

# A Divorced Couple Is Fighting Over Frozen Dead Bodies

**They used to be in the cryonics business together. Then things went wrong.**

By [Yana Pashaeva](#)

Sept 21, 2021 3:23 PM



Danila Medvedev looks inside a liquid nitrogen–filled human-storage unit just outside Moscow on June 17, 2010. Alexey Sazonov/AFP via Getty Images

Two weeks ago, police in the Moscow region received a call about an unusual [robbery](#) and were ordered to stop a truck belonging to the suspect. On a platform attached to the vehicle, they found containers with frozen bodies. They belonged to people who agreed—and paid money—to be frozen after death in the hope of being revived in the future, a practice called cryonics. (It's legal in Russia as well as in the U.S.; former baseball player Ted Williams' head and body are each frozen, separately, at a [cryonics facility in Arizona](#).) It's [unlikely](#) cryonics will ever work. But for people who think there's a chance, the safekeeping of the bodies can be seen as a life-or-death matter.

The woman who allegedly tried to steal bodies was Valeria Udalova, a former CEO of the cryonics company KrioRus, founded in 2006. The man who accused her of theft was her ex-husband, Danila Medvedev, also a former CEO of KrioRus. Both Udalova and Medvedev now own *separate* cryonics businesses and are in the midst of a battle over 81 bodies of KrioRus clients.

The number of people interested in cryopreservation increased to a record in recent months. It came to a head on Sept. 7, when Udalova reportedly broke into the cryostorage near Moscow, which is now under the control of Medvedev (though Udalova claims that she rents this facility). According to the Medvedev's team, Udalova and her partners cut through a metal wall at the lab, dumped liquid nitrogen from containers with dead bodies, and loaded the containers, known in the industry as "[dewars](#)," on the truck. When workers lifted the heavy vats, the dewars were bending like they were going to fall and break, as a leaked [video](#) shows; meanwhile, liquid nitrogen was pouring out and spilling on people. "Even paying much for your death in Russia can't save you from being a part of the criminal conflict," wrote one Facebook user who had watched the video. One of Medvedev's partners, Dmitry Kvasnikov, [claimed](#) on Facebook on Wednesday that Udalova broke some equipment during the raid, so now it is hard to maintain dewars and refill them with liquid nitrogen. This put cryopatients "at some risk," he said.

In total, there are about 500 people frozen all over the world. The pandemic put extra pressure on the cryonics business. The number of people interested in cryopreservation increased to a record in recent months, [according to the New York Times](#). Cryonics companies are transparent about the fact that the technology to revive bodies does not exist, and they do not guarantee their patients another life. What they guarantee is preserving the bodies. But accidents like the one in Russia show that even the task of keeping bodies frozen can go very, very wrong.

Becoming a cryopatient isn't cheap. KriosRus customers pay \$36,000 to freeze their whole body. Freezing only your brain ("neuropreservation") costs much less—about \$15,000. But this is a deal compared with the rates at the Alcor Life Extension Foundation in Scottsdale, Arizona. Alcor, which stores 184 bodies or brains, offers whole-body preservation for \$200,000 and brain-only for \$80,000. Some customers, who signed the contracts while they were still alive, have taken out loans to pay for the expensive service. Cryonics can be done for pets, too. In addition to the humans, KrioRus also stores 47 frozen animals, including dogs, cats, parrots, rabbits, and hamsters. The cost of cryopreserving a pet depends on its size. Udalova says she has cryopreserved her mom and dog, and she has committed to being frozen after her own death, too.

The process works like this: After death, the body is transported to the facility in regular ice or dry ice. Once the patient is at the lab, surgeons perform the "cryoprotective perfusion," in which they wash out all the body's blood and infuse the corpse with cryoprotectants like antifreeze, which stop crystal ice formation inside the body, as it is dangerous for cells. Then the body is cooled and placed inside the dewar, where it is stored in liquid nitrogen at the temperature of negative 196 degrees Celsius.

How long will the bodies stay this way? KrioRus signs contracts with patients for 100 years; the founders believe, for some reason, that the technology to raise the dead will be discovered by the end of the century. Not just to revive them, but to return them to full health. (In 2015, Medvedev and Udalova [told](#) the Village, a Russian news outlet, that half of their patients were diagnosed with cancer.) But if such technology hasn't been invented by the time the agreement comes to an end, it will be automatically extended for 25 years as many times as needed, the company promises.

But so far, KrioRus' promises to revive frozen bodies are total science fiction. No people or animals have been revived after cryopreservation, and there is no scientific evidence that it will *ever* be possible. "There are grounds to think that human cloning will be possible in the future, but not resurrection," says Ilya Kolmanovsky, a Russian biologist and science journalist. It is possible that clones could be produced from cryopatients at some point, though to do so, it would be enough to cryopreserve live body cells, not the brain or the whole body. It would also be a lot less appealing, as all that the clones would have in common with the original person would be DNA and looks. Like Kolmanovsky says, a clone wouldn't have "that patient's personality." But even having a clone of your frozen self walking around a couple hundred years from now would take some technological advances.

It's hardly a guarantee that your frozen body itself will make it into the future unperturbed—there have been a couple reports before this latest kerfuffle about bodies being mistreated. Bob Nelson—who was the first person to [cryopreserve](#) a human, in 1960—outright abandoned several bodies. He was a TV repairman with no scientific background when he became the president of the Cryonics Society of California. The organization didn't have enough resources to maintain frozen clients. When it ran out of money in 1975, Nelson left nine bodies in liquid nitrogen in a vault at a cemetery in California. Without maintenance, they decomposed. Relatives sued him and won \$800,000.

In 2009, Larry Johnson, a former employee of Alcor, [alleged in a book](#) that workers in the facility in Arizona had a few years earlier mutilated Ted Williams' frozen head. According to his [interview](#) with CBS News, employees decided to move the head from one container to another, and they put a tuna fish can on the bottom of the new vessel so the head would stand still. When, a couple of days later, they needed to move the head again, they saw the can was stuck to the top of the head. Then the situation became worse: Workers tried to remove the can with a monkey wrench but accidentally hit the head. (Alcor denied these allegations.)

Udalova, who allegedly stole the frozen bodies, seems to be leaning into the chaos of the industry, joking on a [video](#) posted on YouTube on Sept. 8 that she would write the book "cryonics in hands of madmen." She's promised she is going to do everything to get Medvedev and his team arrested. Police have returned the dewars back to the original storage facility, said Udalova in the video, and they now are studying who is the real owner of the containers. As for the bodies themselves? It's

unclear what kind of damage the bodies might have sustained during the back-and-forth. Maybe it's for the best that they won't live to tell the tale.

[Future Tense](#) is a partnership of [Slate](#), [New America](#), and [Arizona State University](#) that examines emerging technologies, public policy, and society.

[Source](#)