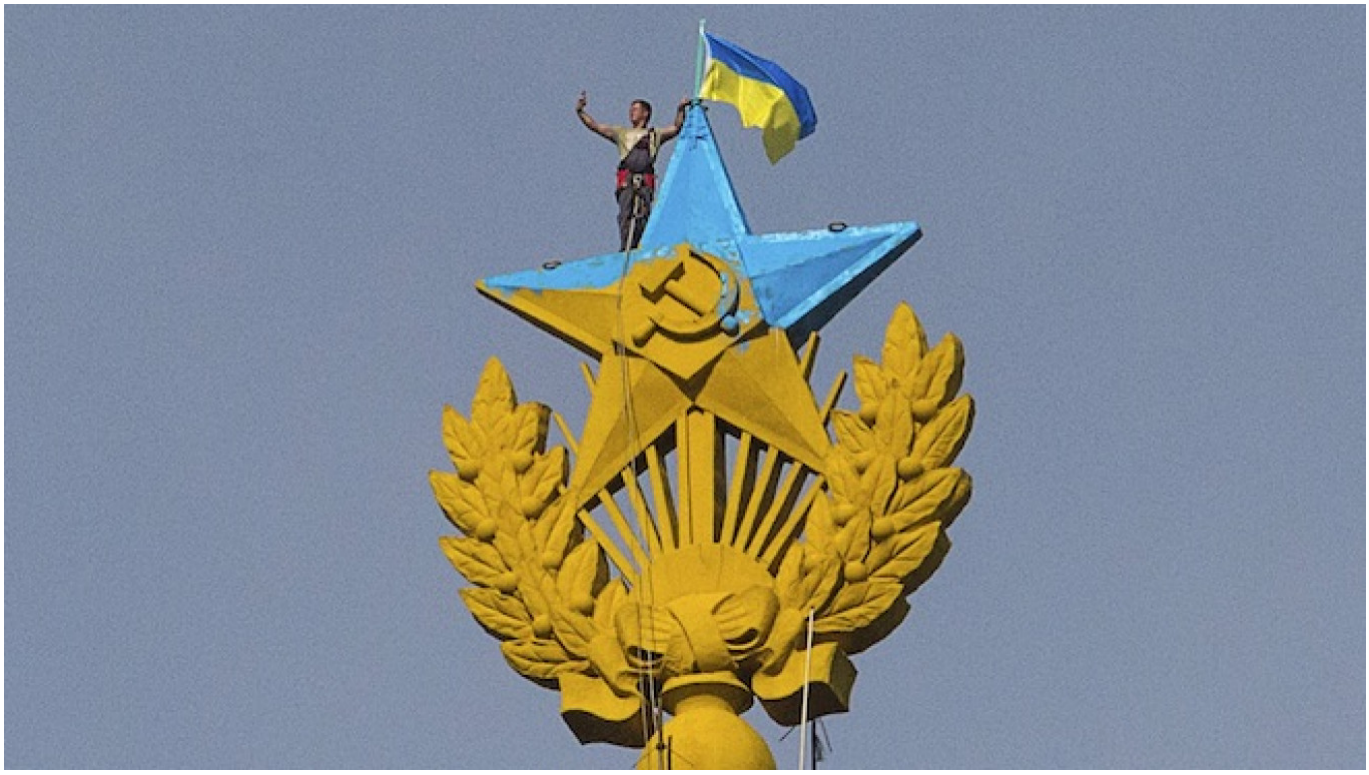
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Internet's Favorite Russia Stories of 2014

By Jennifer Monaghan

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A man takes a "selfie" as he stands with a Ukrainian flag on a Soviet-style star re-touched with blue paint so it resembles the yellow-and-blue national colours of Ukraine, atop the spire of a building in Moscow.

As the year draws to a close, Russia's skidding economy and weakening ruble have dominated the front pages of newspapers both at home and abroad.

But Russia and the Russian people have shown in 2014 that there is so much more to life in this dynamic country than banks, bonds and plummeting exchange rates.

To celebrate another crazy 12 months in Russia, The Moscow Times takes a look back at the stories that most captivated and amused us this year.

1. Soviet Monuments and Spray Paint

Russian authorities spent much of the year involved in a cat-and-mouse chase with graffiti artists from across the former Soviet bloc.

In August, Russia demanded that Bulgaria try harder to protect Soviet war memorials after yet another monument was spray-painted by vandals in Sofia. The following month, two more monuments were graffitied over in Lithuania.

The boldest act of all saw a Ukrainian roofer scale a skyscraper in the Russian capital to paint over the Soviet star atop the building in the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

публикация Mustang Wanted.

Russia later issued an international arrest warrant for the artist involved in the stunt, who responded by formally changing his name to "Glory to Ukraine," a move that no doubt further wound up his pursuers.

2. Extreme Weather

The Russian people showed in 2014 that they are willing to get on with life, whatever it — and their country's notoriously extreme weather — has to throw at them.

This come-what-may attitude explains why passengers in Siberia helped push their plane down a runway ahead of departure last month after the airport's traditional towing gear froze up in temperatures of minus 50 degrees Celsius.

It also explains the ingenuity of two boys who turned their living room into a swimming pool this summer as temperatures in central Russia soared above 30 degrees Celsius. Then again, who hasn't toyed with the idea of building an indoor pool using nothing but tarpaulin and a bit of Scotch tape?

But in some scenarios, no amount of resourcefulness will save you. Bathers in Siberia were left running for cover this summer after a cyclone interrupted an otherwise relaxing day. In a video uploaded to YouTube, swimmers can be seen sheltering under umbrellas as golf ball-sized hail rains down from above in a scene more reminiscent of a war film than a day at the beach.

3. #Sochiproblems

This was also the year that the Olympics came to Russia, with thousands of international athletes — and violinist Vanessa Mae — descending on the Black Sea resort of Sochi to take part in the Winter Games.

But even though the event cost a reported $50 billion to host, some critics were quick

to accuse organizers of skimping on certain crucial amenities. Photos of the infamous tandem toilets soon went viral on social media sites, while images of unfinished hotel rooms and facilities were posted online in the run-up to the Games with the hashtag "#Sochiproblems."

Bobsledders in particular were left to rue several construction mishaps in Sochi. One member of the U.S. team was forced to break through a door after getting locked inside his bathroom — only to get trapped in an elevator a few days later.

Worries over cost and construction were soon put aside for the Games' spectacular opening ceremony. But even then, eagle-eyed viewers were quick to spot that one of the six Olympic rings failed to open during the ceremony, spawning hundreds of memes online and even the odd Lord of the Rings reference.

At least this stray dog got to enjoy the show.

> A stray dog just strolled into the stadium ahead of the Sochi opening ceremony. Volunteers chased him away. pic.twitter.com/UJa8Ny3i5z
>
> — James Ellingworth (@jellingworth) 7 февраля 2014

4. Twitter Spats

Claims that Russian troops and weapons were being dispatched to help rebels in eastern Ukraine continued to circulate throughout the year, despite Moscow's repeated claims to the contrary.

So after 10 Russian soldiers "unintentionally" wandered into Ukraine in July, Canada's NATO delegation helpfully tweeted a map of the Russia-Ukraine border to prevent the mishap from happening again.

Ironically, the Canadians could probably have done with a geography lesson of their own, as their map incorrectly identified the Russian exclave Kaliningrad as part of Europe, despite it having belonged to Russia since 1945.

> Geography can be tough. Here’s a guide for Russian soldiers who keep getting lost & ‘accidentally’ entering #Ukraine pic.twitter.com/RF3H4IXGSp
>
> — Canada at NATO (@CanadaNATO) 27 августа 2014

Russia's NATO delegation soon responded with a map of their own, tweeting an updated chart of the region that clearly identified recently annexed Crimea as Russian territory.

> Helping our Canadian colleagues to catch up with contemporary geography of #Europe @CanadaNATO pic.twitter.com/MjzRxpFFfN
>
> — Russians at NATO (@natomission_ru) 28 августа 2014

Not to be outdone, the British Embassy in Kiev waded into the Twitter game last month, when it tweeted a picture "to help the Kremlin spot its tanks" in eastern Ukraine, amid persistent Russian denials that its military hardware was being sent to the region.

> #Путін досі заперечує,що війська та озброєння #Росії в Україні.Ось інструкція,щоб допомогти Кремлю виявити свої танки pic.twitter.com/3oFb1SuWWo
>
> — UK in Ukraine (@UKinUkraine) 19 ноября 2014

5. Tiger Troubles

While Russians stocked up on toy horses and pony calendars in January ahead of the Chinese New Year, in many ways 2014 was more the year of the tiger than of the horse.

In May, five Amur tigers were released into the wild under a presidential program — with three of the animals freed by Putin personally. Two of the tigers swiftly crossed the border into China in search of food, with one embarking on a killing spree that claimed the lives of several goats and chickens.

Over in Kiev, a less fearsome tiger was given a fright when a drunken visitor scaled a zoo wall to give him a hug. The sorry animal had to be treated for stress after the man fired off his gun in an attempt to escape the tiger's embrace.

And it wasn't just tigers that suffered at the hands of humans this year. A reef shark at Kaliningrad Zoo had a nervous breakdown from visitors repeatedly banging on its glass tank, despite requests from the management not to do so.

But the award for unluckiest animal of the year has to go to the alligator in northern Russia who was crushed when a portly circus accountant was flung from a tour bus and landed on top

of him. The poor reptile was left vomiting for several hours after the accident, although a medical examination found he was clear of any internal injuries.

6. Best of the Rest

There were so many head-scratching stories this year that we struggled to pick out our favorites. But while the following articles didn't make it into our top five, they still deserve an honorable mention:

Large Genitals Get Underage Boy Put in Russian Prison for Theft

Passengers Finish Beer of Man Who Fell Off Train

Russian Orthodox Priest Says Football Is Gay — Because of Its Shoes

The 50 Best 'Only in Russia' Moments

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