

Is road safety a Bulgarian disease?

Description

For several decades, Bulgarian roads have been among the most dangerous in Europe, and Bulgaria is recognized as one of the most accident-prone countries on the old continent.

Only when Bulgaria began to prepare for its accession to the European Union did road safety become a government priority in this country. For a long time, there were too many road accidents in Bulgaria, and the accidents recorded over the last decade still make the country one of the deadliest on the continent. The leading causes are both driver behavior and poorly maintained road infrastructure.



Un des pays champions de la mortalité routière en Europe

In the early 1950s, very few households had motor vehicles, which explains why road deaths rarely exceeded 200 a year. Then, as Bulgarian households acquired family vehicles, the number of accidents increased. This trend continued until 1990, when an all-time high of 1,567 people (drivers, passengers, cyclists, passengers, and pedestrians) were killed in road accidents⁽¹⁾. As Bulgarians regained their freedom after more than 40 years of socialist rule, driving their private cars at high speed, even if it meant running risks to themselves or others, symbolized this new-found freedom for some.

After this black year, the death toll fell steadily until 2012 and 2013, when 601 people died on the roads. The departure abroad of some of the working population may partly explain this downward trend. Then, after a short period of instability (successive rises and falls), the number of deaths fell sharply in 2020 due to the health crisis, which severely restricted road travel. The following year, the authorities at the Ministry of the Interior recorded 561 deaths on the roads with the resumption of activity before the mortality curve slumped again (531 victims in 2022).

The number of people injured has not followed the same trend, with the peak number of victims (10,000) recorded only in 2006. Therefore, the first fifteen years of the post-socialist transition were also particularly accident-prone. This figure has since fallen, but over the last ten years has remained between 7,000 and 9,000 (for 6,000 to 7,500 public road accidents). In 2022, there were still 8,422 victims involved in 6,609 road accidents. These figures show that the authorities need help to significantly reduce the number of accidents.

Certain times of the day and week are more accident-prone and deadly than others⁽²⁾. For example, fatal accidents occur mainly between 3 pm and 7 pm on Tuesdays, while the day with the highest number of accidents is Friday, which coincides with the start of the weekend. Logically, the country's four main conurbations are the most affected by accidents: Sofia (8,697), Varna (2,544), Plovdiv

(2,357), and Bourgas (1,634). The most minor accident-prone areas, such as Smolyan, Kyustendil, Silistra, and Yambol, are the least densely populated.

The reckless and aggressive behavior of the Bulgarian motorist

If Bulgaria is so affected by road deaths, it is above all because of excessive speed and inappropriate, reckless driving. The behavior of drivers who reject the rules of the Highway Code and favor the pleasure of speed over the safety of road users is directly to blame for many accidents. Kalin Terziiski (writer and psychologist) denounces the unconscious attitude of drivers taking part in the chases seen in towns and suburban areas: these are generally young men who drive up to 200 km in large saloon cars to show off their masculinity by imitating the local 'mustri'⁽³⁾: the new criminals, known by this name because of their fierce appearance and shaven heads, have become an inspiring model for the younger generations since the 1990s. Aggressiveness and impatience at the wheel have thus become natural. Drink-driving often contributes to this disinhibition and increases risk-taking. This behavior explains why, even with an aging car fleet and sometimes unsuitable infrastructure, 80 % of accidents result from human error. This massive disregard for the rules and this disorder are killing people, with the de facto complicity of those in charge of Bulgarian institutions, judged to be too tolerant in this area ⁽⁴⁾.

The central observers, therefore, propose implementing better public communication on the civic behavior to adopt, involving opinion leaders in favor of compliance with the rules of the Highway Code and civic-mindedness. Some also suggest that sanctions and penalties imposed on offenders should be irreversible, and cameras should be used to monitor traffic offenses.

Poorly maintained and deadly roads

The other cause of Bulgaria's high accident rate is the need for more roads to cope with the changing flow of vehicles and their poor maintenance. This factor is all the more critical given that the speed limit (140 km/h) is among the highest in the European Union.

Part of the A1 motorway (Trakia) linking Sofia, Plovdiv, and Bourgas was built in the 1970s and 1980s for goods lorries with a maximum laden weight of 8 tonnes. However, today, some commercial vehicles, construction equipment, and international goods carriers can carry loads of 19 to 38 tonnes (three-axle semi-trailers). Heavy goods traffic prefers to use the A1 to cross Bulgaria, and these heavy loads contribute to the daily deterioration of the pavements. Although more than 2,000km of road should be repaired each year to deal with this wear and tear, actual repairs often concern only 200 to 300km, with works regularly postponed pending funding and material resources. According to engineer Ivan Katzarov, President of the Bulgarian Transport Forum, significant works are only undertaken every 15 to 20 years. However, the Road Safety Agency states that almost half of the national roads need repair.

In April 2023, the Acting Deputy Minister for Regional Development and Public Works estimated the total number of dangerous roads at 8,000km⁽⁵⁾. Apart from the A1, the most accident-prone stretches of road over the past decade are those linking Roussé to Byala, Roussé to Makaza, Medza to Botevgrad, Varna to Bourgas, the Vidine-Sofia-Koulata route and the steep Kresna gorge (where 25 people died between 2012 and 2016)⁽⁶⁾. In recent years, 70% of accidents have occurred on first- and second-class roads and not on motorways, safer or minor roads.

The slow and belated reaction of the Bulgarian state

Road safety became a priority for the Bulgarian government when the process of joining the European Union accelerated. Under pressure from the authorities in the 2000s, wearing seatbelts became a general rule, even if this requirement proved unpopular with some drivers. But as customs changed in the mid-2010s, political leaders faced criticism about road safety. In response, roadside checks were stepped up, as was the fight against police corruption, which until then had contributed to the general feeling of impunity among road offenders⁽⁷⁾.

Following the country's commitment to significantly reduce the number of road deaths and injuries by 2030, the National Road Safety Agency (SARS) was created by decree on 1 February 2019. This body approves and monitors the implementation of regional and municipal programs to improve road safety and reduce road accidents. It also provides financial support to municipalities (to the tune of 1M leva, or €511,240, for the 2023-2030 period of the National Road Safety Strategy Plan) to carry out targeted inspections of road infrastructure. Finally, it coordinates primary roadside inspection operations organized at the national or regional level. This was the case on 11 October 2022 on the Roussé-Veliko Tarnovo-Makaza road, where 40 offenders were fined, mainly for using mobile phones and not wearing seatbelts. Similarly, on 10 November 2023, during a nationwide roadside inspection day, 10,624 vehicles were checked. Among the offenses detected, 25 drivers were found to be under the influence of alcohol, and 13 were under the influence of drugs. But these inspections are not all about repression: driving advice can be given because the overriding objective is to change the behavior of road users. To achieve this, we need to win the support of Bulgarian public opinion, which must gradually change its mindset and make improving road safety its objective.

Notes:

(1) « [Zaguinali pri PTP po godini](#) » (Road users involved in traffic accidents by year), Road Safety Statistics, *Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Bulgaria* (MVR).

(2) « [Povetch zaguinali i raneni otchita MVR za minalata godina](#) » (The Interior Ministry reported a higher number of deaths and injuries last year), *Union of Bulgarian Motorists* (SBA); Antoni Iordanov, « *Balgariya e vtora v ES po jertvi na patya* » (Bulgaria is second in the EU for the number of road fatalities), *Automedia Investor*, 23 February 2023.

(3) Kalin Terziiski, « [Istinskiyat mazh kara vinagi s 200. Nishto, tche oubiva detsa](#) » (A real man always drives 200. Nothing that can kill children), *Deutsche Welle*, 17 August 2015.

(4) Ivan Bedrov, « [Koe oubiva horata po balgarskite patishta ?](#) » (Who's killing people on Bulgaria's roads?), *Deutsche Welle*, 17 August 2015.

(5) « [Blizo 8 000 km ot republikanskata patna mreja sa v avariino ili predavariino sastoianie](#) » (Nearly 8,000km of the national road network is in an emergency or pre-emergency situation), *DNES*, 23 April 2023.

(6) « [Nai-opasnite patishta v Balgariya](#) » (The most dangerous roads in Bulgaria), *Balgarskata Assotsiatsiya na postradali pri katastrofi*

(*Bulgarian Association of Accident Victims*), 27 January 2022.

(7) Tatiana Waksberg, « [Borissov i voïnata po balgarskite patishta](#) » (Borissov and the war on Bulgaria's roads), *Deutsche Welle*, 6 October 2015; State Agency "[Road Safety](#)" (SARS).

Thumbnail: Sofia (© C. Bayou).

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