

In the Spotlight

By [Anna Malpas](#)

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On Wednesday night, Russia television treated viewers to more than an hour of a “live” concert in Grozny to celebrate the 35th birthday of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Or I should say, to celebrate Grozny’s City Day, since Kadyrov modestly waved away attempts to celebrate his big day or give him presents. After all, what do you give the man who already has a fleet of Porsches and Ferraris and a stable of racehorses?

The opening of a glitzy new skyscraper complex, Grozny-City, was the ostensible reason for the concert. The birthday boy sat bang in the middle of the front row in a comfy leather armchair, wearing a slightly-too-tight navy blue suit. He was flanked on his right by regional presidential envoy Alexander Khloponin and on his left by Belgian actor Jean-Claude Van Damme, who spent most of the time looking bewildered through his tinted glasses and sinking down into his chair.

Oddly enough, the concert, billed as live on-screen, was clearly not, since it started at 7 p.m. Moscow time but only aired on the channel at 10:50 p.m. Reading witness accounts and watching news, I realized that the show cut out substantial chunks of the concert, including a fulsome tribute from Van Damme, who stumbingly confessed: “I love you, Mr. K--k--k

Kadyrov.” Also cut was a tribute from actress Hillary Swank, best known for cross-dressing in “Boys Don’t Cry.”

There was no sign of Colombian pop star Shakira, after the Chechen government announced she was invited but she denied any involvement on Twitter. That left the show with dimmer stars, including pop crossover violinist Vanessa-Mae, who looked very different from her heyday of playing the violin on the beach in a see-through shirt. Wearing a drab lace dress, she played a bit of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” utterly mechanically.

The most bizarrely unexpected participant was British singer Seal, who tried to put on a show, whirling his microphone and shaking hands with people in the front row. Kadyrov awkwardly tapped his feet to “Kiss from a Rose,” while the camera cut at one point to a group of suited officials openly sniggering at the singer. What with his wife, German model Heidi Klum, hosting the compulsive U.S. reality show “Project Runway,” you would think he would not need to do this kind of gig.

Kadyrov’s aide Timur Aliyev wrote on his blog that he had never heard of Seal, but praised Van Damme, saying he behaved “simply and modestly” and even danced the lezginka at the end of the party.

Naturally, human rights activists have criticized the stars’ decision to take part in a concert effectively glorifying Kadyrov’s leadership, without considering his extremely dubious rights record, dogged with allegations of violence and torture. And it’s hard to see how they could plead total ignorance of a region that has been in the news for a decade, even if, like Hugh Grant’s hero in “Bridget Jones’s Diary,” they “couldn’t give a ----” about Chechnya.

What’s more, rights organizations contacted the stars, or tried to, through their agents. The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights also warned them off in an open letter at the end of last month, detailing rights abuses and torture in the region.

None of this put off Russian stars, who were there in force, including actors Sergei Bezrukov and Fyodor Bondarchuk, nor Ukraine’s Sofia Rotaru, who whispered flirtatiously in Kadyrov’s ear and sang a song called “I will give a planet your name.”

Apparently untroubled by all the scandal, Kadyrov launched into a traditional-style dance on stage on Wednesday, bowing to the audience, which responded with a standing ovation.

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