

## **EARTO Comments on Call for Evidence on AGILE Programme**

16 March 2026

The EARTO Working Group on Security & Defence Research welcomes this Call for Evidence and submits the following comments and recommendations on the implementation of the AGILE Programme.

We recognise that AGILE is primarily aimed at exploring "*fresh ways of engaging with new defence entrants*" and "*enabling new defence players to emerge across the EU*". In this context, we wish to highlight that Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs) have been instrumental in partnering with new defence actors, supporting the integration of prior research results into products and services, and guiding new entrants through the specific requirements of the defence sector – including standards, accreditations, and export control.

We equally recognise the Programme's stated need to "*demonstrate the feasibility of a lower administrative burden and accelerated procedures for supported companies (start-ups, scale-ups and SMEs) which are currently disproportionately affected by the lengthy timelines of existing defence R&D programmes*". RTOs face these same administrative burdens and share a strong interest in streamlined processes.

However, we take issue with the proposed focus on providing "*support to single entities, particularly SMEs, including start-ups, and in some cases small mid-cap companies*." This approach risks overlooking the critical enabling role that RTOs can play in ensuring those very entities succeed.

RTOs – particularly those with established experience in Defence, Security and dual-use Research and Innovation – are uniquely positioned to support new defence entrants by:

- **Bridging civilian and defence ecosystems**, leveraging and adapting civilian technologies for defence purposes, enabling dual-use innovation, and enhancing synergies between research and industrial communities;
- **De-risking innovation** for new entrants, translating civilian breakthroughs and spinning them into battle-ready technology;
- **Translating defence needs and operational requirements into actionable, industry-ready innovation pathways**, helping new entrants align technical development with end-user needs, standards, and qualification requirements;
- **Providing essential capabilities** including research results, world-class infrastructure, and deep expertise in certification, accreditation, and cross-sectorial knowledge that new entrants simply cannot replicate alone.

Denmark offers a compelling precedent. In the Danish CenSec Challenges Programme<sup>1</sup>, SME-led innovation projects are structured so that 40% of the overall project budget must be allocated to knowledge institutions. This reflects a clear recognition that SMEs benefit from access to research expertise, testing capacity, and validation support when developing solutions for defence and security markets, which they often cannot mobilise alone. The EU-level AGILE Programme should draw on this experience.

The EARTO Working Group on Security & Defence Research therefore recommends the **explicit inclusion of RTOs in the AGILE Programme as mandatory participants**, in a supporting role to new defence entrants. In a programme designed to accelerate innovation cycles and reduce administrative burden, access to RTO testing, validation, and demonstration capacities is essential to ensure maturation into credible defence-relevant solutions. Excluding RTOs would risk undermining Europe's broader strategic objectives. Their inclusion is essential to ensuring that the continent does not forgo a critical contribution to its quest for **strategic autonomy, credible deterrence, and disruptive innovation** in a fast-changing and increasingly complex defence environment.

---

<sup>1</sup> CenSec, CenSec Challenges, available at: <https://censec.dk/censec-challenges-2/#>

EARTO WGSD experts remain at the disposal of the European Institutions to provide any further input as needed.

---

**RTOs - Research and Technology Organisations:** *From the lab to your everyday life. RTOs innovate to improve your health and well-being, your safety and security, your mobility and connectivity. RTOs' technologies cover all scientific fields. Their work ranges from basic research to new products and services' development. RTOs are non-profit organisations whose core mission is to produce, combine and bridge various types of knowledge, skills and infrastructures to deliver a range of research and development activities in collaboration with public and industrial partners of all sizes. These activities aim to result in technological and social innovations and system solutions that contribute to and mutually reinforce their economic, societal and policy impacts.*

**EARTO - European Association of Research and Technology Organisations:** *Founded in 1999, EARTO promotes RTOs and represents their interest in Europe. EARTO network counts over 350 RTOs in more than 32 countries. EARTO members represent 228,000 highly skilled researchers and engineers managing a wide range of technology infrastructures.*

**EARTO Working Group Security and Defence Research** *is composed of 80 EU Affairs Specialists working within our membership to elaborate and to voice consolidated positions of RTOs and address them to the EC and other bodies.*

<p><u>EARTO WG Security &amp; Defence Research Chair:</u>          Marcel van Berlo, TNO  <a href="mailto:marcel.vanberlo@tno.nl">marcel.vanberlo@tno.nl</a></p>	<p><u>EARTO Contact:</u> <a href="http://www.earto.eu">www.earto.eu</a></p>
--	---