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Soldiers' Rights Group Faces Eviction

By Jonathan Earle

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Laden with debt and starved of foreign donations, one of the country's most prominent soldiers' rights organizations might be forced to close its office next month, the group's director said.

The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia owes about 460,000 rubles ($14,500) in back rent and utilities bills to its landlord, city-owned Moskomimushchestvo, and hasn't financed a single project since 2010, Valentina Melnikova told The Moscow Times.

"If our current expenses are not paid, they'll turn off our telephones and electricity on Dec. 1," she said by telephone on Friday.

Donations from abroad have dried up due to the financial crisis, and local businesspeople are afraid to back an organization that has often been highly critical of the government, Melnikova said.

"Yes, we had such a billionaire. You know his name, and you know where he is now,"

Melnikova said, referring to former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky, in prison since 2003 on tax evasion and other charges that supporters have called politically tinged.

Melnikova said she decided to appeal to the public last week after the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers recently failed a last-ditch attempt to secure a Russian government grant.

The funding woes date to 2008, well before a new law that forces some non-governmental organizations that accept foreign funding to accept the label "foreign agent," she said.

The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers occupies a single room on Luchnikov Pereulok, not far from the former KGB headquarters on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, and is staffed by four volunteers.

The organization, which was founded in 1989, campaigns against human rights abuses involving soldiers — especially conscripts — and their parents.

Every year, it receives about 500 complaints in person and an additional 500 letters, many telling heart-wrenching tales of illegal conscription, humiliation and torture.

The situation has improved: Violent crime within the military is down "by a factor of 10" in recent years due to reforms, including a ban on soldiers performing domestic chores, she said.

"Both Serdyukov and Medvedev made it clear that it was no longer acceptable to beat soldiers," she said, referring to the recently dismissed defense minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, who served as president from 2008 until May.

Nevertheless, Melnikova said the group's services were still needed, and a physical office was essential to support walk-in clients.

The group has "helped millions of people and never demanded money or thanks," Melnikova wrote on her Facebook page on Thursday to solicit donations to a new Yandex.Dengi account. "We can't let the committee be closed because no one else will help these boys and their families."

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