



PETIT À PETIT presents:

# paradise

A FILM BY ALEXANDER ABATUROV  
FRANCE / 2022 / 88 MIN.



**World premiere**

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2022  
IDFA International Competition

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

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A man wearing a light-colored bucket hat and a jacket is looking off to the side. The background is a hazy, orange-tinted scene of a forest fire, with smoke and trees visible. The overall mood is somber and urgent.

## SYNOPSIS

In the summer of 2021, an exceptional heat-wave and drought led to giant fires ravaging millions of hectares of land in northeastern Siberia. In this region, at the heart of the taiga, lies the village of Shologon, soon to be coated by a thick cloud of smoke. Spread by the wind, the black ashes carry alarming news: the forest is on fire and the flames are fast approaching. The government having left them to fend for themselves, the inhabitants must rally to fight *The Dragon*.





## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ALEXANDER ABATUROV

### How did the idea for the project come about?

The idea came to me in the summer of 2016 as I was working on my film 'The Son'. We were filming solstice, a summer ritual with a big fire. It was the last sequence we were filming for 'The Son'. And I guess this project was a natural continuation of it. When the idea of the film came in 2016, I didn't start the project right away as I had to finish 'The Son'. Then there were several years of research and re-writing of the project. The preparation period was very long, it was brewing in my head, changing, mutating. The idea was not very precise at first, but I knew it would have to do something with fires, wildfires, as their ultimate form. I knew that I didn't want to do a film about professionals fighting fires. I was more interested in telling the story of ordinary people fighting wildfires. Once I came to Yakutia, to the Sakha Republic, I saw the locals who were really committed to this fight because they were abandoned and left to fend for themselves. I found that really powerful.

So in 2019 and 2020, I was scouting in Siberia, and the shooting itself was last year, in 2021. Between all the lockdowns and the pandemic, I found a way to go to Siberia, to Yakutia. And last summer, in July, I went there with the crew. It was still a COVID situation, and it was still pretty difficult, but we managed to go there. And we stayed there for around four weeks.

### How did you find the Shologon village where the story is unfolding?

A wildfire is an unpredictable creature. We don't know when, where and how it will spread as it always moves, so there was an unknown element to it. Because of the unpredictability of wildfires, it really felt like we were trying to chase the Dragon. These were the events I couldn't control, and it was the main challenge, I guess. So we developed a method. First, we looked at a wider area hit by drought and heatwaves, which are the contributing factors to wildfires, and then we zeroed in on a small village, where we would find interesting characters and follow the events there.

Some local journalists helped me find information about the places because they knew the region better. It was a local journalist, Elena, who told me about Shologon. Although there were several villages that were menaced by wildfires, what interested me was not a site with the highest level of danger. I was interested in the place itself. And it was the description of the village she gave me that I found intriguing. She said that Shologon was the smallest village in the area, with a dead-end road. And it was home to a lot of elderly people as well as youngsters with dyed hair. There was something ancestral, even eternal, and something very futuristic about it.



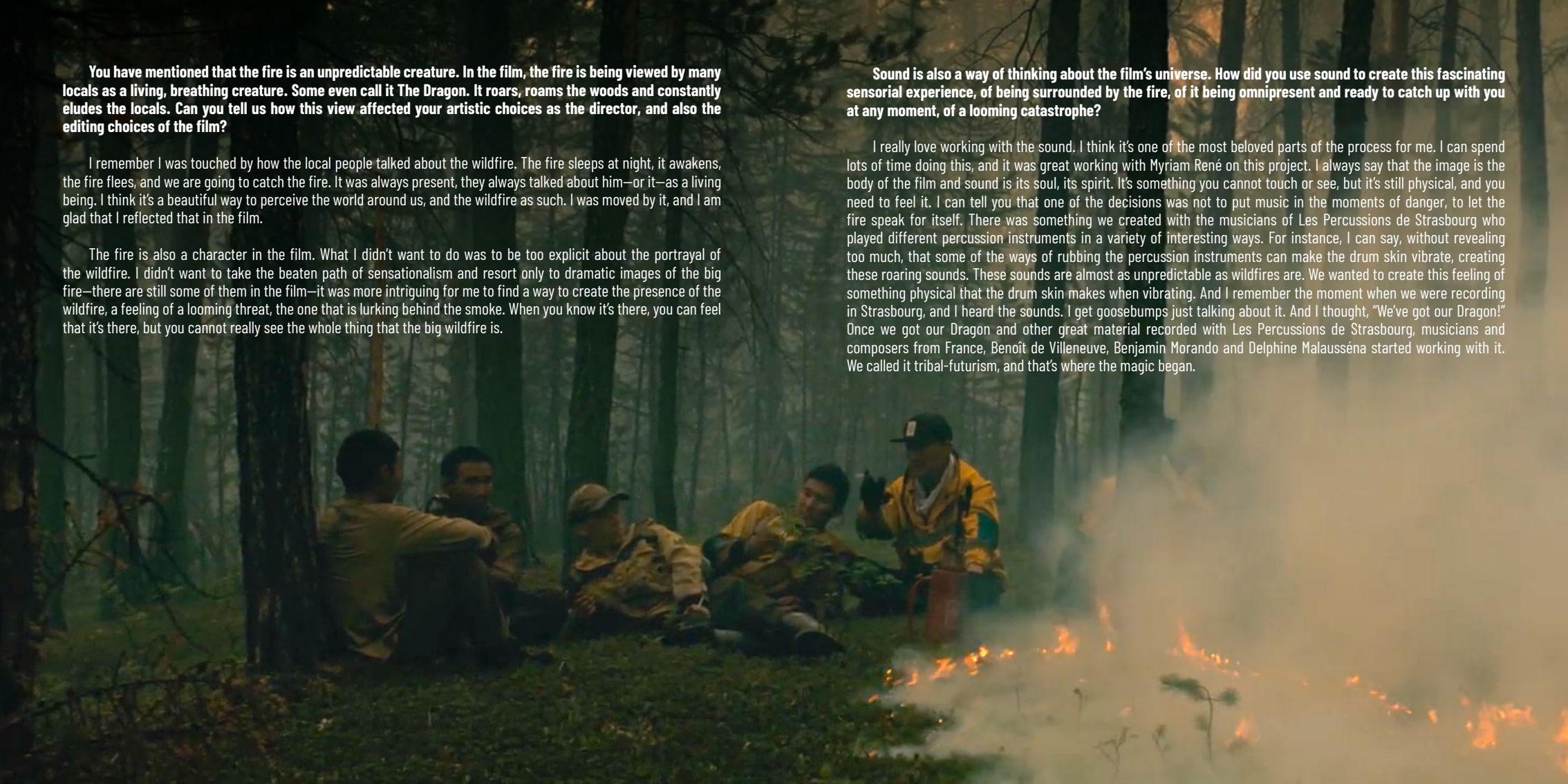
**You have mentioned that the fire is an unpredictable creature. In the film, the fire is being viewed by many locals as a living, breathing creature. Some even call it The Dragon. It roars, roams the woods and constantly eludes the locals. Can you tell us how this view affected your artistic choices as the director, and also the editing choices of the film?**

I remember I was touched by how the local people talked about the wildfire. The fire sleeps at night, it awakens, the fire flees, and we are going to catch the fire. It was always present, they always talked about him—or it—as a living being. I think it's a beautiful way to perceive the world around us, and the wildfire as such. I was moved by it, and I am glad that I reflected that in the film.

The fire is also a character in the film. What I didn't want to do was to be too explicit about the portrayal of the wildfire. I didn't want to take the beaten path of sensationalism and resort only to dramatic images of the big fire—there are still some of them in the film—it was more intriguing for me to find a way to create the presence of the wildfire, a feeling of a looming threat, the one that is lurking behind the smoke. When you know it's there, you can feel that it's there, but you cannot really see the whole thing that the big wildfire is.

**Sound is also a way of thinking about the film's universe. How did you use sound to create this fascinating sensorial experience, of being surrounded by the fire, of it being omnipresent and ready to catch up with you at any moment, of a looming catastrophe?**

I really love working with the sound. I think it's one of the most beloved parts of the process for me. I can spend lots of time doing this, and it was great working with Myriam René on this project. I always say that the image is the body of the film and sound is its soul, its spirit. It's something you cannot touch or see, but it's still physical, and you need to feel it. I can tell you that one of the decisions was not to put music in the moments of danger, to let the fire speak for itself. There was something we created with the musicians of Les Percussions de Strasbourg who played different percussion instruments in a variety of interesting ways. For instance, I can say, without revealing too much, that some of the ways of rubbing the percussion instruments can make the drum skin vibrate, creating these roaring sounds. These sounds are almost as unpredictable as wildfires are. We wanted to create this feeling of something physical that the drum skin makes when vibrating. And I remember the moment when we were recording in Strasbourg, and I heard the sounds. I get goosebumps just talking about it. And I thought, "We've got our Dragon!" Once we got our Dragon and other great material recorded with Les Percussions de Strasbourg, musicians and composers from France, Benoît de Villeneuve, Benjamin Morando and Delphine Malausséna started working with it. We called it tribal-futurism, and that's where the magic began.






I decided not to use traditional Yakutian music or throat singing. We chose drums and percussion instruments because there is something very old and ancestral to them. And it's something we all share. The whole of humanity plays drums. They are everywhere, they are present in every culture. Just like the fire, which created humanity, literally. Using traditional or ethnic music would be too obvious. I didn't want to exoticise these people. I wanted to say that we are in it together.

The sound of the fire itself was sculpted by Myriam as it was not directly recorded. If you record it directly, it would just be crackling and rumbling, that's it. You cannot really record the fire (or the wind) easily because, well, we are prisoners of the microphone. It is limited. So we were sculpting it.

**The locals seem to have a special connection to nature, which is much more tender and patient. They are not trying to tame the wildfires by liquidating them completely, instead they are trying to hold them off until the rain comes. It may be the case because the locals realise the impossibility of extinguishing the fires with the resources and manpower they have. But it feels like it also has to do with their outlook. Could you share your opinion on that, and how you were able to convey that in the film?**

Yakutia is certainly the place where the bond with nature has not been cut off. You know that these people are also pageants and animists. They did not have Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, rather they had Animism, which represented the first form of religion. There was a belief that everything in nature is a living being, and the human is not a little god that controls everything but is one of the elements in nature. And today with these new environmental tendencies, we are coming back — maybe not to the same point — but to the vision that everything is a living being, and we, humans, are just a part of it.



A photograph showing three people from behind, looking out over a forest at sunset. The person in the center is wearing a white headscarf and a dark jacket. The person on the left is wearing a dark jacket and a cap. The person on the right is wearing a camouflage jacket and a cap. The background is a dense forest of tall trees, with the sky glowing orange from the setting sun.

You also have to understand that the locals did not necessarily choose the role of the protector, they had to do it—and they did it the best they could—because there was no functioning system in place that could help prevent the spread of wildfires and ensure that they are put out rapidly when it is still possible to do so. The locals were forced to fight for their homeland on their own because the state just abandoned them. It's an ecological crisis and a very bad management from the government, which essentially reflects Moscow's long-running colonial and parasitic approach towards Siberia and some other regions.

We also have to keep in mind that the rules of the game have changed due to the mounting climate crisis. The ancestral visions and approaches may not be apt anymore for tackling the crisis. Can wildfires play a certain regenerative role for ecosystems? Forest fires had always been part of the circle of life, I guess, but they have now become something destructive, and that has happened because of human actions, of course. There are just too many wildfires now, and the summers are way too long for Siberia. Drought hits the area every year. So yeah, wildfires may be part of nature, but now that the equilibrium is broken, livelihoods are in danger. I am not an expert in environmental science, but I guess the planet and nature may eventually find a way to readapt, but when it comes to humans, I am not so sure. When we say we need to save the planet, I guess we mean we also need to save our civilisation.

**During the shooting there must have been times when you were also in a life-threatening situation, along with the volunteers who fought the wildfires.**

Yes, I felt the responsibility. Besides me, there was Paul Guilhaume, our DoP, our camera assistant and our sound engineer, so there were four people filming during the summer period. Of course, there was some level of danger. There were two filming sessions in the summer, and after that we returned in the winter to do additional shooting. I recall when Vasya, one of the main protagonists, and I met again, we were so glad to see each other, and we were drinking tea and chatting about the shooting back in the summer. At some point, we looked at each other and realised how treacherous some situations were. We realised the full extent of the danger only in the aftermath.





**For a lot of people living outside Russia, the concept of a 'control zone' is frankly shocking. We learn that 'control zones' are deemed those remote or sparsely populated areas where the government is not obliged to fight wildfires if the costs of extinguishing them exceed the estimated damage. In Yakutia, in north-eastern Siberia, we are told that over 80 percent of the territory is a 'control zone'.**

Moscow has an exploitative attitude towards other regions, in particular Yakutia and Siberia. They are just taking the resources, and that's it. It has been like that for a long time. But now with capitalism in the picture, it became even worse, now there is also a mention of money, of the costs of operations, budgets. It is like an epitome of Newspeak [from George Orwell's '1984'] where the Russian federal government just coins the term which is the opposite of reality. A 'control zone' is not under control, it is actually completely out of control. It's hypocritical, it's like they are mocking us. It is enraging.

**At the onset of the film, you introduce us to the locals' plight with the information about Russia's 'control zones', and then you return to it as the documentary draws to a close. It seems to be the backdrop of the story, where the conflict lies, but it is not the main story.**

This is exactly the way I see it. The information about the country's 'control zones' introduces us to the situation, in which the Shologon locals find themselves after the government abandons them to fend for themselves amid raging wildfires. But the main story is about the incredible humanity of people joining forces in the face of a shared hardship, of people protecting their homes almost with their bare hands. [Ed.: At the end of the film, we learn that in the summer of 2021, fires burned some 19 million hectares in Russia and that 90 percent of the fires came from the country's 'control zones'. For the first time ever, ashes blew to the North Pole.]



## **Does such government inaction in Russia also direct media attention and affect the extent and depth of media coverage.?**

It is the case especially now, but it has been like that for around 20 years when Putin and his organised crime group took control of the media and turned it into a propaganda tool. When the fires started in May and continued in June and the first half of July, the authorities were not doing much about it. At some point, there was so much anger from the local people. The regional authorities that were supposed to represent the local people, in reality, only started to put on an act about actively fighting the fires (putting on military uniforms, making some patriotic speeches about fighting the fires) when Moscow demanded that things calm down amid all the anger coming from the local people, so that they can carry on with what they were doing. But it was like one and a half months after the fires started.

I guess as someone from Siberia (I am from Novosibirsk), I have observed that in Siberia in general there is much more opposition because of the different mentality, culture, and perhaps because Moscow is so far away, the people are really connected to their land. They use a lot of new ways to get and exchange information, and that's the case not only among the youths but everybody. In the village of Shologon, they have a WhatsApp group with everybody in it, and all the members can say whatever they think. When I came to these remote places in Yakutia, and I said that I would like to do a film about this issue, we were warmly welcomed. They wanted someone to shed light on the situation because they felt abandoned in facing this situation.

## **Finally, why the title PARADISE?**

The idea is that the place we are living in is our paradise. Maybe life in Siberia is a bit rougher than in other places, but it is our paradise, and we don't have another one. We don't have a plan B. We've got what we've got. Paradise is not an imaginary place that we aspire to. No, this is it. It's here and now.







## INTERVIEW WITH ALEKSEI YAROSHENKO

Head of the Forest Department of Greenpeace Russia

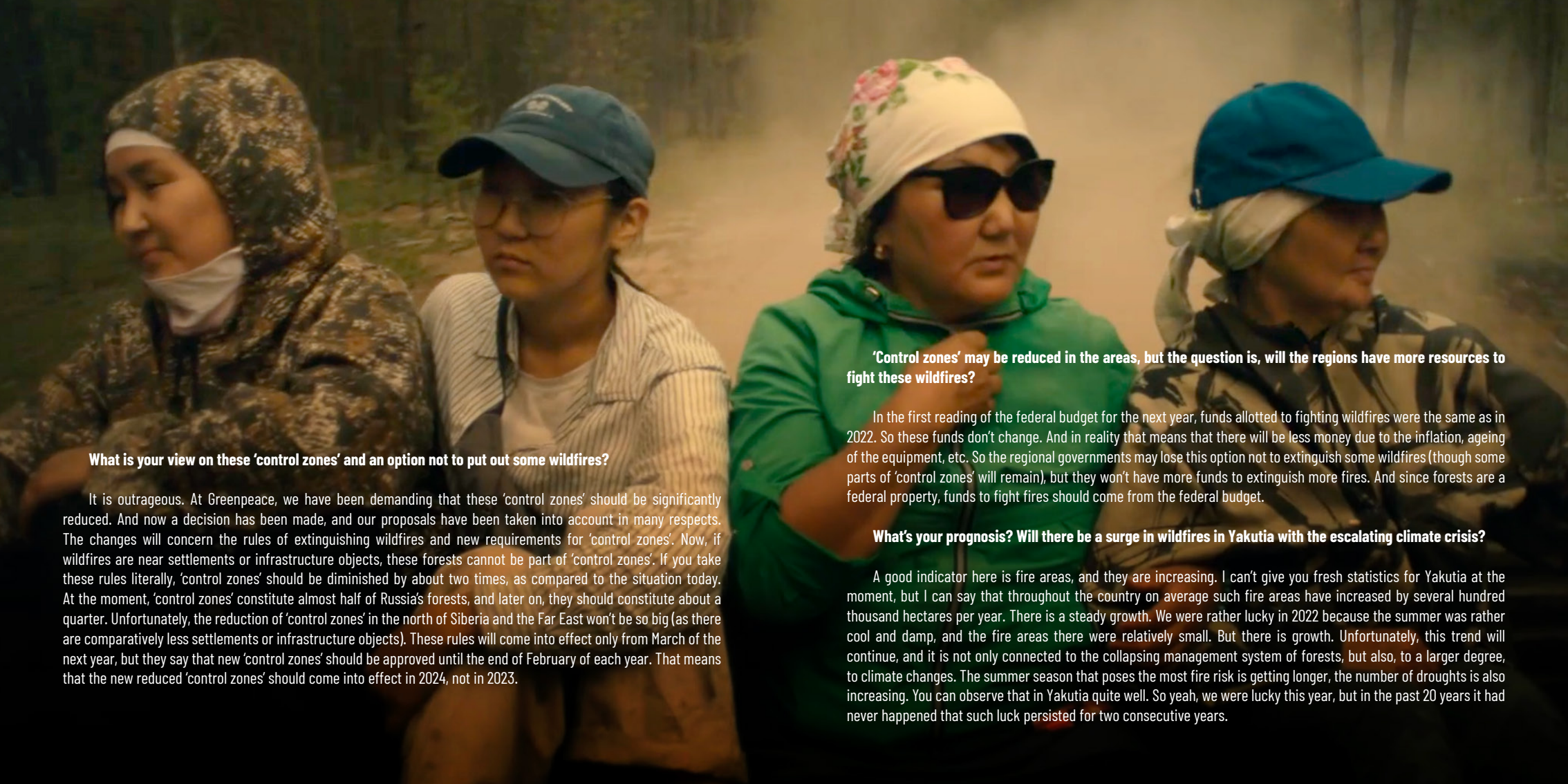
### How did 'control zones' come about in Russia?

There are analogous practices in other countries. In the United States and Canada, there are some territories, dubbed modified response zones, where a modified, not a full response, is deployed. Such a response envisages somewhat different measures than suppressing wildfires until they are deemed out. So the notion of a 'control zone' is not new, but here it got corrupted and turned into a purely financial matter, where 'control zones' are put in place to diminish costs. For instance, in Yakutia, more than 90 percent of forests lie in 'control zones'. The idea is very simple here: We don't have money, so let's not protect some of the forests.

**'Control zones' are deemed those remote areas that are difficult to access and are sparsely inhabited. In reality, we see that sometimes there are also nearby settlements.**

There are quite a few 'control zones' that approach populated areas. There are some settlements that lie directly in 'control zones'. Usually, such 'control zones' are the least populated territories, but it does not mean that nobody lives there. There are some settlements there. And the most important thing is that if a wildfire is already spreading within a 'control zone', it is not a problem for the wildfire to reach a nearby village that is some 10 or 20 kilometres away, even if it is situated not in a 'control zone'.



A photograph of four women standing in front of a smoky forest fire. They are wearing various types of protective headgear: a patterned hood, a blue baseball cap, a white headscarf with a floral pattern, and a blue baseball cap. The woman in the blue cap on the right is wearing a camouflage jacket. The background is filled with thick, brownish smoke from the fire.

### **What is your view on these ‘control zones’ and an option not to put out some wildfires?**

It is outrageous. At Greenpeace, we have been demanding that these ‘control zones’ should be significantly reduced. And now a decision has been made, and our proposals have been taken into account in many respects. The changes will concern the rules of extinguishing wildfires and new requirements for ‘control zones’. Now, if wildfires are near settlements or infrastructure objects, these forests cannot be part of ‘control zones’. If you take these rules literally, ‘control zones’ should be diminished by about two times, as compared to the situation today. At the moment, ‘control zones’ constitute almost half of Russia’s forests, and later on, they should constitute about a quarter. Unfortunately, the reduction of ‘control zones’ in the north of Siberia and the Far East won’t be so big (as there are comparatively less settlements or infrastructure objects). These rules will come into effect only from March of the next year, but they say that new ‘control zones’ should be approved until the end of February of each year. That means that the new reduced ‘control zones’ should come into effect in 2024, not in 2023.

### **‘Control zones’ may be reduced in the areas, but the question is, will the regions have more resources to fight these wildfires?**

In the first reading of the federal budget for the next year, funds allotted to fighting wildfires were the same as in 2022. So these funds don’t change. And in reality that means that there will be less money due to the inflation, ageing of the equipment, etc. So the regional governments may lose this option not to extinguish some wildfires (though some parts of ‘control zones’ will remain), but they won’t have more funds to extinguish more fires. And since forests are a federal property, funds to fight fires should come from the federal budget.

### **What’s your prognosis? Will there be a surge in wildfires in Yakutia with the escalating climate crisis?**

A good indicator here is fire areas, and they are increasing. I can’t give you fresh statistics for Yakutia at the moment, but I can say that throughout the country on average such fire areas have increased by several hundred thousand hectares per year. There is a steady growth. We were rather lucky in 2022 because the summer was rather cool and damp, and the fire areas there were relatively small. But there is growth. Unfortunately, this trend will continue, and it is not only connected to the collapsing management system of forests, but also, to a larger degree, to climate changes. The summer season that poses the most fire risk is getting longer, the number of droughts is also increasing. You can observe that in Yakutia quite well. So yeah, we were lucky this year, but in the past 20 years it had never happened that such luck persisted for two consecutive years.





## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

**Alexander Abaturov** was born in Russia in 1984. After graduating from Gorki University, he became a journalist. In 2010, he received a Masters degree from the French documentary School in Lussas. In 2013, he directed his first documentary, *SLEEPING SOULS*, selected in numerous festivals and awarded with the Institut Français Prize at the Cinéma du Réel Festival. *THE SON*, his first feature length documentary, was premiered in the Berlinale Forum and selected at many other festivals such as ArtDocFest, Message to Men, Cinéma du Réel, and several others.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

**Petit à Petit Production** and its main producer Rebecca Houzel are specifically oriented towards the field of independent creative documentaries. They support young authors as well as confirmed directors.

They produce movies that they feel are necessary, not only because they convey a singular point of view regarding the field they explore, but also for their cinematographic shape, which is always demanding. Petit à Petit Production is geared towards the field of international co-productions.

Their latest productions have been screened in several prestigious festivals: *MAY GOD BE WITH YOU* by Cléo Cohen (Interreligious prize at Dok Leipzig, IDFA, Cinemed), *THE GROCER'S SON, THE MAYOR, THE VILLAGE AND THE WORLD* by Claire Simon (IDFA, RIDM, Popoli, Thessaloniki, États Généraux du Documentaire) and *SOLO* by Artemio Benki (Acid Cannes, Best Czech Documentary Film at Jihlava, Best documentary at Make doc, One world, États Généraux du documentaire)

They create strong relationships with directors, following their careers and evolving with them. They are currently producing the third documentary of Aleksandr Kuznetsov. (*TERRITORY OF FREEDOM*, 2014; *WE'LL BE ALRIGHT*, 2016). *PARADISE* by Alexander Abaturov is their third collaboration with the filmmaker.



# CREDITS

Director	Alexander Abaturov
Production	Petit à Petit Production
Producers	Rebecca Houzel (delegate producer), Alexander Abaturov, Luc Peter
Co-production	SIBÉRIADE, Intermezzo Films, ARTE France Cinéma
Screenplay	Alexander Abaturov
Cinematography	Paul Guillaume
Editing	Luc Forveille, Alexander Abaturov
Sound	Myriam René, Sorin Apostol, Frédéric Buy
Music	Benoit de Villeneuve, Benjamin Morando, Delphine Malausséna, Les Percussions de Strasbourg
Colour correction	Christophe Bousquet
With the participation of	Canal +, ARTE France
With the support of	The Creative Europe – Media Programme of the European Union, Image en Mouvement of Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Brouillon d'un Rêve de la SCAM, Fond d'Aide à l'Innovation Audiovisuelle du Centre National du Cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), the Région Sud Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur with the CNC, the Région Île de France with the CNC, Procirep - Angoa, SACEM, Vision du réel, Succès passage antenne SRG SSR.
World Sales	The Party Film Sales
Distribution	Jour 2 Fête

## FORUMS & MARKETS

Festival Selections: **Pitching du Réel (Nyon) / Dok Leipzig**

Prizes awarded: **Jury Prize Pitching du reel, Visions du reel 2020**



