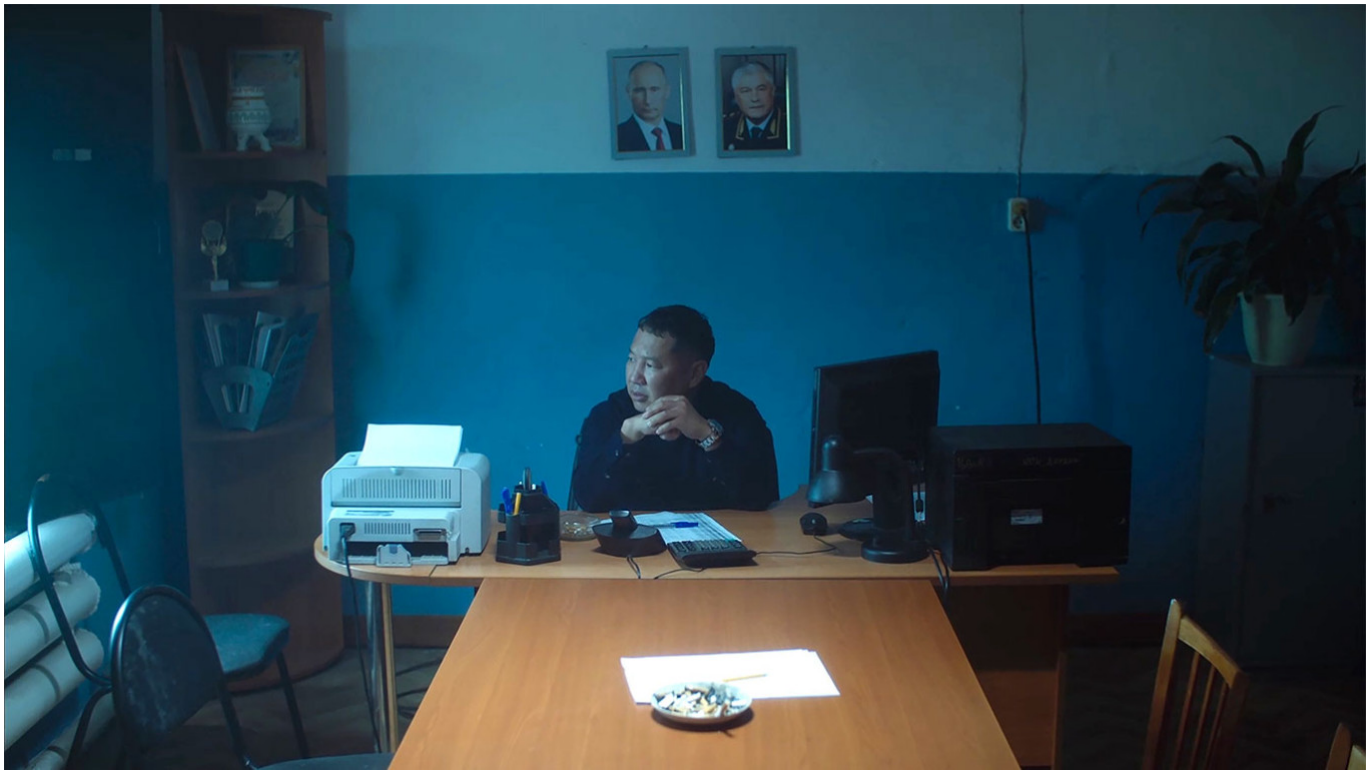
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Russian Media Regulator Slammed After Yakut Film Ban

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A still from the film "Ayta." **Screen grab**

A public row has erupted over the Russian government's decision to ban an ethnic Yakut film from online streaming platforms over claims of nationalism.

"Ayta" became the highest-grossing film ever in the Far East republic of Sakha (Yakutia), raking in more than 26 million rubles ($275,000) at the box office after its premiere in March.

The award-winning thriller centers around tensions between villagers in Sakha and an ethnic Russian police officer wrongfully accused of raping and killing an ethnic Yakut teen.

Russia's media regulator Roskomnadzor earlier this month ordered streaming platforms to remove "Ayta" due to its "destructive information that contradicts the principles of unity among the peoples of Russia."

"The film demonstrates inequality based on nationality," the regulator said, adding that "positive aspects of characters belonging to one nationality are contrasted with the

pointedly negative traits of characters belonging to another."

Related article: The Russian Film Industry Goes East

On Friday, Sakha's weekly publication Yakutsk Vecherniy ran the headline "Roskompozor" on its front page — a play on words that combines the media watchdog's title with the Russian word for "shame."

High-profile Yakut figures interviewed by Yakutsk Vecherniy all expressed hope that Roskomnadzor would ultimately overturn its own ban.

"It feels like the officials just didn't see the movie or didn't finish it," the publication wrote.

"Ayta's" director Stepan Burnashev argued that Roskmonadzor mistook the film's plot for an expression of separatism.

"The story is in fact about the division of people into 'us' and 'them' that can lead to tragedy," Burnashev told the Russian business daily Vedomosti.

Sakha's Culture Minister this week said he hoped Roskmonadzor would reconsider its ban but declined to openly challenge the federal agency.

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