

Speech by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

At the

Regional Butterfly Innovation Awards Ceremony

Sofia, 12 December 2023

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Gabriel, dear Mariya,
Minister Stoycheva, diplomatic representatives, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for coming to the ceremony of our second edition of the Butterfly Innovation Award.

Most of you have wondered why this event dedicated to innovation in WB is hosted in Sofia.

This is due to a combination of some undisputed facts.

First, Bulgaria is a staunch supporter of cooperation in South-Eastern Europe, thus one of the most active participants of Regional Cooperation Council.

Second, the Common Regional Market, alike EU Single Market model, where innovation agenda is included, was born three years ago at Sofia Summit.

Last but foremost, it is because of Mariya. The Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation is in force thanks to her contribution as EU Commissioner.

Dear Mariya, we have to tip our hat to you!

Thank you for your unwavering support to the Western Balkans. Your fingerprints are in key regional and successful digital and innovative agendas such as Roam Like at Home in Western Balkans that paved the way to the ongoing EU-WB roaming reduction, cybersecurity that RCC will facilitate from now on, and so on. This **Butterfly Innovation Award kick-started last year in the margins of the EU-WB Ministerial Meeting on research, innovation, education, and skills - hosted by you, at that time as EU Commissioner.**

Western Balkans have changed a lot in the last decades. The global competition on innovation and digital transformation is the new niche; unfortunately, WB innovation performance is below 70% of the EU's. The Global Innovation Index 2023 ranks our economies between 53rd and 84th place.

Only 1 in 3 businesses introduced innovative products or processes last year, and merely 1 in 10 received innovation support from their governments.

Investment in R&D remains quite low - less than 1% of the GDP while in EU the figure is 2.3%. To fulfil the promise of today's smart machines, policies need to be smart too. Ok. Where are my ladies at?

More and more young women have started considering entrepreneurship as an alternative career path as the opportunity for flexible working patterns and independence proves highly attractive.

The region is performing let's say well when it comes to STEM. The Share of Women in STEM occupations is above 40%, and this is another reason, very close to my heart, innovation is so important for our societies. It leverages women strengths.

Harnessing innovation will enable women to participate in the digital economy and gain access to digital services which is essential for economic empowerment. We just came to the end of the yearly campaign of 16 days of activism against the gender-based violence.

There is one gold star truth in this story: economically independent women can escape the cycle of violence.

Said that,

Let's turn our attention to the stars of today – the winners of the 2nd Regional Butterfly Innovation Awards.

This year, we received **87 remarkable entries across six categories**. Notably, the **Industry category led with nearly one-third of submissions, closely followed by the Green and Women categories**.

Moreover, we observed a remarkable diversity in ideas, spanning from FoodTech to circular economy concepts, from molecular modeling to EdTech innovations. Markedly, nearly half of all submissions centered around digital solutions, signaling a promising trajectory towards a digital transition.

Have things changed since last year?

On the bright side, despite challenges in our region's human resources, we see remarkable creativity and a drive to pioneer in various fields.

Similar to the first edition, we've witnessed many innovative ideas that need more support to thrive commercially.

Several of last year's awardees have enhanced their solutions and consider expanding into new markets. For instance, **WISE Additive**, an innovative solution from North Macedonia, is poised to double its production.

Additionally, another awardee - **the GuesTool app** is fully operational, providing comprehensive support to Montenegro's hospitality industry in 11 diverse languages.

To conclude,

Over the past three years, the Regional Cooperation Council has advocated for a regional innovation support mechanism, and the European Commission has taken action.

As part of the EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, **a regional pre-accelerator focusing on deep-tech will be launched soon**. We're delighted to see our efforts bearing fruit.

We also aim for a segment of this initiative **to support early-stage innovation teams beyond deep-tech**. We need to back both sophisticated and more everyday initiatives simultaneously.

The success of last year's widening programme designed for the WB stands as a testament to its effectiveness. Considering this achievement, the **European Commission might consider allocating a segment of the Plan's budget to reinforce dedicated programmes within Horizon Europe and Digital Europe**. This strategic move could significantly aid the region in closing the innovation gap more efficiently.

The RCC is **set to unveil an online platform aimed at connecting accomplished women in STEM with aspiring young professionals – a pivotal step within our Regional Network of Women in STEM**.

I am confident that we all can learn valuable lessons from the creative minds in this room. They are part of the solutions we need.

A big thank you to the evaluators from outside the Western Balkans who judged 84 proposals. We are grateful for their professionalism and fairness in this process.

To our winners, we hope the Butterfly Innovation Award supports you in navigating challenging markets.

To all the participants, without using too broad of a brush, we know, quantifying creativity is a hell of a job.

But I am sure the ones who are not among the winners this time already know that it is not an event that measures your success. It is your way of operating, doing and being.

Thank you.