

LOM PRAHA – I WOULD LIKE LOM PRAHA TO REMAIN A CONSTANT ON THE CZECH REPUBLIC'S AERONAUTICAL MAP

Interview with Roman Planička,
Managing Director of LOM PRAHA s.p.

Mr Planička, LOM PRAHA boasts the longest tradition amongst the Czech aviation companies, what is the company's current position?

We celebrated our 100th anniversary in 2015 and the company has demonstrated that it has been a truly strategic enterprise of the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic for many years. Our business rests on several pillars. The first is securing the operation and servicing

of helicopters used by the Czech Armed Forces. The second pillar is the training of military pilots and ground personnel, and the third is providing modernization and simulation technology for both air and ground forces. We wish to further develop all these areas. Of course, it would be preferable to expand the portfolio by adding services for a western technology platform in line with the choice of the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic. ►





Half of the Czech Air Force Mi-171Sh fleet has been upgraded by LOM Praha



Main assembly hall of LOM



Among foreign operators Pakistan (on the picture), Afghanistan, Romania or Kenya have overhauled their helicopters at LOM Praha

SINCE I JOINED THE COMPANY, WE HAVE REACHED A CUMULATIVE VOLUME OF EXPORT BUSINESS WORTH NEARLY SIX BILLION CZK

► Years ago, LOM PRAHA focused primarily on the domestic defence sector. How is it today? What is the proportion of foreign orders?

Naturally, the Czech Armed Forces continue to be our primary customer, with the aim of meeting the strategic and security needs of the Czech Republic. Available capacity is then used for the benefit of foreign customers, the number of which has been growing. Since I joined the company, we have reached a cumulative volume of export business worth nearly six billion CZK.

The core business of the company used to be repairs of Russian technology, what is the share and significance of this production today?

Repairs and modernization of helicopter technology continue to be the company's core business. This year, for example, we are expecting to sign two contracts for the modernization of helicopters worth a total of around CZK 1 billion.

Similar repair plants in Bulgaria and Hungary have been shut down or

are in poor condition. With regard to the size of their Air Force, only Polish repair firms are prospering, but they focus solely on domestic production. What is LOM's recipe for market success?

The key to success is that LOM PRAHA, since I joined the company, has been doing business independently, in cooperation with partner companies, and not under their supervision.

A certain rarity from the point of view of Czech law is the legal form of "state enterprise". What positives and negatives does this definition bring for LOM PRAHA?

One of the few positive things is that our business partners regard us as a state organisational unit. On the other hand, this form brings a number of legislative constraints that our competitors do not have to face. These include, for example, procedures stemming from the Public Procurement Act, the Freedom of Information Act, and the Register of Treaties Act.

What do you plan in terms of portfolio expansion and modernisation?

Our company started to expand and replace the aircraft used for training. For example, American Enstroms, replacing the Mi-2 type at the end of its service life, helped to improve the quality of training, and we want to continue this process, as we plan to replace other aerospace technology such as within the L 39NG project currently under discussion. However, this will not be the end of the fleet renewal, as we will have to replace other technology as well in the future. In terms of the repairs side of business, we are expanding the scope of our services within technology modernization provided not just for the Czech Armed Forces but for foreign partners as well.

An example of this development is the cooperation with Rhode Schwarz regarding supplying assemblies for their products.

Do the sanctions against the Russian Federation impact the cooperation in any way?

Sanctions against the Russian Federation complicate our situation, but the Czech Republic has, fortunately, concluded an intergovernmental agreement on military-technical cooperation in

support of helicopter technology. Therefore, deliveries of spare parts and services to the Czech Armed Forces and our foreign customers are not under direct threat.

In your opinion, how do Russian government organizations view LOM PRAHA and the Czech defence industry following the imposition of sanctions?

As far as we are aware, the entities of the Russian Federation see our company as Number One among foreign repair companies for the Russian Mil helicopters.

With many competitors in the market, why should customers prefer to have their overhauls done at LOM?

LOM PRAHA offers a unique solution in terms of its complete range of overhauls including propulsion systems and modernisation. LOM is certified to the "NATO secret" level and is capable of building up classified technology. As a result, we can offer a "bridge solution" for those customers who, for whatever reason, do not want or cannot use the services of Russian repair companies.

LOM PRAHA has its own Flight Training Centre (CLV). What is its current role?

Since its inception in 2004, CLV has been the exclusive supplier of pilot training for the Czech Armed Forces, and in addition to the fleet renewal already mentioned, which will continue, it has undergone organizational changes to improve the quality of services for our key customer.

You have recently signed a contract with the Czech Ministry of Defence for pilot training. You can briefly summarise what training LOM PRAHA will provide?

The new pilot training contract, signed on 21 December 2018 and valid for seven years with an option for a further three years, is a breakthrough in the sense that it has changed the training payment structure. The payments are divided into so-called flat-rate payments covering the fixed costs of CLV, and variable costs per flight-hour. The Czech Armed Forces gain more flexibility in ordering flight-hours for each type of aircraft, with part of the fixed costs paid for training abroad ►



Mi-2 helicopters were phased out and instead new Enstrom type was acquired

► being subsequently reimbursed by the Armed Forces.

Training is a very dynamic area - what does LOM PRAHA do to satisfy evolving requirements of the Air Force?

In order to increase efficiency, the structure of training is changing, in collaboration with the Czech Armed Forces, and this training largely reflects experience from NATO missions and joint exercises.

You have already mentioned the fleet renewal. How does the business manage to continue with this under the conditions of the Public Procurement Act?

The Public Procurement Act contains rules that we, as a state enterprise, must comply with. Of course, the procedure required makes the purchase of technology and spare parts more complex, more difficult and, in many cases, more expensive.

The L-39NG delivery project has been handed over to the government. Why did LOM PRAHA decide on this type of technology?

Training on jets is one of the basic requirements of the Czech Armed Forces. The service life of the L-39C terminates in 2021-2022 and our company must acquire new technology to sustain this type of training. The L-39NG appears to be the logical and natural successor to the L-39C Albatros.

What do you think L-39NG will bring to LOM PRAHA? Do you plan to increase focus on foreign customers?

Yes, we do plan to offer training on these aircraft to foreign customers. The current technical configuration and parameters of the L-39NG meet all the requirements for both the basic and continued training in and outside the NATO countries.

How do you personally see LOM PRAGUE's position in pilot training



Since 2012 LOM Praha is in black numbers with Roman Planička in lead

on a global scale? Several training centres have been established...

We are trying to win foreign contracts within the existing CLV capacities. And we are succeeding, as demonstrated for example by the contract for the training of a group of 31 Iraqi pilots on Mi-17 helicopters - after 12 months of training, these pilots were immediately deployed in the fighting in Mosul. When evaluating the quality and level of the training provided in the Czech Republic, the Iraqi military command ranked it the best compared to all the other groups trained in other facilities.

The Tactical Simulation Centre (TSC) in Pardubice has been now in operation for almost ten years, as one of four in the world. How do you see its current role?

TSC is continuously being improved and its training abilities are being expanded. An example is the introduction of the FAC (Forward Air Controller) and GCI (Ground Controlled Interception)

training. We upgrade its equipment on an on-going basis. We anticipate that the L-39NG will be implemented into the TSC so that our customers' training will include tactical skills.

What are the plans for the airport in Přerov, which is under LOM PRAHA's control?

The Přerov aerodrome is actively used not only by the Czech Air Force, but also by our NATO allies. Last year, we completed three heliports for Mi-17 helicopters and by the start of the season the helicopters will be equipped with lighting systems. In addition, runway guidance lights will be completed by the start of the season, significantly increasing the level of the aerodrome capability and offering a wider use for NATO training. The improved aerodrome utilisation has been evidenced by a number of NATO exercises that have recently taken place in Přerov.

One of LOM PRAHA's subsidiaries is the VR Group, a leading producer

of simulation technologies. What are the plans of this company?

Further development of VR Group's capabilities in simulation technology is one of the priorities of our company. VR Group's current product range includes, in addition to simulators for the air and ground forces, also virtual shooting ranges. For example, VR Group has delivered a virtual shooting range for the Ruzyně Airport and for the Castle Guard. It is important to note that the company's successes have been achieved in tough competition of much larger and often more renowned companies.

Compared with many other aviation companies, you have a positive attitude to the past. What motivates you to pursue activities in this respect?

Our company contributes, within its capacities, to aviation history projects. For example, we have been helping the Military History Institute (VHÚ); with the support of Norwegian funds, we have reconstructed the old hangars of Old Aerovka to be used by VHÚ. We have renovated several types of historical aviation technology -- we perceive such activities as a natural part of our social responsibility.

Under your management, the business has always been in the black and in process of significant modernisation. What is your vision of the company's further development?

I would like LOM PRAHA to cease its dependency on merely one helicopter platform, to get to the position of expanding its military training capabilities and, at the same time, to remain a constant on the Czech Republic's aeronautical map.

**Text: Jakub Fojtík
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Photo: LOM Praha s.p. and author**

LOM IS CERTIFIED TO THE "NATO SECRET" LEVEL AND IS CAPABLE OF BUILDING UP CLASSIFIED TECHNOLOGY