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Hollywood Stars Play for Controversial Charity

By Kevin O'Flynn

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Actor Kevin Costner playing a set with his rock group Modern West. Costner also took part in the Federation event last December in St. Petersburg. **Sergei Karpukhin**

The photos of Hollywood stars have been plastered all over the city for weeks, Dustin Hoffman looking down on Nikitsky Bulvar, Woody Allen and Steven Seagal, paired together on a billboard for probably the first time ever, on the Garden Ring.

This Saturday and Sunday the stars actually came together, apart from an absent Hoffman, at an event organized by the controversial charity Federation fund at a specially constructed outdoor stage at a closed-off Vorobyovy Gory, where Seagal danced, actor Kevin Costner played guitar and Woody Allen the clarinet before signing a black Hummer. It was that kind of event.

The gala did not have the surreality of the Federation fund's previous celebrity event, a night in St. Petersburg where Prime Minister Vladimir Putin sang "Blueberry Hill" as Sharon Stone

and Goldie Hawn, among other celebrities, watched on fawningly.

Dionne Warwick, Francis Ford Coppola, Sophia Loren, Andy Garcia and Isabella Rossellini were among the others who flew in despite recent accusations that the fund is more focused on publicity than raising money as well as a worrying lack of transparency.

The event, which also featured performances by the likes of tenors Jose Carreras and Andrea Bocelli, often veered between maudlin over-rehearsed sentimentality, token appearances on stage by the imported stars and contrived stunts such as when Seagal danced with a young girl who said it was her dream to do the waltz with a Hollywood star. The martial arts star gingerly wandered around the stage with the girl at arm's length as if he was worried he would break her. He later sang the blues classic "Hoochie Coochie Man."

Most off message was Costner who played with his band Modern West, explaining in detail what his songs were about — one was about a female Apache chief — praising Warwick for her singing voice, and failing to mention the charity.

In between the star acts, the hosts called up doctors and hospital workers to collect checks for equipment. Guests could look through a booklet with a list of equipment the fund said it has bought.

Charity director Vladimir Kiselyov has said the fund does not raise money but links donors to hospitals. However, Russian media reported that many of the hospitals listed on the fund's site do not have any connection with the fund. Kiselyov said the charity has donated more than $12 million to hospitals.

None of this has gone down well with many charities who have fought in the last decade to build trust among a cynical public suspicious of charity. The fund's reluctance to release documents and its aversion to transparency goes against the basic principles of modern Russian charities, they say.

"Without documents these words do not mean anything," said Yekaterina Bermant, director of the Children's Hearts charity. "All our reputations are at risk, those who worked for years and got respect of the people."

"It's unclear what exactly they do," she said. "I watched the live concert, and all the money — 3 million rubles here, 3 million rubles there — it is not much. It is good because hospitals do not have much, but it is still little after the grand scale of all the ads."

Critics have also queried the connections the charity must have to organize such high-profile events and gain government-backed sponsors such as Rostelecom. Forbes magazine's web site alleged Monday that Kiselyov is the godfather to Putin's children. Kiselyov has denied knowing Putin.

Guests at the event defended the fund.

"A lot of celebrities came for free or because they are good friends with Kiselyov," said Anna Zaitseva, an agent with Platinum Rai who had helped bring in some of the stars. She said many of the stars gave back their fees.

“People who did not give money think it was stolen. People who did give money know it was not stolen,” Zaitseva said. “I think the biggest problem is bad PR.”

Chris Noth, Mr. Big in the series “Sex and the City,” knew nothing of the scandal and said he received a fee for taking part in the event, a practice that is standard in the United States, The New York Times reported.

The invited crowd of less than a hundred included singer Alsou, members of the Russian national football team and Alimzhan Tokhtakhounov, otherwise known as Taiwanchik, the businessman who the United States government describes as a “major figure in international Eurasian organized crime.”

Despite the huge advertising campaign, which the Moscow city government provided for free, Kommersant reported that only a few dozen turned up at Gorky Park to watch a live broadcast of the event.

The only no-shows were Hoffman, who U.S. media reported turned down the invitation, and former CNN host Larry King, who sent a video message that said he could not come because of a medical problem.

“I was so looking forward to my first visit to Russia where my mother was born,” King said.

Kommersant reported Monday that the parents of Dasha Zvonareva, who died of cancer last year, complained that the fund had used her image in a video without their permission.

“Somebody is trying to use our Dasha’s image in their dishonest ways,” the parents wrote in a letter, the newspaper reported.

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