

# Advanced exercises for clients who like Russian women and vodka!

Many strength coaches have a well guarded secret. And that secret is this: strength exercises typically have boring and lacklustre names. So to make them sound more interesting and exotic, the name of an Eastern Bloc country is added to the movement, transforming an ordinary squat into a 'Bulgarian Squat' and the average deadlift into a 'Romanian deadlift'! Clients are always far more impressed if they are performing a 'Hungarian Chin Up'\* rather than a plain old chin up! And it's now becoming very popular, especially with females strength coaches, to add the name 'Brazilian', if the exercise is performed with no weight at all!

How these exercises came to be named after a country is an interesting story. Certain superstar Eastern Bloc athletes in weightlifting and track and field performed particular lifts with such regularity or with seemingly impossible heavy loads that the lifts themselves, over many years, became known by the country which popularised them. This article summarises five of the better known and widely used exercises with exotic names. The Cuban Press\*\*; however, did not make it to the present list, unfortunately, as it lacks a certain eastern European flavour!

## Romanian Deadlifts (photos 1a, 1b)

The Romanian version of the deadlift obtained its name from two famous Romanian weightlifters (and later coaches) Dragomir Cioroslan and Nicu Vlad who used the movement extensively in their own training and in the preparation of their weightlifting athletes. Some coaches prefer not to name the exercise after Romania, so you'll sometimes see them referred to as a Semi-Straight Legged Deadlift with Neutral Spine. Personally, I think Romanian deadlifts sound better!

### Primary muscles involved

The hamstrings, gluteals, adductors and the erector spinae in hip extension. The rhomboids and trapezius are involved isometrically to hold the scapula in place.

### Set up

- Grip on the bar slightly wider than shoulder width apart, with a pronated grip.
- Set the feet hips width apart and turn the toes out slightly.
- Bend the knees about 20 degrees to relieve pressure on the iliotibial band.
- Lock out the elbows and turn them outwards.
- Keep the chest up and watch forward.

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1a



1b

### Footnotes

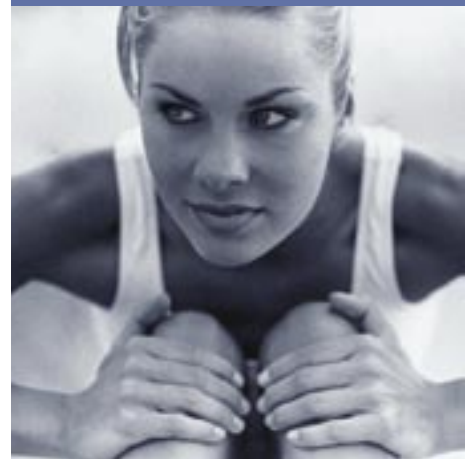
\* No such exercise exists.

\*\* Strength coach Charles Poliquin made up the name 'Cuban Press' so he could convince a weightlifting athlete of his to do them. Poliquin told him that the Cubans did them on a regular basis, and that is why they excelled in the snatch!

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### Descent

- Initiate the descent by shooting the hips back without bending the knees further than the set position of 20 degrees – this movement occurs only in the hips and not the spine or knees.
- Keep the chest up which helps preserve the neutral spine.
- Make sure that the bar brushes the thighs and lower until the spine almost loses the neutral curve.

### Ascent

- Drive the hips forward and the chest up.
- Finish in exactly the same position as the set up position.

### Key Points

- Keep the chest up to maintain neutral curvature of the spine.
- Don't allow the knees to bend more than 20 degrees.
- Keep the bar in contact with legs at all times during the lift.

### Variations

- Perform with dumbbells rather than a barbell or with a single-leg, with the non-working leg acting as a counter balance behind. Romanian deadlifts can also be performed with a wide stance and a shoulder width grip on the bar. The name then becomes a Sumo stance Romanian deadlift.

## Bulgarian Squats (photos 2a, 2b)

It was rumored in weightlifting circles that when the Bulgarians began to match the Russian's dominance in the strength sports that they had a secret training weapon. That secret weapon, as it turned out, was not a secret at all, just hard work and excellent programming under super coach, Ivan Abadjiev. Interestingly though, many ascribed the powerful legs of the Bulgarians, in part, to the athlete's performing single-leg squats with their back foot on a bench to supplement their other squatting movements. This enabled the Bulgarian weightlifters to normalise any strength imbalances between limbs and not to excessively load the back in the same way heavy back squats do. You'll sometimes see these named Sprinter's or Borzov Squats, after the famous Russian sprinter, Valeriy Borzov.

### Primary muscles used

Quadriceps, gluteals, hamstrings, and adductors.

### Set up

- Stand in front of a bench and place one foot flat on the bench so that the ankle is just off the end.
- Position the foot on the floor far enough forward that it will be comfortable to squat without the heel lifting up or the hip flexors of the non-working leg being strained.
- Use either dumbbells in both hands or a barbell on the trapezius.

### Descent

- Squat down, which will allow the hips to push back and down, the knee to come forward of the toes and the torso to lean forward from the hips.
- Squat as deep as you can, the lowest range being when the lumbar spine begins to lose its neutral curvature or the hip flexors of the non-working leg become uncomfortably stretched or the knee touches the ground.

### Ascent

- Drive straight back up to the starting position, making sure that the ankle, knee, hips and torso all move with the same speed and timing.

### Key Points

- Keep the front foot flat on the floor throughout the movement.
- Although the knee will come forward of the toes, it's imperative to keep the patella tracking with the middle toes.



2a



2b

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## Bulgarian Split Squats (photos 3a, 3b)

The Bulgarian version of a split squat (also called a back foot elevated static lunge) is exactly the same Bulgarian squat with the exception of the bench being replaced with a step. This lower back foot position allows for a greater stretch in the hip flexors and a larger range of motion on the working knee.

### Key points

- Keep the front foot flat on the floor throughout the entire range of motion.
- Maintain correct knee tracking.
- Aim to touch the hamstring on the calves in the lowest position.
- Keep the truck completely upright from start to finish, as the tendency will be to lean forward
- Bulgarian split squats are a diagonal movement pattern and not an 'up/down' vertical exercise (like most people perform lunges). Therefore, the descent involves the knee and hips moving forward and down and the ascent is up and back as one smooth movement.



3a



3b

## Russian Deadlifts (Good Mornings) (photos 4a, 4b)

For many decades, Russian weightlifters have performed an exercise to develop the posterior chain where they hold a bar on the trapezius and bow forward from the waist. They would perform this exercise both with a neutral spine and, for variation, with a rounded back. It was because the Russian weightlifters used this movement frequently, it became known as a Russian deadlift outside Russia. The Russians, however, have always called it a name that, when translated into English, means 'Good Morning'.

### Primary muscles involved

The hamstrings, gluteals, adductors and the erector spinae in hip extension.

### Set up

- Place the bar on the trapezius and grip on the bar as wide as is comfortable.
- Set the feet hips width apart and turn the toes out slightly.
- Bend the knees about 20 degrees.
- Keep the chest up and watch forward.

### Descent

- Initiate the descent by pushing the hips back without bending the knees further than the set position of 20 degrees – this movement, like the Romanian deadlift, occurs only in the hips and not the spine or knees.
- Keep the chest up which helps preserve the neutral spine.
- Either inhale or hold the breath during the lowering phase and lower until the spine almost loses the neutral curve.

### Ascent

- Drive the hips forward and the chest up.
- Finish in exactly the same position as the set up position.

### Key Points

- Keep the chest up and hands wide on the bar to maintain neutral curvature of the spine.
- Don't allow the knees to bend further than 20 degrees otherwise the knee extensors become too active during the ascent.
- Keep the abdominals tight through the entire movement.

### Variations

- Try with a single-leg with the non-working leg as a counter balance behind.



4a



4b

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### Polish Good Mornings (photos 5a, 5b)

Single-leg good mornings are not a favoured choice amongst strength coaches because the movement cannot be loaded to any high degree – the weight on the shoulders, of course, would tip any strong athlete over. Polish weightlifters got around this problem by placing their working leg on a low step and keeping their non-working leg on the ground. The movement is then performed like a standard good morning.

#### Primary muscles used

The hamstrings and adductors.

#### Set up

- Stand in front of a low box, that is around knee height or lower.
- Place one leg up on the step, put a 20 degree angle in the knee and then turn the body and the non-working leg away by 30 to 40 degrees.

#### Descent

- Keep the chest up and shoot the hips back.
- The movement only occurs in the hips and not the spine, therefore, only go as far as neutral curvature can be maintained in the lumbar spine.
- Although the working leg is set out to the side, the torso bends forward, towards and in line with the non-working leg and not towards the working leg.

#### Ascent

- Push the hips forward and drive the chest up.

#### Key Points

- Keep the abdominals tight throughout the entire movement.
- Inhale or hold your breath during the descent.
- Don't perform if you have the limited flexibility of my 60 year old father (who has never stretched a day in his life!).

As strength coach Mark McKean is famous for saying, you must 'earn the right' to use these advanced movements. Performing any difficult exercise with a high level of complexity requires that a client has demonstrated skill mastery on less complicated movements and has sufficient strength and flexibility before attempting any of these Soviet bad boys.

From Russia, with love. Enjoy. ♦

The online version of this article at [www.fitnessnetwork.com.au](http://www.fitnessnetwork.com.au) contains Russian Step Ups.



5a



5b



Anton Boutagiov (aka, Tony Boutagy), BHMS

Tony is the director of the Sydney Sports and Athletic Performance Centre, which is a strength training facility located in Sydney. He is a lecturer for the Australian Institute of Fitness (NSW) and is currently conducting research towards his PhD in exercise physiology. In 2004, Tony was named Australian Fitness Network's Author of the Year.

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