

Big Stars Criticized Over Grozny Show

By [Nikolaus von Twickel](#)

October 12, 2011



Hilary Swank in Grozny on Oct. 5. **Musa Sadulayev**

Hilary Swank, Jean-Claude van Damme and other celebrities who performed in front of Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov last week should return any money or gifts they received, a leading human rights organization said Wednesday.

"Kadyrov is linked to a grim record of abuse. When stars get paid to turn up to party with him, it trivializes the suffering of countless victims of human rights abuses," Human Rights Watch [said](#) in a statement.

Oscar-winning Hollywood actress Swank, Belgian action star van Damme, violinist Vanessa-Mae and British singer Seal were among a motley troupe of national and international stars that attended a lavish gala in Grozny on Oct. 5.

None of them has commented on their appearances, where van Damme stammered, "I love you, Mr. K-Kadyrov," and Swank exclaimed, "Happy Birthday Mr. President!"

National media reported that Vanessa-Mae, who infamously performed at a Kremlin concert for the Federal Security Service in 2007, was paid \$500,000 for the gig, and a senior Chechen culture official told the Caucasian Knot news service that the stars' salary demands were "nothing out of the ordinary."

Human Rights Watch said that if they were paid, the stars should not keep the money.

Officially branded as a celebration of Grozny's City Day and the opening of a high-rise business center, the festival also coincided with Kadyrov's 35th birthday.

The Chechen leader, who earlier this year changed his title from president to "head," has long been accused of gravely abusing his powers and running Chechnya as a personal fiefdom, backed by billions of rubles from Moscow in exchange for his ruthless commitment to suppress Islamist insurgents and maintain relative calm.

Kadyrov has consistently denied these accusations, calling them an information war to tarnish his image. In the run-up to Oct. 5, he explicitly banned public birthday celebrations and pledged to fire anybody who attempted to give him a gift.

Rights groups initiated an awareness campaign and sent letters to foreign stars as soon as word got out that they would attend.

Actors Eva Mendes and Kevin Costner said they declined invitations, while representatives of Colombian pop star Shakira first confirmed her attendance and later backtracked, the New York-based Human Rights Foundation [said](#) in a statement.

The organization's founder, Thor Halvorssen, singled out Swank as the least scrupulous by saying her manager, Jason Weinberg, told him in a Sept. 26 e-mail that "Hilary has no current plans to attend."

"Hilary Swank obviously has the right to earn a living entertaining the highest bidder, but this sort of venality should be exposed. Would she have accepted an invitation to entertain Pinochet? Al-Qaida?" he asked.

The activists argued that it was in the stars' personal interest to be sensitive to human rights concerns.

Hugh Williamson, director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch, pointed out that Kadyrov's "veritable catalog of abuse" was widely available on the Internet. "Celebrities should do better to avoid legitimizing people like Kadyrov and embarrassing themselves," he said in a statement on his organization's web site.

Alexander Cherkasov, a senior activist with Memorial human rights organization, which has regularly clashed with Kadyrov, said it was a principle of conscience.

"Any artist has to decide for himself whether he is going to act responsibly, or whether he is going to think of his reputation," he told The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/10/12/big-stars-criticized-over-grozny-show-a10132>