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# Coffins, graveyards, and billions of dollars How gangsters and officials in the police, military, and state carve up Russia's funeral business — Meduza

55-70 minutes

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About two million people die in Russia, every year. In that time, the country's funeral industry officially does about [60 billion rubles](#) (\$924.6 million) in business. According to estimates by the authorities, however, the black market for these services could be worth as much as 250 billion rubles (\$3.8 billion). Over the past 30 years, the mortuary business has been divided up several times, and a medley of organized criminals, *siloviki* (members of the police and national security establishment), and the state have competed for a share of the pie. As a result, finding eternal peace in Russia is often tumultuous, whether it's gunfire at the Khovanskoye Cemetery in Moscow, throwing bodies over a fence in Yekaterinburg, unauthorized mass graves in Tolyatti, or a cemetery owner's suicide in Omsk. *Meduza* special correspondent Ivan Golunov learned how control over Russia's funeral industry has passed gradually from figures in the criminal world to people connected to the state.

This article was originally published in August 2018. Following the

author's temporary arrest in June 2019, which is widely believed to have been motivated by Ivan Golunov's investigative reporting, *Meduza* is making the text available in English now.

- At the turn of the century, the mortuary business was one of Russia's most criminal industries. In different cities, disputes over turf were often decided with gunfire and explosions. Municipal employees and police officers were more like service staff for the funeral business, and all the costs accompanying this competition were passed on to the consumer.
- The funeral industry has remained relatively competitive in Moscow, with broad shifts brought about with the introduction and then partial discontinuation of "Municipal Specialized Service" status, which granted trade preferences and special rights to a small selection of mortuaries.
- Access to land at cemeteries, space in morgues, and information about the recently departed are the funeral industry's key assets. Companies competing in the industry have started introducing hi-tech solutions to draw in customers, but the traditional, often illegal tactics used to get ahead in this business are still vitally important to survival and success.
- The son of a top Russian federal official owns the "Verum" Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Departed, which markets itself as a community to protect the rights of the deceased. The organization disseminates negative stories about funeral companies, which it collects by paying Internet users for video footage of illegal burials and bad business practices, sometimes triggering police investigations that can ruin mortuaries. Verum has roots in a movement created by a neo-Nazi activist. The

organization's overarching objective is allegedly to become the nationwide public controller of Russia's funeral industry.

On December 9, 2017, actor Leonid Bronevoy died at his home.

Famous people in Moscow are typically buried at one of two prestigious cemeteries: Novodevichy or Troyekurovskoye.

Technically speaking, space at both graveyards ran out, long ago, but an exception is made for celebrities as renown as Bronevoy, who is best known for his role as Heinrich Müller in the beloved Soviet television series "Seventeen Moments of Spring." According to *Meduza's* sources in the Moscow government, the decision is made personally by Mayor Sergey Sobyenin, who in these cases sends a text message to his subordinate, Alexey Nemeryuk, the head of the Trade and Services Department, which oversees the city's mortuary business. With Bronevoy, Sobyenin not only issued orders to find a burial plot at Novodevichy Cemetery, but he also asked the municipal enterprise "Ritual" to assume all the costs of organizing the funeral.

It proved to be much easier to issue this order than implement it, however. An employee at Ritual told *Meduza* that one of the company's agents reached Bronevoy's home within 40 minutes of the doctor declaring him dead, but the actor's family had already signed a contract with a private funeral home, "Darko," whose representative arrived at the same time as the paramedics. The man from Darko didn't know who Bronevoy was, but he still refused to relinquish organization of the actor's funeral to the municipal competitor. Because Bronevoy's relatives had turned over his passport to the Darko agent, terminating the family's contract with the company was "virtually impossible," a source told *Meduza*.

In the end, for the public viewing at Novodevichy, the head of the cemetery had to intervene in the ceremony. According to *Meduza's* source at Ritual, the Darko staff nearly placed Bronevoy's casket on its viewing plinth upside down. "If there'd been a mix-up, nobody would have bothered to find out who organized the funeral," *Meduza's* source explained. "We would have been blamed."

During the Soviet era, the state was responsible for all funerals, but this mortuary monopoly, like most monopolies in Russia, was abolished after the USSR's collapse. In 1996, the country adopted a law that left the state in control of only the cemeteries and crematoriums. Management of the actual funeral services was entrusted to municipalities. At first, they issued mortuary licenses to private entrepreneurs, but in 2002 even this bureaucracy was eliminated in a government campaign to cut red tape.

By this time, the mortuary business was one of Russia's most criminal industries. In different cities, disputes over turf were often decided with gunfire and explosions. Municipal employees and police officers were more like service staff for the funeral business, and all the costs accompanying this competition were passed on to the consumer. Grieving relatives don't typically raise many questions about the services imposed on them, and they're usually ready to pay whatever is asked.

Since then, in many regions across the country, the same thing happened to the funeral industry that's happened with the rest of the Russian economy: state officials purged the market and forced its previous masters to the periphery, using various law-enforcement agencies. Instead of bullets and bombs, the mortuary business today is abuzz with inspections by state prosecutors. In

some places, monopolies have formed under the control of former and current officials, lawmakers, and *siloviki*. In other places, funeral-services entrepreneurs have found positions in the state. Elsewhere still, these businesspeople have managed to become the authorities' junior partners. There are also regions in Russia where the "purge" remains incomplete. In Moscow, for instance, there are dozens of mortuary business groups (often associated with former state officials) still at war with the authorities and *siloviki*.

## A private security monopoly

In the late 1990s, a [wave of murders](#) tied to the funeral business swept through St. Petersburg. The victims included seven orderlies at city morgues, two lawyers representing the interests of mortuaries, the head of the pathology department at Mechnikov North-Western State Medical University, and a priest who performed religious rites at one of the morgues' chapels.

State investigators attributed the killings to a gang based at one morgue that soon expanded its control over others. When preparing bodies for burial, orderlies working in this racket would force overpriced services on families, and sabotage the funeral if relatives refused to pay. The head of the gang was a man named Valery Burykin, who was formally employed as the executive examiner at the city's Pathoanatomical Bureau. In February 2003, the "gang of orderlies" murdered another lawyer. Over the next year, the group's key leaders were arrested.

The next "boss" of St. Petersburg's funeral business was Igor Minakov, a former criminal investigator in Sestroretsk, just north of

the city, who founded a successful private security company called “Zashchita” (Protection). His staff have [guarded](#) the city’s cemeteries since 1998.

Minakov’s main business partner was Valery Larkin, the former head of the municipal funeral enterprise “Ritual Services.” According to the newspaper [Delovoi Peterburg](#), companies affiliated with these two businessmen now control roughly 90 percent of the city’s mortuary industry. This group of businesses also collaborates with state companies. For example, the Ritual Services truck fleet shares the same address and works closely with the “Motor Pool: Ritual Services,” which is controlled by Minakov and Larkin. Antitrust regulators in St. Petersburg established that “Motor Pool” employees often show up to collect bodies, in place of staff from the state company.

Nine of the 10 private companies in St. Petersburg that maintain the city’s 71 cemeteries are also controlled by Minakov’s firms or by businesses affiliated with him. Of the companies tied to Minakov and Larkin, some manufacture caskets and tombstones, as well.

In morgues and medical examiner’s offices, Minakov’s businesses [rent](#) the premises where they process the bodies of the recently departed for money. Staff at state medical institutions are prohibited by order of Russia’s Health Ministry from doing this, and Minakov’s company operates essentially without competition, while simultaneously gaining access to databases of recent deaths. (This doesn’t prevent economizing, however. For example, in one crematorium, Minakov’s company rents only 750 of the total available 10,000 square meters.) Embalming services, meanwhile, are provided by medical examiners, outside their main working

hours.

The receipt of death certificates is structured similarly. For “convenience,” this paperwork is only available at [two branches](#) of the St. Petersburg Civil Registry. When you walk into either of these buildings, you pass the offices of mortuary companies owned by Valery Larkin. According to estimates by *Meduza*, the firms owned by Minakov and Larkin did more than 2.3 billion rubles (\$35.6 million) in business in 2016, earning a net profit of almost 580 million rubles (\$9 million).

## The “Pamyat” (Memory) Society

In the winter of 1996, President Boris Yeltsin signed legislation introducing new regulations on Russia’s funeral industry. The law guaranteed all citizens the right to free funeral services at public expense, and entrusted oversight of the mortuary sphere to municipalities: the country’s city and district officials. Today, Russia’s federal budget pays for just a fraction of Russians’ funeral costs, and the rest is supposed to be covered by municipal enterprises. The amount currently pledged to individuals from the federal government is [5,701 rubles](#) (about \$88). In Moscow, the cost of guaranteed services is set at 16,701 rubles (\$260), while in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, it’s 55,100 rubles (\$850). Nationwide, regional budgets cover the costs not financed by the capital. People can delegate funeral arrangements to companies controlled by the state, or handle ceremonies independently, and then receive cash compensation.

After the new rules were introduced, each municipality approved a list of guaranteed services and goods provided to all citizens. A

federal audit in 2017 revealed that quality requirements for these services vary — sometimes even within the same region. For example, in the city of Biysk, in Russia’s Altai Krai, the deceased were offered free unupholstered coffins made from unfinished wood boards. In the neighboring town of Belokurikha, meanwhile, the free coffins are upholstered in velvet. In Stary Oskol, mortuary staff are supposed to place bodies inside coffins, while this responsibility falls to relatives in several other areas of the Belgorod region. The state spends about 20 billion rubles (\$309.1 million) annually on these guaranteed services, but in reality it’s nearly impossible to receive free funerals in many regions across the country.

In Volgograd, Tatiana Popova’s uncle died in June 2016 after a long illness. When police officers arrived at his home to document the death, they determined that an autopsy was necessary. An agent from the city’s “Pamyat” (Memory) funeral service arrived next, and [demanded](#) an immediate payment of 20,000 rubles (\$310) to transport the body to the morgue.

There are about 20 funeral homes operating in Volgograd, but it’s effectively impossible to bury someone without Pamyat, because the other companies in town lack access to the necessary infrastructure. Pamyat was founded by Irina Solovieva, whose husband, Iosef Efremov, [supervised](#) various municipal mortuary companies for many years. In 2002, Pamyat won a [15-year contract](#) with City Hall to provide state-guaranteed funeral services and maintain the local cemeteries. Shortly thereafter, the municipal funeral home “Kerber,” which was headed by Efremov, declared bankruptcy. In this way, Pamyat became the only company in Volgograd that had the right to dig graves, and its agents



established a foothold in the city's morgues. A few years later, when City Hall created a dispatcher's office, which police officers and doctors were required to inform about all deaths, the office was [housed](#) at Pamyat, and the dispatchers themselves were the company's employees.

Even the Russian Orthodox Church couldn't compete with Pamyat. In 2004, the Volgograd Diocese opened its own funeral home and acquired a plot of land to create a religious cemetery. The prices were reasonable, and the operation did well, but the prosecutor's office soon identified [violations](#) in the allocation of the land, and prohibited the church from holding funerals. In the end, control of the land was handed over to Pamyat.

Solovyeva's company has grown in different directions. In 2011, Pamyat staged a grand opening for the first crematorium in the region, promoting the new facility with a massive [ad campaign](#). The new endeavor worries the people living next-door, however. Less than 100 meters (about 330 feet) separates the crematorium from several residential buildings, which violates Russia's health and safety regulations. When locals appealed to health inspectors and City Hall, they were [told](#) that no construction or operation permits had been issued for a crematorium in the area, which meant it didn't exist. According to the Federal Agency for State Registration (Rosreestr), a manufacturing plant is located at the site. In reality, the crematorium is still up and running.

In the summer of 2016, when a Pamyat representative asked Tatiana Popova for 20,000 rubles, she called the company's office and the district government, and her uncle's body was transported to the morgue at no charge. She read online about state-subsidized funerals and hoped Pamyat would live up to its

obligations. When Popova came to the company's office, however, she was told that they weren't going to bury her relative for free. "Either you pay 80,000 rubles, or you get off our property," they said. For several days, the morgue refused to issue her uncle's death certificate, claiming that staff had not found the time to conduct the autopsy.

Seeing that Volgograd City Duma deputy Dmitry Krylov had criticized Pamyat in the press, Popova turned to him for help. Krylov told *Meduza* that they managed to get a death certificate for her uncle, and then found another company that agreed to organize a funeral for a smaller fee. When the hearse arrived at the cemetery, however, guards refused to let them bring the coffin onto the premises, claiming that it didn't meet funeral quality standards. These requirements were [adopted](#) in 2009 by the Volgograd Duma at Irina Solovyeva's initiative, who just a year earlier was elected as a deputy from United Russia and made the head of the legislature's municipal services committee.

When staff from Pamyat's competitor started digging a grave for Popova's uncle, Pamyat diggers shoveled earth right back into the hole. In the end, Dmitry Krylov [dug the grave himself](#), and only managed to bury the man under police protection.

According to Yulia Ermakova, the deputy head of the Federal Antimonopoly Service's Welfare and Trade Oversight Office, Volgograd is one of the country's leaders in complaints and violations in the funeral industry. As far back as 2011, the agency ordered Pamyat and the Volgograd mayor's office to comply with state regulations, but the company found it easier simply to [pay the fines](#). Evgeny Yalymov, the director of the Volgograd mortuary "Radonitsa," says the average funeral in Volgograd is now three

times more expensive than in Volzhskiy, just on the other side of the Volga River: 60,000 to 80,000 rubles (\$925 to \$1,235) versus 23,000 rubles (\$355). “Radonitsa” used to rent some municipal facilities as office space, but Irina Solovyeva [instigated](#) the termination of their lease.

Solovyeva is still a rising political star. Today, she’s the deputy speaker of the Volgograd Regional Duma, and she is regularly ranked as one of the wealthiest civil servants in the region. In 2017, Solovyeva earned more than [18 million rubles](#) (\$277,920); she owns four residential buildings, 26 non-residential buildings, her own pond, and several Mercedes and Porsche Cayenne luxury cars. Pamyat now belongs to her son, 21-year-old Iosif I. Efremov, who returned to Volgograd after getting a [university education](#) in London. In 2015, her son joined the City Duma as a deputy from United Russia, [overseeing](#) the party’s “Strong Family” initiative.

In 2016, the eight funeral companies under the Pamyat brand took in 561.1 million rubles (\$8.7 million), earning a net profit of 83 million rubles (\$1.3 million). That same year, Efremov Jr.’s company received 26 million rubles (\$401,440) in municipal subsidies. In 2017, without accepting rival bids, Volgograd City Hall [extended](#) its contract with Pamyat for another decade. At the end of the year, officials also decided to institute [“tax holidays”](#) for funeral businesses. The city’s lawmakers decided not to collect taxes from the local mortuaries “due to the industry’s underdevelopment and lack of competition.”

## **Rituals and criminals**

Since 2002, anyone in Russia can become a funeral agent without

any additional permits, technically speaking. In reality, grabbing your share of the mortuary business isn't so easy. To make it in this industry, you need access to its most vital resource: information about the departed.

Until recently, the leaders of Moscow's funeral business were those who could establish lines of communication with the morgues at city hospitals. The idea to set up reception stations for new orders at city morgues first occurred to Moscow Emergency Medical Services deputy chief physician Vladimir Panin, who in 1986 organized a funeral cooperative that later became the company "Stiks-S." Panin and his competitors officially rented small areas at morgues, offering services to people who came to collect the bodies of their relatives.

With the industry's gradual privatization, more and more players with ties to organized crime emerged. Panin recalled how his office was set on fire several times, killing three of his employees, in disputes with different mafia groups.

Back then, even the companies created by state officials turned out to be connected to organized crime. In 1993, Moscow officials established the "Ritual-Service" agency, which was supposed to organize commercial funerals (the company advertised funerals for "mainly young people who died violent deaths in their prime"). City Hall's partner in the venture was the "Arigon-Company," which officials described as an English business, though documents filed with the Moscow Registration Chamber identify its founder as [Olga Shnaider](#), the wife of businessman Semion Mogilevich, who is currently number 494 on the FBI's [most-wanted list](#) for "his alleged participation in a multi-million dollar [fraud] scheme." Mogilevich himself owned 40 percent of the British company "Arigon."

In the late 1990s, when Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov started streamlining the funeral industry, 19 of 900 municipal mortuaries were accredited by City Hall. In exchange for a small equity stake, the businesses received trade preferences and the status of “Municipal Specialized Service” (GSS), granting them the right to perform funerals at the public expense by offering services on behalf of the city.

This new system was the brainchild of Alexey Suloyev, the head of the charity foundation “Sodeistvie” (Assistance). In those years, he worked closely with representatives from Mayor Luzhkov’s office. At one time, Suloyev served as an adviser to Moscow City Duma head Vladimir Platonov, and in the early 2000s he owned a company that opened several dozen “Russian Bistro” cafes. (Luzhkov, who owns the patents on the *coulibiac pirogi* and *sbiten* beverages that were sold at “Russian Bistro,” [personally oversaw](#) this business chain.)

The 19 companies that received GSS status were selected by the nonprofit “Funeral Organizations and Services Management” (UROS), which Suloyev managed. Four of these businesses were closely tied to Suloyev himself, and he tried to seize control over the others. For example, “Ritual Orthodox Service” head Anna Shirokova [complained](#) to Luzhkov that Suloyev demanded a blocking minority stake in her company (for himself) in exchange for GSS status, highlighting his “close acquaintance with the heads of organized criminal groups” as a good reason to accept his offer. Shortly thereafter, Shirokova’s company lost its accreditation, while several businesses granted GSS status were in fact transferred to UROS. *Meduza* was unable to contact Alexey Suloyev for this report.

The Funeral Organizations and Services Management was founded by the companies “Gorbrus” and “Ritus-Service,” which were in turn created by several entrepreneurs from the Moscow suburb of Lyubertsy. In the 1990s, these individuals owned a distillery, an outdoor market, a shopping center, a crematorium, and a cemetery in Balashikha (just north of Lyubertsy). Suloyev also co-owned some of their shopping centers in Balashikha. In 2012, police [charged](#) one of these Lyubertsy businessmen (a man named Yuri Manilov) and the crime boss Mark Milgotin with racketeering and extortion, but the case was closed two years later for lack of evidence.

In 2007, Alexey Suloyev took charge of the metropolitan funeral state enterprise “Ritual,” and some time later he became deputy head of the city’s Trade and Services Department, giving him oversight over the capital’s entire mortuary business. By the end of the decade, an informal holding group tied to Suloyev controlled more than 40 percent of Moscow’s funeral industry, including the purchase orders at morgues in the city’s biggest hospitals. With 25.1 percent of the market, the nearest competitor was Stiks-S, owned by industry veteran Vladimir Panin, whose agents also worked at Moscow’s hospitals.

When Sergey Sobyenin replaced Luzhkov as the city’s mayor, the situation changed. In 2011, Suloyev left City Hall, and two years later the government divested itself of its shares in most accredited mortuaries, ending some of the privileges they enjoyed. Today, the only two funeral homes that still have GSS status are municipal Ritual and Ritual-Service. The latter enterprise was created some time earlier by Semion Mogilevich’s wife, who sold her shares in the business to the company’s management in 2008, when her

husband was arrested in Moscow.

In the meantime, Moscow's Municipal Property Department terminated its rental agreements with private funeral homes for space at morgues, citing the system's "unreasonableness," and agents from Ritual took their place. As a result, Stiks-S's market share plummeted tenfold by 2018, and revenue for Gorbrus was cut in half over the next four years (falling from 275 million rubles to 142 million rubles, or \$4.2 million to \$2.2 million). The mortuary empire tied to Alexey Suloyev only managed to save its businesses outside the city, in Moscow's surrounding region.

Andrey Marsy, the man who replaced Suloyev in the Trade and Services Department, lobbied to remove private companies from hospital morgues. A former top manager at "Blagosostoyanie" (Russia's second-largest corporate pension fund), Marsy initiated the privatization of Moscow's funeral state enterprise. The Blagosostoyanie fund was one of two potential buyers, but in late 2013, after Ritual staff were targeted in a series of arrests, Marsy resigned from City Hall, citing "accumulated fatigue," and his privatization plans were forgotten.

In early 2015, Artem Ekimov, the senior criminal investigator at the Interior Ministry's Anti-Corruption and Economic Security head office, was appointed the director of Ritual. Taking office, Ekimov declared that his duty was to purge the industry of organized crime. Speaking to *Meduza*, he said he hasn't yet succeeded in reining in the entire market, and he admitted that opportunistic companies are still working out of some morgues.

One facility Ekimov has not brought under City Hall's control is the forensic analysis bureau in Tsaritsyno, where funeral homes still

operate much as they did in the 1990s. Most relatives who come to the local morgue in Tsaritsyno arrive having already signed a contract with one of two funeral companies in Chekhov, another Moscow suburb. In the second half of 2017, the order volume at these businesses skyrocketed. According to an employee at Ritual, “someone from the staff [at the morgue] was probably giving them data about the deceased’s relatives, the moment the body arrived.”

## 292 pairs of eyeballs for sale

Morgues are another part of Russia’s funeral business with wide-ranging opportunities to turn a profit. For example, one of the biggest morgue operators in Moscow (including the morgue in Tsaritsyno) is the “Forensic Analysis Bureau” (BSME). Until recently, its CEO was Evgeny Kildyushov, the [head](#) of the Forensic Analysis Department at the Pirogov Russian National Research Medical University (RNRMU).

Many of Kildyushov’s colleagues from the department were also listed as co-founders of the company “Broniks-Service,” which until 2014 provided the paid services offered at BSME morgues and the morgues operated by occupational health clinics staffed by RNRMU graduates. Because civil servants (including Kildyushov) are prohibited from owning commercial entities, control of Broniks-Service was transferred in 2014 to Alexey Nikolaev, the son of Boris Nikolaev, the head of the Postgraduate and Residency Department at the Health Ministry’s Russian Center of Forensic Medical Expertise.

In 2014, the state forced BSME to solicit bids when selecting the



company to provide paid services at its morgues. The winner was “Help-Ritual,” a business founded just a few weeks before the procurement process. The company was created by Vladislav Finogenov (then the head of one of the city’s Board of Health departments) and Rashid Sadykov (the business partner of Eduard Gallyamov, the chief surgeon at the Moscow City Hall Medical Center). Soon, however, agents from another company called “Ritual Services” (RSS) set up shop at BSME’s morgues, and started intercepting customers. According to employees at several funeral bureaus and staff in the mayor’s office, BSME commercial assistant director Oksana Doronina lobbied for RSS.

The competition didn’t last. RSS agents disappeared, and Doronina resigned, after police opened a criminal negligence case against BSME executives, when 13 employees contracted tuberculosis. A pre-investigation probe revealed numerous health and safety violations. In October 2017, Evgeny Kildyushov resigned from his position at RNRMU. The negligence case is still under investigation.

According to the publication *Life’s* [sources](#) in law enforcement, BSME is also suspected of illegally removing organs from cadavers. Bureau staff and their colleagues in the industry who spoke to *Meduza* say they doubt the validity of these allegations, but they don’t deny that organs were in fact removed from bodies at morgues. “We do everything by the book. We have government contracts to remove them,” explains one former employee. “Are you aware that in Russia there’s a presumption of consent to organ transplant? Removing organs doesn’t require relatives’ permission. We don’t have the right [to remove a body’s organs], only if relatives provide us with a notarized restraining order from

the deceased. But I've never encountered that once." (For the record, [according to Russian law](#), immediate relatives themselves can also forbid the removal of a dead person's organs.)

According to public procurement records, BSME does in fact sign agreements every year to remove organs from bodies at its morgues. For example, in 2018, the company was [hired](#) to supply the Helmholtz Institute of Ophthalmic Disease with at least 292 eyeballs, and a [plastic surgery clinic](#) in Bashkiria was owed 1,000 dura mater membranes (dense connective tissue that surrounds the brain and spinal cord), 250 tibias, 100 Achilles tendons, and 400 tunica albuginea (the blue-grey membrane covering of the testis).

"In Moscow, forensic pathologists earn good salaries, when you include the surcharges for commercial services [preparing bodies for burial and embalming]," says the owner of one funeral business. "Selling organs and removing the gold crowns on teeth is specific to certain regions, and it's especially prevalent in the south and in Ukraine. A few years ago, there was a case like this outside Moscow, but it turned out that it was carried out by people from the Rostov region."

In 2013, police in the Serpukhov District outside Moscow actually opened a criminal investigation against mortuary staff suspected of stealing jewelry and gold teeth from dead bodies and then selling them to a local pawnshop. The company targeted in the case was the biggest funeral business south of Moscow, "Stella-Pamyat," which also manages several cemeteries in Serpukhov. The company was founded by the Kovshar family, which moved to Moscow from Donetsk in Russia's Rostov region. Since 2010, Olga Kovshar has also served as a member of the Serpukhov City

Council, and in 2013 she became head of United Russia's local political council.

*Meduza* was unable to find out what became of the investigation into the Kovshars. Olga Kovshar has [tried](#) to get court orders requiring news outlets to retract allegations against her, but judges have dismissed her lawsuits twice.

## Access to death

The state has had the most difficulty “purging” companies that work not with morgues or hospitals, but so-called home deaths — a business that also relies on informal access to information. It's generally accepted that conventional advertising isn't suitable for the mortuary business because few people think about burying their loved ones before they die. Based on [sociological polling](#) in 2017, Muscovites over the age of 50 usually learn about funeral companies through phone calls from the businesses themselves, which have somehow learned about the death of a loved one.

Sometimes (most often in non-metropolitan areas), ambulances drive slowly, and someone from a mortuary arrives at a person's home before the paramedics. “It all depends on the agent's professionalism,” says the director of one funeral home. “Once, one of our employees came to an address, and the individual was still alive. As a result, he and our agent looked over the catalog and chose a coffin, wreaths, and everything else. In the end, everyone was satisfied.”

The costs of buying information about recent deaths (in Moscow, each tip runs roughly 17,500 rubles, or \$270) are passed on to the consumer. It is impossible to narrow down who is selling the

information. “Who has access? The emergency dispatcher who takes the calls, the ambulance driver and paramedic, the police dispatcher, the desk sergeant, the responding police officer, the mortuary-ambulance dispatcher, and the two mortuary-ambulance crew members,” explains Ritual head Artem Ekimov. “That’s already nine people, not counting their management, which could establish a whole system for selling information.” Even at hospitals, Ekimov’s staff face nurses who leak information, immediately after patients die, and grieving relatives show up with already signed funeral contracts.

According to research by *Meduza*, there have only been a handful of criminal cases filed across the country against ambulance crew members and police officers for official misconduct and disclosing personal information. The standard penalty is a fine.

The municipal enterprise Ritual says there are almost 500 companies and entrepreneurs in Moscow that offer services related to funerals (mostly for people who die at home). *Meduza* has learned, however, that many of these businesses are interconnected, and they actually form a few dozen large informal holding groups.

Remember that the company “Darko” was hired to carry out Leonid Bronevoy’s funeral. That firm’s former co-owners and their relatives own several more funeral homes in Moscow and the Tambov region, as well as a company that owns a fleet of hearses. Darko CEO Svetlana Kozlova is business partners with Igor Medvekov, who headed Ritual from 2013 to 2015.

Kozlova previously managed several of Medvekov’s companies, and her husband partnered with him at “Posbon R,” a funeral

business in Reutov. That firm’s registration paperwork lists the same phone number as four companies owned by Saken Korganbaev, who sells flowers. Korganbaev owns a [small building](#) in the industrial zone of Moscow’s Golyanovo District, where there are offices for several other mortuaries, all of which have their own websites and phone numbers, but all their registration documents were filed [on their behalf](#) by the firm “GSS Posbon.”

One of GSS Posbon’s co-founders was Alexey Chuikov, the head of Russia’s AC/DC fan club. The company’s current co-owner, Andrey Besfamilny, sued Russia’s Migration Service in 2016, after he was accused of illegally recruiting foreign laborers to manufacture coffins and various funeral accessories in Shchyolkovo. Besfamilny initially [claimed](#) that Migration Service officers themselves brought the workers to his shopfloor, and supposedly passed out tools and photographed the laborers. He then pivoted to arguing that the foreigners were merely living at the site, not working for his company (another witness stated that the migrant workers came to the shopfloor in response to a job advertisement and “started manufacturing coffins at no charge,” without being asked, in hopes of getting hired). Besfamilny asked the court to take into account his “poor material position,” and in the end he got off with a fine.

Based on *Meduza*’s calculations, the informal holding group tied to Igor Medvekov includes more than 30 legal entities. As of early 2018, together they controlled about six percent of all burials in Moscow. You can find a full list of all the main players in Moscow’s funeral market, compiled by *Meduza*, [here](#) in Russian.

## **A piece of land in Seychelles**

In 2016, Russia's traditional funeral companies and holding groups were confronted by a well-organized, high-tech competitor that said it would rely on conventional advertising to draw in business, not the illegal purchase of information about deaths. Oleg Shelyagov (a former top executive at the same "Blagosostoyanie" corporate pension fund where Andrey Marsy worked) bought out half of "Ritual-Service" (the company founded in 1993 by Semion Mogilevich's wife and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov), and set about disrupting Russia's funeral industry.

According to chief operations officer Valery Pilnikov, Ritual-Service's monthly orders rose from 20 to 1,200, in the two years after the deal. Pilnikov says the company's new management abandoned the practice of buying information about recent deaths and relies instead on Internet promotions, advertisements in regional newspapers, and mailed leaflets. For funeral agents, the company has developed a special digital platform like the one Yandex.Taxi uses for rideshare drivers.

Shelyagov became widely known in Russia in 2017 after throwing a party at Vladimir Palace in St. Petersburg to celebrate his 10-year wedding anniversary with his wife, Viktoria. A thoroughly Russian affair, the guests were greeted by 15 balalaika players. In an interview with the magazine *Tatler*, which reported extensively on the party, Viktoria Shelyagova noted that her family has "a piece of land in Seychelles," adding, "In my old age, I'll garden and grow tomatoes there." According to Shelyagov's [income declaration](#), he earned just 9.2 million rubles (\$142,500) in 2017, and his wife brought home nothing at all. Additionally, the couple owns two apartments in Moscow and a single car.

Competitors, meanwhile, say Ritual-Service is also not above the

traditional rules of Russia's mortuary business. In early 2018, the number of bodies passing through the morgue at the Center for Traumatology and Orthopedics suddenly skyrocketed. At the time, the center's funeral services were provided by a new company called "Bruno," created in January 2017. Bruno's founder and CEO was a man named Oleg Penyaev, who was simultaneously employed by Ritual-Service (the company confirms this information, but denies any connection with Penyaev's business). At the morgue, however, Bruno agents introduced themselves to clients as staff from the municipal enterprise Ritual, leading to felony fraud charges in the spring of 2018.

Shelyagov now plans to scale up his business in different regions across the country, though it's generally accepted that Russia's funeral industry has no nationwide players, because the business is built on connections with local officials. In early 2018, Shelyagov registered Ritual-Service in St. Petersburg, even though the company hadn't yet established a market presence in the city. Shelyagov said it was necessary to take stock of the "monopolism" in the area. For now, the businessman is trying to "test out technology" in other regions.

All over the country, Shelyagov has partnered with different influential people: in Chelyabinsk, he teamed up with the former head of the local funeral state enterprise; in Nizhny Novgorod, with the former deputy mayor; and in Yekaterinburg, Shelyagov is working with Viktor Bublikov, who used to be a lawyer for companies tied to the "Uralmash" organized crime group.

Studying Shelyagov's success, older mortuaries have also started adopting new digital technologies. Artem and Ilya, the sons of Gorbrus holding group owner Yuri Manilov, created a business

called “Honest Agent” that launched its own [IT platform](#) for the integrated delivery of funeral services, from transporting a body to the morgue to choosing a burial plot. The company’s greatest advantage, however, remains its strong links with cemeteries. Honest Agent manages municipal cemeteries in several districts outside Moscow, and the land — together with information about the recently departed — is still the funeral industry’s main asset.

## Guardians of the graves

In 2012, the grave of a young woman named Marina Krasilnikova appeared in one of the central paths at Moscow’s Vagankovo Cemetery. Engraved with letters from her loved ones, the [monument](#) behind her tombstone is situated at the intersection of two walkways. Beside the grave, there are four worn-down tombstones with different surnames.

Marina’s father — Sergey Krasilnikov, who co-owned the flea market (demolished in 2016) near the Petrovsko-Razumovskaya subway station — received the burial plot under a program called “Guardianship of Graves.” According to a resolution issued in 2009, graves could be recognized as abandoned and transferred to the “guardianship” of another person. Guardians were supposed to renovate or replace the tombstones, and the name of the deceased person who previously occupied a plot had to be engraved on the back of any new gravestones, if guardians decided to bury someone new in the same place. A guardianship commission comprising Ritual employees and unspecified “members of the public” was responsible for decisions about transferring control over abandoned graves.



This system was invented by Alexey Suloyev, when he was head of Ritual. A few years before the guardianship program launched, his company “Spot.ru” won a public procurement contract to conduct an inventory of Moscow’s older cemeteries. When Suloyev joined the civil service, he announced a program to re-register Moscow’s graves and issue electronic burial passports to relatives of the departed. The plan, he [said](#), was designed to help forgetful people find the resting places of their loved ones, and electronic terminals were supposed to be installed at cemeteries (this never happened). If the graves’ owners failed to re-register in time, their burial plots were classified as abandoned and made available to new “guardians.”

In the late 2000s, under Suloyev, Moscow’s older cemeteries were actively rebuilt and modified, as maintenance buildings were demolished and paths were narrowed to free up land to sell for new graves. Most cemeteries were not on the books with the land registry, moreover, which meant they didn’t have clear boundaries, allowing administrators to seize adjacent territory. In 2011, for example, environmental protection officials discovered that the Butovskoye Cemetery had illegally seized more than seven acres of forest, upon which there were now roughly 4,000 graves. (The conflict was later resolved in an amicable settlement.)

In 2014, Moscow's government stripped Ritual of its ability to sell land for new graves, and canceled the guardianship program. City officials also started using online auctions to sell land for family graves in the city’s older cemeteries. Over several years, they solicited bids on more than 2,000 burial plots. The new procedure failed to generate much buzz, however. The most expensive plot — four square meters (about 43 square feet) at the front entrance

to the Troyekurovskoye Cemetery — [sold](#) for 4.7 million rubles (\$72,850) to Valery Korotkov, a former shareholder of the Itera Oil and Gas Company. The cheapest lot put up for auction — 0.88 square meters (about 9.5 square feet) at Cherkizovskoye Cemetery near Sheremetyevo Airport — never found a buyer.

Another important asset in Russia's funeral industry are retail locations at cemeteries. As *Meduza's* investigation shows, the most attractive sites for this business belong to people affiliated with former cemetery managers and ex-officials from Ritual.

Competition is fiercest at Moscow's biggest cemetery, Khovanskoye, where there are more than 35 active retail locations, two of which belong to Igor Dashdamirov, who has ties to the Solntsevskaya Bratva mafia and is suspected of involvement in the 1995 murder of journalist Vladislav Listyev. The biggest local merchant is "Ritual-1," one of the oldest companies in the market and still to this day a prominent supplier of funeral goods and granite headstones. Very little is known about Ritual-1's owners. They include Orthodox patroness Vera Slepukhina and Solntsevo native Pavel Rudnev, who together with Russia's Interior Ministry produces documentary films and miniseries about the police.

Moscow, Tolyatti, and Omsk

## **Suicide at the cemetery**

Every year, Moscow needs roughly five hectares (more than 12 acres) for new burials. The city's authorities have decided to expand several existing cemeteries, but the process is not without its difficulties. For example, residents of a townhouse village near the Khovanskoye Cemetery (Moscow's biggest graveyard) are

against a planned 43-hectare (106-acre) expansion. Meanwhile, at Domodedovskoye Cemetery, it's Moscow regional officials who oppose a 60-hectare (150-acre) expansion, worried that the new territory would attract too many birds and cause problems for planes landing at Domodedovo Airport.

Moscow is now planning a radical solution to this problem: the creation of one of the world's largest cemeteries, located 35 kilometers (22 miles) from the Moscow Ring Road, near the "Malinki" landfill. At 580 hectares (1,433 acres), the new graveyard will be second only to Wadi Al-Salaam, an Islamic cemetery in Iraq. It will be called "White Birches," and the government plans to spend roughly [2 billion rubles](#) (\$31 million) to build it.

Regions across the country often lack the money needed not only to create new cemeteries, but also to maintain existing graveyards. In mid-June 2018, space officially [ran out](#) at all cemeteries in Tolyatti (where roughly 700 people die every month). In recent years, locals have buried relatives in a private graveyard that appeared on land that used to be the "Rossiya" collective farm (the co-owner of the local shipyard opened the cemetery in 2011). There were already several thousand graves here when a court prohibited new burials, ruling that private cemeteries shouldn't exist. Tolyatti City Hall is supposed to buy the land and reopen the cemetery, but officials have yet to allocate the money.

Today, the only place you can dig graves in Tolyatti is at the site of a burned down pine forest, located beyond the fence at the municipal Toazovskoye Cemetery. Technically, this land belongs to the city's Forestry Department, but people have been burying loved ones here without permission since the early 2010s, and recently the cemetery's administration started allocating burial

plots formally. Relatives clear the territory themselves, hiring contractors to remove [fallen trees](#), for example, because the cemetery doesn't actually own the land, and can't make these arrangements.

Many people in Tolyatti now bury their relatives in rural cemeteries around the city. Unofficially, this costs up to 30,000 rubles (\$465), though officially it's a free service. According to the findings of a deputy commission in the Samara Regional Duma, only five of the 14 graveyards surrounding Tolyatti are on file with the land registry. Cremation is another option, but the Samara region doesn't have its own crematorium. Several times a week, local mortuaries send bodies to Moscow, to a private crematorium operated by Gorbrus.

Efforts to create completely private cemeteries in Russia have run into legal uncertainty. In the early 2010s, Omsk entrepreneur Igor Malyshev, who until then worked in the scrap metal industry, decided to build his own graveyard. His company rented 40 hectares (almost 100 acres) of land outside Omsk, officially allocated for a cemetery. Malyshev developed the land and completed all the necessary paperwork. A cathedral was supposed to be built at the entrance, and a local bishop even blessed the site of the church and the cemetery in the presence of district officials. In the fall of 2012, Malyshev's graveyard started burying people.

The cemetery only got three bodies in the ground before the facility was shut down by the new head of the district. On November 19, 2012, the district administration filed a lawsuit to terminate Malyshev's lease, move the existing graves to another location, and restore the site to its original condition. Two weeks later, Malyshev telephoned his business partner and said he was

going hunting and would “take food and wages to the guys.” Instead, he came to the graveyard, shot himself twice in the chest, and soon died at the hospital. Police later discovered in a safe at his home a 10-ruble coin and a [suicide note](#) addressed to the officials who opposed the creation of his cemetery. “You’re taking my land, so you might as well take my life,” he wrote.

A few years after Malyshev’s death, a new cemetery appeared on the same land. The area where people are buried belongs to the local village council, but the graveyard’s entrances and administration building are located on private property. Today, the cemetery belongs to the company “Avalon.” One of the firm’s owners is Grigory Gorovoi, the “trash king” of Omsk, who [controls](#) the region’s largest garbage dumps.

## “Dondiki” versus the President’s Office

In many large Russian cities, the redistribution of funeral markets is still underway. Sometimes this process is rapid, in which case top-level backers are essential for newcomers to the industry.

In 2016, after a series of arson attacks on hearses and other violence against competitors in Yekaterinburg, there was a major criminal case against the creators of a group of funeral companies, dubbed “Dondiki” in the press. Posing as municipal funeral service workers, the mortuaries’ staff took bodies from relatives and then demanded money to perform a funeral (technically, they billed the families for related services, such as transporting the corpse). During the trial, it emerged that the defendants were connected to both municipal funeral officials and individuals involved in a criminal case against the so-called [Uralmash mafia](#).

That same year, police arrested the directors of several cemeteries in Yekaterinburg. The public learned about graveyard officials demanding money for burial plots thanks in part to Dmitry Malyshev, who twice tried to bury different friends at various cemeteries, and twice raised hell in the media, when he wasn't allocated free burial sites.

Later, it turned out that Dmitry Malyshev is himself involved in the funeral business, both in his hometown of Perm and the city of Yekaterinburg, where he manages the company "Memory Animals," which built a pet cemetery and columbarium for storing urns with human ashes. His partner at this firm is Olga Kurchenkova, the wife of former high-ranking Rostekhnadzor official Konstantin Kurchenkov, who is in turn business partners with former world chess champion and State Duma deputy Anatoly Karpov (greetings from Kurchenkov and Karpov are posted on Memory Animals' [official website](#)).

The company Malyshev runs was founded by other active players in the Yekaterinburg funeral business: Natalia Domracheva and Alexey Anisimov, who own the "Voznesenie" (Ascension) group, which gained notoriety in 2015, when its funeral home [blocked the road](#) into Yekaterinburg's only forensic morgue, and charged competitors for admittance. The conflict was so messy that people even started throwing bodies over the morgue's fence at night. In the end, the mayor had to intervene to resolve the issue.

Alexey Anisimov co-founded Voznesenie when he was 21 years old. His uncle, also named Alexey Anisimov, at that moment served as deputy head of the Russian Presidential Administration's domestic policy team. In the spring of 2014, the older Anisimov became the head of the All-Russia People's Front's executive

committee. Based on data released by the Anonymous International hacktivist group, he discussed Voznesenie's work in his correspondence.

## The activist from “Occupy-Pedophilia”

Since late 2016, the Moscow news media has published an unusually large number of stories about the funeral business. *Ren-TV*, channel *360*, *Lenta.ru*, and other outlets wrote about the “[coffin party](#)” at a local morgue, about coffins [dug out](#) of burial sites following conflicts with morticians, and about people being buried in “[dirt pits](#)” outside Moscow.

In all these reports, the source for the information was the “Verum” Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Departed. The organization's president, Vladimir Gorelov, says he decided to create a human rights group after a friend encountered the same “lawlessness” that confronted Dmitry Malyshev, when he tried to bury his friends. On social media, Verum says it buys footage of illegal actions committed by mortuary staff. Besides Gorelov, the group also employs two lawyers and a press secretary who disseminates information to the news media.

Gorelev says Verum earns money by selling legal advice to people who have experienced problems when organizing funerals.

*Meduza's* correspondent visited Verum's office and noticed only a few people from funeral companies there trying to resolve a situation after a scandal in the news and on social media. “These [people] from Ruza saw that we recently posted a video [about them]?” Gorelov said. “Now they've come to get acquainted, and explain how they're making it right.”

In its first 18 months, Verum publicized bad business practices at nearly every major mortuary in Moscow and the surrounding region. For some companies, the attention resulted in state inspections, and a few mortuaries actually collapsed, sources told *Meduza*. People in the funeral business who ran afoul of Verum confirmed to *Meduza* that they met with Gorelov, but they didn't say how their negotiations ended. "They must have very powerful protection," said one entrepreneur, explaining his reluctance to disclose any details. "They're definitely not small-time. We've hired a private detective to find out who's behind them."

"[Verum president Vladimir] Gorelov is a front — he's decorated, retired military who was found through a résumé posted on job search websites," *Meduza* learned from a person familiar with the work. *Meduza* has also discovered that Gorelov previously managed investment promotion for the company "Social Initiative," signing contracts with equity construction coinvestors. The homes in this project were never actually built, and more than 9,000 people were recognized as victims of the company's actions. Gorelov himself, who owned [four percent](#) of Social Initiative, was a witness in the criminal case against the company, and its main owner was ultimately sentenced to [10 years](#) in prison.

The person actually in control of Verum is someone else entirely. Until 2016, the legal entity that would later become Verum was called the "Kostroma Public Organization for Consumer Protection." It was founded by three people living in the Kostroma region, one of whom told *Meduza* that the organization was sold several years ago to a Muscovite named Denis. Multiple people who have communicated with Verum told *Meduza* that a man named Denis Loginov represented the organization in



negotiations.

Loginov is the former head of the interregional office of the “Restrukt” movement, which was created by neo-Nazi Maxim “Hatchet” Martsinkevich. The movement’s activists are particularly notorious for their “Occupy-Pedophilia” campaign, where they posed as minors on social networks and made contact with potential “pedophiles,” luring them to face-to-face meetings, where they were beaten, humiliated, recorded on video, and then blackmailed. In August 2014, Martsinkevich was sentenced to five years in prison. Loginov was a person of interest in another criminal case, as well, but he was ultimately named a witness. Several Restrukt activists told *Meduza* that they learned after the trial that Loginov used to work in the police’s counter-extremism department.

Afterwards, many of Martsinkevich’s supporters cut off communications with Loginov, but not everyone did. Together with other associates, says one former Restrukt activist, they started thinking about a “more legal” field of application for the “technology” developed for “Occupy-Pedophilia.” To this end, the consumer society “Restrukturizatsiya” (Restructuring) was created (with Loginov’s participation). The group’s first few concepts flopped, however. Chain stores promptly shut down an initiative to inspect groceries at supermarkets, and a project to push back against construction companies also failed to produce the desired results. In 2016, Restrukturizatsiya was disbanded.

Before long, the “Kostroma Public Organization for Consumer Protection” transformed into Verum. “I heard they recently got involved in something related to funerals,” says a former Restrukt activist. Three mortuary industry representatives identified Denis

Loginov from a photograph as the man who participated in negotiations at Verum's office. Loginov's profile photo on [Facebook](#) was taken at Verum, and he's also shared photos taken in front of Verum's booth at the 2017 "Necropolis" funeral exhibition (see below). News about Verum appears regularly on the VKontakte community "Hands Off Hatchet!" and [similar content](#) is shared on Martsinkevich's own VKontakte page. Several people who know Loginov and one man whom he hired to work at Verum confirm that Loginov is the mastermind behind the organization.

*Meduza* sent questions to Denis Loginov over Facebook, after which Verum president Vladimir Gorelov text-messaged the phone number provided by *Meduza*, saying he was ready to supply all necessary information about the organization. Loginov later telephoned *Meduza* himself, saying he was ready to discuss anything regarding the funeral industry, but he asked that his name not be mentioned in connection with Verum.

Verum's overarching objective is to become the nationwide public controller of Russia's funeral industry, according to a source who knows Denis Loginov and several businessmen who have interacted with the organization. Vladimir Gorelov and his colleagues participate in almost every Verum event related to problems involving mortuaries, and they have twice initiated discussions about new legislation on burial and funeral businesses that's been in development for more than five years in Russia's Construction Industry, Housing, and Utilities Sector Ministry (Minstroy).

According to state officials, the new law would regulate the work of funeral services, create criteria and registries for these companies, ban staff from coming to people's homes without telephoning the

relatives of the deceased in advance, and prohibit mortuaries from operating on the premises of medical institutions and morgues. Violators would be blacklisted. The legislation also envisages oversight of the industry by public organizations.

Denis Loginov's father, Andrey, serves as a deputy cabinet head on Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's staff, overseeing legislative work. Two sources in the funeral industry told *Meduza* that Loginov Sr. started lobbying in the fall of 2017 for the speedy adoption of Minstroy's draft mortuary regulations. At that time, Andrey Loginov's wife, Svetlana, headed the ministry's Central Research and Design Institute, and the minister himself was Mikhail Men, a close friend.

Early in the morning on May 16, 2018, state investigators and police officers raided the apartments of Vladimir Gorelov and another five Verum employees, along with the [newsroom](#) of *The Daily Storm*, which published several stories about Moscow's funeral business. The searches were tied to a felony libel case initiated based on a complaint by employees at the municipal funeral enterprise Ritual. When Dmitry Medvedev formed a new cabinet in 2018, he replaced Mikhail Men at Minstroy with Tyumen Governor Vladimir Yakushev.

The draft legislation's future is currently unclear. The industry doesn't welcome the changes. According to [one study](#) commissioned by Moscow's government and conducted in 2017, the directors of funeral companies "urged caution when introducing any innovations in the funeral business, insofar as innovations in this sector in Western Europe accelerated the end of traditional society, which was accompanied by the breakdown of structures like the family." Entrepreneurs in the funeral industry [told](#) the staff

in Russia's Economic Development Ministry who analyzed the draft law itself that it won't solve the market's existing problems, though it would legally cement the position of current monopolists.

One of the respondents was Alexey Semenov, who owns a mortuary in Tikhvin, outside St. Petersburg. He says the city council transferred the local municipal cemetery in 2017 to the management of the company "Art Stone Master," which immediately raised prices several-fold. The business is part of Igor Minakov's holding group, which controls almost the entire funeral industry in St. Petersburg.

"With the adoption of the new law, this firm will become a monopolist in everything," Semenov says. "People are already trying to bury [their loved ones] in the villages, and in the near future they'll have to turn to their own gardens."

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