

Ousted Red Cross Head Threatened

By [Alexander Bratersky](#)

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Lidia Khrameyeva standing in an abandoned Red Cross medical center near the Marino metro that she once led. **Alexander Bratersky**

Irina Lerno-chinskaya, a veteran leader of Moscow's Red Cross, proudly shows off pictures of her together with Dutch Princess Margriet and former first lady Naina Yeltsin.

Lerno-chinskaya has won much praise from the world's luminaries for her work to establish and keep afloat a Red Cross-sponsored charity for homeless and runaway children in southern Moscow.

However, the phone calls she now gets are not filled with praise and encouragement but anonymous threats warning her to retire.

Lerno-chinskaya has lost her job with the Red Cross, and she and other former Red Cross employees link the threats to the new head of the organization's Moscow branch whom they describe as an unscrupulous businessman with highly placed connections.

The city's Red Cross, which numbered 50,000 members and hundreds of employees, including 205 full-time nurses, was disbanded last year and immediately replaced by a new Red Cross headed by entrepreneur Sergei Natarov.

Lernochinskaya said the reorganization was carried out with numerous legal violations, all of which were condoned, if not implemented, by Natarov's associates in government agencies. She said this is also why the threats continue, physical attacks against her and other former Red Cross workers have gone uninvestigated, and only a handful of lawsuits have been won by the Red Cross' old guard.

"If I had ever thought that something like this might happen, I never would have started working for the Red Cross in the first place," Lernochinskaya, a woman in her early 50s, said dejectedly in an interview.

Lernochinskaya joined the Soviet branch of the International Red Cross in 1989. Now she and a dozen other die-hard former employees of the city's branch are waging a battle against the decision to put them out in the streets after two decades of hard work.

They all blame Natarov, a Bryansk region native who runs a real estate business in the capital, for their misfortunes.

The city's Red Cross, incidentally, ran several properties in Moscow, including three medical centers, two charity drug stores and a small laundry used by low-income people. Its former employees said it assisted 15,000 elderly people and 5,000 disabled people per year.

One of the medical centers, which opened in the late 1990s in southeastern Moscow and had the capacity to treat simultaneously 30 people, mostly lonely retirees, now stands abandoned, with its equipment and beds covered in dust. The 700-square-meter center had a cardiologist and a surgeon who treated patients under contract with the Red Cross.

"We have closed all of this with tears in our eyes," said Lidia Khrameyeva, former chairman of the Red Cross southeastern Moscow branch, who chaired the center. "They are so dumb to have destroyed this."

Khrameyeva said the center could not continue to operate after the new national leadership at the Red Cross disbanded the Moscow organization and took over its bank accounts in 2008.

Red Cross Revamp

The Russian Red Cross oversees all 82 regional branches of the Red Cross, including the branch in Moscow. All national Red Cross organizations are loosely affiliated with the International Red Cross, but the central office in Geneva cannot interfere with the activities of the local offices.

The Red Cross survives on donations, but its charter allows it to raise funds through commercial activities, including leasing office space, running businesses and staging lotteries.

Natarov was appointed head of Moscow's Red Cross in 2010 by his friend, head of Russian Red Cross Raisa Lukutsova — another Bryansk native who became the organization's chairwoman

in 2006 and was re-elected to the post in August.

Natarov's appointment came after a drawn-out battle by Lukutusova's administration to uproot the then-head of the Moscow Red Cross, medical professor Erik Prazdnikov, who also came to power in 2006 with promises to reform the organization.

Lernochinskaya, who headed the southern district branch of the Moscow Red Cross, said Natarov tried to bribe her into replacing Prazdnikov at the helm.

"I told him that even if he showered me with money, it would not help him because the decision doesn't depend on me alone," Lernochinskaya said. The Moscow Red Cross chief is elected through a vote by all district branch leaders.

Maybe she should have taken the money, if there was any. In August 2008, Lernochinskaya was severely beaten in the hall of her apartment building, with the attacker stopping for a moment to inform her that he was acting on behalf of Natarov, who was by then a senior official in the Russian Red Cross, she said.

Police never investigated the attack, she said, and soon after she filed a complaint, she started to receive threats by text message, urging her to quit.

She also ended up at the wrong end of a lawsuit after Natarov reported to police that she had stolen money from the sale of an apartment donated to the Red Cross by a retiree.

Lernochinskaya is indeed in need of money for heart surgery. But she denied wrongdoing and said she has bank papers tracing the sale proceeds to prove her innocence.

But that did not stop the police from searching her house, embarrassing Lernochinskaya in front of her neighbors.

"My neighbors who once heard me speaking on television saw the police officers in my apartment," she said, crying as she remembered the humiliation of the moment.

The investigation is ongoing.

A request submitted to city police on August went unanswered.

Other people accused by the former Red Cross workers of wrongdoing were equally unresponsive to requests for comment. Natarov refused to comment for this report. A faxed request to Russian Red Cross went unanswered, and the organization's spokeswoman, Tatyana Klinitskaya, declined to comment.

The spokeswoman for the International Red Cross representative office in Moscow said her office was aware of the situation but could not comment on an internal matter regarding the Russian side. She also said she did not want to discuss the issue in view of an ongoing court case filed by the dismissed employees.

Building Takeover

In February 2008, matters were advanced by means of private security guards, employed

by the Russian Red Cross to vacate the headquarters of the organization's city branch on Piryeva Street in western Moscow.

Moscow Red Cross employees, many of them middle-aged women, were put out in the streets during the takeover, much as illegal corporate raids are routinely carried out at hundreds of commercial enterprises across Russia.

This was also when Moscow Red Cross chief Prazdnikov was fired by the organization's national chairwoman, Lukutsova. She was helped by a State Duma deputy with United Russia, Viktor Voitenko, who said at the time that Prazdnikov was removed for "discrediting" the group. He did not elaborate.

Prazdnikov declined to be interviewed for this story. A former associate, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Prazdnikov "is afraid to speak out."

In June 2008, Moscow police opened a criminal case into the situation surrounding the Moscow Red Cross but dropped it soon without explanation.

Natarov was appointed by the Russian Red Cross as the chairman of a close-out commission to oversee the disbanding of the city's old Red Cross.

Then in September 2010 Natarov established the new Moscow Red Cross at Lukutsova's request. Voitenko — a former KGB general — was a co-founder. Russian Red Cross spokeswoman Klinitskaya also co-founded the new city branch.

A fax sent to Voitenko's office in the Duma requesting comment for this story went unanswered. Voitenko was not included on United Russia's electoral list for the December parliamentary elections, an indication that he will not serve in the next Duma.

The new Red Cross has 195 nurses who assist 35,000 elderly people a year, according to the Russian Red Cross [web site](#).

In contrast to the old Red Cross, the revamped city branch does not show how many members it has on its web site. In fact, it lists Natarov as the head of the branch but provides little other information. Those who want to make a donation are directed to the Russian Red Cross web site. A woman who answered the phone at a Red Cross office said no services for caring for the elderly were currently available but they were being established.

Investigations and Lawsuits

Lidia Chavkina, one of the former Moscow Red Cross officials, said Lukutsova and her allies wanted to take over the city branch because it is the most prosperous one in Russia.

She is among the two dozen former employees battling the establishment of the new organization, which has been upheld by the Justice Ministry and now before the Moscow Arbitration Court, said their attorney, Andrei Yegorov. The arbitration court recently announced that it would wait until the Gagarinsky District Court hears a case contesting Natarov's establishment of the new Moscow branch. The next hearing is scheduled for Oct. 20.

The disbandment was done with violations and without the members' approval, Yegorov said.

But even though the fired Red Cross employees lodged numerous requests with prosecutors and investigators to look into the situation, no inquiry followed, he said.

Yegorov said he believes that all law enforcement officers who have tried to take up the case have given up on informal phone orders from senior officials.

Threats appear to be the order of the day. Even City Duma Deputy Mikhail Antontsev, who organized unsuccessful hearings on the matter in the legislature in late 2008, has received anonymous death threats by telephone, said Chavkina, who attended the hearings.

Antontsev was not immediately available for comment.

Igor Maimistov, a reporter for the Literaturnaya Gazeta weekly who [wrote](#) about the scandal in May, also spoke about telephone threats. "I received calls from two old 'pals' who asked me about my well-being," he wrote in his article, attesting the "pals" as "plainclothes guys," a Soviet-era euphemism for law enforcement officers. He said he understood that his well-being might be in danger.

Meanwhile, Natarov has begun to rent out Red Cross premises for commercial purposes and pocketed the money, said ex-employee Lernochnikskaya. She estimated that Natarov collects 350,000 rubles (\$10,000) monthly from the tenants.

Former employees wrote in an open letter to President Dmitry Medvedev in February 2010 that Natarov was once caught by city police red-handed with cash that he had received from tenants but released on orders from on high.

The Kremlin did not react publicly to the complaint, which was the second one to the Kremlin. The first, submitted in early 2010, was forwarded to the Moscow prosecutor's office, which promptly leaked it to Natarov, lawyer Yegorov said.

The former employees have scored some modest wins in Moscow courtrooms, winning a combined 20 million rubles (\$690,000) in wages that they were owed over their dismissals, Yegorov said.

But reversing the group's liquidation will be much harder because the new Moscow Red Cross appears to have friends in high places, he said.

The husband of Natarov's ally Lukutsova is a judge in their native Bryansk region, said Khromeyeva, another sacked employee. "Lukutsova told us she never has any problems with the courts," Khromeyeva said.

Yegorov still believes that the arbitration court might reverse the establishment of the new Moscow Red Cross. But Lernochnikskaya, though she continues to champion their cause with the others, fears that nothing will change.

"Elderly people have been coming to us, seeking our help. We were their last hope, and they have killed that hope," she said. "And my own good name has also been ruined."

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