Tekever has raised significantly less funding than some of the most-talked about defence techs in Europe — but is drawing in coveted contracts

Tekever CEO Ricardo Mendes. Photo: Tekever.

By the time Europe's defence tech boom had started to take hold in 2022, Portuguese startup Tekever was entering its third decade.

Founded in 2001, the company — which builds surveillance drones — flew largely under the radar of the continent's VC community, bootstrapping its way along until finally seeking external investment in 2022.

From there, its profile has risen significantly: in May this year, Tekever became Europe's latest unicorn, with the backing of the Nato Innovation Fund and Spotify-backer Ventura. It's secured contracts across the globe, from frontline work in Ukraine to the UK's Home Office, Brazil's navy and Colombia's military — deals likely to be coveted by peers with significantly deeper pockets.

Tekever is proud of its slow and steady rise.

"We could probably have gone faster if we had external investment earlier but, at the same time, you build things that are very solid, because you're building them over time," says Ricardo Mendes, Tekever's CEO.

2025 has seen the company pick up the tempo even more, signing a deal with the UK government to invest £400m into the country and promising to create thousands of jobs in the process.

Students in Lisbon

Back in 2001, Tekever's founders Mendes, Pedro Sinogas and Vítor Cristina were students at Lisbon's IST engineering school. The company started building software, with a broad remit, based on the founders' conviction that everything was about to be transformed by AI and autonomous systems.

That was pretty futuristic then, says Mendes. "You need to see the world from the lens of the year 2000 — there weren't any apps. We believed everything was going to be connected: cars, fridges, planes."

Tekever didn't turn to drones until 2007. In the years up until then, the team built everything from mobile banking systems to workflow tools for an electrical company. Each project was tailored to a specific customer because each needed to fund itself.

Mendes says there was "no alternative" but to bootstrap the company. "None of us had any money or rich dad or anything like that. Everything needed to pay for itself," he says.

Drones

Drones were a natural progression for Tekever, says Mendes, because they were ripe for disruption by software and autonomy. The company first approached the industry wanting to make software and partner with existing companies for the hardware.

That plan soon changed, after the team realised how slowly the hardware companies iterated.

"We designed the organisation to work at pace, to work with agility. That was extremely different from what we were seeing as we started plunging into the drone world, the aerospace world. It was the opposite," says Mendes.


Tekever's drone

Tekever's drones are used for surveillance — be it over battlefields, fisheries, disaster zones or borders. The company's first significant customer was the European Maritime Safety Agency, which still uses the tech for maritime surveillance. Shortly after, Tekever secured a deal with the UK Home Office to survey the Channel.

Enter VCs

In 2020, the team met Ventura, a London-based VC which would become its first investor — writing Tekever a $23m cheque in January 2022. Despite being profitable, Tekever had decided to raise external funding in order to build up a supplies of its product, allowing it to ship to customers more quickly.

Ventura has made some well-placed bets — backing Uber, Spotify and Alibaba — and brought some famous names into its fold: British politician Peter Mandelson was on Ventura's board until he stood down to become the UK's ambassador to the US earlier this year.

Mo El Husseiny, founder of Ventura, says Tekever's bootstrapped roots are part of what drew him to the company.

"When we meet frugal founders with business models that really have grown through reinvested profits from day one, we take them very seriously," he tells Sifted, adding he was impressed by the company's speed of iteration.

"By the time the primes are done with an NDA, [Tekever's] got a prototype being floated to the client," El Husseiny says.

Ukraine

Ventura's investment came before Tekever started working in Ukraine on defence applications — a path that would set it on the way to significantly greater recognition within Europe's VC and tech community.

"We started working in Ukraine very early on in the war," says Mendes. Tekever's drones are used for reconnaissance missions from the front line, to identify targets.

To work in Ukraine, the company needed to iterate on its existing product quickly, including working out how to run the drones in areas where GPS was blocked and work around jamming technologies designed to disable drones.

"Intense demand in my LinkedIn inbox"

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered soaring investment into European defence tech — and Tekever has ridden the wave. It secured a $74m Series B in 2024, bringing on board new investors like the Nato Innovation Fund and Baillie Gifford.

Those investors then invested a further, undisclosed sum earlier this year which gave Tekever its $1bn valuation. The round didn't take on any new investors, says El Husseiny, because the existing ones all wanted to double down, but that didn't stop inbound interest.

"I don't know how folks hear about these rounds, because it is supposed to be a confidential process, but there was intense demand in my LinkedIn inbox," he says.

Ben Balmforth, senior associate at the Nato Innovation Fund, says the fund liked that Tekever has paired its software expertise with a hardware focus.

"Tekever's vertically integrated model and expertise across both hardware and software results in a solution that is unmatched in the domains they currently operate in," he says. "Extensive in-the-field use on the Ukraine frontline allows for rapid product feedback and iteration."

The UK

Tekever has had a long-standing presence in the UK, a country which it's put a significant amount of its focus on this year. It first opened an office in the country in 2013, choosing it because of the extensive talent pool coming out of British universities, Mendes says.

In May, Tekever announced it plans to invest £400m into the UK as part of a programme called Overmatch, which aims to work out how the UK and NATO can effectively use AI applications for defence.

UK prime minister Keir Starmer meets Tekever CEO Ricardo Mendes

As part of that, Tekever has bought a small airport in west Wales to test its tech from — and Mendes says more infrastructure plans will be announced soon.

The UK and the rest of NATO can learn from the rapid iteration cycles happening on the frontline in Ukraine, says Mendes. “The Army, the Air Force and the Navy are all very clear on what needs to change,” he says, adding that there’s a need to cut the red tape around getting new defence tech approved, and to simplify procurement processes.

Mendes says the strategic nature of Tekever’s tech means it needs to think carefully about which countries it works with. “I don't think we would be able to do what we do if we were working for missions that we didn't believe in,” he says — though does not go in detail about which countries that excludes.

The competition

Tekever has raised significantly less funding than some of the most-talked about defence techs in the European ecosystem, notably Helsing, the Daniel Ek-backed defence company which has raised over $1.5bn.

“We come from very different origins and different cultures as companies,” says Mendes. Helsing is working on strike drones, which actively hit targets — something Mendes says Tekever has no plans to get into.

That said: “We're all trying to solve the same problem, which is how do governments and private entities embrace this new world of capabilities that AI-driven autonomy brings,” he says.

For all European companies, the biggest challenge comes from well outside the continent, Mendes says.

“It's a world dominated by companies coming from China and there's going to be tremendous competition in the coming decades,” he says. “Europe has an opportunity to do things in the right way and to create companies that can be leaders in this space from a global point of view.”