THE PLAIN
TRUTH

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FEUILLETON

UNMOVED AS A MOUNTAIN

A tale of one grove, one questionnaire and one oak, as told by eyewitnesses and the newspapers

I. THE OAK

The oak at the edge of the Neitralsk grove had seen everything: three foresters, two fires on paper and one audit, after which a stump went missing. The oak itself stood as unmoved as a mountain and did not yield to the passing situation.[1]

In Neitralsk the grove was held in common. Firewood could be taken by anyone who came with an axe and a conscience. It was guarded by Yerofei Nedelimov, who kept count: forty-two oaks, a hundred and seven birches and one bench. Nobody sat on the bench: everyone was busy with firewood.

On Monday Ippolit Zavisimtsev, chairman of the Eurosun co-operative, turned up at the oak. He had brought solar panels from beyond a distant border, as cheap as sunflower seeds, and wanted to put them up where the grove stood.[2] The sun, he explained, needed room, and the trees were in its way.

"The grove is common," said Yerofei.

"And the sun will be common too," Zavisimtsev replied. "By subscription."

"And the firewood?"

"Firewood is yesterday. We are moving on."

"Where to?"

"Into dependence. But a new kind."

"And us?" asked Yerofei.

"You're in the small print."

Yerofei decided not to leave the oak. He had nowhere to go: the grove stood at his back.



Purpose of visit: firewood; no subscription, conscience not on the list.

FACT FILE

Talks between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Shenzhen lasted more than two hours, after which the leaders continued over a working breakfast. 2026 marks 30 years of partnership and strategic interaction between the two countries and 25 years of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation.[1]

THEIR WAYS

Having given up Russian fuel, the European Union depends ever more on Chinese green technology, writes the WSJ. "This is a new type of dependence," said Joseph Dellatte of the Institut Montaigne.[2] In Neitralsk nobody has yet abolished the old type of dependence, on firewood.

LETTERS

Dear Editor, Please count my stove as neutral: it warms both those who are for firewood and those who are for the sun.

A resident of Forest Edge Street

— Notice —

EUROSUN CO-OPERATIVE

Sunshine by subscription. Small print free

Ray ..... **by tariff**
Shade ..... **free**
November ..... **not served**
Firewood ..... **ask Nedelimov**

Sources (RBC, 18 November 2026, in Russian):
1. What the leaders of Russia and China agreed in Shenzhen — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdb3cee396645a4dbd3b70
2. WSJ on the EU's new dependence after giving up Russian gas — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdf202b6b65c1d059c81fe
3. Jeffrey Sachs reveals the subject of his personal talk with Putin at APEC — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdda7f49ef85cb5ecd9897
4. The Kremlin reveals when Putin and Trump will meet separately — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdc52c7a1d0f3f100a973b

II. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

On Tuesday a questionnaire was put up at the edge of the grove. Without it nobody was let in any more.

ENTRANT'S QUESTIONNAIRE
1. Purpose of visit?
2. Do you have an axe?
3. Do you have a subscription?
4. If not, why not?

Yerofei filled in the questionnaire honestly. Under "purpose" he wrote "firewood", under "subscription" he wrote "conscience". The form was rejected: conscience was not on the list.

"Write it in by hand," Yerofei asked.

"Only the signature goes in by hand," replied Zavisimtsev. "Everything else is from the list."

Meanwhile the panels came out a third cheaper than local timber, and a third cheaper on local nerves.[2] Zavisimtsev explained it simply.

"Cheap because it's from far away. The farther, the cheaper."

"And who will mend them?" asked Yerofei.

"Also from far away."

On the co-operative's gate hung a sign: "Clean energy — in the interests of nature." Aloud Zavisimtsev added: "And in mine." Nature did not object: nobody asked it.

So Yerofei decided to declare the grove neutral, like Switzerland: nobody's, and therefore everybody's.[3] For that he needed a paper from the town council, and he went to get the paper.

III. THE ADVISER

At the town council Yerofei was met by a visiting adviser, Iyeremiya Arkhitekturov. He had been advising everyone since the nineties: two former chairmen, the bathhouse and the river port.[3] After his advice the port became dry, but stable.

Arkhitekturov heard him out about the grove and proposed a new security architecture. The advice fitted on one page; the small print under it ran to three.

"What's in the small print?" asked Yerofei.

"Payment," said the adviser. "And a disclaimer for the weather."

"And the grove?"

"The grove is in the large print. It must be made neutral. Like Austria."

"I thought of that myself."

"Then at a discount," Arkhitekturov agreed.

The council chairman, Feoktist Raspisanov, promised to put the matter to a meeting with the head of neighbouring Zagorye. He called the meeting important. Its importance, in his words, lay above all in its being important in itself.[4] Yerofei put his name down in the queue for importance and waited.

IV. THE SCHEDULE

The meeting did not take place: the parties could not agree a schedule.[4] The chairman lunched at one, the head of Zagorye at two, and at three both of them had the bathhouse. They decided to have a brief word in the corridor.

The brief word lasted two hours, and then went on over a working breakfast.[1] The head called the chairman "my dear friend"; the chairman promised to stand back to back with him.[1] And so they stood: with their backs to the grove.

On the third day the panels went dark. From beyond the distant border came word that they could also be switched off from there, for safety.[2] Zavisimtsev called this a new kind of dependence, put on felt boots and went to the grove for firewood.

"Filled in the questionnaire?" asked Yerofei.

"Purpose: firewood," said Zavisimtsev. "No subscription."

"And conscience?"

"It turned up. Yesterday, when they switched us off."

"Took its time."

"It came from far away," sighed Zavisimtsev. "The farther, the cheaper."

Yerofei thought it over and took the questionnaire off the gate. Letting people in by questionnaire, it turned out, works only for those who will not fill it in.

V. NEUTRALITY

The matter settled itself, without a meeting. By evening the whole town stood in the grove: the chairman, the head of Zagorye, the adviser and the Eurosun co-operative at full strength, that is, Zavisimtsev.

Yerofei found a use for the panels too. One he fixed over the woodpile as a roof, with wire and a kind word. Out of two he made a sledge: it hauled firewood over the snow very well and needed no sun at all.

The grove was declared neutral. Everyone signed the paper except Arkhitekturov: he looked for the small print in it and did not find any.

"And who is the owner now?" asked the chairman.

"Nobody," said Yerofei. "That's why it stands."

"And who gets the firewood?"

"Whoever comes with an axe and a conscience."

"And without a conscience?"

"Then with the questionnaire," said Yerofei. "I kept it."

The oak at the edge stood as unmoved as before and once again did not yield to the situation. Nobody even nailed the questionnaire to it: they did not dare.

"We'll send you the bill for the advice," Arkhitekturov said in parting.

"Send it," replied Yerofei. "The oak will read it. It has seen everything here."

From press reports



The parties stood back to back; the firewood was hauled face forward.

Sources (RBC, 18 November 2026, in Russian):
1. What the leaders of Russia and China agreed in Shenzhen — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdb3cee396645a4dbd3b70
2. WSJ on the EU's new dependence after giving up Russian gas — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdf202b6b65c1d059c81fe
3. Jeffrey Sachs reveals the subject of his personal talk with Putin at APEC — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdda7f49ef85cb5ecd9897
4. The Kremlin reveals when Putin and Trump will meet separately — rbc.ru/politics/18/11/2026/6afdc52c7a1d0f3f100a973b