STREnGth_M
Strengthening EU
Road Transport R&I

Deliverable 3.3

Toolbox for multi-level alignment of sustainable RTR roadmaps

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
D	Deliverable
ERTRAC	European Road Transport Research Advisory Council
R&I	Research and Innovation
RTR	Road Transport Research
SRIA	Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda
WP	Work Package

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1 Introduction to the report

This report of the STREnGth_M project, officially titled 'Deliverable D3.3 – Toolbox for multi-level alignment of sustainable RTR roadmaps' introduces the RTR Roadmaps and Programme Alignment Navigator, i.e. a chatbot, which provides tailored recommendations on how to initiative alignment between RTR programmes and roadmaps at EU, national and regional levels.

1.1 Related STREnGTH_M work package and task

This report is part of the work carried out under WP3 of STREnGth_M, building on Task 3.1 (T3.1) and Deliverable 3.1 (D3.1), which provided a *'Visualization of the sustainable RTR landscape at EU Member States level'*. It also builds upon the work carried out in Task 3.2 (D 3.2) that generated an '*Interactive map of collaboration paths EU and sub-national programmes*". It is also informed by Task 1.3 '*Assess roadmapping methods at the European Road Transport Research Advisory Council, on Member State and on international level'*.

1.2 Objectives and scope of this report

The objective of this report is to analyse how a better alignment between European, national and regional research and innovation (R&I) funding programmes and roadmaps in the field of sustainable road transport research (RTR) can be achieved. The report especially focuses on the conditions and mechanisms that enable or hinder coordination across governance levels and funding instruments.

This analytical focus responds to a key challenge identified throughout the STREnGth_M project: Alignment of research and innovation funding programmes is widely recognised as beneficial for e.g. the efficient pooling or synergetic combination of resources, particularly in RTR where dedicated funding programmes exist not just in the context of the European partnerships '*Towards Zero-emission road transport'* (2Zero) and '*Connected, cooperative and automated mobility'* (CCAM), but also at the levels of European member states (see Task 3.1) and regions (Task 3.2), It often remains a vague concept in practice, though. Stakeholders face fragmented funding landscapes, differing policy objectives, misaligned timelines, and varying administrative logics. As a result, potential synergies are frequently underused, and alignment efforts depend heavily on individual experience rather than structured guidance. Addressing this gap requires a systematic understanding of alignment mechanisms that can be applied across multiple contexts.

The scope of the report therefore covers the identification and categorisation of concrete alignment mechanisms used in European, national and regional R&I programme governance. These mechanisms span financial, programmatic, regional and knowledge-related dimensions, such as co-financing models, coordinated programming, smart specialisation linkages, portfolio-level coordination, and policy feedback loops. The analysis draws on lessons learned and examples from RTR-related initiatives, European Partnerships, Joint Undertakings, cohesion policy instruments and interregional cooperation frameworks.

A central purpose of this report is to translate this analytical work into practical requirements for the development of a toolbox for multi-level alignment. The findings directly inform the design of a chatbot that supports stakeholders in navigating alignment options in the RTR programme domain. The analysis defines the guided interview questions that structure the chatbot's conversational logic, enabling users to identify relevant mechanisms based on their role, objectives, governance level and timing.

Through a structured set of questions and filters, the chatbot addresses common challenges that often stand in the way of alignment, such as mismatched funding cycles, unclear roles between governance levels, limited access to co-financing, or insufficient links between roadmaps and funding programmes. By linking these challenges to concrete mechanisms, the tool supports users in exploring practical solution pathways, for example, how to better coordinate programmes despite timing constraints, how to leverage complementary funding instruments, or how to create coherence between regional priorities and European research and innovation agendas or roadmaps.

1.3 Methodology

The work presented in this report followed an exploratory and qualitative approach, combining stakeholder input, desk research and iterative tool development. The objective was not only to identify supportive or hindering conditions for alignment, but to develop a toolbox for spatio-temporal alignment of roadmaps and RTR funding programmes.

As a starting point, an initial conceptual workshop was held with the project consortium and the greater RTR stakeholder community in the context of the STREnGth_M General Assembly in Brussels on 6 March 2025. This workshop focused on clarifying the purpose of multi-level alignment in sustainable road transport, identifying perceived benefits and barriers, and discussing expectations towards a practical toolbox. The discussion helped to frame alignment as a process shaped by governance structures, timing, funding logics and actor perspectives, and highlighted the need to move beyond purely descriptive programme comparisons.

Based on these insights, a targeted desk research phase was conducted. Prior work conducted in T3.1 (D 3.1) and T3.2 (D.3.2) of STREnGth_M, relevant policy documents, evaluation studies and guidance materials from EU, national and regional sources were reviewed, including e.g. ERA-LEARN project deliverables, European Court of Auditors reports, strategic research and innovation agendas of partnerships, ERTRAC roadmaps, and cohesion policy documentation. This research resulted in a structured list of alignment mechanisms that are already applied or discussed in practice in RTR and beyond.

In a next step, these mechanisms were grouped according to their main purpose, leading to four overarching dimensions: financial alignment, programme alignment, regional and interregional synergies, and knowledge and policy synergies. These dimensions formed the basis for a multi-stage filter logic reflecting typical user questions and framework conditions.

The mechanisms and filter logic were then translated into a conversational structure and implemented as a chatbot dataset. Finally, the chatbot was validated through a dedicated RTR stakeholder workshop, held online on 18 November 2025 and written feedback rounds, allowing users to test the logic and suggest refinements before finalisation.

2 Assessing the potentials of national and regional roadmaps and finding synergies

There are multiple possible starting points for supporting alignment between EU, national and regional RTR programmes and roadmaps. One approach would be to assess individual programs in terms of their thematic fit, timing, target groups or compatibility of funding conditions. However, such an approach is highly context-specific, multi-faceted and remains limited to individual instruments. Instead of focussing on what should be aligned, the emphasis of this task was therefore placed on how practical alignment can be achieved in general. The analyses thus centers on the principle mechanisms that enable relating national and regional RTR roadmaps and programmes with the strategic research and innovation agendas of ERTRAC, 2Zero, CCAM and other relevant RTR EU-programmes and partnerships.

By placing alignment mechanisms at the centre of the analysis, supportive and hindering framework conditions can be systematically explored. These include matching or contradicting objectives, complementing or misaligned roadmap and programme topics, coherent or successive funding cycles, as well as concrete opportunities and barriers in implementation. It can be shown which mechanisms enable alignment under specific framework conditions, where their limits lie, and for which purposes they are most effective, for example, how misaligned roadmap priorities can still be connected through coordinated programming or how successive funding periods can be bridged through upstream or downstream synergies.

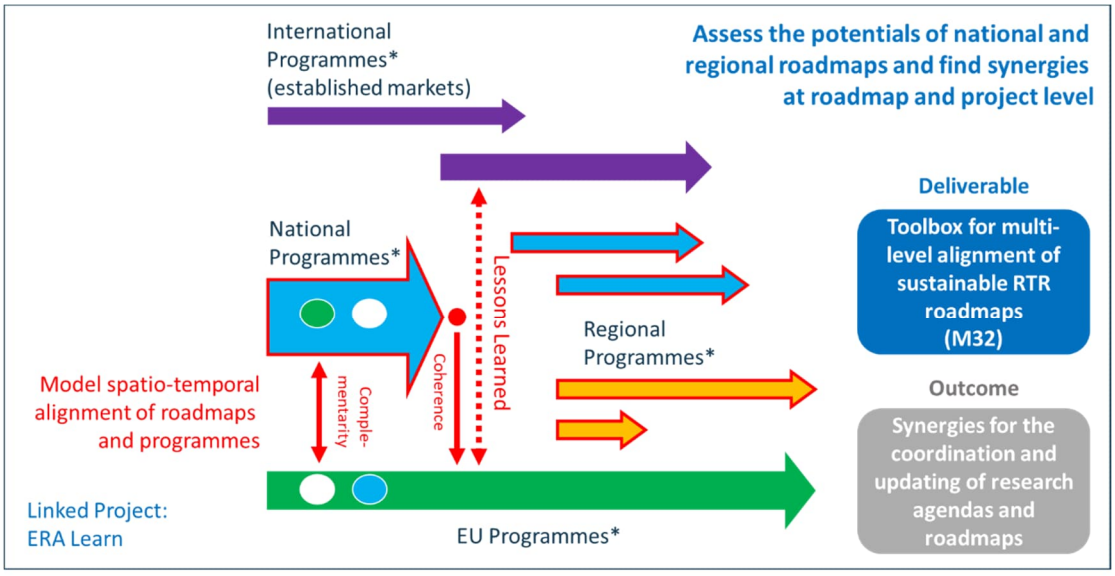

Figure 1: A Model for Spatio-Temporal Alignment of roadmaps and programmes

This perspective is also illustrated by the model of spatio-temporal alignment of roadmaps and programmes represented in figure 1 which shows how it creates the conditions for cooperation by actively linking these levels through targeted mechanisms. The first step is complementarity: identifying where gaps or blind spots at EU or national level can be addressed by measures at another level. Here targeted mechanisms serve to fill each other's strategic or operational gaps. Building on this, coherence focuses on the interaction between programmes

over time. It examines how outputs from national or regional programmes can be meaningfully taken up or be further developed in EU-level initiatives, while avoiding fragmentation and inefficient overlaps. Finally, alignment extends beyond Europe by integrating lessons learned from international and global cooperation. This ensures that generated knowledge is transferred to inform future roadmaps and programs. Based on this model, Task 3.3 developed STREnGth_M a toolbox for multi-level alignment of sustainable RTR programs and roadmaps.

At the conceptualization workshop on 6 March 2025, the discussion was guided by a set of core questions addressing the purpose of aligning EU, Member state and regional funding programmes in RTR, the supporting and limiting factors of alignment and expectations what a toolbox for multilevel alignment should deliver.

Regarding the purpose of alignment, participants agreed that alignment primarily serves to strengthen shared strategic objectives across governance levels, avoid duplication of research and innovation efforts, and use EU funding as a lever to mobilise national and regional resources for RTR funding. Alignment was also seen as a means to build R&I capacity that effectively contributes to EU-wide goals, increase the involvement of SMEs and regional clusters in European programmes, address regulatory challenges linked to innovation, and improve awareness and visibility of EU-funded activities.

Successful alignment was associated with clear complementarities between programmes, visible continuity across funding stages, and the ability to translate results from one level into follow-up actions at another. Participants highlighted reduced fragmentation, improved uptake of results, and sustained cooperation between actors as key signals that alignment is working.

A number of contextual factors were identified as both enablers and constraints. These include regional and national interests, the focus on regional capabilities (e.g. Smart Specialisation priorities), the degree to which EU strategies are mirrored at national or regional level, and the presence of intermediary organisations or associations actively supporting alignment. At the same time, local political priorities, budgetary definitions, programme rules and the timing of funding cycles were mentioned as limiting factors. Person-dependent alignment and informal networks were also recognised as influential, but fragile, drivers.

The toolbox to be developed was expected to support and facilitate RTR funding programme planning by showing concrete alignment options, highlighting synergetic potentials, and explaining structuring elements such as roadmaps. Participants also emphasised the importance of identifying barriers and opportunities, clarifying administrative aspects, and referring to concrete practice examples. The ability to remain up to date and accessible to different users was also seen as a requirement.

The workshop results clearly highlighted the multifaceted nature of alignment in RTR funding: while participants recognised substantial potential benefits of alignment, they also pointed to significant challenges in implementing them. These insights directly informed the chatbot's conceptual design which aims to break down the vague concept into early-stage guidance tailored to users' needs. It is designed to help users pre-identify potentially relevant mechanisms, thereby reducing complexity at an early stage, and to clearly link each mechanism to specific target groups and alignment objectives, addressing the perceived vagueness of the concept. The integration of best practice examples further provides tangible entry points and reflects empirical experience.

3 Design of the RTR Programme and Roadmap Alignment Navigator

The conceptual approach and the insights generated from the workshop, informed the design of the toolbox for multilevel alignment of sustainable RTR roadmaps and programs. The toolbox, namely the RTR Programme and Roadmap Alignment Navigator, is implemented as a chatbot, because this tool makes it possible to guide a user through a complex set of variables, considering their individual needs and objectives.

3.1 Identifying Mechanisms

As a first step in developing the chatbot, a set of relevant alignment mechanisms was systematically identified and structured. This list did not emerge from a single source, but from an iterative analysis combining insights from policy documents, evaluation reports, and practical experiences discussed throughout the STREnGth_M. project. Key inputs included European Commission guidance on synergies between Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy, reports by the European Court of Auditors, ERA-LEARN materials on programme coordination and joint calls, as well as partnership-level strategies (e.g. Joint Undertakings and SRIA-related documents). In parallel, the conceptual workshop and subsequent validation workshop with STREnGth_M consortium partners, European Commission representatives and RTR stakeholders of the STREnGth_M Multiplier Group on 18 November 2025 helped to refine the data set.

Based on this data collection, the identified alignment mechanisms were systematically assigned to primary objectives of alignment. This clustering reflects recurring patterns observed across policy documents. Four overarching dimensions emerged as particularly meaningful:

1. Financial alignment captures mechanisms that connect or combine RTR funding streams to increase leverage and feasibility.
2. Programme alignment addresses coordination at the level of RTR strategies, roadmaps, calls and implementation cycles to reduce fragmentation and duplication.
3. Regional and interregional synergies capture the role of territories, ecosystems and place-based capacities in anchoring and operationalising RTR alignment.
4. Knowledge and policy synergies reflect mechanisms that support learning, visibility, feedback loops and the diffusion of RTR results and experiences across levels.

These mechanisms allow the chatbot to guide users from abstract alignment ambitions towards concrete mechanisms, depending on whether their primary challenge relates to funding, programming, learning processes or territorial integration.

Financial Alignment	**Cumulative funding**: Combining different RTR funding sources (EU and national/regional).
	Seal of Excellence: EU-evaluated but unfunded projects can receive national or regional funding.

	ERDF / Structural Funds contributions: Use of Structural Funds as co-financing for EU partnerships.
	Co-funded / Joint calls: EU and national RTR budgets are pooled in joint calls.
	Interregional Innovation Investments (I3): Regions pool resources and align investments with EU priorities.
	Transfers: Up to 5% of cohesion funds redirected to other EU instruments (e.g. Horizon Europe).
	Combined funding: Strategic combination of multiple funding instruments for one initiative.
	Co-financing: Covering national or regional co-funding shares of EU projects (e.g. Interreg, I3, RIV).
	Pre-funding / proposal support: Supporting applicants in preparing and qualifying for EU or regional RTR programmes.
	Upstream funding: Support for early-stage research and innovation activities to prepare for larger-scale funding instruments.
	Downstream funding: Support for piloting, demonstration and market uptake to scale up RTR project results.
Programme Alignment	**Strategic planning**: Ex-ante alignment of SRIAs and multi-annual programmes with EU and national strategies.
	Coordinated programming: Joint definition of priorities, objectives and timelines.
	Coordinated calls: Separate budgets with thematically aligned RTR calls.
	Joint programming / partnerships: Shared research agendas between the EU and Member States.
	National programme committees: Participation in shaping national priorities linked to EU work programmes.
	Strategic planning: Ex-ante alignment of SRIAs and multi-annual programmes with EU and national strategies.
	Roadmaps: Aligning regional programmes and strategies ex-ante with EU, national and other regional agendas to set common priorities and avoid overlaps.

Regional and Interregional Synergies	**Regional Innovation Valleys**: Regions align their strategies with EU missions and partnerships.
	Smart Specialisation (RIS3): Regions link their innovation strategies to EU funding logic.
	Interreg / Territorial Cooperation: Cross-border, transnational and interregional synergies supported by EU co-financing.
	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs): Linking local mobility planning with EU and national transport priorities.
Knowledge and policy synergies	**Portfolio-level coordination**: Exchange on RTR project portfolios between EU, national and regional actors.
	Outreach and dissemination: Joint information days, platforms and visibility of results.
	Policy feedback loops: Feeding project results back into EU and national policy-making.
	Strategic framing: Embedding RTR projects in policy priorities and enhancing their visibility.

Table 1: Alignment Mechanisms and Objectives

3.2 Building a Conversation Tree

As a next step, the identified alignment mechanisms were embedded into a filtering system, which forms the conceptual backbone of the chatbot and directly informs its interview logic. Rather than presenting users with a flat list of mechanisms, the system structures the exploration of alignment along a sequence of guided filters, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The filtering process starts from the user perspective (e.g. European Partnership, national funding agency, regional authority or beneficiary), recognising that alignment challenges and decision spaces differ significantly depending on the actor involved. Based on this perspective, users are then guided to clarify their main aim of alignment, i.e. financial alignment, programme alignment, regional or interregional synergies, or knowledge and policy synergies.

If these filters remain too broad and are linked with too many relevant mechanisms, the chatbot introduces more specific guiding questions, for example regarding the stage at which alignment is sought (ex-ante planning, implementation, or uptake), or whether the focus lies on RTR programme-level instruments or system-level mechanisms. After these contextual dimensions are clarified the system narrows down a targeted selection of relevant alignment mechanisms, which are explicitly linked to the user's perspective and stated objectives. Users are then guided to a more detailed explanation of the selected mechanisms. Once the user selected a specific mechanism, the filtering process leads to concrete best practice examples, illustrating how similar mechanisms have been applied in practice.

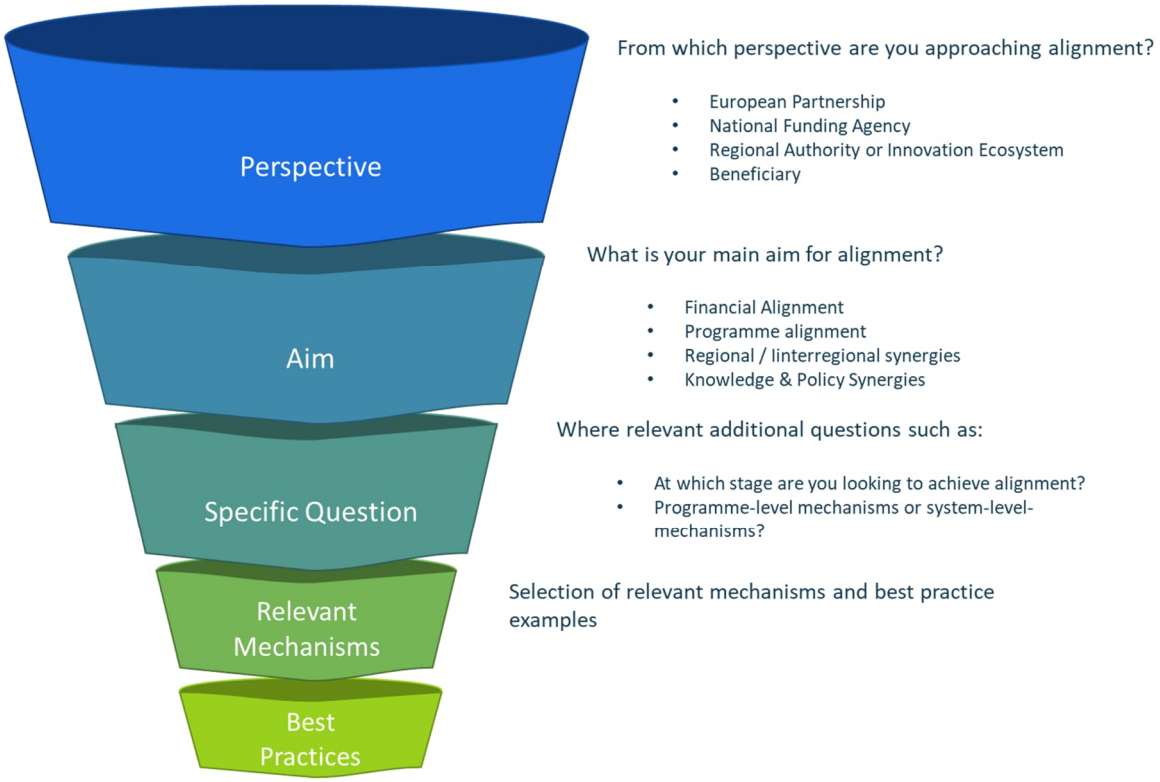

Figure 2: A multi-layer filter for a tailored identification of alignment mechanisms

Based on this filtering logic, the identified alignment mechanisms were systematically mapped onto the different filter layers. Each mechanism was assigned to specific perspectives, alignment aims and guiding questions, reflecting the conditions under which it is most relevant and applicable. This mapping resulted in a structured conversation tree, which constitutes the core logic of the chatbot. For each predefined question sequence, the system narrows down the set of applicable mechanisms and links them to corresponding explanations and examples.

Building on the conversation tree, a structured dataset was then created in a format compatible with the selected chatbot tool *Aitisi* developed in-house by VDI/VDE-IT. For this purpose, entry questions and follow-up questions were translated into a system of unique identifiers, allowing each question to be logically linked to specific alignment mechanisms, explanatory texts and examples. All questions were carefully formulated to reflect the underlying logic of the conversation tree and enriched with concise descriptions and source information, ensuring transparency and traceability of the content.

3.3 Validation

To validate the chatbot logic and content, a dedicated workshop was conducted with the STREnGth_M Multiplier Group on 18 November 2025. The session introduced the overall concept of the chatbot, explained its underlying filtering and conversation logic, and provided participants with hands-on time to test the tool using different queries.

Participants were invited to reflect on the chatbot based on three guiding questions:

1. whether the information provided was clear, consistent and coherent across different query paths;

2. whether mechanisms or topics closely related to their own area of expertise would require additions, refinements or corrections; and
3. whether the best practice examples presented were relevant for the road transport research (RTR) context, or if additional RTR-related examples could be suggested.

Beyond content validation, the discussion also addressed operational and maintenance-related aspects, including how updates and long-term content maintenance could be ensured. Upon request, the chatbot logic was further clarified, particularly regarding the sequencing of questions and the narrowing down of mechanisms. Feedback was also provided on the usability and adaptability of the standard *Aitisi* interface, especially in view of the chatbot's international and multi-level target audience. Finally, participants offered targeted comments on individual examples, highlighting cases where adjustments might be needed from a user perspective to better reflect practical alignment experiences.

Following the workshop, a written validation round was conducted via email. Consortium members were given the opportunity to further review the chatbot and provide additional comments or clarifications. The combined feedback from the workshop and the written consultation informed the final refinement of the chatbot logic, content, and presentation.

3.4 Finalisation of the Chatbot

Based on the feedback gathered during the validation workshop and the subsequent written consultation, the chatbot was finalised and refined accordingly. The tool is hosted by VDI/VDE-IT website and will be made available at the ERTRAC Webpage. At the same time, the long-term maintenance and updating of the chatbot content is still under discussion. This remains a key challenge, as the relevance of the tool depends on regular updates to reflect evolving policy developments at EU, national, and regional level.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

This work has demonstrated that alignment of RTR funding programmes and roadmaps cannot be effectively addressed through static comparisons of programmes or roadmaps alone. Instead, a *how-oriented approach* is required that focuses on the mechanisms through which alignment is implemented in practice.

Based on this approach, a structured set of alignment mechanisms was identified from policy documents, ERTRAC and partnership practices, and empirical examples. These mechanisms were then organised through a multi-layer filter logic reflecting key framing dimensions such as objectives of alignment, actor perspectives, funding and governance contexts, timing, and levels of intervention. This filter logic was implemented as a conversational decision tree and operationalised through a chatbot, translating conceptual insights into a practical, user-oriented tool.

The resulting chatbot enables tailored guidance for different user groups. It supports users in identifying alignment mechanisms that are relevant to their specific context, taking into account

diverse objectives (e.g. financial, programmatic, interregional or knowledge transfer) and perspectives (e.g. Partnerships, national, regional, beneficiary), and framework conditions such as programme timing, maturity of roadmaps, and the intended level of alignment. In this way, the tool provides individual recommendations to initiate alignment processes.

For future iterations and updates of the chatbot, it is essential to consider the following recommendations, as they can help enhance the tool's functionality and applicability. These aspects should be integrated both in the refinement of the chatbot's decision-making capabilities and in its ongoing use. The chatbot, being a dynamic tool, will benefit from regular updates to ensure its alignment with the evolving needs and challenges faced by its users. As such, incorporating feedback from users will be crucial for improving its recommendations and ensuring that it remains adaptable to diverse contexts and requirements:

- **Adopting a mechanism-based perspective on alignment**
  Alignment efforts should focus less on formal programme matching and more on identifying and activating suitable mechanisms that enable complementarity, coherence and learning across levels and at different stages of implementation.
- **Addressing alignment in different stages of funding programs and roadmaps**
  Alignment should be considered throughout the lifecycle of funding programmes and roadmaps. Many obstacles stem from differing timelines and governance cycles; addressing these early and revisiting alignment choices over time increases the chances of effective and workable coordination.
- **Addressing diversity of objectives and contexts**
  Alignment is not a one-size-fits-all exercise. Tools and processes should explicitly accommodate different actor roles and strategic priorities.
- **Embedding learning and feedback into alignment processes**
  Systematic use of lessons learned and best practice examples should be an integral part of alignment activities, supporting policy learning.
- **Prioritising mechanisms by complexity and accessibility**
  Alignment mechanisms differ significantly in their level of complexity. While some instruments, such as the transfer of ERDF resources to other EU programmes for example, depend on complex legal and institutional conditions, others are comparatively low-threshold, including networking activities or informal coordination formats. A gradual approach that starts with accessible mechanisms and progresses towards more complex instruments can therefore lower barriers to engagement and support more sustainable, long-term alignment processes.

Overall, the approach and tool developed in this work offer a practical and flexible basis for supporting multi-level alignment in RTR programmes and strategies. They show how complex coordination challenges can be translated into concrete steps and mechanisms, while still allowing actors to adapt their choices to changing framework conditions

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