

Talking points of the RCC Secretary General, Majlinda Bregu, at the Balkathon Final Event

3 October 2023, Sarajevo

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed minister, participants, partners, and friends,

Welcome to the grand finale of Balkathon, a journey that has united visionaries, doers, and dreamers from all corners of the Western Balkans.

Yesterday was a good day for regional cooperation. Against a very difficult backdrop in our region currently, we managed to start this week, month and season with an excellent news, which pleases me immensely. The roaming prices between our region and the EU started falling with leaves, just as we promised at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana last year, when 38 telecommunication operators from European Union and our region signed a Roaming Declaration enabling what we are witnessing today.

Using 1 gigabyte of data in roaming in the EU, which is equivalent to downloading a good quality video, used to cost, in some cases, astonishing more than 9.000 euro. And now that cost dropped by 99%, or to 17 euro per one gigabyte for regular as you go prices. In travel packages, prices are even much lower in the entire region, in some cases, even less than 2 euros.

We promised that we will work hard on this from the inception of this story and we did. Together with our partners, European Commission and telecommunication operators. This journey was everything but an easy one, yet marked with dedication, innovation, and a shared passion for making a positive impact. We've faced challenges head on, found solutions, and worked hand-in-hand to create something truly valuable.

Regardless of the difficulties, we wouldn't want it any other way. **Wins are made hard but therefore even sweeter.** And I hope the wins of today will be sweet as well for six of our finalists. **There are seventeen teams of finalists, some of them even teenagers, selected out of more than 60 team applications this year. Our seven-member expert jury will have a hard time selecting the best; hence I would like to thank them for accepting to do this tough job.** We also expect to have more applications in the future and we use this opportunity to encourage young people from the Western Balkans to follow Balkathon, an RCC trademark, and apply in the next edition.

Nevertheless, **Balkathon has been and will continue to develop our young people's entrepreneurial skills and we hope create new jobs, because there are almost 34% of young people unemployed in our region. According to our Balkan Barometer, 71% of youngsters would consider leaving and working abroad, mostly in the EU - 10 more than 2 years ago. So it is a matter of urgency to create more jobs and better jobs for them. More opportunities, and good and competitive ones.**

There has been 15 new Made in Western Balkans products produced through Balkathon that we launched in 2020, and we hope to add 6 more today, where we stand in the heart of innovation, and at the convergence of talents and ideas. As we gather here, we are not merely celebrating an event; we are celebrating the extraordinary power of smart and bright ideas. Balkathon is a testament to the belief that change is not just a concept but a creation waiting to be moulded by those who dare to test ideas and to envision smart tech solutions for the real world which can be applied to various domains.

Our region, with its rich history and diverse tapestry, has always thrived on the spirit of resilience and innovation. Today, that spirit has found a new vessel - a digital, interconnected world. A world where challenges are met with solutions, where knowledge is the ultimate currency, and where the seeds of progress are sown by individuals like you.

Balkathon is more than a competition; it's a canvas for your ideas, a laboratory for your creativity, and a launchpad for your dreams. In the face of the challenges that

surround us, it's your novelty that offers hope, your start-ups that breathe life into change, and your ideas that can redefine our day-to-day life.

It is a call for the public institutions and decision-makers to increase significantly the budgetary support to research and innovation which is currently on average **less than one percent of GDP.**

I'm thrilled to be here, and I have no doubt that the innovative solutions and concepts you will present in the coming hours will not only inspire us but also take us a step closer to the global trends.

Last but not least, I want to invite you all for a Western Balkans Digital Summit, an annual flagship event dealing with digital transformation in our region, the RCC is supporting since its inception in 2018. I am sure Minister Forto will tell you more about it, as Sarajevo is this year's host of the Summit, after Skopje, Belgrade, Tirana, Podgorica and Pristina.

Thank you for being part of this journey, and may the best innovations win.