

# BLACK SNOW

Directed by Alina Simone

## PHOTOS

Available [here](#)

**Total Run Time: 100 min**  
**Russian dialogue with english subtitles**

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## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Facebook: [@blacksnowthefilm](#)

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## **SHORT SYNOPSIS:**

When residents of a remote Siberian coal mining city discover that an abandoned mine has caught fire, pushing toxic gas into their homes, they turn to homemaker-turned-journalist Natalia Zubkova for help. But

after her news coverage of the coal fire goes viral, the government launches a massive effort to cover up the truth. In the shadow of an increasingly authoritarian government, Natalia embarks on a dangerous quest to reveal the full extent of the environmental catastrophe unfolding in her midst. Filmed over the course of four turbulent years in Russia and eastern Europe, this taut and revelatory eco-thriller shines new light on the human cost of coal and the clandestine tactics of Russia's modern surveillance state.

#### **LONG SYNOPSIS:**

On June 6, 2019, residents from the Siberian coal-mining city of Kiselyovsk make an extraordinary appeal to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Standing in a barren field, they explain an abandoned Soviet mine has caught fire beneath their neighborhood of Podzemgas, pushing toxic gas into their homes, yet the government refuses to resettle them. They beg for asylum from Russia as environmental refugees.

The source of the video is Natalia Zubkova, a 42-year old mother of three, whose YouTube channel — consisting mostly of live, self-narrated, cell phone videos — has become Kiselyovsk's only independent news outlet. Kiselyovsk is among the most polluted cities in Russia. Within the space of a decade, nine massive open pit coal mines and three coal processing plants have opened there, cloaking it in year-round smog. Many believe the coal industry has taken over the city, operating outside the constraints of environmental laws, yet with tacit backing from the government. The region has among the lowest life expectancy rates in Russia.

Natalia is convinced her own daughters' health problems are caused by coal pollution. This is why she began reporting on the city's environmental issues, even though the work pays nothing and her husband, a coal truck driver, deeply opposes it. Early that year, freshly fallen snow blanketing the city had turned black because a local coal processing plant lacked filtration. Residents flooded social media with eerie videos of the apocalyptic landscape, but government-controlled news outlets remained silent. Natalia filled this void; her critical coverage of the black snow crisis turned her channel into a trusted local news source, but it also put her on the government's blacklist.

When Natalia publishes the video appeal to Trudeau, it sparks a media maelstrom in Russia, fueled by Alexei Navalny and other independent news outlets. Within 48 hours, it airs on Canada's CBC news, prompting an official response from the Canadian government and garnering the attention of the state's powerful governor, Sergei Tsivilev, a coal oligarch married to Putin's first cousin.

A week later, Governor Tsivilev arrives in Podzemgas. After touring the burning fields with residents, he announces the government will launch an investigation to determine the true cause of the fire. In the meantime, all 71 families of Podzemgas would be resettled. For Natalia and the residents, it is an extraordinary victory; they had forced the government's hand using nothing but their creativity, a cell phone and an internet connection.

But Tsivilev's promise turned out to be a lie. The decision was reversed and they soon found themselves the targets of a massive disinformation campaign. Despite government pressure and constant police surveillance, Natalia launches her own scientific investigation, discovering new coal fires and documenting shocking levels of toxic gas. The government responds to Natalia's controversial reporting with a devastating, final assault — this time, targeting her family. Faced with a painful ultimatum, Natalia must decide how much she is willing to sacrifice to protect those she loves.

## **MORE ABOUT THE PRODUCTION:**

### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

The issue of Russian authoritarianism is deeply personal to me; I was born in Soviet Ukraine and came to the U.S. after my father was blacklisted by the KGB. In addition to being fluent in Russian, I have a profound personal connection and deep knowledge of Siberia through my previous career in international development. Prior to becoming a journalist, I spent 10 years working on NGO projects in Siberia.

I reached out to Natalia in mid-2019 and found much common ground as both a Russian-speaking mother and a journalist. But our relationship deepened considerably once I embedded with Natalia in Kiselyovsk and we found ourselves under heavy police surveillance. Eventually, we were interrogated by the FSB together (a scene which I managed to secretly record, and is included in the film), and I was fined and banned from returning to Russia. While my personal experience is distinct from the film's narrative, it gave me invaluable insight into the corrosive pressure tactics employed against Natalia and other environmental activists in Kemerovo.

Within the past ten years, environmental journalism has become one of the profession's most dangerous beats. Unraveling the chain of accountability behind environmental abuses invariably leads reporters to the thresholds of the powerful and the wealthy, and in countries where the rule of law is absent, exposing the truth often comes at great personal cost. In Russia, journalists and activists who investigate the secretive and powerful mining industries responsible for providing much of the nation's wealth face the gravest risks. And coal is an industry that Russia wants to protect at all costs.

Most Western countries have pledged to phase out coal. Aside from the hydra of health and environmental ills it spawns, coal is the single greatest contributor to Co2 emissions on the planet and one of the largest drivers of climate change. Yet Russia, the third largest global exporter of coal, is doubling down on it. Putin has vowed that coal production will increase by at least 25% over the next fifteen years, from 440 million tons to 550-670 million tons.

The city of Kiselyovsk is part of the Kuznetsk Basin, one of the largest coal basins in the world, which provides more than half of all coal produced in Russia today. In the span of just ten years, the number of open pit mines operating within the city's borders increased from one to nine, creating an unimaginably toxic environment for those who live there. Residents of Kemerovo Province (where the Kuznetsk Basin is located) have nearly the lowest life expectancy in Russia, and are far more likely to develop cancer, asthma or other chronic health problems associated with coal toxins.

Putin keeps a watchful eye on this coal-rich swath of Siberia not just for its economic significance; the region has also long been known as a bellwether of Russian politics. During Perestroika, the riots that eventually toppled the Soviet regime began here, when coal miners throughout the state went on strike demanding better pay and working conditions. For all of these reasons, cities in the Kuznetsk Basin are subject to even stricter government control and censorship than other parts of Russia.

Citizen journalists like Natalia Zubkova face massive challenges in accessing the information necessary to hold mining companies accountable for violations of Russia's environmental laws. The mines are constantly changing hands, often between the same cadre of oligarchs, most of them close associates of Putin. They create obfuscating networks of corporate subsidiaries in order to hide their true ownership and deflect responsibility. Mines conveniently go "bankrupt" to avoid the costs of rehabilitating land or providing payouts to residents for the toxic environments they've left behind. And the Russian government abets these abuses by perpetrating an informational blackout, threatening journalists and activists with financially crippling fines or arrest, failing to enforce existing laws, and passing egregious legislative carveouts that allow, for example, extending an open pit mine to within 100 feet of an inhabited home.

It is my hope that Black Snow will expose the tactics the government is using to suppress activists and journalists and provide powerful evidence for how Russia's slide into authoritarianism, coupled with an unrestrained mining industry, is creating global environmental impacts that the world cannot afford to ignore. If documentary film can do one great shining thing, it is to provide powerful proof of our shared humanity. By illuminating the struggles of ordinary Russians speaking out against their government and the powerful coal-mining industry at great personal risk, Black Snow gives voice to mining communities who must endure the cost of pollution so that the rest of the world can enjoy cheaper energy costs.

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS:

**Alina Simone** (Director/DP/Producer) is a Ukrainian-born journalist and filmmaker whose work has appeared in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Guardian Long Read, California Sunday, Slate, and NPR, among many others. Her articles have been featured on best-of lists in The Atlantic, NPR and Rolling Stone, and have been optioned for film by major studios. She is the author of an essay collection and a novel, both published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, and has taught writing at Yale University. Simone is the recipient of the Andrew Berends Film Fellowship, an NYSCA/NYFA Film Fellowship and the Mountainfilm Emerging Filmmaker Fellowship. *Black Snow* is her first film.

**Kirstine Barfod** (Producer) is an acclaimed film producer, celebrated for her significant contributions to the film industry. She has earned prestigious awards including an EMMY, a Cinema Eye Award for Outstanding Achievement in Production, a Peabody Award, and a 2020 Academy Award nomination for producing *The Cave*, a documentary by two-time Oscar-nominated director Feras Fayyad. Throughout her career, Kirstine has produced and co-produced numerous notable documentaries and series, such as *Reunited* (Hot Docs), *The Magic Life of V* (Sundance), and *Ibrahim* (TIFF). Her outstanding work led to her invitation to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2019.

**Aleks Gezentsvey** (Editor) has received multiple awards, including an Academy Award for Best Documentary and a BAFTA for the film "Navalny" (as co-editor) an Emmy for Exceptional Merit in Documentary Filmmaking and the Sundance Audience Award for "Jim: The James Foley Story." Her films and series have appeared on major platforms such as HBO, Netflix and Hulu.

**Katya Mihailova** (Composer) is a composer for film and media whose work spans the range from solo piano to experimental-electronic, and orchestral to folk. Katya has composed original scores for numerous documentaries, features and shorts, including "The Territory," "Born Free," and "Russian Woodpecker." Originally from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Katya holds a Masters Degree from the Manhattan School of Music in piano performance. She has been nominated for the British Academy Television Craft Awards for Original Score and was a Film Composer Fellow at the Sundance Institute.

**Morten Green** (Sound Designer) a seasoned professional in film and television sound, boasts a career spanning over two decades since his graduation from the National Danish Film School in 2001. He's made substantial contributions to more than 20 Danish feature films, excelling as a supervising sound editor, sound designer, and re-recording mixer. His achievements include four Danish Film notable films like "The Good Nurse" (2023) and "Prisoner" (2023).

## **ABOUT THE FILM'S PROTAGONIST**

### **NATALIA ZUBKOVA:**

Natalia Zubkova is an environmental journalist from Kiselyovsk, Russia whose work focuses on environmental abuses and government corruption. She founded her online news and video outlet, News of Kiselyovsk, in 2017, and it soon became the only independent media outlet in the city. Her investigations on environmental abuses in the mining industry, and the government's effort to cover up these catastrophes, received coverage from independent news outlets throughout Russia (Echo Moscow, Novaya Gazeta and TV Rain, Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation) as well as major international outlets such as CBC News, Deutsche Welle and the Wall Street Journal, which dubbed Kiselyovsk the "Death Valley" of Russia.

In 2020, the government of Kemerovo launched a public campaign of intimidation and harassment against Natalia, which was documented in Justice for Journalists's 2020 report on attacks against female media workers. Natalia was forced to flee Russia in 2021 and was able to move to Georgia with support from an international coalition of NGOs, including the Committee to Protect Journalists. Since then, Natalia has received grants from the Estonian NGO "SN", Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights and Czech NGO People in Need, to establish a new Russian online environmental media outlet and database of documented environmental abusers, as well as a grant from the World Wildlife Fund for a report on harms caused by the coal industry to steppe ecosystems in Khakassia.

In 2023, Natalia opened a 17-bed refugee shelter, "A Quiet Place" near Batumi, Georgia, with funding from private and NGO sources.

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