



IAR has a seven-year upgrade contract for Romanian Pumas

Transylvanian transformation

Bell's interest in IAR could haul the Romanian manufacturer from a difficult future

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BRASOV IS A picturesque Transylvanian town known for its architecture, its location in the Carpathian mountains, and its proximity to the semi-legendary castle now known – for the benefit of tourists – as “Castle Dracula”.

Although the much-feared, but respected historical leader Vlad the Impaler, in whose memory the castle has been named, apparently spent little time there, he would no doubt be flattered that he is remembered – not only in tourist attractions and vampiric legends, but also in the name of a military helicopter programme crucial to the future of Romania's

defence forces and its aerospace industry: the AH-1RO Dracula.

The helicopter looks set to be the latest in a line of machines to be licence-produced at the IAR factory just outside Brasov, which maintains a tradition of aeronautical construction begun in 1925.

Between the World Wars, the company had licence-produced aircraft such as the Savoia-Marchetti 79B, Fiesler Storch Fi 156 and Messerschmitt BF-109G. It also built what was then acknowledged as one of the best fighters in the world, the Romanian-designed IAR 80.

Political decisions taken by the post-war Communist Government relegated IAR to building tractors, although a small team of engineers, lead by Losif Silimon, continued to design and build light aircraft. Then, in 1968, the factory returned to mainstream aircraft construction under the name ICA Brasov, starting out with licence production of Pilatus Britten-Norman Islander subassemblies and manufacture of metal gliders.

Since 1971, however, IAR has focused on helicopter work, fulfilling one of then-President Nicolae Ceausescu's ambitious dreams of industrial expansion. IAR began production of

the IAR-316B Alouette III under licence from Aerospatiale, eventually building 230 units. The company later moved on to licensed production of the IAR-330L Puma in 1976, to meet a Romanian Army requirement for a troop carrier and tactical support helicopter.

To date, IAR says it has produced some 160 Pumas, but production has slowed to only one or two units per year. For now, the company is working on a seven-year programme for a combat upgrade of the helicopter for the Romanian army, which IAR president Neculai Banea says will be fitted with state-of-the-art avionics, manufactured “with the support of Aerostar [in Bacau] and Elbit [of Israel]”, and a new weapons package. The aircraft is to be capable of night missions, and will have a high degree of commonality with the Dracula, says Banea.

The first prototype of the upgraded Puma is to come off the production line this year, possibly even before the Paris air show in mid-June. Banea says that the company will at least display a mock-up of the helicopter in Paris.

In the mid-1980s, IAR was pursuing a light attack and training helicopter called the IAR-317 Airfox – a derivative of the Alouette III with a revised, armoured tandem cockpit which first flew in April 1984. IAR says that development of this helicopter – which had been intended for the Romanian armed forces – was cancelled by the Government of Ceausescu, then struggling with a crippling national debt.

Work on licensed production of the Kamov Ka-126 turboshaft version of the Ka-26 helicopter, announced in 1985, has now also been halted. The first Romanian-built Ka-126 was flown in 1989, and although IAR says it still has some airframes and components at Brasov, Kamov, and the rest of the world, appears to have lost interest in the programme. “Everybody is looking towards the West,” says IAR marketing manager Stefan Paunescu.

AIRCRAFT MANUFACTURE

The company is also developing the IAR-46 very light aircraft, which it hopes to certificate by the middle of this year. The two-seat, 750kg maximum-take-off weight aircraft has a 60kW (80hp) Rotax 912 F3/A3 flat-four engine driving a two-blade Hoffman constant-speed propeller. Several prototypes have been built, and Paunescu says that certification has so far been delayed by lack of financing and by “difficulties in establishing a certification agenda with the Romanian authorities”. However, the company still sees “huge” potential for the aircraft, estimating a market for 1,000 units worldwide – and “particularly in the United States”.

The factory at Brasov now employs about 2,400 people, including some 300 engineers. This staff has been cut from 4,000 in 1990, and is still excessive for IAR's reduced workload.

Now, after long-running negotiations, the company appears to be on the brink of a majority takeover by US manufacturer Bell Helicopter Textron.