DIPLOMATS

Meet the people uniting nations

His Excellency Kirill Mikhailovich Barsky PhD
The ambassador of the Russian Federation to Thailand talks about his country’s presence in the kingdom
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This rapidly changing world according to Russia’s dynamic new Ambassador

In a refreshingly candid two-hour conversation, His Excellency Kirill Mikhailovich Barsky PhD, new ambassador of the Russian Federation to Thailand, covered a wide range of major topics, from mutual trade and historical relations to the controversial case of arms dealer Viktor Bout, the international media, and the astonishing increase in Russia’s presence in Thailand.

Aside from being a highly experienced diplomat, Mr Barsky is also a linguist, writer, poet, musician-composer, collector of chopstick holders and a sinologist who can speak, read and write Mandarin Chinese. The interview with this gifted envoy took place in the splendid setting of the embassy meeting hall, shortly before the ambassador celebrated his 50th birthday. He is married, with one son and one daughter.

From the outset, Mr Barsky made it clear that on subjects like the international media coverage of Russia he’d prefer to speak “off the cuff” rather than go through pre-prepared answers.

“These days, usually only negatives are published in the mainstream media, and if you write the truth about something then you immediately become the enemy of somebody. I can talk about problems that we are facing now, both the international community and Russia, but I don’t think it will be very interesting to your readers. Therefore, I will concentrate on positive things.

“There is so much good news but no one knows about it because it is not published. As the first Russian ambassador whom I served under in China used to say: ‘If a bridge is being built on a river nobody notices and nobody writes about it; but if the bridge collapses then it will be the top news.’

“Capitalism is a very effective system, but there are many flaws. A free flow of information is something that is really necessary. It is one of the basic human rights, a fundamental freedom, but we can see that very often this right is abused by the media and by governments in order to achieve political goals. They distort the information and control the media to get the effect they want - and they even try to control the minds of the people. This is disgusting because it runs counter to fundamental freedoms and human rights.

“We are entitled to have free access to information and we must have the right to make our own assessments of what is happening, without pressure from the outside. However, the international mass media operates in a way that takes that freedom of choice from people. Very often governments and corporations impose their views on the public through mass media. This can be called anything but not a free flow of information,” Mr Barsky said.

Asked later whether Russia is portrayed fairly by the international media, Mr Barsky replied: “The way the question is asked speaks for itself. Anyone who asks this question can see clearly that Russia is portrayed in a very negative way in the media, to the approval of some governments in pursuit of a narrow political agenda. It is unfair and frustrating, but we [Russia] will fight the information war which has been waged against us. The reasons behind the information war are clear: there are currently forces in the world that believe they have the right to dominate everything.

“We are living in a multi-polar world now. Sovereign countries do not wish to obey orders from any foreign capital. Why is Russia being punished? Because Russia doesn’t want to be a puppet in a theatre directed by the West. We are not in school. They aren’t professors and we are not the students. We are all equal. Russia has its own traditions, culture, economic priorities and independent foreign policy.

“Interestingly, despite illegal and unfair sanctions against Russia and in spite of all the shaming and blaming of Russia - which is absolutely groundless - people still tend to be attracted by Russia, by President Vladimir Putin, and by our example of speaking out about things which some people in some countries cannot accept, or wish to say but cannot afford to.”

The ambassador said that one reason he was eager to give the interview was to try and set the record straight. “Even though I have been very busy since arriving in Thailand, I attach a lot of importance to the media. I want very much to have good relations with professional journalists who will give an objective image of my country.”
“As you can see, I believe that it is extremely important to portray the Russian Federation, as well as the embassy and our work here in the proper light in the media, and I will make this a priority during my tenure in Bangkok. I will give you another reason why I respect professional journalists so much: my son is a journalist.”

Mr Barsky’s diplomatic road

“I arrived in Thailand to take the ambassador’s post on September 26, 2014, so I am absolutely new and fresh from Moscow. The first time I came to Thailand was in 2003. That was on the occasion of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Forum) summit meeting held in Bangkok.”

“I was picked up as an exchange student in China in 1985 and then I graduated from Moscow State University for Foreign Relations (MGIMO) with honors in 1989. I mastered in Chinese language and history. I joined the MFA in the same year and was sent to China as I spoke fluent Chinese. It was the year the Soviet Union was planning to normalize relations with China.

“Mr Gorbachev, then the President of the Soviet Union, went to China in May. I was a student at that time preparing for graduation and writing my thesis when I received a telephone call from the MFA asking me to join the team of interpreters accompanying the Soviet delegation. We were each assigned to a particular member of the delegation. This high-level delegation included, in addition to President Gorbachev, some other big shots in the Communist Party, Soviet government and the MFA.

“For me, a young man of 25 years, it was a real honor to go to China with a delegation headed by President Gorbachev. To cut a long story short, from that time on I had to combine a diplomatic job with a job of an interpreter. In 1998 I was sent to New York and in 2001 I was appointed Chief of the China Desk at the MFA in Moscow but continued to do oral translations during high level meetings.

“I travelled with President Putin for the APEC meeting in Bangkok in October 2003. I was in charge of translation during a meeting between President Putin and then Chinese President Hu Jintao. I was, as always, sitting between the heads of state. It was my usual position for over ten years. That visit lasted for four or five days because the President not only participated in the APEC summit but also paid a bilateral visit to Thailand.

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“After I finished my duty during the meeting with the Chinese President, I had some free time - which was a little bit of a luxury. I capitalized on the opportunity and familiarized myself with Bangkok and Thailand.

“From morning until night, I was strolling along the streets. I visited the King’s Palace, Wat Pho and the Jim Thomson museum and took a boat trip on the klongs and so on. I was so fascinated by Bangkok, and like many Russians I fell in love with Thailand. But back in 2003 I couldn’t even dream that I would someday be appointed as ambassador to this beautiful country.

“I made several visits to Thailand after 2003 while serving as Minister-Counsellor at the Russian Embassy in Jakarta from 2004 to 2008. I made a couple of stopovers in Bangkok while going home on vacation or travelling around the region. My last visit to Bangkok was in March 2010 when I attended an international conference on regional security. I am pretty familiar with Thailand and know what a great country it is, with amazing traditions and history. However, I need to travel, meet people and learn more about Thai culture, religion, customs and everyday life.

“Mr Barsky said the term for Russian ambassadors is usually four years but it depends on the situation. He is ambassador only for Thailand and not other regional countries as is often the case, but he is also a Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

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Russian presence in Thailand

“Our embassy in Bangkok has about 50 Russian staff, diplomats and technical staffers, plus seven Thai citizens as drivers, gardeners and housekeepers. If you add family members of the Russian diplomats there are 160 to 170 Russian people here. We also have a trade representative office at another location; everyone works together under the guidance of the ambassador.

“Other Russians in Thailand include representatives of the state-run Aeroflot airline, as well as Transaero, a private airline. We also have here representatives of Rosoboronexport, a company selling defense-related products. Many Russian tourist companies are represented here, mainly in Pattaya and Phuket. Russian journalists are also here working for media outlets such as Russia Today News Agency, Itar-Tass and Komsomolskaya Pravda.

“All in all, we Russians are quite numerous here and there are more to come. We are expecting representatives of the Ministry of Interior and the Federal Agency for Illicit Drug Trafficking Control to arrive in 2015. Russia has already started to cooperate with Thai law enforcement agencies in arresting and extraditing Russian criminals, on the request of the Russian side. Security and combating crime is a very important aspect of our cooperation. I want to stress that the majority of our citizens living in Thailand are good people. We are obliged to protect their rights and legitimate interests. Only the criminals should be worried,” Mr Barsky said.

Diplomatic mission

“My mission as ambassador is multiple. Of course, I have a lot of duties and responsibilities including trade promotion, cooperation in security and crime prevention, fostering political dialogue, expanding cultural exchanges between our peoples, and taking care of Russian citizens in Thailand. But apart from that I wish to consolidate the healthy elements in the Russian community, and I intend to do that with help of the Russian Orthodox Church in Thailand. Russians in Thailand have some very good tendencies. We have discovered that they aren’t coming to Thailand only to enjoy life but also to find new sources of enlightenment and knowledge. Many are trying to restart their lives, to find new sources of moral support, and that’s why many Russians are turning to the church,” said Mr Barsky.

“I would love to visit Chiang Mai, Issan, Chiang Rai and the South, and I definitely will. But it’ll have to wait, because from my first day in Bangkok I have been extremely busy. Morning until night I have cables to write, reports to read, documents to approve, meeting after meeting during daytime and receptions in the evening.

“I am going to start taking courses in Thai language at least twice a week. I will squeeze out some time to learn the language because I believe it is very important to understand what people are saying and be able to express yourself. This is why in the past I took courses of French, Canton dialect of Chinese and...
Bahasa Indonesia. This is also a way to express your respect for the country you are posted in. My goal for the Thai language is to learn to speak and to read as much as I can.”

**Bilateral relations**

“Relations between Thailand and Russia are excellent. We are old friends. Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1897, and in a few years we will celebrate the 120th anniversary. Such a long relationship between two countries is a very rare thing in the modern world. We will celebrate together with the Thai Royal Family, Thai Government and the Thai people. It will be a great celebration.

“As you may be aware, Russia played a major role in preserving the independence of the Kingdom of Siam. In March 1891 a Russian Navy vessel anchored in the Chao Phya River, and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) was on hand to personally greet one very distinguished voyager on the ship - Crown Prince Nicholas, the man who would three years later become Tsar Nicholas II, Russia’s last emperor. Tsar Nicholas was the first royal guest from a foreign superpower, and his visit raised King Chulalongkorn’s hopes to save the country from becoming a colony.

“It is especially dear to my heart that the Thai people still remember that,” said Mr Barsky. “Not only among the Royal Family and in political circles; the rank and file people also remember. And everybody knows about King Chulalongkorn’s visit to Saint Petersburg in 1897 and his personal friendship with Tsar Nicholas II. This history is a very, very important cornerstone of our bilateral relationship.

“Thai people also still remember the story of how the second son of King Chulalongkorn, Prince Chakrapong, met a girl from a Russian aristocratic family whose name was Ekaterina Desnitskaya, and fell in love with her completely. They were married. It happens sometimes. This interesting romantic story also brings our people closer together.”

Turning to current affairs, Mr Barsky described bilateral trade as “unacceptably small” at about US$3.3 billion. “I am not satisfied. We are aiming to expand our trade with Thailand and we are going to do our utmost to bring new trading partners to Thailand and Thai businessmen to Russia. According to the latest figures the dynamics are positive. In the first nine months of 2014, the trade amount was around US$2.6 billion, so by the end of the year we hope to reach US$3.9 billion, which would be a considerable increase. Of course, we wish that our trade was increasing as fast as the number of Russian tourists coming to Thailand,” he said.

Oil, metals and chemicals are a major part of Russia’s exports to Thailand. But other goods are also hopeful, in particular defense-related products. “Russia can sell everything a modern army of any country may need. Our weaponry is some of the best in the world. We produce all kinds of weapons, from submarines, airplanes and helicopters to machineguns. There are plenty of opportunities for the Thai armed forces to become equipped with Russian-made armaments. We have already started a very good cooperation in this regard.

“A framework agreement was signed in 2003 and now we have a mechanism of negotiations and regular meetings. The last meeting of the working group was held in Moscow in late August. We signed several contracts, among them for Mi-17 helicopters, and there are a number of things in the pipeline.

“We import from Thailand mainly machinery, automobiles and spare parts, as well as some high-tech, chemical and agricultural products. I believe that the current structure of the Thai-Russian trade is not ideal for the Russian government. We would like to diversify. We have a lot to offer to Thailand and we can buy more from Thailand too. Now we are in the process of important negotiations in several avenues, in particular for the purchase of Thailand’s rice, poultry, fish, seafood, pork, tropical fruits and natural rubber. On our part, we can supply Thailand with wheat.”

**Why are so many Russians in Thailand?**

“When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992 we already had Russian tourists coming to Thailand because the country opened up and people could travel freely. From the start, Thailand was one of the important destinations, but at that time the number of tourists wasn’t so large. It all changed with the development of the tourist infrastructure here and the growing interest of Russian tourists who wished to look beyond Cyprus, Egypt and Turkey.
Another major factor is that Thailand has a wonderful atmosphere, the 'Kingdom of Smiles' as we say in Russia. There is a very cordial attitude of the local people toward Russian tourists.

"Last but not least, in Thailand the dry season is exactly the time when it is especially cold in most parts of the Russian territory - December, January and February. This also overlaps with the Russian holidays for New Year, Russian Orthodox Christmas and winter vacations for students. Russian people like to flock to Thailand especially at this time, but now they are increasingly coming throughout the year. Within 10 years the number of Russians tourists in Thailand jumped ten-fold. Last year we had 1.7 million tourists from Russia; in 2009, it was only 300,000. This year, we are expecting at least not less Russian tourists in Thailand than last year."

"Thailand is linked to Russia by over 60 flights per week, both regular and charter. Flights go to and from not only Moscow and Saint Petersburg but also dozens of other cities across Thailand. Russia is in the hearts of Russian citizens. We all know and love Thailand. Our people wish to come to Thailand again and again and not to stay only in one place but to explore new places. Some Russians are so obsessed with Thailand that they stay here permanently or for the most part of the year.

"The number of Thais visiting Russia is much smaller, but it is growing. In 2013 about 24,000 Thai nationals visited my country. I hope that Russia will become more attractive for Thai tourists. We are making a special effort to advertise Russia, its beauties, cultural heritage and cities big and small.

"Take the ancient city of Vladimir, where my father came from. It is a medium size city with a population of 350,000 people, about 200 kilometers to the east of Moscow. But it has a glory of being the ancient capital of Russia, full of monasteries and churches, and all are beautiful just like swans bending over the waters. The natural landscape is so beautiful. I would encourage all my Thai friends and colleagues to go to Russia to visit Vladimir as well as other old Russian cities and towns."

**The Russian community in Thailand**

"The Russian diaspora in Thailand is a complex phenomenon. We have people who are just travelling for leisure. We have also businessmen who settled down in Thailand. Some have bought property, apartments, houses or villas. Some have their own business here and some trade with Russia or operate a tourist business. We also have people engaged in IT, construction, property, jewelry, food production and other fields. The Russian community here has started to develop its own character with its own social infrastructure. This means Russian cultural events, schools, kindergartens, music studios and so on. Even Russian cable TV channels.

The Russian Orthodox Church is another story. We have seven churches in Thailand, two of them in Pattaya. I have visited the beautiful cathedral in Bangkok, both cathedrals in Pattaya and have seen photos of the gorgeous cathedral in Phuket. I will definitely go there as soon as I can. We have also built several new cathedrals. One of them will be inaugurated next year. We are going to have big festivity and I will attend the ceremony. Archimandrite Oleg (Cherepanin), the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) is a very nice person and he’s doing a great job here. He conducts sermons in Russian, English and Thai. It’s amazing! As Russian ambassador I intend to support him fully."

**Viktor Bout case**

Our discussion then turned to the controversial case of Viktor Bout, the Russian citizen who was arrested by US drug enforcement agents in Bangkok in March 2008. He was extradited to the US in November 2010 and convicted of “conspiring to kill US soldiers by way of his agreement to sell weapons to a Colombian rebel group.” He was sentenced to 25 years in prison by a US court in April 2012.

Mr Barsky said that Mr Bout’s guilt or innocence should be up to a Russian court to decide. “He was arrested illegally here and extradited to the US without proper cause. We are still fighting the case. He is in jail now but we still have hope that his case may be reconsidered. His lawyer has collected some additional documents, materials and data not presented in the trial and will ask for a reconsideration of Mr Bout’s right to appeal,” Mr Barsky said.

**Miscellaneous questions**

**Who is the biggest Russian ally in Asia?**

"Now that we are living in a polycentric world, it is silly to speak about allies, because the alliances of the Cold War period do not work anymore. This is our firm belief. We can talk of partners. We have a lot of partners in Asia. Of course, our closest partner in the region is Kazakhstan with which we have many common interests in the areas of security and economics.

"If we speak about the Asia-Pacific region, then China is a very important neighbor for Russia. We have a long common border and we share a lot of common interests and values with China in the modern world. We have had a very open political dialog between our leaders for a long time. We are working hand-in-hand to strengthen regional security and stability and we have more and more economic cooperation with China. We are expanding our trade, which will soon reach US$100 billion. As compared to the US$5 billion we had 25 years ago when I was a young diplomat in Beijing, this is like Heaven and Earth. China is a very significant strategic partner and we believe that this partnership is an important element of stability in the Asia-Pacific region. We will continue to work together to make our world a better place to live."

**How does the Russian economy compare to the Chinese economy?**

"The Chinese economy is growing very fast although the pace has slowed a little. But it is still going at a 7.5% rate. Some experts have calculated that it is already the world’s second biggest economy. But things are changing very quickly. Russia is among the most promising countries economically in the world, not only because of our vast natural resources but also our huge science and technological potential and human resources. Once this is translated into commercial endeavors, I am sure that in five to ten years’ time you will see quite another Russia.

"For China, the import of huge amounts of Russian oil, gas, coal, timber and electric energy adds tremendous value in terms of economic development."
Chinese culture and later on the issues of Chinese domestic and foreign policy, on the many articles on the history of China, on of China. I wrote a book and have published defended my PhD in Moscow on the history /uni00A0 “I have lots of hobbies. I like history. I free time in Thailand by asking, reading foreign land - ask.’ I am trying to use my about the country. It is like Confucius once said, ‘If you go to you go to a foreign country, you are supposed to learn more /uni00A0 As I said, these days I don’t really have free time, but I still /uni00A0 Free time and hobbies /uni00A0 “As I said, these days I don’t really have free time, but I still /uni00A0 “I like music. I play the piano and guitar. I used to compose music when I was younger and I am still a fan of rock and jazz music. This summer I published my new ‘twins,’ a couple of books. The first book is called ‘Fragrant Hills’ and the second ‘Crystal Waters.’ The books contain poetry and short stories. This is what I am doing in my free time, even if I don’t really have free time. But when I am on a flight or alone in a hotel room during the night I am writing and writing and writing. I like theatre and movies, impressivism and modern art. I am fond of sports, especially tennis, although nowadays I watch more than play. /uni00A0 “I am also a collector of chopstick rests. One day I will organize an exhibition in Thailand. My collection has over 400 pieces of chopstick rests. This is not the biggest collection in the word; some collectors I am in contact with have over 1,000 pieces. Asked how he would describe himself at the conclusion of this interview, Mr Barsky answered: “I am just a Russian intellectual who is thinking about the past, present and future of my country and the world we live in.”

Should Russia turn more to Europe?

“This is not the right way to put this question. Russia has a unique historic, geographic and geopolitical role because it is a big land between Europe, the Muslim South and Asia. In fact, Russia combines all these influences within its culture and within its people. We are Europeans but we have some traditions that make us close to the Oriental countries. We have been living side by side with Muslims for centuries. We have never clashed, for example, with the Tatar people since Genghis Khan conquered Russia eight centuries ago. In terms of dialogue or a clash of civilizations Russia cannot take sides. We are going to be a partner to Europe, the Muslim world and Asia. This is our destiny and our greatest asset as well. And we will take every effort to promote dialogue between civilizations and cultures.”

Is Russia’s population continuing to shrink?

“The current population of Russia is about 145 million. It is not going down any more like during the 1990s. Our government has taken effective measures to strengthen public health care, to develop social infrastructure, to foster family values, to provide families with housing and support families with over three children, and this has paid off. Now our population has begun to grow again.”

Free time and hobbies

“As I said, these days I don’t really have free time, but I still hope that I will have a chance to do my favorite things. When you go to a foreign country, you are supposed to learn more about the country. It is like Confucius once said, ‘If you go to foreign land - ask.’ I am trying to use my free time in Thailand by asking, reading and travelling.

“I have lots of hobbies. I like history. I defended my PhD in Moscow on the history of China. I wrote a book and have published many articles on the history of China, on Chinese domestic and foreign policy, on the Chinese culture and later on the issues of security and cooperation within the Asia-Pacific region."

“..."