

## In the Spotlight

By [Anna Malpas](#)

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This week, officials cruelly invaded the privacy of Russian celebrities. First they stripped epic film director Nikita Mikhalkov of the flashing blue light on his car, forcing him to sit in traffic as if he were an ordinary person. Then they searched the office of doe-eyed Eurovision winner Dima Bilan to check whether he was really declaring all the income from his corporate gigs.

Mikhalkov hit the headlines this week with his harsh criticism of the defense ministry for its handling of the annual Victory Day parade. The president and defense ministry watching from the balcony of the Lenin Mausoleum should have stood up to inspect the troops as a sign of respect, he insisted. And as for this year's event, my dear, it was simply a "faceless mass of identical uniforms" and a paltry five helicopters "representing all the might of national aviation," he scoffed in an open letter.

He spoke with the confidence of someone who spent years mustering hundreds of troops in the trenches during the long drawn-out making of his "Burnt by the Sun" trilogy. And he used the letter to dramatically hand in his resignation as the chairman of the ministry's public committee, a celebrity-heavy watchdog.

But some accused him of a fit of pique since his outburst was published shortly after the defense ministry deprived him of the blue flashing light on his car that gave him the right to zoom around Moscow breaking traffic rules indiscriminately.

Sources in the defense ministry quoted by news agencies said Mikhalkov asked to step down as chairman after he heard he would lose his blue light as part of cuts. Mikhalkov denied this, saying he had written the letter earlier although it was only published in Komsomolskaya Pravda on May 23.

Nevertheless he bitterly stood by his right to use a blue light. "What basis do they have to take this blue light from me now? Have I broken a rule? Or are there bad comments about my driver? There is nothing of the kind," he told Komsomolskaya Pravda. "How could the defense ministry be dependent on the hysterics in the blogosphere?"

In March, Lifenews.ru phoned Mikhalkov to ask about his blue light and recorded and posted the obscenity-filled reply, the only printable bit of which was: "I am glad that there is only one problem left in our country, the problem of Mikhalkov's blue light."

Mikhalkov has become an increasingly pitiful and wacko figure recently, with an ill-advised venture into video blogging in which he called himself the "Exorcist" and the disastrously unprofitable last two films in the "Burnt by the Sun" series. Not that we should worry too much for him, since the films were funded on a "don't bother paying us back" basis by two huge Russian banks and from the state coffers.

Meanwhile Bilan, humiliatingly, had his office searched by tax inspectors on the very day that he released his latest album, "Dreamer."

Marker.ru wrote that tax officers were skeptical that he had earned only about two million rubles in 2009, as his tax consultant, Valentina Postnikova, told Komsomolskaya Pravda last year. That was the year after he won Eurovision.

The Russian edition of Forbes magazine in 2010 listed him as the sixth richest Russian celebrity with earnings of \$3.7 million. His producer, Yana Rudkovskaya publicly declared earnings of 13.219 million rubles (about \$470,000) last year, because her husband, figure skater Yevgeni Plushenko is a deputy in St. Petersburg's city government.

Bilan certainly keeps himself busy, most recently performing at the opening of what is claimed to be Russia's largest mall in Moscow. Rudkovskaya told RIA-Novosti of the search that "All is OK. We have nothing to fear."

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