

# How to Beat a Bulgarian Radar Trap

By Barry Wellman

Sofia, April, 1990 — “The Lada is fast, but the Skoda is quick!” my colleague exulted as she squirted past on the inside of a curve. She smiled. “He will feel humiliated.” She had struck another blow against *machismo* on the road to Gabrovo.

We’d been following the Lada for ten kilometers in standard Bulgarian fashion, tailgating nose to bumper. Every time we had swung out to pass, the Lada had pulled away. Hence the inside pass. “There was nothing else to do.”

The Skoda felt like a cross between my old 2002 and a Corvaire — its rear engine and quick steering whipped us around turns and potholes. The 1200cc engine accelerated like a tiger to 80 kph, but had no top end.

We were wearing shoulder harnesses, as required by law. Bulgarians drape them over their shoulders but don’t fasten them. In a society filled with petty regulations, people find freedom where they can — even when they must ignore the laws of physics.

To celebrate our triumphal pass, we ate Bulgarian salami and apples as well as granola I’d imported from Toronto’s famous Harbord Bakery. All Bulgarians travel with bags of food — “just in case.” A 5-liter gas can is also standard equipment, routinely used when no gas stations are open or the line-ups are more than a half-hour. The ultimate last resort is the 2-liter can buried in the trunk. This has become a Bulgarian metaphor: “To use my last 2 liters” means to dig down within oneself for the last bit of emergency energy.

This time the gas station only had a 20 minute wait. The approved queuing procedure is to shut off the engine — why burn the gas you are waiting for? I found out why Skodas, Wartburgs, et al. are called “socialist cars.” Two people cooperate on line: one pushing, the other steering. Fortunately, socialist cars are light.

I asked a waiting farmer about his Trabant, the slow, plastic-bodied car from East Germany. He sighed. “The sheep eat right through them.”

The woman in the next car on line was a literature student reading Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* in English. Her face lit up when I started chatting. “Canadian? I have a cousin who hopped off the Cubana airlines plane last month when it refuelled in Gander. Could you call him when you get home?” Over 1,700 young Bulgarians have recently used this route, filling all the hotel rooms in Newfoundland while their immigration cases are heard. I met six more “cousins” during my week’s stay.

As practicing sociologists, we used

survey research to find our way. When we came to a problematic intersection, we flagged down a passing car. The first car always stopped — no North American fears that we were highway bandits. A lively discussion ensued as to (a) the best route and (b) whom to vote for in the June 10th election — the first free one in many decades. We usually learned that we had just passed the correct turnoff. Fortunately, Bulgarians drive backwards with great skill.

Of course, I had to drive the lively Skoda. The speed limit was 80 kph, so like all Bulgarians (except Trabant drivers) I did more than 100. A bad vibration point at 100 suggested I take it up to 120.

No need for concern, a cooperative radar detection system was at work. Bulgarian radar traps (which come about every 30 kilometers) are stationary — either mounted on a

*A one hour wait for gas in Sofia. Note the man pushing his car. A year later, the station would be empty — there is no gas.*



parked police car or pointed (like a bazooka) by a policeman standing at the side of the road. When drivers pass such a trap, they flash their headlights at oncoming traffic for the next 5 kilometers. Everyone smiles, waves and slows down in true socialist cooperation.

This system is cheaper than an electronic radar detector but not as reliable. As I came over a hill, a man ran into the middle of the road waving a little red octagonal sign with "Stop" written on it (in English lettering — it's a universal word). I realized that a car hadn't passed in the opposite direction for over 5 kilometers.

The uniformed policeman had a huge handlebar moustache. Another man was in civilian clothes with a red armband, a party volunteer doing his bit for good driving morality.

The two policemen demanded my license. My companion began talking fast. Her voice and body language became deferential — you do not deal with the police as you do with *macho* Lada drivers. The policemen were perplexed. They could handle two categories of speeders: Bulgarians, and foreigners in foreign cars. I was the anomaly — a foreigner driving a Bulgarian car.

A solution came after long discussion and several Marlboros shared "for friendship". My visit to Bulgaria has been sponsored by the Trade Union Confederation, now headed by a sociologist. The policemen decided that I was a prosperous foreign sociologist cum trade unionist come to invest in the "new Bulgaria". One policeman smiled and asked me to call his cousin in Newfoundland. My punishment: my companion was ordered to give me a stern lecture in English on proper Bulgarian driving procedure.

A few days later, my visit ended. A friendly functionary helped me through customs. As I left, he whispered, "Don't forget to call my cousin."



#### *Further Notes on the Sociology of Bulgarian Cars*

As Bulgaria does not manufacture any of its own cars, the cars on the street give a good guide to the broader East European market. But it's important to remember that cars have not been bought because a particular model was freely chosen from a host of alternatives. Rather, people drive what they can get — either because their number came up in a queue (some people told me of an eight-year wait) or because they got access to a new or used car through their network of connections. Where we in the West limit choice through price, Eastern Europe has limited choice through access.

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***I asked a farmer about his Trabant. "The sheep eat right through them", he said.***

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Almost all cars on the road are of East European manufacture, except for some Mercedes and BMWs presumably used by some of the top elite or bought through money gained in the "second economy" (black and grey markets). Sporting drivers prefer the tight handling of the Czech-made Skoda. A few are sold in Canada as inexpensive sports sedans, but it took

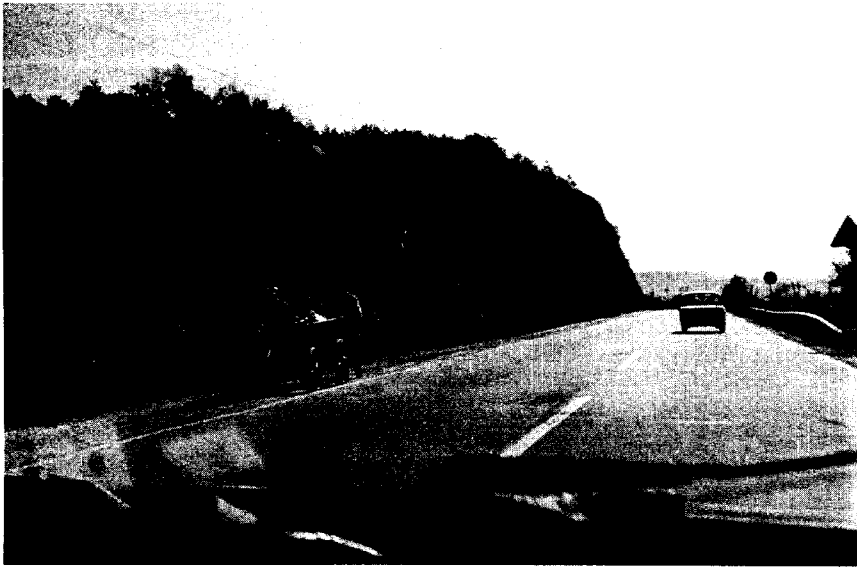
*The Skoda with a thermos of coffee to fuel its occupants. [Note I have whited-out the license plate to protect the owner/driver.]*

a drive through Bulgaria to make it remind me of my 2002.

My informal count told me Ladas (USSR) were the most widespread car — Fiat 125 derivatives. Although sold in Canada as a low-end model, it is a desirable car in Bulgaria. The only thing faster is the Volga (USSR) — usually big and black, as seen in Western spy movies — the favorite of apparatchiks (those who make the apparatus run). The Volga looks and acts like a 1950s American car — good speed, poor handling, soft ride, gas eating. I also saw a few new Ladas (a handful have been sold in Canada as the Samara), but didn't learn anything about them.

Although the Trabant has become the maligned symbol of East Germany, it's kinder to see it as a Citroen 2CV equivalent. Trabant owners were aware of its many faults but were even more delighted to have a car that was available to purchase and that they could afford to buy.

Another East German two-stroke, the Wartburg, was more upmarket, modern looking and larger. Other small cheap cars were the Russian Moskvitch and Zaporozhetz. There were some large Dacias — Romania



*In rural areas, horse carts are as common as Ladas.*

had bought the tooling for the old Renault 12 — all with peeling paint and tattered upholstery.

But, as elsewhere in eastern Europe, the big distinction is between those who have cars — of any sort — and those who do not. By now most Bulgarian households have access to a car — if not their own then through their immediate family or intimates. And the cars are well-used, despite excellent public transport and gasoline shortages. More changes are in store. “What with the parking problem and my joining the ecology movement,” my companion said [we’d had to walk 200 metres to her office], “I may have to start bicycling to the office!”

*Update: January, 1991:* My Bulgarian driving adventures couldn’t happen now. The Skoda — like almost all other private cars — has been grounded. The reasons provide a fascinating insight into how the dispute between Iraq and the United States has affected poorer countries.

Bulgaria was a major supplier to Iraq during its war with Iran — like the U.S., U.S.S.R. and France. To pay off their \$1.5 billion debt, the Iraqis had been supplying the Bulgarians with oil.

The Bulgarian government, anxious to show its solidarity with the West and the U.N., promptly agreed to the economic blockade of Iraq in August,

1990 — and lost its major (and no cost) supply of oil. With a heavy national debt, the Bulgarians couldn’t do what the West has done and buy oil on the world market.

Because of the national oil shortage, all private cars are rationed to 30 liters (7 gallons) per month — about half the tank of my 325ix. Skodas are limited to about 200 miles/month; little Trabants, etc. can go a bit farther.

Gas shortages have made food shortages worse. Most urban

Bulgarians have relatives in the countryside growing vegetables and raising chickens. Last year, the roads were filled with people driving to grandma’s country house, and returning loaded with lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers.

Now, hardly anyone can go. At the same time, there is even less food than usual in the stores — as the commercial system tries to adjust to new market situations.

The result is a national emergency. Unlike the West, people don’t drive to the country principally to breathe the rural air or to obtain organic produce. They go to get food vital for their families’ survival. The Skodas are grounded and Bulgaria is hungry.



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*Heavy traffic in the capital, Sofia. The building in the background is the University, the site of frequent pro-democracy demonstrations.*

