



# Reinforcing NATO's Southeast

France in Romania – Leadership,  
interoperability, flexibility

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Cover: Vadim Ghirda/TT Nyhetsbyrå/AP Photo. 25 January 2023, Romania, Smardan: A French serviceman stands on a Leclerc main battle tank during an exercise.

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## Abstract

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, French security policy has undergone a significant shift. Previously considered a reluctant NATO ally, France has now assumed a central role in the collective defence of Allied territory. One of the most prominent examples is its role as framework nation for NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Romania.

This report analyses the design of FLF Romania through the lens of several categories: *type of presence, contributing countries, type of units, command and control, military mobility, and framework nation–host nation relations*. Strengths and challenges are identified in relation to these categories.

Regarding the type of presence, the study reveals that France has opted for a flexible approach characterised by a rotational multinational battle group in Romania and additional units in readiness at home. France values interoperability over multinationality, contributing to a cohesive FLF with relatively few participating countries. In the event of reinforcement, FLF Romania would likely consist of a mechanised brigade with units from France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain, reporting to NATO's Multinational Division Southeast.

While France's experience in leading military operations abroad has been an asset, challenges include military mobility and the polarised political environment in Romania.

**Keywords:** enhanced Forward Presence, Forward Land Forces, framework nations, France, host nations, NATO, Romania.

## Sammanfattning

Sedan Rysslands fullskaliga invasion av Ukraina i februari 2022 har fransk säkerhetspolitik genomgått ett betydande skifte. Tidigare betraktad som en motvillig Natoallierad har Frankrike nu tagit en central roll i det kollektiva försvaret av alliansens territorium. Ett av de tydligaste exemplen är rollen som ramverksnation för Natos framskjutna markstyrkor (FLF) i Rumänien.

Denna rapport analyserar utformningen av FLF Rumänien utifrån flera kategorier: *typ av närvaro, bidragande länder, typ av enheter, lednings- och lydnadsförhållanden, militär rörlighet och ramverksnation-värdnation-relationer*. Styrkor och utmaningar identifieras kopplade till dessa kategorier.

Vad gäller typ av närvaro visar studien att Frankrike valt ett flexibelt förhållnings-sätt i form av en roterande multinationell stridsgrupp i Rumänien och ytterligare enheter i beredskap hemmavid. Frankrike föredrar interoperabilitet över multinationalt, vilket bidragit till en tätt sammanknuten FLF med ett relativt lågt antal deltagande länder. I händelse av förstärkning skulle FLF Rumänien troligen att bestå av en mekaniserad brigad med enheter från Frankrike, Belgien, Luxemburg och Spanien. Brigaden lyder under Natos multinationella division sydöst.

Frankrikes erfarenhet av att leda militära operationer utomlands är en tillgång, men utmaningar återfinns bland annat vad gäller militär rörlighet och det polariserade politiska klimatet i Rumänien.

**Nyckelord:** framskjutna markstyrkor, Frankrike, förstärkt framskjuten närvaro, Nato, ramverksnationer, Rumänien, värdnationer.

## Preface

The Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS) programme at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) analyses security and defence developments in Western countries and organisations that influence Swedish security, and is commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence.

European NATO members' most important task in the coming years is to shoulder more responsibility for the deterrence of threats against, and the defence of, the European continent. France plays a crucial role in this and has increasingly demonstrated its willingness to bear more of Europe's defence burden.

Recent FOI research has analysed the alliance's Forward Land Forces in the Baltic states, military mobility on the European continent, and NATO's overall strategy for deterrence and defence. This study of France and its role as framework nation for the Forward Land Forces in Romania thus complements our previous research.

The author is grateful to colleagues at FOI and to the interviewees for their generous contributions. A special thank you is extended to Carina Gunnarson and Eva Hagström Frisell, who accompanied the author to Paris and Bucharest to conduct interviews. Jakob Gustafsson subsequently reviewed the report. Richard Langlais and Karin Blect provided excellent support in the language review and layout process. Their contributions greatly improved the report.

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Albin Aronsson, Deputy programme manager, Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS)

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## Abbreviations

BEL	Belgium
BG	Battle Group
BFCE	Brigade Forward Command Element
C2	Command and Control
eFP	enhanced Forward Presence
ESP	Spain
FLF	Forward Land Forces
FRA	France
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicle
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
JFC	Joint Force Command
LANDCOM	Allied Land Command
LUX	Luxembourg
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MISOPS	Missions Opérationnelles (Operational Missions)
MMA	Military Mobility Area
MNB	Multinational Brigade
MN BG	Multinational Battle Group
MNC-SE	Multinational Corps Southeast
MND-SE	Multinational Division Southeast
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NFIU	NATO Force Integration Unit
NRF	NATO Response Force
OPEX	Opérations extérieures (External Operations)
ROU	Romania
tFP	tailored Forward Presence
TCN	Troop-Contributing Nation

## Executive summary

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, French security policy has undergone a significant shift. Previously considered a reluctant NATO ally, distant from the concerns of Eastern Europe, France is now a central player in the collective defence of Allied territory. A prominent example of France's increasing engagement on the Eastern Flank is its role as framework nation for the alliance's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Romania.

NATO allows the framework nation and the host nation room for flexibility when designing an FLF. This applies to *type of presence, contributing countries, type of units* deployed, setup of division *command and control*, and *framework nation–host nation relations*. This report analyses FLF Romania through the lens of these categories, as well as its strengths and challenges. In this regard, the report complements previous FOI research on the FLFs in the Baltic states.

### FLF Romania

Striving for flexibility, France has opted for a *standby presence* in Romania. This means that a brigade is held at readiness at home, while a battalion-size multinational battle group is rotationally deployed in Romania. In terms of contributing countries, France prefers *interoperability* to *multinationality*. This appears to have contributed to the fact that FLF Romania includes only four participating countries: France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain. The interoperability between France and Belgium is particularly high, as they share a language and several types of equipment.

The French contribution to the multinational battle group consists of one armoured squadron, one mechanised infantry company, and one artillery battery. These units' principal equipment includes main battle tanks, light armoured vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles, medium-range artillery, and rocket launchers. Belgium and Luxembourg participate with a mechanised infantry company, consisting of three Belgian sections and one Luxembourgish section. Spain contributes a mechanised marine infantry company.

During the large-scale exercise Dacian Fall in 2025, the battle group was reinforced with two mechanised battalions (one from France, one from Belgium/Luxembourg) and two French artillery batteries. The participation of eight French attack helicopters indicated that the FLF could be reinforced with this asset in the event of crisis or war. The exercise was crucial for France as it demonstrated its capacity to scale up the battle group to brigade-size in the event of a crisis and reinforcement. The high level of readiness is a major French strength, maintained over decades of leading military operations abroad.

In terms of *command and control*, FLF Romania reports to the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE). A French-led Brigade Forward Command

Element (BFCE) is located in Bucharest, ensuring the readiness and continuity of the FLF. With respect to national control and decision-making procedures, the French president is the commander-in-chief with the exclusive authority to authorise French action under Article 5 in the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

The *framework nation–host nation relations* can be described as cooperation rather than interoperability, allegedly because of cultural and technical gaps. However, exercises are conducted to reinforce mutual understanding.

A key challenge is *military mobility*, as there are many borders to cross between France and Romania. Plans to develop a Military Mobility Area (MMA) between Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece could improve the sea and rail route via the harbour in Alexandroupoli. A second challenge is the frequency of rotations among the participating nations, making the improvement of interoperability a recurring task. A third challenge is the polarised political environment in Romania, as divergent threat perceptions and disinformation put constraints on the visibility of the FLF.

In addition to the high level of readiness and close ties between the participating countries, strengths include the positioning of heavy equipment and the straightforward decision-making procedures of the French political system.

Overall, France's prioritisation of interoperability with a limited group of allies may reflect a French view that credible deterrence is rooted more in military capability than in the number of countries represented.

Compared with other FLFs, FLF Romania shares significant similarities with the British-led FLF Estonia. Both countries opted for a standby presence, are the least multinational FLFs, and possess similar capabilities. However, they differ in overall mass (the UK provides one additional battalion) and type of units (the French-led brigade is mechanised while the British-led brigade is light infantry).

## Looking forward

With the 2027 presidential election approaching, the French engagement on the Eastern Flank will likely persist. Despite the political turbulence in France, there is broad agreement among the political camps both to honour the country's commitments in NATO and to increase defence spending. The threat from Russia is now prioritised in the national strategic reviews and the Military Programming Law. A victory for a centrist candidate would most likely continue Emmanuel Macron's strategic line, while a victory for the National Rally could entail less willingness to take on more of Europe's defence burden. Nevertheless, due to strained resources and mounting international instability, French decision-makers will have to confront difficult trade-offs between more or less flexible military postures in Europe and globally.

# 1 Introduction

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, French security policy has been undergoing a significant shift. A central feature of this shift is a greater priority being given to the collective and territorial defence of Europe, and in particular NATO's Eastern Flank. Besides France's co-leadership of the Coalition of the Willing for Ukraine, a prominent example of its increasing engagement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is Mission Aigle in Romania. The mission includes France's role as framework nation for the Forward Land Forces (FLF) and the deployment of an air defence system to the Black Sea coast. Around 800 French soldiers are rotationally deployed in FLF Romania, making it one of the largest French deployments abroad.<sup>1</sup> FLF Romania is one of eight existing FLFs.<sup>2</sup> The ninth, FLF Finland, led by Sweden, is being launched in 2026.

FLF Romania reflects two broader issues with high political relevance. The first is the concept of Forward Land Forces itself, which could be seen as reflecting a new generation of forward defence.<sup>3</sup> NATO has given a stronger role to *deterrence by denial*. In doing so, the alliance commits itself to defending "every inch" of its territory, as stated in its Strategic Concept from 2022.<sup>4</sup> The second broader issue is France's ascending commitment to the collective defence of Europe.

## 1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this report is to identify and describe the design of FLF Romania and analyse its challenges and strengths. Accordingly, the study is exploratory in nature, with explanatory factors left to future research.

The particular case of FLF Romania is important in several regards. First, Romania is a priority for France, representing its army's most significant commitment on the Eastern Flank. A study of FLF Romania could therefore serve as an indicator of French strategy and military capacity in the region. Second, Romania is a cornerstone of NATO's southeast, with a population of almost 20 million, bordering Ukraine and the Black Sea, and host to one of NATO's largest air bases. Third, France is participating in the development of the Swedish-led FLF Finland.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, "Dacian Fall 2025: Dossier de presse," press release, 2025, [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/20251020\\_NP\\_DOSSIER-PRESSE\\_DACIAN-FALL\\_VF.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/20251020_NP_DOSSIER-PRESSE_DACIAN-FALL_VF.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The other FLFs are located in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia.

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Gustafsson and Eva Hagström Frisell, A New Generation of Forward Defence—NATO in the Baltic states, FOI Reports FOI-R--5765--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2025), 14.

<sup>4</sup> NATO, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 29 June 2022, para. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, "Statement regarding NATO's Forward Land Forces in Finland," statement, 25 June 2025, <https://www.government.se/statements/2025/06/statement-regarding-natos-forward-land-forces-in-finland/>.

Consequently, it is important that Swedish decision-makers have access to insights on how France operates in such a context. From a Swedish perspective, it is also useful to understand the designs that other framework nations have selected.

The aim is addressed through one principal research question, complemented by a sub-question:

- What is the design of the French-led FLF in Romania?
- What are its strengths and challenges?

## 1.2 Methodology

While NATO is clear on what is to be delivered, it is flexible regarding *how* the framework nation and the host nation may design an FLF. Examining the FLFs in the Baltic states, Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell have previously pointed out variations in the *type of presence*, *contributing countries*, *type of units deployed*, setup of *command and control*, and level of *integration* with the host-nation forces.<sup>6</sup> This prompts the question, one left open in previous research, of what model France has opted for in Romania.

The aforementioned categories are applied to this study for two reasons. First, it has been demonstrated that these categories vary between the FLFs. Second, using a similar framework allows for a comparison to the FLFs in the Baltic states.

The first category, type of presence, may differ between standby, rotating, or permanent deployments. In the British-led FLF Estonia, a battle group in situ would in a crisis be reinforced by a brigade held on standby in the UK. In FLF Lithuania, Germany opted for a permanent presence, planning to install a brigade in the country by 2027. In the Canadian-led FLF Latvia, a reduced brigade is continuously present through persistent rotations of various units. While the German solution arguably represents the most robust posture, it is also the least flexible.

Second, the level of multinationality varies considerably, from two participating countries in FLF Estonia to thirteen in FLF Latvia. This could have implications for interoperability and, consequently, military efficiency. On the other hand, more participating nations can pose a stronger political signal on alliance solidarity, therefore contributing to an increased tripwire effect.

Third, type of units differs between infantry, mechanised, and armoured, accompanied by a variety of enablers such as artillery and engineering units.

Fourth, the command structure can have multinational or national entities, and the degree of national control and reservations, as well as decision-making procedures, vary between contributing countries.

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<sup>6</sup> Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation*, 11.

The fifth category is broadened in this study, as the integration of French forces with their Romanian counterparts is complemented by the FLF's relationship with the Romanian polity, society, and terrain in general. This category therefore covers not only the design, but also its context, including possibilities and challenges.

Finally, an additional sixth category has been added: *military mobility*, which is an increasingly visible challenge in Europe. Nor can this be considered a part of the design of the FLF; it is instead a challenge in itself. The decision to broaden one category and introduce an additional one was taken because both emerged as central challenges in an early phase of the study.

Beyond these fixed categories, an inductive approach was used to discern patterns of strengths and challenges in the material.

### 1.3 Sources

Previous research on FLFs in general, and FLF Romania in particular, is very limited.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, interviews play a central role in this study. The material consists of written open sources and 12 semi-structured interviews with military officers, policy officials, journalists, and experts. The written material includes primary sources such as official documents and press releases, and secondary sources such as previous research and media articles.

The interviews were conducted in Paris and Bucharest in late November and early December 2025. French and Romanian officials were interviewed to capture the perspectives of both the framework nation and the host nation, and reduce the risk of tendentious interpretations. Additionally, a French journalist, as well as French and Romanian researchers, was interviewed to complement the official lines. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the report does not provide the names of the respondents, nor does it include quotes from the interviews. The organisational affiliation of the respondents is listed in the bibliography.

### 1.4 Structure of the report

Following the introduction, the report begins with a historical background of France's engagement in Central and Eastern Europe. Chapter 3 presents the study of FLF Romania, structured around the categories previously outlined. Strengths and challenges are identified throughout this analysis. The chapter ends with a brief comparison of the FLFs in the Baltic states. The final chapter offers some conclusions as well as an outlook on France's future engagement on the Eastern Flank.

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<sup>7</sup> Two exceptions are Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation* and Élie Tenenbaum with the collaboration of Amélie Zima, *Return to the East: The Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank*, Focus stratégique no. 119 (Paris: French Institute of International Relations—Ifri, 2024).

## 2 France in Central and Eastern Europe

Historically, France and the CEE countries have tended to have diverging views on European security. An understanding of this legacy is essential for assessing the ramifications of France's role on the Eastern Flank today.

While impactful junctures can be observed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the more recent divergence emerged in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall, France took a sceptical position on the EU and NATO's enlargement, preferring stronger European autonomy (driven by a *deeper* rather than a larger EU), a limited role for NATO, and a broad European security architecture with the OSCE at the centre.<sup>9</sup> In the French view, it was important to involve Russia in this architecture.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the French vision differed from the aspirations of many CEE countries, which were eager to join the 'transatlantic family' and reduce ties with Russia.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, France was known for its traditional Gaullist dissonance, and sometimes defiance, towards NATO and the US. The CEE countries did not consider this tradition to be serving their interest, as the transatlantic relationship was viewed as vital for their security. On the other hand, France had gradually reintegrated into NATO's structures and activities since the 1990s. For example, the French Air Force had already started to carry out air policing in the Baltic states in 2007.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, the French-Russian deal on four MISTRAL warships in 2011, and the Franco-German desire to maintain the relationship with Moscow after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, deepened mistrust within CEE countries.<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Macron's efforts to renew the dialogue with Russia through the Bregançon initiative in 2019 were viewed with suspicion.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, France's military contributions to NATO's defence posture along the Eastern Flank remained rather limited. For example, France did not assume the role of framework nation when the predecessor of the FLF, enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), took

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<sup>8</sup> Examples include the French inability to protect the CEE countries from the outbreak of the Second World War, and President de Gaulle's decision in 1966 to withdraw from NATO's integrated command structure. For an overview, see Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 10-14.

<sup>9</sup> Alice Pannier and Olivier Schmitt, *French Defence Policy since the End of the Cold War* (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 131-132.

<sup>10</sup> While it can be argued that France was particularly adamant in this position, it should be added that partnership with Russia remained common NATO policy until 2022. In particular, France and Germany were to a great extent aligned in their Russia policy.

<sup>11</sup> David Cadier, "The end of dissonance? France and central Europe's newly converging strategic outlooks," *International Politics* 62 (18 November 2024), 1029.

<sup>12</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 64.

<sup>13</sup> BBC, "France and Russia strike Mistral warship deal," 26 May 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13564977>.

<sup>14</sup> Cadier, "The end of dissonance?," 1028.

form in 2016. At that time, France was also constrained by counterterrorism operations in France (Opération Sentinelle) and the Sahel (Opération Barkhane, where up to 5000 French soldiers were deployed).<sup>15</sup> This prioritisation was reflected in the national strategies where terrorism was viewed as the foremost threat until 2022.<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 2022 marked a major shift in both words and actions. In words, Russia replaced terrorism as the dominant threat in the updated National Strategic Review 2022.<sup>17</sup> In his speech at the Bratislava Forum in 2023, Macron recognised that the European security architecture had failed to protect itself from Russian attacks.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he implied that Western European countries should have taken the concerns of CEE more into account, signalled steadfast support for NATO, and declared that CEE "can count on France." The shift was also facilitated by France's involuntary withdrawal from the majority of its military activities in Africa. No longer committed to operations in the Sahel, France has freed resources for Europe.<sup>19</sup>

In practice, France is today more actively engaged in NATO, and has increased its engagement in CEE. Resistance against a prospective EU enlargement has been replaced by a stronger support for Ukraine, Moldova, and other candidate countries in the Western Balkans.<sup>20</sup> In 2022, Macron initiated the European Political Community as a new forum for strategic discussions. Moreover, France co-leads the Coalition of the Willing, which is intended to send a multinational force to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire. Along with the role as framework nation in Romania, France contributes to the British-led FLF Estonia with a mechanised company. As previously mentioned, the French Air Force participates not only in air policing and other ISR activities in the Baltic states, but also Poland and Romania. The French Navy participates in missions in the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025; H el ene Bienvenu, et al., "Sur le flanc est de l'OTAN,   la fronti ere avec la Russie, 'l' ere de l'avant-guerre' a commenc e," *Le Monde*, 7 July 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/07/07/sur-le-flanc-est-de-l-otan-a-la-frontiere-avec-la-russie-l-ere-de-l-avant-guerre-a-commence\\_6247426\\_3210.html?random=439020389](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/07/07/sur-le-flanc-est-de-l-otan-a-la-frontiere-avec-la-russie-l-ere-de-l-avant-guerre-a-commence_6247426_3210.html?random=439020389).

<sup>16</sup> Emma Sj okvist and Eva Hagstr om Frisell, *Rethinking European Military Engagements Abroad—The Strategic Trajectories of the United Kingdom, France and Germany*, FOI Reports FOI-R--5464--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2023), 18.

<sup>17</sup> R epublique fran aise, *National Strategic Review 2022*, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Macron, "Closing speech by the President of the French Republic," transcript of speech to the Bratislava Forum,  lys ee website, 1 June 2023, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2023/06/01/globsec-summit-in-bratislava>.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that French support for enlargement is conditional on internal EU reform, particularly of the decision-making process. Furthermore, the French approval of accessions could be constrained by domestic opposition. See Milan Ni c et al., *Europe's Next Enlargement: What Berlin, Paris, and The Hague Really Think*, DGAF Policy Brief No. 6 (German Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

<sup>21</sup> See Tenenbaum for an excellent overview of these different engagements.

In recent years, France's profile has steadily risen in both public opinion and policy circles in CEE. In a public poll in 2025, France was considered one of the two key strategic partners by 23 per cent of respondents in CEE, compared to 14 per cent in 2021.<sup>22</sup> In Romania, the figure stood at 32 per cent, up from 19 per cent when the FLF was launched in 2022.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, in a study from 2023, "Central European foreign policy elites converge in noting a 'profound,' 'important' and 'paradigmatic' change in France's policies towards Russia, Ukraine and their region."<sup>24</sup> While France has increased its engagement in NATO and CEE, developments in the United States have prompted other European countries to recognise the need for a stronger European pillar within the alliance.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the gap in strategic thinking between France and CEE has narrowed.

When the decision was made to establish FLFs in NATO's southeast, France and Romania appeared as a logical fit. Not only were they the largest countries that were not yet framework and host nations, but they also had historical ties. The first French officer in Romania had already been deployed in 1916 to reorganise the Romanian armed forces, and diplomatic ties were maintained during the Communist era.<sup>26</sup> In terms of its size and geographical position, Romania is an important part of the alliance's collective defence. The country is a member of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (*l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*) and a significant share of the Romanian political and military elite has traditionally spoken French.

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<sup>22</sup> GLOBSEC, GLOBSEC Trends 2025: Ready for a New Era?, GLOBSEC Trends series (GLOBSEC, 2025), 47.

<sup>23</sup> GLOBSEC, GLOBSEC Trends 2025, 51.

<sup>24</sup> Cadier, "The end of dissonance?," 1030–1031.

<sup>25</sup> Cadier, "The end of dissonance?," 1031.

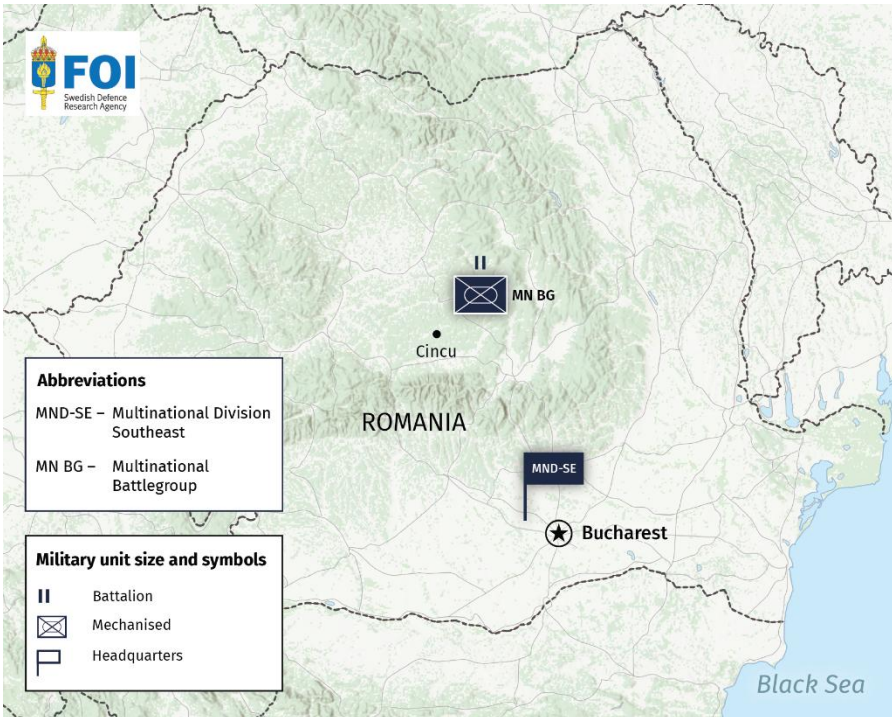
<sup>26</sup> Interviews, Bucharest, December 2025.

### 3 FLF Romania

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, France was in charge of the NATO Response Force (NRF). 72 hours later, a French emergency deployment was sent to Romania. The swift response was facilitated by an emerging French openness to lead an eFP in the country.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the high readiness that certain units maintain is one of the main strengths of the French Armed Forces, traditionally accustomed to leading and participating in operations abroad. In turn, their emergency deployment accelerated France’s subsequent establishment of the FLF. A technical agreement for host nation support was signed by France and Romania in December 2022.<sup>28</sup>

After a brief presentation of the security situation in the region and the aim of the mission, the following chapter is structured around the categories characterising the design of FLF Romania. Challenges and strengths are continuously identified. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief comparison between FLF Romania and the FLFs in the Baltic states.

Map 1: FLF Romania



<sup>27</sup> Tenenbaum, Return to the East, 52.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

### 3.1 Security situation and mission

While battalion-sized eFPs were launched in the Baltic states and Poland in 2017, the Alliance's southeastern zone was covered by a lighter tailored Forward Presence (tFP) consisting of land, air, and sea elements.<sup>29</sup> The decision to replace the tFP with four separate eFPs (in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia) was taken after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A few months later, the eFP concept was replaced by the FLF.

The war in Ukraine entails tangible spillover effects that affect the security situation in Romania. Russian drones are regularly detected in Romanian airspace, and some of them have crashed on its territory.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, drifting mines disrupt commercial maritime traffic and hamper economic development in the Black Sea, where the vulnerability of Romanian underwater gas fields is an emerging concern.<sup>31</sup> A horizontal escalation of the war in Ukraine, such as destabilisation in the Republic of Moldova, would pose additional risks.<sup>32</sup>

Romania's geographical position makes it strategically important as a hub for military aid to Ukraine. Consequently, it is in Russia's interest to influence Romanian public opinion and politics, with the aim of undermining the country's Western orientation, obstructing the functioning of the hub, and limiting NATO's presence there.

In this context, the FLF should be interpreted as a form of reassurance that the southeastern zone of the Eastern flank is well covered by NATO. Romania has previously worried that Russia could perceive the Black Sea region as being weaker than the northeast.<sup>33</sup> Since 2014, the country has called for increasing awareness of this risk in NATO and the EU. According to Romanian policy officials, France was one of the allies that best understood Romania's concerns.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 Type of presence

At the 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO decided to transform eFPs into FLFs and added a provision that battalion-sized battle groups should be able to scale up to brigade-size *when and where required*.<sup>35</sup> This formula allowed for some flex-

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<sup>29</sup> NATO Allied Land Command, "ENHANCED FORWARD PRESENCE (EFP)," no date, <https://lc.nato.int/operations/enhanced-forward-presence-efp> (retrieved 30 March 2026).

<sup>30</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 80.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025; George Scutaru, *Black Sea's Offshore Energy Potential and Its Strategic Role at a Regional and Continental Level*, (Bucharest: New Strategy Center—NSC 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Albin Aronsson, et al., *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2024: Part III: NATO's Strategy for Deterrence and Defence towards 2030—Matching Ambition and Capabilities*, FOI Reports FOI-R--5636--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2024), 66.

ibility, making standby arrangements and rotational deployments alternatives to a permanent presence.

France has opted for a standby presence. This means that a multinational battle group is rotationally deployed in Romania, while the remaining forces needed to scale it up to brigade size are held in readiness in France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Currently, the multinational battle group consists of around 1200 soldiers.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the deployment includes a French national support element of around 460 personnel.<sup>37</sup>

The credibility of the standby model presupposes well-developed C2 elements, infrastructure such as accommodation, and prepositioned stocks.<sup>38</sup> Put simply, the framework nation needs to demonstrate that it can actually scale up to brigade size at short notice. At present, it appears that the first two conditions are met to a large extent. In terms of C2, France has launched a Brigade Forward Command Element (BFCE) in Bucharest. In terms of accommodation, the camp in Cincu has finally gained sufficient capacity to host enough troops.<sup>39</sup> Prepositioning is a work in progress (see the section on military mobility).

### 3.3 Contributing countries

From 2017 until early 2022, France rotated a mechanised company between the British-led eFP Estonia and the German-led eFP Lithuania. During this period, it appeared that France found it more efficient to cooperate solely with the UK (in the former), while the latter was seen as a “Tower of Babel” where France had to cooperate with five other countries.<sup>40</sup> Guided by this experience, France prefers operational effectiveness to multinationality. French military officers describe trying to cooperate closely with too many allies as challenging, likely reflecting Paris’s view that military capability, with a less multinational command structure, forms the basis of credible deterrence.<sup>41</sup>

As the framework nation in Romania, France had the opportunity to influence the setup of partner nations, taking into account equipment, language, and strategic culture. In terms of equipment, compatible information and communication systems were a priority.<sup>42</sup> This resulted in an FLF with a low degree of multinationality.

France accounts for the majority of soldiers (around 800) in the in situ battle group. The other contributing countries are Belgium, Spain, and Luxembourg. France highly values the relationship with Belgium. Not only do the two countries have

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<sup>36</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, “Dacian Fall 2025: Dossier de presse”.

<sup>37</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, “Dacian Fall 2025: Dossier de presse”.

<sup>38</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 40–41.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025; Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

linguistic and cultural ties, but also a high level of technical interoperability in terms of communication systems and vehicles. Since 2018, the two countries have had a motorised capacity partnership (CaMo).<sup>43</sup> Moreover, French military officers view their Belgian colleagues as more accustomed to NATO doctrine.<sup>44</sup> France and Spain have traditionally been united by similar interests in the Mediterranean and the Sahel, where they have developed strong ties.<sup>45</sup>

France coordinates with the partner nations at all levels. Belgium and Spain have representatives in the BFCE, and regular meetings are held between the defence ministries on a bilateral basis. France invites the partner nations' forces to joint exercises in various formats.<sup>46</sup>

While the low number of participating nations creates opportunities to develop high interoperability, the rotations pose a challenge.<sup>47</sup> As new units enter Cincu, they have to relearn the characteristics of their partners and the terrain. In this regard, the BFCE is crucial for transferring knowledge between rotating French units. One advantage with the rotations is that many units within the French Army have now been deployed in Cincu. This knowledge base should now be more widely distributed, possibly strengthening the preparedness of prospective reinforcements.

### 3.4 Type of units and capabilities

In terms of unit types, France contributes one armoured squadron, one mechanised infantry company, and one artillery battery to the battle group.<sup>48</sup> The French soldiers are characterised as highly motivated. They have long working days, and the deployment is considered important for both the army's training and the military careers of individuals involved.<sup>49</sup> Belgium and Luxembourg participate with a mechanised infantry company, consisting of three Belgian sections and one Luxembourgish section.<sup>50</sup> By the end of 2024, Spain had joined with a mechanised marine infantry company.<sup>51</sup> From the outset, the participating nations planned to

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<sup>43</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, "CaMo. Une coopération européenne inédite entre la France et la Belgique," news release, 17 June 2022, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/eurosatory/actualites/camo-cooperation-europeenne-inedite-entre-france-belgique>.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews, Paris, November 2025; Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Alba Iulia, "NATO tests war preparedness on eastern flank facing Russia," France 24, 5 November 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20251105-nato-tests-war-preparedness-on-eastern-flank-facing-russia>.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>49</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>50</sup> Tenenbaum, Return to the East, 53.

<sup>51</sup> Ministerio de defensa, "Marine Corps Battle Group deployed to Romania joins NATO's Battle Group in Romania," news release, 2 December 2024, [https://emad.defensa.gob.es/en/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/31\\_Forward\\_Land\\_Forces/31.3-FLF\\_Rumania/noticias/listado/241202-ni-rumania-toa-infanteria.html](https://emad.defensa.gob.es/en/operaciones/operaciones-en-el-exterior/31_Forward_Land_Forces/31.3-FLF_Rumania/noticias/listado/241202-ni-rumania-toa-infanteria.html).

manage logistics nationally. However, they later decided to make logistics multinational, which improved efficiency. Both the logistics and the medical units are now working together in the field.

Notably, the French artillery battery possesses rocket artillery systems despite their scarcity in the French Army.<sup>52</sup>

Table 1: The French contribution to FLF-BG Aigle in Romania in autumn 2025

Basic units	Principal equipment
1 armoured squadron	MBTs, armoured vehicles
1 mechanised infantry company	Infantry fighting vehicles
1 artillery battery	Howitzers, rocket artillery systems
<i>+ national support element</i>	

### Standby units

Each year, a French brigade is responsible for being on standby in France, as well as supplying the French units to the multinational battle group on a rotational basis. Usually, each unit stays at Cincu for four months. The same brigade staffs the BFCE in Bucharest, with officers assigned to rotations lasting 4–6 months.<sup>53</sup>

The responsibility for FLF Romania rotates between the 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade (from the First Division) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigade (from the Third Division). These are the heaviest brigades within the French Army.<sup>54</sup> In October and November 2025, Exercise Dacian Fall<sup>55</sup> offered an indication of the forces held on standby, as the battle group was reinforced by a FRA mechanised battalion, a BEL-LUX mechanised battalion, and two additional FRA artillery batteries.<sup>56</sup> Consequently, it is likely that the scaled-up FLF will be mechanised rather than armoured, though it will retain significant armoured features.

Eight French attack helicopters were deployed during Dacian Fall 2025. Because of the preference for flexibility, there are no plans to deploy these permanently to the battle group.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, their inclusion in the exercise could be perceived as an indication of readiness to use them in the event of scaling up.

<sup>52</sup> Héloïse Fayet and Léo Péria-Peigné, *La frappe dans la profondeur : un nouvel outil pour la compétition stratégique ?* Focus stratégique No. 121 (Paris: French Institute of International Relations—Ifri, 2024), 66.

<sup>53</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025; Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>54</sup> Carina Gunnarson, “France,” in *Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023: Part I: National Capabilities*, ed. Björn Ottosson and Krister Pallin, FOI Reports FOI-R--5527--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2024), 160.

<sup>55</sup> Originally scheduled for Dacian Spring, the expansion was postponed until the autumn because of the political turbulence around the Romanian presidential elections.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

### 3.5 Command and control

FLF Romania falls under the Multinational Division Southeast (MND-SE), the division established in 2015 to implement NATO's operational plans in Romania and Bulgaria. The commander of MND-SE is Romanian, and the deputy commander French. The latter is double-hatted as the French Senior National Representative (SNR). The SNR oversees the French troops transferred to NATO's authority and the national support element. He is also the "red-card holder"<sup>58</sup> for the French troops, ensuring that allied exercises and operations comply with French rules.

Alongside FLF Romania, the Italian-led FLF Bulgaria and a multinational brigade led by Romania fall under MND-SE.<sup>59</sup> The American deployment in Romania is organised on a bilateral basis; hence there is no direct coordination between this deployment and the FLF.

For France, the BFCE is crucial for facilitating compliance with the directives from the Allied Land Command on Forward Land Forces. The BFCE is supposed to be familiar with the regional plans, tests the interoperability between the multinational forces, and coordinates with the troops held in readiness in France and the Romanian armed forces.<sup>60</sup>

MND-SE falls under the Romanian-led Multinational Corps Southeast (MNC-SE), located in Sibiu. France has three liaison officers assigned to MNC-SE.<sup>61</sup> In addition, France has liaison officers in the NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU) in Bucharest. Conferences are held every six months with Troop Contributing Nations (TCNs) and Romania. One of the recurring themes is how to implement NATO directives.

MNC-SE reports to Allied Land Command in Izmir and to JFC Naples.

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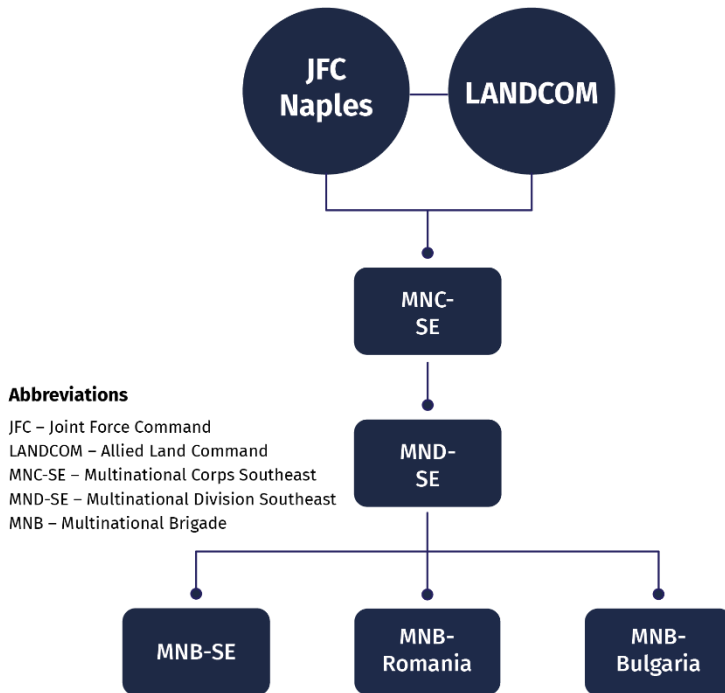
<sup>58</sup> A red-card holder is a senior officer appointed by their home country to block coalition orders that conflict with that country's laws, rules, or operational restrictions.

<sup>59</sup> FLF Bulgaria consists of Italian, American, Bulgarian, and Greek troops. The Multinational Brigade South-East (MNB-SE) consists of Romanian, Polish, Portuguese, and North Macedonian troops.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>61</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

Figure 1: Command and control of FLF Romania



### Decision-making procedures

The French president is the national commander-in-chief and represents France in the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The president also has the exclusive authority to place French forces under the authority of the NATO command structure upon activation of Article 5.

While the French defence budget has traditionally classed military missions abroad as external operations (OPEX), the FLF is an operational mission (MISOPS).<sup>62</sup> MISOPS is subject to less parliamentary control than OPEX, which is subject to a vote in the National Assembly four months after activation.<sup>63</sup> Under MISOPS, there are no such constraints on the president. This situation likely makes the French president able to more quickly reinforce the French contingent, and by making the deployment and its possible reinforcement more credible, this should positively contribute to deterrence.

<sup>62</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Falk Ostermann, "France's reluctant parliamentarisation of military deployments: the 2008 constitutional reform in practice," *West European Politics* 40, no. 1 (2017), 102.

### 3.6 Military mobility

One of France's main challenges has been military mobility between France and Romania. In the view of French military officers, the problem is the number of borders rather than the distance.<sup>64</sup> Documentation requirements in Germany are a commonly mentioned obstacle. Currently, several routes are used depending on the requirements for specific convoys. This includes rail and road through Germany or Italy, and shipping via the Greek port of Alexandroupoli. The latter route may become increasingly attractive, as Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece signed a letter of intent to establish a Military Mobility Area (MMA) in the context of the Washington Summit in 2024.<sup>65</sup> Aircraft could also be used for the transport of rotating personnel.

The challenges related to military mobility are particularly prominent due to the French preference for flexibility. For the military leadership, a constant consideration is how much logistical capacity should be forward based.<sup>66</sup> While France has plans to preposition stocks in Romania and Czechia (a crossroads between France's engagements in Romania and Estonia), a brigade expansion in the event of a crisis would still imply an extensive logistical challenge.<sup>67</sup> A relatively sparse expressway network and bridges unsuitable for tank transporters put further constraints on mobility within Romania.

From the host nation's perspective, Dacian Fall 2025 was important because it allowed France to demonstrate its capacity to scale up.<sup>68</sup> This was the first time the battle group was reinforced to brigade size. To a large extent, this was a logistical exercise, with the purpose of validating the efficiency of transport corridors and identifying administrative constraints and infrastructure shortages.<sup>69</sup> The battle group was reinforced to brigade size between mid-September and early October.<sup>70</sup> NATO certified the exercise as successful in terms of logistics, technology, interoperability, and reaction capacity.<sup>71</sup> However, it is not clear how much of the reinforcement was dependent on earlier preparations.

In conclusion, the constraints on military mobility pose an obvious challenge, especially in relation to flexibility. On the other hand, France has a culture of readi-

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<sup>64</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>65</sup> The Sofia Globe, "Bulgaria, Romania, Greece sign letter of intent on harmonised military mobility corridor," 11 July 2024, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2024/07/11/bulgaria-romania-greece-sign-letter-of-intent-on-harmonised-military-mobility-corridor/>.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>67</sup> Tenenbaum, *Return to the East*, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>70</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, "Dacian Fall 2025: Dossier de presse".

<sup>71</sup> Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, "Dacian Fall 25: la France teste sa capacité à projeter une brigade de combat sur le flanc Est de l'Europe," news release, 17 November 2025, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/terre/actualites/dacian-fall-25-france-teste-sa-capacite-projeter-brigade-combat-flanc-est-leurope>.

ness, and experience in finding logistical solutions, especially in times of crisis. This ability was also demonstrated in the emergency deployment of 2022 and exercise Dacian Fall 2025.

### 3.7 Framework nation–host nation relations

The proper functioning of an FLF presupposes good cooperation between the framework nation and the host nation. In this regard, French military officers value a clear delineation of responsibilities, a robust technical agreement, and agreements with local authorities.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, knowledge of the theatre, including the terrain, is undeniably important.

#### Defence cooperation

French military officers in Romania have regular contact with their Romanian counterparts, and the defence section at the Embassy of France in Romania has been reinforced.<sup>73</sup> The French SNR is the liaison officer to the Romanian Ministry of Defence, and the brigade in charge of the FLF cooperates closely with Romanian authorities. Both French and Romanian interlocutors describe bilateral relations as excellent.<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, cultural and technical gaps are said to make the French and Romanian armies fairly dissimilar, and the state of the military relationship can be described as cooperation rather than interoperability.<sup>75</sup> To address these problems, French units in Romania regularly take part in joint Franco-Romanian exercises with the purpose of strengthening mutual understanding.<sup>76</sup>

The relative absence of substantial industrial partnerships is notable, as this is usually a prominent feature in strategic relationships. In an interview in late 2025, the former Romanian Minister of Defence hinted that Romania had made “mistakes” in its relationship with France.<sup>77</sup> One possible example is the cancellation of plans to acquire two French corvettes in 2023, alongside a continuing priori-

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>74</sup> Interviews, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>75</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>76</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December; Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, “Bataillon multinational de l’OTAN en Roumanie - EAGLE WARRIOR : renforcement de la coopération franco-roumaine,” news release, 8 August 2025, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/bataillon-multinational-lotan-roumanie-eagle-warrior-renforcement-cooperation-franco>.

<sup>77</sup> Bianca Dogaru, “Ionut Mosteanu confirma că sistemul american anti-dronă MEROPS a ajuns în România: „Îl testăm și urmează să fie integrat,” Gandul, 6 November 2025, <https://www.gandul.ro/actualitate/ionut-mosteanu-confirma-ca-sistemul-american-anti-drona-merops-a-ajuns-in-romania-il-testam-si-urmeaza-sa-fie-integrat-20698353>.

tisation of American military equipment.<sup>78</sup> The deal for MISTRAL air-defence systems in November 2025 was likely much-anticipated by the French side.<sup>79</sup>

### Political context and terrain

The political context in Romania is a complicating factor, as public mistrust has made the country a fertile ground for disinformation and influence campaigns. The Western-oriented president and the government on the one hand, and the main opposition party on the other hand, have different threat perceptions and stances on Romania's security policy.

The public opinion reveals significant paradoxes. In GLOBSEC Trends 2025, 91 per cent of Romanian respondents supported NATO, while 39 per cent thought "that NATO is an aggressive organisation and a tool for the US to control other countries."<sup>80</sup> The degree of polarisation in this political context is different from that in the Baltic states and makes the FLF vulnerable to disinformation. Notably, the far-right candidate George Simion accused Macron of interfering in the last Romanian presidential election.<sup>81</sup>

This political context has concrete implications. For fear of fuelling accusations of 'warmongering', some mayors and local authorities are allegedly seeking to limit the visibility of NATO's presence.<sup>82</sup> French military officers stress the importance of having access to an area where they can train and experiment, but so far, they have not been able to exercise in open terrain.<sup>83</sup> However, they did not see this as a major problem, as the range in Cincu is now of high quality.<sup>84</sup>

The Romanian terrain is different from the French one. An example is that tanks can more easily get stuck in the mud.<sup>85</sup> To familiarise themselves with the terrain, brigade representatives conduct reconnaissance of the actual sites, and the exercises are closely aligned with the regional plans.<sup>86</sup> In the framework of Dacian Fall 2025, advanced engineering capacities needed for the Romanian terrain, such as water crossing, were tested.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>79</sup> Reuters, "Romania signs deal to buy French Mistral air defence systems," 27 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/romania-signs-deal-buy-french-mistral-air-defence-systems-2025-11-27/>.

<sup>80</sup> GLOBSEC, GLOBSEC Trends 2025, 25, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Elena Giordano, "Romanian presidential front-runner accuses Macron of 'dictatorial tendencies,'" Politico, 16 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-george-simion-accuse-emmanuel-macron-dictatorial-tendencies-france-iran-election-interference/>.

<sup>82</sup> Tenenbaum, Return to the East, 55.

<sup>83</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>84</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>85</sup> Interview, Paris, November 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, Bucharest, December 2025.

<sup>87</sup> Iulia, "NATO tests war preparedness."

### **3.8 Comparison with the FLF brigades in the Baltic states**

Comparing FLF Romania with the FLFs in the Baltic states, significant similarities with FLF Estonia are visible. They are by far the least multinational of the FLFs, with two contributing countries in Estonia and four in Romania, respectively. Both the UK and France hold brigades on standby in their home countries. They have similar capabilities, such as rocket artillery in place, and attack helicopters would most likely be deployed if needed.<sup>88</sup> France and the UK are also nuclear powers, a status that entails an additional deterrence effect. One important difference is that the French-led FLF Romania consists of a mechanised brigade, whereas the UK-led FLF Estonia consists of an infantry brigade and a mechanised battalion. Another difference is that the standby brigade in France rotate, whereas the UK keeps the same brigade in charge.<sup>89</sup>

Although FLF Romania also shares some similarities with FLF Latvia and FLF Lithuania (for example, the brigade composition of three battalions and, in the Latvian case, the rotational character), there is a significant difference in the number of contributing countries. In the event of a crisis, it is possible that the French-led FLF Romania would be quicker to activate because of the strong executive powers of the French president. On the other hand, the political systems in Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain should also be taken into account, meaning France might be quicker to unilaterally reinforce its presence in Romania, while potentially having to wait for remaining countries to send their forces.

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<sup>88</sup> Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation*, 35.

<sup>89</sup> Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation*, 36.

Table 2: Summary of key attributes of the FLF brigades in Romania and the Baltic states<sup>90</sup>

	FLF Romania	FLF Estonia	FLF Latvia	FLF Lithuania
<b>Framework nation</b>	France	United Kingdom	Canada	Germany
<b>Type of presence</b>	In situ rotational BG, standby brigade	In situ BG, standby brigade	Rotating brigade (2 battalions in situ, 1 on standby)	Permanent brigade (from 2027)
<b>Number of contributing countries</b>	4 (FRA, BEL, ESP, LUX)	2 (GBR, FRA)	13 (CAN, ALB, CZE, DNK, ESP, ISL, ITA, MKD, MNE, POL, SVK, SVN, SWE)	7 (DEU, BEL, CZE, HRV, LUX, NLD, NOR)
<b>Type of units</b>	Mechanised brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 FR mechanised battalion, 1 BEL/LUX mechanised battalion)	Mechanised BG, infantry brigade (2 GBR infantry battalions, 1 FRA battalion)	Mechanised brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DNK/SWE mechanised battalion, 1 CAN infantry battalion)	Armoured brigade (1 MN mechanised BG, 1 DEU armoured battalion, 1 DEU mechanised battalion)
<b>Key capabilities</b>	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, rocket artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence, rocket artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence	MBTs, IFVs, artillery
<b>Division HQ</b>	Multinational (ROU)	Host nation (EST)	Multinational (DNK, LVA)	Framework nation (DEU)
<b>Decision-making in Art. 5</b>	FRA national decision needed to deploy before NAC decision, no parliamentary decision needed	GBR, FRA national decision needed to deploy before NAC decision, no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in CAN no parliamentary decision needed	NAC decision and national decisions needed, in DEU parliamentary approval needed
<b>Full brigade exercise</b>	October–November 2025 (Dacian Fall)	May 2025 (Hedgehog)	November 2024 (Resolute Warrior)	Unknown

While considerations behind the design have not been systematically examined in this report, two interrelated factors help explain the standby models of FLF Romania and the British-led FLF Estonia.

First, France and the UK are *global* powers, with ambitions to remain globally engaged.<sup>91</sup> Both are former imperial powers with varying degrees of ties to former colonies and remaining overseas territories. However, they no longer have the relative military strength to deploy large permanent forces in all theatres. This reflects a mismatch between ambition and resources. While the mismatch could

<sup>90</sup> The details on the FLFs in the Baltic states are drawn from Gustafsson and Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation*, 57.

<sup>91</sup> Alice Pannier, *Rivals in Arms: The Rise of UK–France Defence Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2020), 28–29.

be addressed through difficult priorities, for example, scaling down their global ambitions, both France and the UK have preferred *flexibility*. It appears that the trade-off between prioritisation and flexibility will continue to be a key question for French and British foreign, security, and defence policy in the years to come.

Second, French and British experience in leading military operations has endowed them with the capability to deploy troops rapidly. While both countries' armed forces are adapting for high-intensity warfare, they already possess expeditionary qualities. Consequently, they trust their own ability to respond rapidly. Nevertheless, resource constraints may be the most important factor.

Compared with FLF Romania and FLF Estonia, the degree of multinationality in FLF Latvia would make a standby model more complicated. In the case of FLF Lithuania, Germany does currently not have the same tradition of leading external operations as France and the UK. Therefore, it has neither the particular experience, nor a similar global legacy to uphold. Deploying a permanent brigade could be symbolically important in German efforts to build a new military identity, and to send reassuring signals to allies.

## 4 Conclusions

This study outlines the design, main strengths, and challenges of the French-led FLF Romania. FLF Romania is characterised by a standby presence and a low number of contributing countries. The scaled-up brigade would likely be heavily mechanised. The FLF reports to MND-SE, which falls under JFC Naples. A Brigade Forward Command Element ensures coordination between the multinational battle group, the brigade in France, and MND-SE.

Some of the challenges, such as military mobility, are typical for most FLFs. Others might be more specific to the particular case. For example, the polarisation in threat perception in Romania differs from that in the Baltic states, Poland, and Finland. Among FLF Romania's strengths are high interoperability among the participating countries and France's experience in leading military operations abroad. Future assessments would benefit from also analysing the Belgian and Spanish forces' readiness and the countries' decision-making procedures.

The design of FLF Romania may reflect a French thinking about deterrence on the Eastern flank more broadly. First, the preference for fewer contributing countries over many small contingents may indicate a prioritisation of military credibility over political signalling. Second, the view that a stand-by posture can be robust when it is underpinned by proper planning and experience of rapid deployments. A reorientation towards a permanent forward deployed presence is unlikely however, given Paris's preference for flexibility to engage in various theatres and its constrained resources. France would be further constrained if it were to send forces to Ukraine as part of a Coalition of the Willing deployment.

### 4.1 Future engagement on the Eastern Flank

Looking ahead, one question of general interest, not least in Romania, remains: Is France's engagement on the Eastern Flank here to stay? Based on several indicators, the answer is mostly yes. However, there is significant uncertainty regarding *the level* of this engagement.

French leadership and participation in the FLFs in Romania and Estonia, commitments in the air and sea domains along the Eastern Flank, support for Ukraine, and the initiation of the Coalition of the Willing should not be interpreted as tactical decisions by the French president aimed at short-term objectives, but as strategic decisions to reaffirm France's commitment to European security.

The collective defence of Europe is now singled out as one of France's main objectives, as reflected in the National Strategic Review of 2025 and the Military

Programming Law for 2024–2030.<sup>92</sup> While Macron himself has played an important role in this shift, it is now anchored in France’s political machinery. As France has invested significant credibility in its engagement with European security, it would be difficult to reverse this course.

While the political and budgetary situations in France are problematic, broad majorities in the National Assembly have committed to increased defence spending. There is widespread agreement among the political parties that a strong defence is essential to maintain France’s status on the international stage.

The outcome and repercussions of the presidential election in 2027 remain uncertain. As of April 2026, the most likely scenario is a second round between a centre, centre-left, or centre-right candidate and National Rally leader Jordan Bardella. A victory for a candidate from one of the former camps would most likely reaffirm Macron’s foreign and security policy legacy, while Bardella has indicated that he would not attempt to withdraw from the EU or NATO. He has also acknowledged France’s engagement on NATO’s Eastern Flank as “fundamental.”<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, a far-right administration could redefine France’s main priorities, choosing a more nationalist focus and taking a more transactional approach towards allies. While the contributions to the Eastern Flank could be honoured in principle, there is a risk that its forward-leaning leadership would diminish. Possible reductions in support to Ukraine or a partial renunciation of the French nuclear doctrine’s “European dimension” would have implications for the Eastern Flank, potentially influencing Russian assessments of Europe’s deterrence and defence. It is too early to assess the extent of this potential change; a National Rally president could entail anything from a slight redefinition of France’s position to a more radical shift.

Finally, it should be noted that French policy circles are characterised by an awareness of the risk of a significant reduction of the American engagement in Europe. France has long advocated for handling this risk by increasing European strategic autonomy, and feels vindicated by recent developments. Consequently, Paris increasingly signals its preparedness and willingness to play a greater role in safeguarding Europe, together with its NATO allies. Barring radical changes in its domestic political situation, France can be expected to continue its efforts to strengthen French and European credibility on the Eastern Flank.

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<sup>92</sup> République française, National Strategic Review 2025, 2025, para. 161; République française, LOI n° 2023-703 du 1er août 2023 relative à la programmation militaire pour les années 2024 à 2030 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense (1), version in effect as of 16 January 2026.

<sup>93</sup> *The Economist*, “Jordan Bardella starts to lay out his plans,” 5 November 2025, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/11/05/jordan-bardella-starts-to-lay-out-his-plans>.

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France has often been seen as distant from the security concerns of Central and Eastern Europe, but this has changed with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. France has drastically increased its military presence along NATO's Eastern Flank, as demonstrated by its role as Framework Nation for the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Romania. This report examines the French leadership of FLF Romania, including its design, strengths, and challenges.

France has chosen a standby presence in Romania, which means that a multinational battle group is deployed in the country, while additional forces are held on readiness at home for possible reinforcement. Moreover, France has preferred leading a cohesive FLF, characterised by few contributing countries, but with high internal interoperability. France's experience in leading military operations abroad, and the strong executive powers of the French president are assets that, when combined, may facilitate FLF Romania's functionality. The main challenges are military mobility throughout the European continent, and the polarised political climate in Romania.

This report was prepared within the Northern European and Transatlantic Security Programme (NOTS) at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). The NOTS programme analyses security and defence policy developments in Western countries and organisations that influence Swedish security.