

Q&A: Head of Boehringer Ingelheim Says Kiev Stint Prepared Him For Russia

By [Anatoly Medetsky](#)

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Blanarik sees the key to success in learning, unlearning and relearning.

The Carpathian Mountains and the Atlantic Ocean have excited admiration for nature in Ivan Blanarik.

The man, who is steering the Russian office of German pharmaceutical giant Boehringer Ingelheim, was in awe from his mountainside hiking tours as a youth. A college student in Czechoslovakia at the time, he said the rough and ragged terrain commanded respect and caution.

Ivan Blanarik

Education

2003 — MBA, The Johannes Gutenberg
University of Mainz, Germany
1991 — Department of Pharmacy, Comenius
University in Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Work experience

2009 — General director at Boehringer
Ingelheim's Russian division.
2006 — Managing director at Boehringer
Ingelheim's Finnish division.
2003 — Head of marketing and sales
at Boehringer Ingelheim's Portugal division.
1994 — Started work at Boehringer
Ingelheim as a trainee.

Favorite book: "Knowledge and Decisions",
a nonfiction book by U.S. economist Thomas
Sowell. First published 1980.

Reading now: "The Snowball: Warren Buffett
and the Business of Life," a biography of the
investor by Alice Schroeder. First published
2008.

Movie pick: "Hair," a 1979 film adaptation
of a Broadway musical about a Vietnam war
drafted who learns from long-haired hippies
on his way to the army induction center.
Directed by Czech-American Jan Tomas
Forman, known as Milos Forman.

Favorite Moscow restaurant: The likes
of Chaikhona, which serves Central Asian or
Caucasus Mountains cuisine.

Best weekend getaway: Moscow parks
and historical estates, such as Gorky Park,
Serebryany Bor, Tsaritsyno.

Later on, at a Boehringer posting in Portugal, Blanarik experienced similar feelings when sailing a boat in the often fierce winds of the Guincho Beach and Cabo da Roca.

Yet, there is another side of nature that he is familiar with as a pharmacy student. It is the inner workings of the human body, whose intricacy and perfection he extols with the passion of a BBC documentary maker.

Blanarik sat down with The Moscow Times to talk about his work as a postman, learning his way with one of the first personal computers in Bratislava and the spirit of open-mindedness he picked up from his parents.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you come to Russia?

A: I was interested because Russia is an important world player, not only in pharmaceuticals. Russia also kept appearing on my radar in Helsinki, where I had my previous posting. You could get a radio station from Russia — and in Russian — I think it was Mayak. So, I was hearing a lot about Russia going around Helsinki in a car. Additionally, over weekends, the center of Helsinki had a lot of Russian visitors from St. Petersburg.

Q: What advice would you offer a foreigner who wants to invest or expand in Russia?

A: To learn, unlearn and relearn is an important skill. If you stick to your methods, which might have been successful, they probably will give you some mileage, but every market requires an open mind. That even more applies to Russia, given its size and complexity.

I had to relearn plenty of things in Russia. Coming from Finland, I concluded that these countries are the high and low of the hierarchy scale. Russia is a culture that is more hierarchical. The boss decides everything. In Finland, it is very flat, "You are the boss. OK, so what?" Here, I had to tune myself. People expect orders.

I did not come completely unaware of these things. I had some background experience when I worked in Kiev, Ukraine in the 1990s. That was my introduction to the region. Many elements were the same or similar.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: I get a lot of energy and inspiration from nature. I studied pharmacy at college. I remember very well the course of biochemistry where we had a huge map of all the biochemical processes, molecules, enzymes that go there or work here in the human body. It all happens in microscopic cells that you cannot even see with your naked eye and it all goes automatically. It is amazing. With all the might that we have as humankind, with all the technology, with all the energy we put in developing things, we still do not even get close, in many areas, to what nature did.

Also, as a college student I went to the Carpathian Mountains with friends, where you are one-on-one with nature. You learn there to be humble because if you ignore nature, you get punished. Unfortunately, a lot of people get hurt or die in the mountains because they probably forgot that.

By the same token, during our stay in Portugal, I saw how people lived next to the ocean and how they learned to respect it. When you go on a sailboat, it is you and the sails being at the mercy of wind and water. I rented a boat and sailed myself. Off the Guincho Beach on the Atlantic coast, where wind sometimes pushes you off the feet, or at Cabo da Roca, an equally windy Europe's westernmost cape, you make a lot of effort with the boat and there is something that makes you think you need to be respectful to nature.

Q: Share some stories about significant events, meetings, problems that shaped who you are.

A: I started work at a post office at 16 years when I still went to school. At 4 a.m., I would go

to the post office and make my first round delivering newspapers. After school, I would deliver magazines. My responsibility was several streets. Sometimes, there was a large amount of various magazines in big packs, so it was physically demanding. My parents did it as a side job to support the family, and I did it, too.

My father and mother were biologists and their main jobs were teachers at Bratislava's Comenius University. As scientists, they also taught me to explore things and find solutions. You go and kill yourself until you get it solved. Another skill I am using today is if you do not know or see something, it does not mean it does not exist.

I learned that you never say never. You need to stay open-minded to whatever unusual things cross your way. I was raised in socialist Czechoslovakia, and when my father sent me to a school where they studied English, I thought to myself, "How can that be helpful?"

Our family was one of the first in the country to have a personal computer in late 1980s. My father figured out it could be useful, and he brought it in. It was worth a car at the time. I thought, "What is that good for?" My brother started programming and now has an IT company. I have a good command of technology.

The other source of changes in me is my wife Anna who helped me to understand social skills. I grew up in the family of scientists and was probably a little weak on those. I was more used to wearing jeans and a sweater and working with chemicals at a lab. However great your idea and the knowledge of the subject matter is, a successful leader has to understand people.

Q: Is there anything you cannot do but would like to learn?

A: Playing a musical instrument. I had two attempts and both failed. I bought an old piano for \$100 when I was in Kiev. I started classes but it did not work. I took the piano with me when I moved to Germany, and still made no progress. I took it to Portugal with the same result. I then gave the piano to my assistant there who made better use of it.

Before, as a college student I had a friend who played the guitar at the campfire during our outings to the mountains. I tried to learn as well, but it proved too difficult.

My wife has a music education and my son plays the guitar.

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