is watching, and for how long.

A further stage is more thorough audience analysis (including segmentation, focus groups, and polling) to work out what sort of content works to achieve a desired objective.

The Content Fund seeks to better understand the demographic profiles of audiences in core territories, their behaviour and media consumption habits. This provides actionable data that allows for more accurate measurement of outcomes, and informs future decisions on commissioning productions, targeted media outlets and audiences.

The fund's aim is to establish a complete picture of which genres and platforms work best with which audiences, based on demographics and geographical location. It wants to prioritise content that increases trust in free and fair media and reaches new audiences, including those inside filter bubbles.

Ultimately, this insight will help increase the productivity of the Content Fund's work by making it more closely targeted to outcomes and strategic objectives. Lessons learned through this process can also be shared more broadly, both with other organisations working in the region, and with all who are committed to supporting independent media or have a stake in the global response to disinformation.







*Ukraine in Flames*, TV8, Moldova

Back Cover: *When Flowers Are Not Silent*, Belsat TV, Poland





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