

PRESS RELEASE

**NEXT FRONTIER AI BY SPRIND: TEN TEAMS
SELECTED TO TAKE ON THE WORLD'S LEADING
AI LABS***Leipzig, 17 July 2026*

Ten teams from five European countries can each secure up to €26.5 million in equity-free funding to build AI labs that can compete with the US and China over the coming decade.

SPRIND, the German Federal Agency for Breakthrough Innovation, today announced the ten finalists of its €125 million Next Frontier AI Challenge. Three teams come from Germany, two from the United Kingdom, two from Switzerland, two from France and one from Italy. They begin work this month.

The Challenge attracted applications from over 30 countries across Europe. After pitch days at the end of June, the teams were selected by an international jury of AI researchers, founders and frontier lab veterans: Neil Lawrence, DeepMind Professor of Machine Learning at the University of Cambridge; Philipp Herzig, CTO of SAP; Markus Wulfmeier, Chief Scientist at Nomagic; Pim de Witte, Co-founder of General Intuition; Søren Hauberg, Professor at the Technical University of Denmark; Allison Duettmann, CEO of the Foresight Institute; Yu-Ting Kuo, former Corporate VP at Microsoft; Daniel W. Dippold, CEO of EWOR; Andreas Köpf, co-author of PyTorch; and Johannes Otterbach, Investment Advisor AI & Quantum at SPRIND.

To qualify, teams had to present an approach that promises an improvement of at least one order of magnitude in at least one essential KPI, such as data efficiency, energy consumption or the ability to learn continuously. As a result all teams are looking beyond chasing the current generation of large language models. Selected teams are working on physical AI, from world models for robotics and embodied AI to algorithms that invent industrial hardware. Others are building AI for time series that operates directly on the live streams of measurements and signals produced by real-world systems, or pursuing continual learning with systems that adapt their world models in real time with every interaction. Further teams are automating scientific discovery itself and targeting a leap in the efficiency of large language models with a foundation model trained on the weights of other neural networks rather than on text or images. The finalists include spinouts from Oxford, ETH Zurich, the University of St. Gallen and the University of Tübingen, among others, with founders who previously built AI at Google DeepMind, OpenAI and Hugging Face, and have now chosen to do so for Europe.

SPRIND

"If we simply copy what the leading labs did five years ago, we end up exactly there: five years behind," says Jano Costard, Head of Challenges at SPRIND. "The interesting question is what the next paradigm looks like, and that question is still open. These ten teams each have a serious answer to it. Now they get the funding and support to test it at speed."

The announcement comes months after three European AI companies raised the largest early-stage rounds the continent has seen. AMI Labs in Paris closed a seed round of over one billion dollars, Ineffable Intelligence in London raised 1.1 billion dollars, and Recursive Superintelligence, also in London, emerged from stealth with 650 million dollars.

"Companies like AMI, Recursive, and Ineffable have shattered the myth that Europe can't raise billion dollar rounds in AI. But three bets aren't enough to win. Europe needs thirty of them, with European majorities driving their cap tables", says Dr Johannes Otterbach, co-initiator of the Challenge and Investment Advisor AI & Quantum at SPRIND. "The €125 million we're deploying is a launchpad, not the endgame. It gives ten exceptional teams the runway to prove their science while keeping the steering wheel firmly in their own hands."

STAGE 1 OF SPRIND COMPETITION UNTIL FEBRUARY 2027

The Challenge runs over 24 months in three stages. In the first stage, each of the ten teams receives up to €3 million. The jury then reviews progress and advances up to six teams to the second stage, with an additional €8 million each. Up to three teams reach the final stage and receive another €15.5 million each. All funding is equity-free, and teams are encouraged to attract private investment before, during and after the Challenge. At the end of the challenge, in autumn 2028, the three winning teams will be supported in raising one billion euros each from public and private investors.

Find more details about the finalists [here](#).

ABOUT SPRIND CHALLENGES

SPRIND Challenges are innovation competitions in which the participating teams receive quick and unbureaucratic financial support to develop solutions for the major social and technological challenges of our time. In SPRIND Challenges, the teams take part in a multistage competition. At the end of each stage, the teams' work is evaluated and only the best teams remain in the competition and receive further financial support to continue developing their idea.

ABOUT SPRIND

SPRIND is the German Federal Agency for Breakthrough Innovation. It is dedicated to supporting groundbreaking technologies and innovations that have the potential to fundamentally improve our lives and solve the major challenges of our time. SPRIND empowers people, ideas, and opportunities across Europe — partnering, financing, and building for impact.

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