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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rural Russians Face Hardship as Prices for Firewood Spike

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A village in Russia's Arkhangelsk region. **Vladimir Smirnov/TASS**

While Russian state propaganda has for weeks been portraying Europeans freezing in their own homes as a result of the EU's collective decision to boycott Russian energy due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, independent Russian news website Verstka reported the widespread challenge faced by many Russian households to keep warm on Tuesday.

More than 10 million Russians — some 7% of the population — live without central heating, according to the 2020 census. That share rises to more than 80% in some of the country's non-ethnically Russian regions in the Far East and Siberia, Verstka reported.

Many of those 10 million rural dwellers who live disconnected from the national gas network simply cannot afford to buy firewood this winter due to low wages and the rise in the cost of living, Verstka found.

Russian families need an average of 25,000 rubles ($350) to buy sufficient firewood for the winter, according to NGO estimates, a figure that is often equivalent to an average monthly

wage in regions that depend heavily on firewood.

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While local authorities provide low-income families with either a fixed amount of firewood or plots of woodland where they can chop their own, Verstka found that both were often insufficient to keep a family warm through Russia's freezing winter.

Following President Vladimir Putin's mobilization order in September, some regional authorities have begun providing free heating wood to the families of those drafted as well.

Those unable to afford wood for the winter tend to rely on local NGOs, charities, and even media outlets that crowdsource funds to buy firewood for those in need, according to Verstka.

An additional factor this year has been a series of large-scale accidents that hit central heating systems in early December, Verstka reported, leaving even those who normally have central heating reliant on firewood to keep warm.

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