

Russian Culture Ministry Moves to Ban Films That Undermine 'National Unity'

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Daniil Dondurei

Russian films may be denied a distribution license if they are deemed to undermine the country's "national unity," according to new regulations that critics have denounced as an attempt to make filmmakers toe the Kremlin line.

The regulations were supposed to take effect on January 1, but have been delayed because the Culture Ministry is still awaiting reviews and comments on the proposed rules from other government agencies, a ministry spokesperson said Wednesday, the Interfax news agency reported.

The regulations, drafted in November, state that a film may be denied a distribution license — effectively banning it from Russian movie theaters and television screens — if it "contains content defiling the national culture, posing a threat to national unity and undermining the foundations of the constitutional order," Interfax cited the ministry as saying.

Filmmakers and critics have been outraged by the prospect.

"What is national unity? This is a completely new term, it didn't exist in the past," the chief editor of *Iskusstvo Kino* ("The Art of Cinema") magazine, Daniil Dondurei, was quoted by Interfax as saying. "In the past, all we had was [the term] anti-Soviet propaganda."

"Censorship is just a mechanism, but this is an ideological doctrine," Dondurei said.

The planned introduction of the new requirements appears to be part of a wider campaign by the Culture Ministry to unify Russians around Kremlin-endorsed values.

Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky earlier this week called for Russia to "consolidate the state and society on the basis of values instilled by our history," and urged the creation of a "patriotic" Internet and the spread of like-minded films, radio and television content.

Tighter government control over cinematographic expression is also likely to affect the domestic distribution of Andrei Zvyagintsev's film "Leviathan," set to hit Russian cinemas in early February.

"Leviathan" earlier this week raked in a Golden Globe award in the best foreign film category and is a contender for an Academy Award in the same category.

Russians who watch "Leviathan" in theaters are likely to see an edited version, with harsh language removed from the film's dialogue in line with a law passed last year that bans the use of expletives in the arts.

The editing of "Leviathan" appears to be a harbinger of what is to follow.

The head of distribution company Kino Bez Granits ("Cinema Without Borders"), Sam Klebanov, said that the new rules, if enacted, would be unlikely to affect many foreign films unless they specifically deal with Russia-related topics, but warned they could effectively hobble the Russian film industry, Interfax reported.

"This is, of course, primarily aimed at bringing domestic filmmakers in line, and pointing out to them their place as the 'wait staff' in the new ideological hierarchy," he was quoted as saying by the news agency.

It remained unclear how cultural officials would decide whether a film is detrimental to Russia's "national unity" or culture.

"Who is going to decide that the culture has been besmeared? The ministry? The public? A court? And on the basis of what?" director Andrei Proshkin was quoted as saying by Interfax. "How do you determine legally that the [national] culture has been besmeared? And what can besmear a culture more in the 21st century than such laws?"

"I don't doubt for a second that soon we will hear about malicious attempts to smear the national culture, and the banning of films," he said, adding that that would mark a return to Soviet-era practices.

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