

Talking to the Bulgarian long-distance drivers (Interviews in spring 2005 by Diana Ivanova for Cargo TIR)

Vladimir Bulgarov*, 52, driver since 1973; since 1980 – truck driver.
In the 1980s he worked with the only international forwarding company SOMAT.
This is when he made his longest journey – 45 days – to Teheran.



Where have you travelled?

In the past 5 years I have travelled mostly in Europe: Germany, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg: there and back every second week. I was last in Antwerp.

Is your work exciting?

It was most interesting in the early 1990s, when democracy was starting: Moscow, Kazan, Nizhni and Novgorod were better paid, and so were Iran and Iraq. I knew personally the two drivers who were killed in Iraq last year, however life goes on: as a driver, you go where they send you.

Has anyone ever refused to go wherever he was sent?

Yes, in 1981-1982, during the first Gulf War, no one wanted to travel to Iran, the company offered a \$500 bonus. Israel was also dangerous and so was Afghanistan (then at war with Moscow)

Have you ever felt you were in danger?

I was stopped in Kosovo, once, and I had spent 2 days surrounded by men with machine guns. The Albanians are different people, of different faith; in Yugoslavia it was also dangerous, I was held up 32 times by the police between Niš and Prizren – they would ask for cigarettes and alcohol, they all had machine guns; I gave them as much Marlboro as I could. On the way back, I could only give them money, I had no more cigarettes.

In the Soviet Union they also used machine guns, it was dangerous – Novgorod, Kazan, Moscow too – you never know who is who, who is behind the company you work with, once they fired at the owner, young men at a gas station...



What do you take with you on a journey?

My wife makes me grilled chicken, and that's what I eat when I'm on the way to the chosen destination, and when I'm driving back, I have canned food, salami... I always carry with me a knife, it used to be a bigger one in the past, but now it is smaller.

I always take something to drink – a bottle of brandy (Grappa); we, the drivers, often get together.

And I also take an icon of the Virgin Mary; it's a small icon. I am not religious, but my wife gave it to me, she goes to church with the icon and then gives it to me, I also had an icon from a magazine by my bed and sometimes at night I would look at it and pray; I have asked myself: "For God's sake, does Mother Mary forgive us?" Because we commit sins all the time: we should in fact be only driving for 4 hours and then take one hour rest but we never do it.

What do you bring home from abroad?

Facial creams, detergents...not so many clothes lately; I have two daughters, they always want something to wear, but I rarely buy them clothes.

In the 1980s and 1990s I would bring leather jackets from Turkey (one jacket used to cost 20-30 dollars, and my wife would sell it for 300-400 Leva).

What do you take abroad?

Wine and cognac – Slunchev Briag – the Poles like it very much, as a souvenir from the Black Sea. Once I was caught at the Hungarian border with 50 bottles of cognac, I gave them 2-3 bottles and everything was OK, but they told me not to try it again and, indeed, I never have. Sometimes, the bottles leak and the whole truck stinks of cognac.



Is driving a truck a prestigious job? Do young people come to the job?

The young seek jobs where you do nothing. And, mind you, it is an interesting job but when you do it all the time it is not always interesting.

Driving across a country itself is not difficult; it is hard only at the border. In Serbia during the war, the Serbs were so mad at us that I was held up for three days because I refused to give them anything. Once, I was even brought to court in Novi Sad. The policeman asked: why don't you take the motorway? And we did not because we did not want to pay – one has to pay up to 80 Euro toll. When I was young, I dreamt of seeing the whole of Europe; in the meantime I have seen a lot, the only two countries I haven't been to, are Portugal and England.

The Germans are the strictest – if you have done something wrong you have to be punished. The Germans and French are very civilized – they never ask for money or something...Serbs, Romanians and Hungarians – they always want something from you.

In Romania, we always sleep at the paid parking areas; to sleep anywhere lese would be dangerous. Today, the danger comes from the refugees – they try to sneak into the truck. Once it happened to me, in Belgium, not far from Brussels, that several people had hidden in the truck during the night, when we were at a gas station, and we only noticed that 20 km later. They were trying to get to England that way: 80 kilometres into England and one can no longer send them back.

I have never thought about death.

The most dangerous was in Russia and, also, Teheran. But in those days we were friendlier to each other, we used to work together, wait for each other, and give each other signs. I have a small TV set and a tape recorder. I like Serbian music; my mother is from Tsaribrod (now in Serbia) and my wife from Kalotina.

In France, one cannot watch TV, the programmes are encoded.

I have dozed off while driving several times; once, even, when my wife was with me. I don't know how it happens but I always wake up, some force wakes me, something protects me.

In the truck, I have two beds, a frying pan and all you need for cooking; sometimes we would cook, at a parking lot, but the Turks cook much more often, they are friendlier than we are.

In Komi in Urals, live quite different people; and, life there is also different, it's of very poor quality.

In Moscow, they'd tried to rob me – cans, such things; and if you leave your truck open, the Romanians will steal a lot. In Byelorussia, nobody would exchange dollars, I found that very odd, it was the first time that nobody wanted US dollars.

Mariela Stefanova, 32

The manager of a forwarding company BILCAR for Bulgaria (an international transport company from Istanbul)

I have a Master's Degree in economics from the University of National and World Economy. I have never been abroad. I saw the ad in a newspaper. I applied and have been working here for three years now. The pay is good, by Bulgarian standards.

Since I am the only one responsible, I have to decide about everything – prices, terms; it is a risky place: a lot of stress, I am always alert, even at home – the Internet, the mobile phone – always on.

The company runs mostly to destinations in England and Europe – distant Europe. Sometimes, drivers call from London or Istanbul and say: Greetings from us. We are sitting here with this or that person and he knows you and we chatted about you. This makes my job interesting and enjoyable; you always work with people.

I work with men, this is a male job, but I have a female secretary in the office.

Thefts are a great danger. Sometimes, whole trucks would disappear (the goods are reloaded onto another truck).

These days, the refugees are the greatest danger for transport – if they are discovered by police, the driver may be brought to court, which is too bad for the company. It costs a lot of money and causes delays (even if the drivers are not involved), the latest case was with four Africans in England: the driver only discovered them in Manchester.

