

Understand Russia

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Post Sochi and human rights controversies, President Putin turns his attention to Ukraine, raising concerns over a new cold war.

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The country's mountains, plains, forests and beaches are home to a Noah's ark of flora and fauna.

Russia Today

The controversies surrounding the jailing of Pussy Riot members, the Sochi Winter Olympics, the annexation of Crimea and the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH-17 have meant that recently Russia has seldom been far from international headlines. And the face most readily associated with the country is that of Vladimir Putin, who polarises opinion between those who see him as the leader of a party of 'crooks and thieves', and those who hail him as the president of an economically and politically resurgent Russia.

Best on Film

Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer Directed by Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin, this documentary is about the trial of the Pussy Riot trio.

My Perestroika (www.myperestroika.com) Robin Hessman's film focuses on five Russians and the effects on their lives of the past 20 turbulent years.

A Winter Journey Sergei Taramaev and Lubov Lvova direct this art-house feature. It has scooped awards at film festivals abroad but been shunned in Russia because of its gay love theme.

Best in Print

Russia – A Journey with Jonathan Dimbleby Also a BBC series, this is a revealing snapshot of a multifaceted country by one of the UK's top broadcasters.

The Last Man in Russia Oliver Bullough's spot-on portrait of modern Russia, told through the tumultuous and tragic life of an Orthodox priest.

Lost Cosmonaut and Strange Telescopes Daniel Kalder's books explore some of Russia's quirkiest and least-visited locations.

Releasing the Prisoners

For thrashing out a couple of lines of their 'Punk Prayer' in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, three members of the female punk group Pussy Riot were jailed for two years in August 2012. The trial hit headlines around the world and brought condemnation on Russia for its approach to freedom of speech and human rights. In their 2013 report on the country, Human Rights Watch noted the 'unprecedented crackdown against civic activism' since the re-election of Vladimir Putin.

Six weeks later, one of the trio changed her lawyer and managed to get her sentence suspended. The other two – Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova – remained in jail until December 2013 when they were released in an amnesty celebrating the 20th anniversary of Russia's constitution. Putin granted freedom to 25,000 people under the amnesty, including the former oligarch Mikhail Khordokovsky, who had been incarcerated for a decade, and 30 people arrested on a Greenpeace ship protesting oil exploration in the Arctic.

Controversial Olympics

Shortly after her release, Tolokonnikova stated that she had been released only because of the approaching Olympics Games, which Putin did not want ruined. Indeed, as the most expensive Olympics ever with a budget of more than US\$51 billion, the sporting event was hyped as Russia's chance to turn around world opinion on the country, often still seen in the harsh light of the Soviet and Yeltsin years of decline. Was it money well spent? Well, Russia did top the medals table and the event was mostly hailed an organisational success.

However, the Olympics also acted as a lightning rod for disaffected Russians. The LGBT community protested the introduction of a controversial law banning the distribution of 'propaganda of nontraditional