

"Innovation corridors: Why European collaboration can't wait"

TNO's Kristina Karanikolova calls for structural partnerships to secure Europe's competitive future

Collaboration in Europe isn't just nice to have, it's a necessity. That was the urgent message from Kristina Karanikolova, Innovation Policy Consultant and Researcher at TNO, in her speech on "Building European Corridors". Speaking at the Clusters Meet Regions event in Eindhoven, Karanikolova challenged her audience to rethink how and why we collaborate across borders - and why we're not doing enough of it today.

"If we do not collaborate, we are going to fall behind. The regions that do collaborate will succeed, while others will struggle."

Collaboration with purpose, not for its own sake

Karanikolova was clear from the start: collaboration cannot be a vague buzzword. It must be intentional, strategic, and rooted in a shared ambition. "Everybody likes to talk about new collaboration," she observed. "But when you ask why it's important, you're often met with silence. Collaboration for the sake of collaboration is going to fail."

Instead, she argued, we need to start by identifying the *why* - and that will vary depending on the actor involved. For a startup, it might mean expanding market access or connecting with new partners in another country. For a researcher, it could be about tapping into complementary expertise across Europe. And for a regional policymaker or cluster organization, it's about linking ecosystems to amplify their impact.

Challenges don't respect borders

Karanikolova framed innovation as Europe's answer to the cross-border challenges we face, whether global, like climate change, or surprisingly specific, like how to pick ripe strawberries more efficiently. "Innovation is bigger than the challenges," she said. "But we need to operationalize it. We need to make it a priority, not just talk about it."

Yet, European collaboration is still hampered by fragmentation, she warned. Most partnerships remain project-based and short-lived. Once the project ends, the relationships tend to dissolve, and all the effort must be repeated next time.

Enter the Innovation Corridors

The solution? What Karanikolova and her colleagues call *Innovation Corridors* : structured, long-term collaborations between entire regions, not just individual parties. These corridors aim to reduce the cost and friction of starting new projects from scratch every time. They also help build lasting trust and continuity. "Projects end, connections disappear, and then we have to start over: finding the right partners, building trust. That takes time and money. With corridors, we can lower development costs and speed up collaboration."

But she warned that such corridors don't build themselves. It takes work and choices. "No region can collaborate with 200 others. You have to choose. With whom do you

collaborate? How do you build a relationship and trust? How do you find the funding to keep it going?"

Clusters as gatekeepers of connection

In Karanikolova's vision, regional clusters and authorities - and similar organizations - are critical in managing and sustaining these corridors. They are the gatekeepers who can connect ecosystems across national boundaries by linking, for example, a university in Bulgaria with its counterpart in France, or helping SMEs from Estonia and the Netherlands join forces on a shared challenge. "Clusters are key actors. They are the bridge between regions. And these collaborations must be more than one-off projects. They should build towards something bigger."

She pointed to European programs that already stimulate collaboration as models that can be expanded.

Five building blocks for successful corridors

To build these corridors successfully, Karanikolova outlined five essential building blocks:

1. **Services and projects** – "These are the core of what we do in the corridor, how value is added and maintained."
2. **A shared mission** – "Collaboration without a clear goal will just lead to isolated projects."
3. **Mutual trust and cultural alignment** – "You can't shortcut it. Trust takes time, especially across cultures. I am originally from Bulgaria, where we are not as direct as in the Netherlands. So the first meetings can be a bit more difficult, but you have to build on that and each other's strengths."
4. **Organization and governance** – "You need to align on how we will work together and make decisions."
5. **Financial sustainability** – "We need to find out how we will ensure that we have the time and resources to build the collaboration. What happens when that one project ends? How do we continue?"

"Policymakers must enable this process, not just observe it."

A call to action

Karanikolova closed with a direct challenge to her audience, particularly to the clusters and regional policymakers in the room: "Take your role seriously. As a cluster, be the gatekeeper of connection. As a policymaker, enable these corridors to grow. Because Europe's success in innovation depends on what we do *together*."

In a Europe increasingly defined by fragmentation, her message was simple and urgent: build the bridges before the gaps become too wide to cross.

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