PREPARED: A corridor perspective

North Sea-Rhine-Mediterranean Corridor

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PREPARED is an ESPON study of transport bottlenecks and how planning and governance can be better coordinated across the North Sea-Rhine-Mediterranean Corridor.

In this interview, Dr. Reinert discusses what its findings mean for regional and local actors.

Study: ESPON PREPARED, final report (2026)

1. From your experience, what is the biggest governance challenge facing the NSRM Corridor today?

The main challenge is ensuring that major infrastructure investments are aligned with territorial needs across the corridor.

The NSRM is one of Europe's most strategic transport corridors, connecting ports, industrial regions, metropolitan areas and cross-border economic flows. Its performance is therefore essential for European competitiveness and resilience.

As highlighted by the PREPARED project, the NSRM corridor continues to face significant challenges, particularly in urban multimodal hubs, access to ports and terminals, cross-border rail sections and inland waterways which are increasingly affected by climate change.

Those bottlenecks are of particular importance for the members of the EGTC Rhine-Alpine, which gathers regions, metropolitan areas, urban nodes and ports. The EGTC promote enables cross border collaboration, also along the Rhine which is the more important inland waterway in Europe. This provides us with a practical understanding of where investment is most needed and how projects can generate the greatest territorial impact.

Removing the bottlenecks along the NSRM corridor requires sustained investment from different sources including the European Union and the Member States. At the same time, investment decisions need to benefit from territorial knowledge. Regional and local authorities understand where constraints occur, how transport interacts with spatial planning, and which operational and development priorities need to be considered.

Governance should therefore not be seen as an additional administrative layer. Its purpose is to improve how investments are prioritised, coordinated and implemented so that they deliver lasting benefits for the entire corridor and the territories it serves.

2. The PREPARED project highlights the importance of involving regional and local stakeholders more effectively. What does meaningful stakeholder involvement look like in practice, and how can it improve decision-making?

For our EGTC Rhine-Alpine, “meaningful involvement” means that participation in corridor governance should not be reduced to consulting stakeholders once decisions have already been taken. Instead, regional and local actors should contribute throughout the planning and implementation process.

Regional and local authorities, together with urban nodes, ports and other territorial stakeholders, can help identify operational challenges, multimodal needs, land-use constraints, implementation risks and investment priorities. This is precisely what PREPARED advocates through stronger representation of regional and local actors within corridor governance.

Such involvement can lead to better project prioritisation, stronger coordination between governance levels, greater consistency with regional planning and a more effective allocation of funding. A key PREPARED recommendation that supports this is the move towards a project-driven approach, bringing stakeholders together around concrete projects rather than institutional discussions.

The EGTC Rhine-Alpine and its members are ready to contribute to this approach by getting involved to the new thematic and territorial working groups, particularly on cross-border issues, and to help ensure that regional perspectives are effectively reflected in corridor planning and implementation.

3. Can you share an example where stronger coordination between different levels of governance led (or could have led) to a better outcome for the corridor or one of its regions?

One example is the development of cross-border railway connections along the Rhine-Alpine axis. Our collaborative work within our EGTC already highlighted several strategic bottlenecks, including Utrecht–Arnhem–Emmerich–Oberhausen, Venlo–Kaldenkirchen–Dülken, Basel–Karlsruhe and Milano–Chiasso. Although these sections are essential for the performance of the entire corridor, they are located far from national political and administrative centres, where investment priorities are largely determined.

As a result, projects that are of strategic importance for European connectivity can sometimes appear as regional priorities from a national perspective. Yet their benefits extend well beyond the border region itself: removing these bottlenecks increases rail capacity, improves reliability and strengthens connectivity along the entire Rhine-Alpine axis.

This is precisely where stronger territorial cooperation can make a difference. By giving regions and urban nodes a stronger role in corridor governance, they can bring first-hand knowledge of operational constraints while also demonstrating the wider European value of these investments. The objective is to ensure that national investment decisions are better informed by the corridor perspective. In this way, regional projects are recognised not only for their local importance but also for their contribution to the performance, resilience and competitiveness of the entire NSRM Corridor.