

Lada Unveils the Granta as Sales Continue to Rise

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Komarov, left, showing the Granta's trunk, which, the prime minister noted, can "hold two sacks of potatoes." **Alexei Nikolsky**

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin struggled with the modern features of Lada's new budget sedan Thursday during a visit to AvtoVAZ's Tolyatti headquarters Wednesday.

Putin was invited to inspect a Lada Granta by AvtoVAZ director Igor Komarov, but he fumbled with the unfamiliar electronic gas transmission pedal when he got behind the wheel of the new car.

After taking the cherry red car for a spin on the plant's testing track, he tried his best to give it the thumbs up.

"It's practically the same, but I personally found the Kalina a tad nipper, " Putin said, using untranslatable car enthusiasts' jargon meaning quicker to accelerate and more sensitive

to steering.

Putin, who likes to burnish his patriotic credentials by driving around in Russian-brand automobiles, took a four-day trip in a yellow Kalina down a new highway between Chita and Khabarovsk last summer.

In an apparent bid to promote the car to dacha owners, Putin showed off the car's trunk and noted that it could "easily take two sacks of potatoes."

Last month, he test-drove one of Mikhail Prokhorov's hybrid Yo-Mobiles to President Dmitry Medvedev's out-of-town residence at Gorki.

The Granta, developed from the Lada, will replace AvtoVAZ's classic models when they go out of production in 2012.

Line production of the four-door sedan will start in October and the first models should be available for purchase by the end of the year.

A basic version of the car will cost 220,000 rubles (\$8,000), compared with the Kalina's cheapest model at 242,000 rubles. A more powerful version of the Granta will go for 300,000 rubles.

AvtoVAZ, which is 25 percent owned by Renault, returned to profit in 2010 after taking a severe battering during the financial crisis of 2008-09.

The company has been the main beneficiary of a government backed cash-for-clunkers scheme that encouraged drivers to trade in 10-year-old cars for new models produced in Russia.

New car sales in Russia surged 64 percent in the first four months of 2011, according to figures released by the Association of European Businesses on Wednesday. The industry group said 754,081 new cars were sold between January and April, compared with 458,435 in the same period in 2010. Sales in April alone were up 42 percent to 235,711.

Lada remains the best-selling brand, selling 176,410 in the first quarter, up 41 percent on last year. But recovery slowed in April, when sales climbed just 3 percent year on year to 54,093 units.

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