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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians' Average Monthly Salary Falls to $500 as Food Prices Skyrocket

By Peter Spinella

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Amid soaring inflation, the average monthly salary across Russia shrank to 31,200 rubles ($500) in January, Gazeta.ru reported Tuesday citing the Economic Development Ministry.

The current average represents an 8 percent decrease from the same month last year in ruble terms, and a nearly 50 percent plunge in dollar terms as a result of a severe economic downturn that has rapidly devalued Russia's national currency.

Spending on food is expected to account for 50 to 55 percent of household income by the end of this year, business newspaper Vedomosti reported Monday. Food prices surged 22 percent in February alone, though that figure is expected to stabilize in coming months, Vedomosti said, citing VTB analysts.

A Sverdlovsk regional lawmaker from the ruling United Russia party caught flak in January for encouraging Russians to deal with the rising prices by "eating less."

The lawmaker, Ilya Gaffner, said in televised comments that his region's 25 percent inflation rate would "not [be] that bad" if people learned to control their appetites.

Russia's already struggling economy was hit hard last year by a halving of global oil prices — the country's No. 1 export — and by Western sanctions imposed over Russia's role in the Ukraine conflict.

Russia's unemployment rate is also on the rise, having increased to 5.5 percent in January as the government and private sector fired employees amid the economic slump, Reuters reported.

About a third of Russians expect their family's income to fall in the next couple of months due to wage cuts and layoffs, according to a poll by the state-run Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM).

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