

DEFENSE ACCELERATOR – 2nd EDITION

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Startup Leiria & FI Group

2026/2027

This Call sets out, for the 2nd edition of the Defense Accelerator, the specific conditions for applications, eligibility, selection and participation provided for in the Programme Regulation. In the event of any conflict, the Regulation shall prevail.

1. Framework and objective

1. The Defense Accelerator is an acceleration programme jointly promoted by Startup Leiria and FI Group by EPSA, aimed at technology companies with solutions that may be applied to the Defense and/or Dual-Use sector.
2. The Programme aims to prepare companies for entry into and expansion within Defense value chains, strengthening their positioning, qualification, business development, access to funding, and engagement with industrial partners, public entities, investors and other relevant ecosystem players.
3. Participation in the Programme does not constitute a guarantee of funding, investment, procurement, award, conclusion of contracts, letters of intent, memoranda of understanding or any other commercial outcomes.

2. Target beneficiaries

1. Applications may be submitted by legally incorporated companies established in Portugal or in other EU Member States or NATO Allied countries, that develop products, services or technologies with potential application to Defense or Dual Use.
2. Eligible companies include those at different stages of development, including startups, scale-ups and established SMEs, provided they demonstrate technical, operational and management capacity consistent with the Programme's objectives.
3. Companies that have previously taken part in innovation, entrepreneurship or technology development initiatives — including pre-acceleration programmes, hackathons, innovation challenges or equivalent initiatives — may also apply, without prejudice to full compliance with the eligibility requirements and the evaluation process applicable to all applicants.

3. Eligibility conditions

1. Applications must cumulatively meet the following requirements:
 - a) the company must be legally incorporated;
 - b) it must present a technological solution with potential application to Defense and/or Dual Use;
 - c) it must demonstrate a minimum technology readiness level corresponding to TRL 4¹;
 - d) it must have a team with the capacity and availability to follow the acceleration journey;
 - e) it must provide true, complete and up-to-date information in the application process;
 - f) it must accept the Programme Regulation and the conditions of this Call.
2. Given the nature of the Defense market and the opportunities for which companies may be prepared, the Organisation may request information and evidence regarding the company's establishment, corporate structure, ownership and effective control (ownership and control).
3. For the purposes of the preceding paragraph, verification may include, inter alia, whether the company is subject, directly or indirectly, to control by third-country entities or countries that may limit or prevent its eligibility for Defense instruments, programmes or opportunities, and whether it

has effective decision-making autonomy over its management, assets, technology and intellectual property, under the terms applicable to the opportunity concerned.

4. Where necessary, the Organisation may request declarations, corporate organisation charts, identification of beneficial owners, information on qualifying holdings, control agreements or other elements reasonably required to verify these requirements.

¹ TRL (Technology Readiness Level) — Technology maturity scale from 1 to 9. For the purposes of this Programme, TRL 4 generally corresponds to a technology whose main components or concepts have already been validated in a laboratory environment or equivalent, demonstrating a functional proof of concept.

4. Technology areas

1. The Programme is open to technological solutions with relevant application to Defense and Dual Use. By way of indication and without limitation, solutions may fall within areas such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, autonomous and unmanned systems, sensors, communications, advanced materials, maritime, land, air and space technologies, energy, logistics, health, mobility and critical infrastructures.

2. Suitability for the Defense sector will be assessed in light of the potential use of the solution, the problem it addresses, and the company's ability to demonstrate a credible path to integration into relevant value chains.

5. Applications

1. Applications shall be submitted exclusively through the form made available by the Organisation at **[LINK/PLATFORM]**, between 26 October and 20 December 2026, by 23:59 (Lisbon time).

2. The application shall include, at least:

- a) identification of the company and of the team responsible for participation in the Programme;
- b) a description of the technological solution and of the problem it addresses;
- c) a reasoned indication of the technology readiness level (TRL);
- d) demonstration of applicability to Defense and/or Dual Use;
- e) information on market, customers, competition and scalability potential;
- f) relevant information on intellectual property and technological differentiation;
- g) a pitch deck or equivalent presentation;
- h) information on corporate structure and ownership and control, where requested.

3. Applications may be submitted in Portuguese or English. The Organisation may request translation or additional clarifications whenever necessary for proper evaluation.

4. Given the international nature of the Programme, sessions, communications or activities may take place in English. The working language will be adjusted to the composition of the cohort and to the entities involved at each stage.

5. Submission of an application will be subject to electronic confirmation of compliance with the eligibility conditions and does not, by itself, confer any right of admission to the Programme.

6. Evaluation and selection process

1. The selection process comprises the following stages:

- a) verification of admissibility and eligibility;
- b) assessment of the merits of the application;
- c) interview or request for clarifications, where considered necessary by the Organisation;
- d) final decision and communication to applicants.

2. Applications will be evaluated by a Selection Committee designated by the Organisation, which

may involve external specialists, partners or other entities with relevant expertise for the evaluation.

3. Evaluators are subject to duties of impartiality, confidentiality and declaration of conflicts of interest.

4. The final decision will be communicated individually to applicants. There is no right of appeal against the decision, without prejudice to the correction of any material errors.

7. Number of companies to be selected

1. Up to 20 companies are expected to be selected to join the initial phase of the Programme.

2. The actual number of selected companies may be lower than the maximum provided for if the applications received do not present sufficient quality or suitability for the Programme's objectives.

3. Progression to subsequent phases will be subject to a Gate Review process, under the terms of the Regulation and of the rules communicated to participating companies.

8. Structure and duration of the Programme

1. The Programme will last 14 weeks and will run in a hybrid format.

2. In simplified terms, the journey comprises a selection phase, the first acceleration phase "Defense Builder", an intermediate Gate Review, the second acceleration phase "Defense Scale", and culminates in the Defense Deal Day.

3. During Defense Builder, companies will be supported in structuring their Market Entry Dossier, including, according to each company's needs, aspects relating to certification, supply chains, business model, intellectual property and export controls.

4. The Gate Review is a formal intermediate evaluation milestone and will determine the progression of up to 10 companies to the Defense Scale phase.

5. The Defense Scale phase will focus on preparation for collaboration opportunities, procurement, public and private funding, qualification in value chains, and relevant legal and regulatory aspects, culminating in the Defense Deal Day.

6. Expected activities and outcomes will be adapted to each company's maturity and needs and do not constitute a guarantee of obtaining contracts, investment, funding, LoIs, MoUs or other commercial results.

9. Timeline

Application period	26 October to 20 December 2026, by 23:59.
Evaluation and selection	21 December 2026 to 8 January 2027.
Defense Builder	18 January to 28 February 2027.
Gate Review	1 to 12 March 2027.
Defense Scale	15 March to 27 April 2027.
Defense Deal Day	28 April 2027.

Note: The Organisation may adjust the timeline where necessary for the proper operation of the Programme, communicating such adjustments in due time to applicants or participants.

10. Conditions of participation

1. Participation in the Programme is free of charge for selected companies and does not involve any transfer of equity to the Organisation.

2. Selected companies undertake to ensure active participation, availability for sessions, compliance with milestones and delivery of the information required for monitoring and evaluation.
3. Serious or repeated breach of the obligations set out in the Regulation may result in exclusion from the Programme.

11. Clarifications

1. Requests for clarification regarding this Call shall be submitted by completing the form on the Programme webpage.

12. Final provisions

1. Submission of an application implies knowledge and acceptance of the Defense Accelerator – 2nd Edition Regulation and of this Call.
2. Situations not provided for in this Call shall be resolved by the Organisation under the terms of the Programme Regulation.