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THE STRATEGIC TECHNOLOGIES FOR EUROPE PLATFORM

Policy brief

Weblink	https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/index_en
Relevance	☐ National policy ☒ EU policy ☐ other: _____
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Short summary of the policy

The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP)1 is an initiative designed to enhance the EU's industrial competitiveness and reinforce European sovereignty by focusing on the development and manufacturing of critical technologies. STEP aims to bolster investments within three strategic sectors:

- Digital technologies and deep technology innovation,
- Clean and resource efficient technologies,
- Biotechnologies.

STEP also supports projects growing the skills necessary to develop those critical technologies. STEP introduces a new STEP Seal – an EU label for high quality projects granting STEP projects visibility and facilitating their access to other possible sources of funding.

STEP leverages and synergises resources from 11 existing EU funding programmes: the Digital Europe programme, the European Defence Fund, the EU4Health programme, Horizon Europe, the Innovation Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund+, Just Transitions Funds, Recovery and Resilience Facility, InvestEU.

The STEP Seal2 is a recognition given to projects that contribute to STEP objectives and meet the minimum quality criteria set by calls for proposals under the 5 EU funding programmes: Digital Europe Programme, European Defence Fund, EU4Health, Horizon Europe and the Innovation Fund. This Seal is awarded irrespective of whether the projects receive direct funding from these programmes. The Seal is a quality label and a facilitator for accessing EU funds, making it easier for projects to receive combined or cumulative funding from various EU budgetary instruments. For example, projects awarded the STEP Seal can receive support from cohesion policy funds (e.g., ERDF or ESF+) by Member States without undergoing additional selection processes3.

A Guidance Note provides practical support in implementing the STEP Regulation, making it easier to navigate its key provisions.

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[1] *REGULATION (EU) 2024/795 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 29 February 2024 establishing the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP) https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/strategic-technologies-europe-platform_en*

[2] *Sovereignty seal, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/strategic-technologies-europe-platform/sovereignty-seal_en*

[3] Provided these projects are aligned with the scope of ERDF or ESF+ and contribute to the programme objectives.

Main objectives of the policy

The main objectives of the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform:

- Supporting the development or manufacturing of critical technologies throughout the Union, or safeguarding and strengthening their respective value chains:
    - Supporting the development or manufacturing of critical technologies throughout the Union

The STEP Regulation focuses on advancing technologies from feasibility to commercial production, refining prototypes, ensuring scalability, and aligning with high standards for quality and interoperability. Manufacturing involves scaling production, implementing quality controls, and ensuring economic viability. Critical technologies must drive innovation, economic potential, or reduce the EU's strategic dependencies, strengthening competitiveness and autonomy.

    - Safeguarding and strengthening value chains

The STEP Regulation emphasizes strengthening the value chain for critical technologies to reduce the EU's strategic dependencies and support the internal market. The value chain includes final products, specific components and machinery, critical raw materials (as defined by the Critical Raw Materials Act4), and specialized services essential for developing or manufacturing these technologies. Critical raw materials like silicon, lithium, and rare earths are vital for producing semiconductors, batteries, and medical devices. Associated services, such as cleanroom operations, cloud computing, and clinical trial management, play a key role in enhancing efficiency and innovation. Only services directly tied to STEP projects are eligible for funding.

- Addressing shortages of labour and skills

The STEP Regulation addresses critical labour and skills shortages hindering the EU's leadership in developing and manufacturing critical technologies, especially for the green and digital transition. It promotes investments in sector-specific training, lifelong learning, and education to equip the workforce with the skills needed for digital innovation, clean technologies, and biotechnology. Regulation prioritizes inclusive opportunities for young and disadvantaged individuals, complementing the European Skills Agenda. It supports skills projects in areas like advanced battery technology, renewable energy systems, cybersecurity, and data analytics, with a focus on creating quality jobs and leveraging initiatives like the EU Pact for Skills and Net-Zero Industry Academies.

STEP conditions

To qualify as critical under the STEP framework, technology must meet at least one of the two conditions below:

1. Innovativeness - brings to the internal market an innovative, emerging, and cutting-edge element with significant economic potential.
    - Technology should exhibit at least two of the following three characteristics: innovative, emerging, or cutting-edge.
    - It must also demonstrate significant economic potential by having a substantial impact on development or manufacturing, addressing various Union markets, and generating positive spillover effects across Member States.

[4] Regulation (EU) 2024/1252 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 establishing a framework for ensuring a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and amending Regulations (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020

2. Strategic dependencies - contribute to reducing or preventing the strategic dependencies of the Union. Technology should meet several of the following factors:
    - Enhancing Union industrial and technological leadership,
    - Supporting critical infrastructures,
    - Increasing manufacturing capacity (only where a strategic dependency has been identified)
    - Strengthening security of supply
    - Promoting positive cross-border effects within the internal market.

Authorities in charge of the programmes falling within the scope of the STEP Regulation set specific criteria for the above conditions in their funding processes (e.g., calls for proposals) and accordingly assess compliance in the evaluation of the submitted projects.

A Guidance Note elaborates on certain provisions of the STEP Regulation to facilitate its implementation.

STEP National Contact Points

The STEP National Contact Points are designated officials in EU Member States responsible for overseeing and supporting the implementation of STEP at the national level. Their role includes:

- Promoting STEP to national stakeholders, including industry representatives
- Supporting the implementation of STEP in shared management programmes
- Providing guidance to potential applicants and beneficiaries of STEP funding opportunities
- Engaging bilaterally with the Commission STEP Task Force for questions that may arise during implementation

As the National Contact Points operate primarily at the national level, and the development of strategic technology industries varies across the EU, the services they offer may differ from country to country.

STEP NCP contacts: https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/managing-authorities_en#paragraph_308

Context and relation to DIGITAL EUROPE

The Digital Europe Programme and the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform are interconnected in their objectives to strengthen Europe's digital, technological, and innovation capabilities, but they differ in scope and focus.

The Digital Europe Programme is a foundational component of STEP, focusing on Europe's digital capabilities, while STEP encompasses a broader, more strategic vision for Europe's technological future by integrating digital, green, and industrial priorities.

What parts of the Policy are directly related to specific objectives (SO) in DEP

1. Digital Europe Programme:

- **Focus**: DEP is a funding programme specifically aimed at building the digital capacities of Europe. It emphasizes:
    - SO1: High-performance computing (HPC).
    - SO2: Cloud, Data and Artificial intelligence (AI).
    - SO3: Cybersecurity.
    - SO4: Advanced digital skills.

- SO5: Deployment: digital transformation of public services and businesses.
- SO6: Semiconductors.

- **Purpose**: To ensure that Europe is globally competitive in the digital domain and to accelerate the digital transformation across sectors.
- **Budget**: ~€ 8,1 billion (2021–2027).

2. Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform:

- **Focus**: STEP is a broader initiative, building on 11 existing EU programmes, to support the development of critical and strategic technologies. It aligns with the European Union's industrial and strategic autonomy goals.
- **Purpose**:
  - To support investments in technologies that are essential for digital and green transitions.
  - To enhance Europe's competitiveness and reduce reliance on third countries for critical technologies.
  - To complement and consolidate funding across various programmes like Horizon Europe, InvestEU, and DEP.
- **Budget**: STEP doesn't have its own dedicated budget; instead, it integrates funding and priorities from existing EU programmes.

Relationship Between DEP and STEP:

1. **Complementary Roles**:
   - DEP is a key funding instrument under STEP, focusing on digital technologies. STEP leverages DEP's investments in digital transformation as part of its broader strategy to strengthen Europe's technological sovereignty.
2. **Strategic Alignment**:
   - Both aim to ensure Europe's leadership in strategic and critical technologies, but STEP integrates DEP's digital focus into a more extensive framework that includes green technologies and industrial innovation.
3. **Funding Synergy**:
   - Projects funded under DEP, especially those aligned with AI, HPC, and cybersecurity, may also support STEP's goals. STEP acts as an umbrella platform to channel resources from DEP and other programmes like Horizon Europe and InvestEU, etc.
4. **Policy Framework**:
   - STEP reflects the EU's policy shift toward consolidating various initiatives to streamline funding, avoid duplication, and maximize impact. DEP's digital focus directly feeds into STEP's overarching goals.

Which activities in the current DEP Work Programme contribute to meeting the objectives of the policy

In DEP Work Programme 2021-2024 call documents referring to the award of the Seal:

DEP Specific Object	Call	Status
SO2: Cloud, data and artificial intelligence (DIGITAL-2024-AI-06)	Reference deployments of European cloud-edge services	Closed

SO2: Cloud, data and artificial intelligence (DIGITAL-2024-AI-06)	Making available a high performing open-source European foundation model for fine-tuning	Closed
SO4: Advanced Digital Skills (DIGITAL-2024-ADVANCED-DIGITAL-07)	Specialized Education Programmes in Key Capacity Areas	Closed

A number of topics in DEP Work Programme 2025-2027 are designated as being in the scope of the STEP. See the table below. Eligible proposals for those topics that exceed the evaluation thresholds will be awarded a STEP Seal and will be listed on the STEP portal[5].

Table 1: Topics in the 2025-2027 WP that are under scope of the STEP Seal

Area	Topics
AI/Cloud-to-edge	Reference deployments of European cloud-edge services
AI/Data for EU	Data Space for Health: Data ingestion capacities and data services for the European genomic data infrastructure
	Data Spaces for manufacturing, use cases and converging landing zones of EU and national initiatives
AI/GenAI and applications	Testing genAI4EU application at scale and under real-world condition
	Deployment of cutting-edge multi-modal AI-based solutions in cancer and other medical imaging
	Virtual Human Twins and Artificial Intelligence in healthcare: platform validation and uptake incubator
	Virtual worlds test beds
AI/European Digital Innovation Hubs	Completion of the Initial Network of the European Digital Innovation Hubs
	Consolidation of the Network of European Digital Innovation Hubs (AI EDIHs)
Advanced Digital Skills	Sectoral digital skills academies
	Excellence in higher education and training programmes in key digital areas and applied technologies

Please match any specific activity mentioned in the policy with concrete call topics from the current/upcoming DEP Work Programme

Digital Dialogue (informal) NCP Training other

Events

For finding related events, please check out the following online calenders: Shaping Europe's digital future, STEP

[5] *https://strategic-technologies.europa.eu/index_en*