

# Housing is to die for in former Soviet Union

MOSCOW (AP) — Raisa Milshtein liked her vodka and she liked her friends. Together, they did her in.

Her story of betrayal and murder at the hands of ruthless young men sounds like a novel by Dostoyevsky. But this is a modern tale with a dark moral, one plucked from an as-yet-unwritten survivor's guide to the dangerous new Russia.

Milshtein, 56, became one of the dozens, perhaps hundreds or thousands, killed for the one thing of value they had: an apartment.

Millions of Russians, particularly the elderly, were impoverished by the dizzying economic changes wrought by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Raging inflation wiped out life savings; paltry pensions failed to keep pace and state services were either inadequate or nonexistent. For pensioners, the promised free market became a flea market. They stood on the streets selling the socks from their feet or anything else they could spare.

Although cash-poor, many became property-rich when the government announced in 1992 that they could claim and sell their state-owned apartments, breaking the Soviet system's 70-year stranglehold on real estate.

Suddenly, an apartment of three or four rooms in central Moscow was worth \$100,000 or more. Even smaller, less-desirable apartments could be sold for tens of thousands of dollars, more than most Russians could earn in a lifetime.

The lure of money proved especially strong for the old and lonely, who dreamed of cashing in and getting out of the mean city to spend their final years in country comfort, or for alcoholics looking for a bottomless bottle.

Some quickly learned just how cruel capitalism could be.

Criminal groups began preying on those who lived alone. They devised several schemes, sometimes offering to buy the flats for cash and the promise of new housing outside Moscow, other times drawing up contracts that offered lifetime maid service, food

and medical care in exchange for the apartment after the owner's death.

"The tragedy begins when the papers are signed," said Vladimir Vershkov, a Moscow police spokesman.

Milshtein lived in a one-room apartment and spent much of her time drinking with friends, said Vitaly Ryabov of the city prosecutor's office.

"Among her friends were two young men who knew she was living alone and wanted to seize her apartment," he said. "They tricked her into signing a trust agreement to sell the apartment, and during another drinking party, they took her to the countryside and killed her by injecting her with some drug. They buried her at their dacha outside Moscow."

The criminals were caught after they bought a flashy foreign car with the proceeds. Investigators believe they killed another elderly woman in a similar setup.

At least 30 Muscovites are known to have been killed for their apartments last year, and police are investigating the whereabouts of 3,000 who disappeared after selling their flats. Russians are still required to register with police when they move.

"They were either killed or completely bungled all of their documents," Ryabov said. "We have no idea where they are now. It's a serious problem both for the prosecutor's office and the police."

Authorities expect the number of known victims to grow with the end of winter: They are finding unidentified bodies that had been concealed for months in snow-covered woods or frozen rivers.

"As horrible as these facts are, it is only natural considering the high cost of housing," Vershkov said. "The transition period of the economy is a good breeding ground for criminals."

So far, 1.5 million apartments in Moscow have been claimed by their tenants, about 40 percent of the total, Ryabov said. Filing the privatization papers is easy and the only payment required is a small document-handling fees.

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