

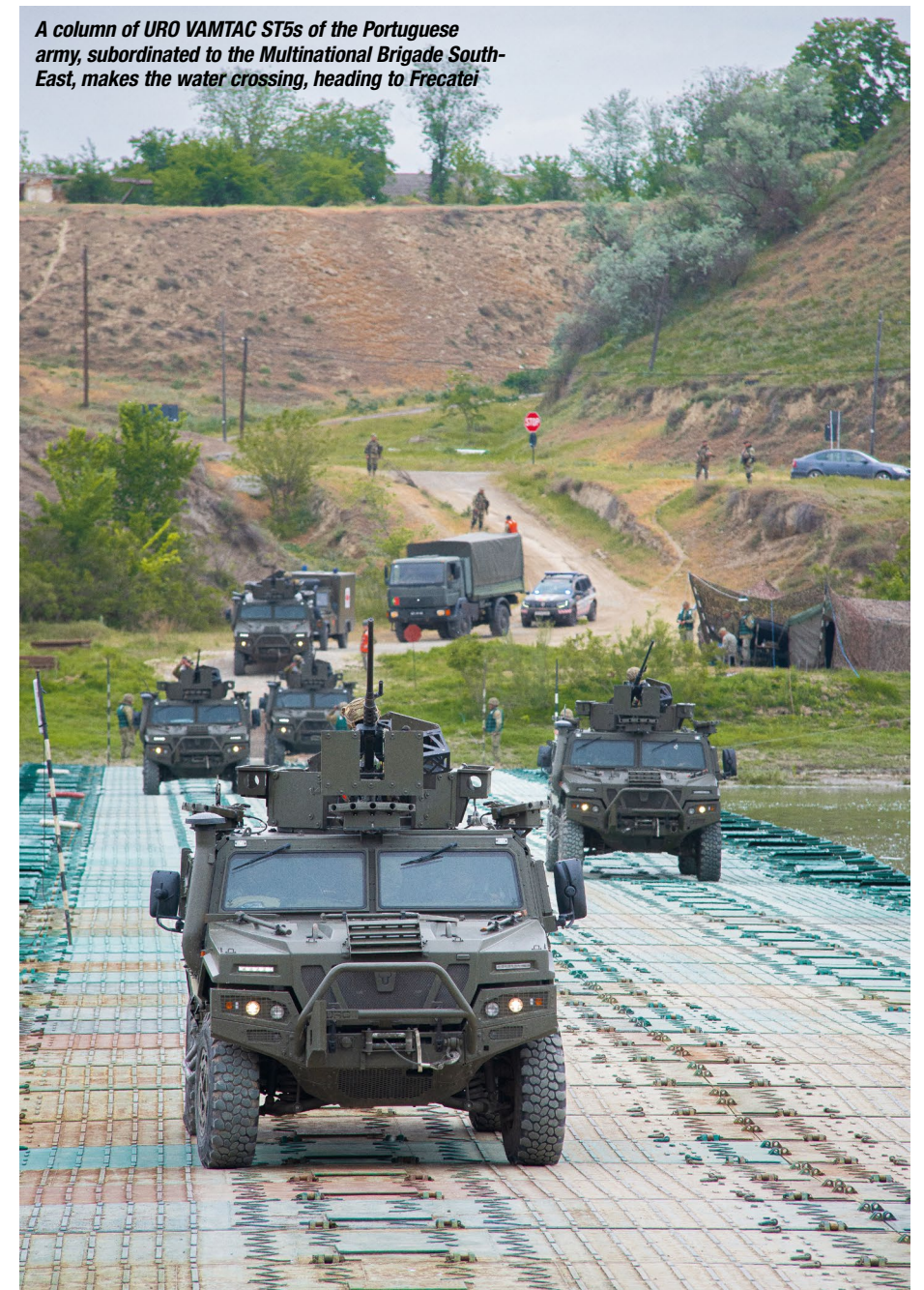
Bridging the Gap

Pedro Manuel Monteiro reports from the Romanian border with Ukraine, where NATO mechanised forces successfully crossed the Danube during a major field exercise recently

Unlike the Carpathian Mountains and forested hills with winding roads in northern Romania, the rolling plains of the southern part of the country present very few obstacles for the swift movement of mechanised forces. During the Scorpions Legacy 2025 exercise, NATO forces faced the Danube River as a natural barrier near the city of Galați. This became an opportunity to carry out one of warfare's oldest and most difficult manoeuvres: a wet gap crossing.

The solution came when the 72nd Engineering Battalion 'General Constantin Savu' of the Romanian Army quickly assembled a PR-71 pontoon bridge near the town of Frecăței, just 50km from the border with Ukraine. The different modules were placed and held in position by small ST-140 motorboats, creating a 200m safe passage between the two

A column of URO VAMTAC ST5s of the Portuguese army, subordinated to the Multinational Brigade South-East, makes the water crossing, heading to Frecăței



shores. Unlike models such as Germany's self-propelled M3, this Soviet-era system is truck-transported. But the key principle remains the same: to enable rapid, modular, tactical bridging across water obstacles, such as rivers, to support mechanised movement.

Leading the column on the second day of the crossing were Piranha V armoured troop carriers of the 26th Infantry Battalion 'Neagoe Basarab'. Weighing around 33 tonnes – roughly the same as a Sherman tank – they are fitted with an Elbit Systems UT30 MK2 unmanned turret, integrating a 30mm autocannon. Part of the first batch of 227 vehicles was locally assembled in Romania by Uzina Mecanică București, and recent reports suggest an additional order of 150 units is underway. These, along with most of

'This became an opportunity to carry out one of warfare's oldest and most difficult manoeuvres: a wet gap crossing'

the units involved in the exercise, are part of the Multinational Brigade South-East, headquartered in Craiova, which is a key component of NATO's tailored forward presence in the Black Sea region.

Besides Romanian troops, the brigade includes units from Portugal, ►



The Polish forces, based in Craiova, use the Rosomak, a Patria AMV built under licence and armed with a 30mm gun



Heavy trucks and armoured vehicles rush across the 200m floating ribbon bridge a dozen kilometres away from the border with Ukraine



The Piranha V is gaining traction across NATO countries. It is already in service with Romania and Denmark, and soon will be with Spain



The fully amphibious Piranha III of the 22nd Infantry Battalion 'Romanai' makes its crossing of the river



The Scorpions Legacy 2025 NATO exercise around Galați mobilised over 2,000 troops from five countries

Poland, and North Macedonia. "This is an exceptional training opportunity," explained a Portuguese driver of a 10-tonne VAMTAC ST5 light armoured vehicle after completing two crossings that morning. The Portuguese contingent of the 6th Deployed Portuguese Force is based in Caracal and regularly trains with the 22nd Infantry Battalion 'Romanai', which operates the Piranha III model. Being fully amphibious, those Romanian vehicles simply swam across the river once it was secured by Spanish troops in Zodiac-type inflatable boats. The brigade-level Scorpions Legacy 2025 NATO exercise around Galați mobilised over 2,000 troops from five



The URO VAMTAC ST5 features NATO STANAG 4569 Level Three protection and EID P/PRC-525 multiband digital radio

'This larger exercise ran from May 5 to 23, involving over 4,000 troops and 900 vehicles from ten countries across eight locations in Romania'

countries and took place under the umbrella of the division-level Dacian Spring 2025. This larger exercise ran from May 5 to 23, involving over 4,000 troops and 900 vehicles from ten countries across eight locations in Romania.

However, a truly cohesive multinational force requires more than annual manoeuvres. For instance, Portugal has continuously deployed troops in Romania for the past three years. "Our first Pandur-equipped infantry company arrived just



The KTO Rosomak has a passenger capacity of eight dismounts, with three crew – the commander, driver and gunner

two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine," explained Lt Col Carvalho Gomes, Commander of the 200-strong Portuguese Force based in Caracal. A second special operations detachment is also stationed in Târgu Mureș, in the north of the country. "And we're committed to staying in Romania until 2030," the Portuguese officer added. After all, operations like these are not mere drills. They are also a strong message of NATO's strategic presence and readiness on its eastern flank.

The author would like to thank the Portuguese troops deployed in Romania, particularly to Lt Col Carvalho Gomes, Commander of the 6th Deployed Portuguese Force in Romania, and to the Public Affairs Officer, 1st Lt Rodrigo Andrade.

A Different Sort of Gap

Days later, a Portuguese reconnaissance platoon equipped with URO VAMTAC ST5 light armoured vehicles encountered two TABC-79s advancing as OPFOR (opposing force) in the Smârdan live-fire range. Despite similar size and weight, the generational gap between the two models was striking. The Romanian-built vehicles, introduced in 1979, are the last of the Soviet-era amphibious BRDM-2s in NATO service. In contrast, the Spanish-built URO VAMTAC ST5s used by the Portuguese are much more modern and feature modular armour with NATO STANAG 4569 Level Three protection, and updated communications with the EID P/PRC-525 multiband digital radio. They also feature the new EyeCommand Battlefield Management System (BMS) developed by the Portuguese firm Critical Software, which offers real-time co-ordination and situational awareness.

The Portuguese army fields a total of 139 URO VAMTAC ST5 light armoured vehicles, which were received between 2019 and 2021. These include 12 used for special operations and 13 in medical configurations. Three more vehicles will be received and



TABC-79 vehicles, true Cold War relics, made an appearance in the Scorpions Legacy 2025, facing the Portuguese troops in Smârdan

fitted with the RapidRanger short-range air defence missile system. The VAMTACs are battle-proven, having been deployed in the UN-led peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic since 2020.

While the platoon advanced through simulated fire and smoke screens created by their Rheinmetall ROSY L grenade launchers,

a fifth team launched an RQ-11B Raven drone, which glided quietly above under the clouds. Thanks to its electro-optical and infrared sensors, the Raven streams real-time video during the day or night. A quiet reminder that, unlike in the Cold War era, reconnaissance today is no longer limited to wheels and boots on the ground.