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Russia Edging Away From Quantity Over Quality Approach to Construction

By Alexander Panin

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Migrant workers are often employed by construction companies at a low cost in Russia to ensure greater profits.

Until the demand for cheap and affordable housing is satisfied in Russia, there will be no incentive to use modern materials or advanced technology to improve the quality of the living quarters that are being built for most consumers.

This was one of the conclusions that was reached in Moscow last week during a roundtable on the problems associated with introducing new technologies in construction.

"New technologies" refers to the broad range of solutions that improve living standards, including better lighting, ventilation, soundproofing, insulation and energy efficiency.

Russia is far from being the world's leader in using new materials and technology in construction and any attempts to change that are hindered by the need to build apartments

quickly and cheaply, industry experts said.

The average resident in Russia is still squeezed into 22 square meters, which is two times less than in France or Britain, said Gonzague de Pirey, chief of operations in Russia, Ukraine and the CIS for Saint-Gobain, a Paris-based international construction group.

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly stressed the need for more affordable housing in Russia. The upshot is that apartments made from standard concrete blocks spring up rapidly all over major cities, while governors proudly report increases in living space in their regions.

In Moscow the aim is to build 3.2 million square meters of residential space this year, according to Deputy Mayor Marat Khusnullin, who oversees construction in the city. "Our plan is to further build no less than 3 million square meters per year," Khusnullin has said.

Measuring everything in square meters is a very formal approach to housing construction that will not provide quality, just quantity, said a prominent Russian architect Mikhail Khazanov, adding that the term "innovation" may only be applied to about 1 percent of what is currently built in Russia.

"Construction businesses today aim for fast returns on investment, using cheap labor, which puts barriers on innovation. They are building as fast as possible, with no real care for quality," he said.

Moreover, most consumers do not prioritize improved ventilation, better insulation and energy efficiency when choosing their new home.

"The main criteria for choosing a house is its price and location, although consumers do want better value for money," said Yana Sosoreva, deputy head of the NDV real estate company.

Customers do inquire about the kind of construction materials were used, and about the quality of ventilation and windows. "But questions as to whether there is air conditioning, for instance, are only addressed to find out if they would have to incur extra expenses, something that is not desired," she said.

Top-notch engineering systems, quality materials and safety, however, become more important as potential buyers' incomes grow, developers said.

"In our elite housing projects we use modern technology that not only ensures comfortable living conditions but also lowers utility bills for the clients," said Igor Bychenok, head of sales at Hals Development. "The use of advanced technology in construction is not widespread in the business and economy segments of real estate as it pushes up the cost of each square meter," he said

But as technology develops further and becomes cheaper, it will be applied more widely, Byichenok said, adding that even today most construction companies try to use them at least to some extent.

This will become more common as middle class attitudes are currently changing in Russia, Saint-Gobain's de Pirey said.

"Until recently the situation here was similar to what we saw in France in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was a need for a lot of affordable housing. Now it is different, people do not want to live in low-quality apartments any more," de Pirey said.

At the same time advanced technology does not necessarily substantially increase the costs of construction. "When new materials and better solutions are planned at an early stage of the project, they on average add about 5 percent to the overall cost," he said. If, however, changes are introduced later, the cost may spiral up to 50 percent, he added.

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