

STEP (Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform) (Regional Programme 2021 2027 – RP Puglia ERDF ESF+ 2021-2027)

Overview

Regione Puglia, the regional government, has created a set of investment incentive schemes that offer generous funding for investors, making Puglia one of the best places to start, finance and expand a business in Europe.

STEP is one of the regional incentive schemes, operating on an open-window for applications basis, starting from 05/08/2025, which is managed by the regional finance agency **Puglia Sviluppo S.p.A.**, designated by Regione Puglia as the Intermediary Organism.

This information sheet provides information on the **STEP** incentive scheme, designed specifically for large enterprises, SMEs and innovative start-ups intending to carry out investment projects in Puglia, aimed at the development and manufacturing of "critical" technologies, as set out by Regulation (EU) No. 795/2024, as well as by the Communication from the Commission C/2024/3209 of 13 May 2024 (Guidance Note concerning certain provisions of Regulation (EU) 2024/795 establishing the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform).

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide initial guidance on this funding opportunity.

Please note that the information provided is purely indicative and may be subject to change. For full details on the STEP incentive scheme, please refer to the Public Notice:

- as published in the Official Bulletin of Regione Puglia (B.U.R.P.) n. 23, dated 23rd March 2026;
- available on the official website of Regione Puglia at:

<https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/competitivita-e-innovazione/-/avviso-pubblico-step-tecnologie-critiche-digitali-e-biotecnologie>

What are "critical" technologies

Regulation (EU) 2024/795 established the Strategic Technologies Platform for Europe (STEP) to support the development and manufacturing of critical and emerging strategic technologies, with the aim of strengthening industrial development and value chains in related industries across the EU.

The regional STEP incentive scheme stems from Regione Puglia's participation in the STEP platform, with the aim of further strengthening the regional industrial policy aimed at fostering the growth and consolidation of local industry, promoting ever-higher levels of innovation, efficiency and competitiveness. This scheme aims to increase the presence of knowledge-intensive industries across the region in sectors considered critical and strategic for regional competitiveness.

In particular, the STEP scheme supports the development and manufacturing of "critical" technologies, primarily in the following sectors:

- a) Digital technologies and deep tech innovation:
 - i. Digital technologies: tools, systems, and devices that can generate, create, store, or process data, through computer-based processes programmed to perform various functions.
 - ii. Deep tech innovation: innovations that have the potential to offer transformative solutions rooted in cutting-edge science, technology and engineering, across digital technologies, clean technologies, and biotechnologies.
- b) Biotech: technological applications that use biological systems, living organisms, or their byproducts, to create or modify products or processes for specific uses.

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- c) Clean Tech: clean and resource-efficient technologies, including net-zero emission technologies, that reduce or avoid environmental impact through significant improvements in energy efficiency, sustainable use of resources, or environmental protection activities.

Clean and resource-efficient technologies, including net-zero emission technologies (Clean Tech), may be included in integrated projects that also address at least one of the sectors referred to in subparagraphs (a) and (b).

To qualify as "critical", technologies should meet at least one of the following conditions:

- i. bring to the internal market an innovative emerging and cutting-edge element with significant economic potential;
- ii. contribute to reducing or preventing the strategic dependencies of the European Union.

Who can apply: beneficiaries

The following types of companies may apply for funding through the STEP incentive scheme, individually or in association, provided they are capable of making investments strictly related to the development of "critical" technologies:

- a) Large enterprises, as defined by the GBER – General Block Exemption Regulation - Appendix I of EU Regulation n. 651/2014, that have approved accounts for at least two previous financial years on the date of application;
- b) Medium enterprises, as defined by the GBER – General Block Exemption Regulation - Appendix I of EU Regulation n. 651/2014, that have approved accounts for at least two previous financial years on the date of application;
- c) Small and micro-enterprises, as defined by the GBER – General Block Exemption Regulation - Appendix I of EU Regulation n. 651/2014, with an average annual turnover of no less than €1,000,000.00 for the previous three years;
- d) Innovative start-ups and enterprises, individually, only in specific circumstances related to the level of technological innovation or maturity achieved or to be achieved by the investment project;
- e) Inactive enterprises, wholly controlled by a large or medium enterprise that has approved accounts for at least two previous financial years on the date of application, or by a small enterprise with an average annual turnover of no less than €1,000,000.00 for the previous three years;
- f) Active enterprises, wholly controlled by a large or medium enterprise that has approved accounts for at least two previous financial years on the date of application, or by a small enterprise with an average annual turnover of no less than €1,000,000.00 for the previous three years;
- g) Enterprises participating in the STEP investment project, presented by the proposing enterprise which assumes responsibility for the sole purpose of the technical and industrial coherence of the project, in possession of the requirements set out in one of the previous subparagraphs.

Eligible investment projects for STEP

The STEP funding scheme supports investment projects to be carried out by existing businesses already located in Puglia or new businesses to be located within the region, relating to the following activities:

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- i. industrial research and experimental development projects in the STEP sectors that have already achieved a TRL¹ no less than 5 and are capable of achieving a TRL of at least 8;
- ii. capital investments to be carried out following the completion of certifiable R&D activities in the STEP sectors, undertaken by the applicant;
- iii. capital investments, involving R&D activities in the STEP sectors, aimed at significantly improving the state of the art of the capital investments they are related to. The R&D activities should have already achieved a TRL of at least 5. This category of investments may also include the purchase of R&D results, under specific conditions set out in the Public Notice;
- iv. capital investments in line with the strategic objectives of the STEP Regulation, as they are explicitly connected to the manufacturing of critical technology.

STEP investment projects may be integrated with investments in:

- training programmes, aimed at consolidating and strengthening the competitiveness of the regional economy;
- business services and consulting, including the participation in trade fairs, only if they are an integral part of the investment cost of a STEP Program.

STEP investment projects should involve the development or manufacturing of critical technologies, as follows:

- a) **Technology development** aimed at progressing from the demonstration phase to commercial-scale production through:
 - the fine-tuning of prototypes and/or ensuring that technologies meet stringent performance and scalability standards;
 - activities aimed at achieving technological breakthroughs;
 - improving the technology based on market needs, including improving efficiency and reliability.
- b) **Manufacturing** which may involve:
 - the creation of first-of-a-kind production lines and facilities;
 - the expansion or repurposing of existing facilities;
 - the expansion of processes to meet demand and/or the implementation of quality control mechanisms to ensure the consistent production of high-quality products.

STEP investment projects must include the protection and strengthening of entire value chains with the aim of reducing supply issues and strategic dependencies within the internal market, as these are strictly functional and necessary for the development and manufacturing of critical technologies, related to the sectors listed in the **Annex 3 of the STEP Notice**:

a.1) technologies listed in Annex 3 A;

a.2) critical medicines listed in Annex 3 B;

¹ TRL: Technology readiness levels or level of technological maturity, as defined by the European Commission in the Horizon 2020 – Work Programme 2018-2020, referring to a 9-level scale to assess the level of technological maturity of a product or process, where level 1 is the lowest (basic principles) and level 9 is the most advanced (system proven in operational environment).

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a.3) critical raw materials listed in Annex 3 C;

a.4) specific components and machinery used primarily for the manufacturing of technologies indicated in a.1) or biotechnologies, including the critical medicines indicated in a.2);

a.5) specific critical services for the manufacturing of technologies and products, indicated in a.1) and a.2), as listed in Annex 3D.

Investment limits

The **STEP** scheme provides funding for investment projects with overall minimum eligible expenditure of **€3,000,000.00** for large enterprises and **€1,000,000.00** for SMEs and technological start-ups and innovative enterprises.

Investment limits for the STEP incentive scheme, in terms of maximum eligible expenditure and costs for capital investments, are fixed at:

- €110,000,000.00 for capital investments by large enterprises;
- €50,000,000.00 for capital investments by medium-sized enterprises;
- €40,000,000.00 for capital investments by small enterprises;
- €20,000,000.00 for capital investments by innovative start-ups.

In addition, maximum eligible expenditure and costs for investments in industrial research and experimental development should not exceed:

- €30,000,000.00 for large enterprises, which may be raised to €40,000,000.00 under specific conditions set out in the Public Notice;
- €20,000,000.00 for SMEs, technological start-ups and innovative enterprises.

Maximum eligible expenditure and costs for investments in training programmes should not exceed:

- €4,000,000.00 for large enterprises;
- €2,000,000.00 for SMEs, technological start-ups and innovative enterprises.

Costs for consulting and international business services cannot exceed €0.5 million; expenses for the participation in trade fairs cannot exceed €0.5 million. These types of expenses are eligible exclusively for SMEs.

Eligible expenditure

Eligible capital investment costs and expenditure refer primarily to:

- tangible assets, including: land purchase, construction works and similar, new machinery and production plant facilities and vehicles;
- intangible assets, including: software licenses or development, acquisition of operating licenses and patents, patented or unpatented technologies and know-how, new product or process technologies, used for the activities carried out in the business unit covered by the investment project;
- feasibility studies and planning costs relating to capital investments (exclusively for participating SMEs and start-ups).

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Eligible investment costs and expenditure for R&D refer primarily to:

- instruments and equipment to the extent and for the period necessary to carry out the R&D activities;
- contractual research, know-how and patents;
- general costs and operational costs, directly associated with the investment project for R&D.

Eligible costs related to training programmes for full-time employees of the enterprises involved in the STEP investment project.

In addition, exclusively for participating SMEs and start-ups, costs for consultancy services and the participation in trade fairs relating to the STEP investment project.

Levels of funding available

The **STEP** incentive scheme provides substantial levels of funding for eligible investment projects, both for large enterprises and participating SMEs.

The levels of funding available, within the limits indicated in the **STEP** public notice, are based on the type of investment as follows:

- **Capital investments**, involving overall eligible investments <€55,000,000.00:
 - o 45-50% for large enterprises;
 - o 55-60% for medium-sized enterprises;
 - o 65-70% for small enterprises;
- **Capital investments** by large enterprises involving overall eligible investments =/>€55,000,000.00: maximum 30%;
- Investments in eligible **industrial research***:
 - o 50% for large enterprises;
 - o 60% for medium-sized enterprises;
 - o 70% for small enterprises;
- Investments in eligible **experimental development***:
 - o 25% for large enterprises;
 - o 35% for medium-sized enterprises;
 - o 45% for small enterprises;
- Investments for **training initiatives**:
 - o 50-60% for large enterprises;
 - o 60-70% for medium-sized enterprises;
 - o 70% for small enterprises;
- Investments in **auxiliary services, business consultancy services** and the **participation in trade fairs**, exclusively for SMEs and start-ups: 50%.

**In certain conditions, additional funding of up to 15% is available for investments in R&D, for an overall maximum of 80%.*

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How to apply

Applications must be submitted exclusively online, in Italian, following the procedure in the dedicated section “**STEP project**”, through registration on the Smart platform:

<https://smart.sistema.regione.puglia.it>

On submitting an application, a protocol number and CUP (Unique Project Code) will be assigned to the application. The CUP must be quoted in all of the invoices and administrative documentation related to costs and expenditure for investments included in the STEP investment project.

The initial application, including a technical description of the investment project, the financial plan and the profiles of the enterprises involved in carrying out the investment project, requires online compilation of the templates and presentation of the supporting documents indicated in the STEP public notice and Smart platform.

Following assessment of the application by Puglia Sviluppo, Regione Puglia will formally communicate the assessment outcome to the proposing company and, for successful applications, invite the proposing company to present a final draft of the investment plan within 60 days of the application’s approval, using the Smart platform.

The final draft and supporting documentation will be evaluated by Puglia Sviluppo in order to determine eligible funding.

Regione Puglia will deliberate the overall funding assigned to the project and set out the terms for signing the STEP programme agreement with the beneficiaries.

Where to find the public notice

The **STEP** public notice and all of the official documentation regarding the **STEP** incentive scheme, including the templates for both the initial application procedure and the final draft proposal are available online at:

<https://www.regione.puglia.it/web/competitivita-e-innovazione/-/avviso-pubblico-step-tecnologie-critiche-digitali-e-biotecnologie>

Deadline for applications

There are **no fixed deadlines for proposals**, subject to the availability of funds.

For additional information

www.pugliasviluppo.eu - smart.sistema.regione.puglia.it - www.regione.puglia.it

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