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**Introductory remarks by the
RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu
at the
BALKATHON 3.0 FINALE
Pristina, 6 September 2022**

Welcome to the third (3rd) Balkathon.

I am happy we are starting our back to work season in Prishtina with one of the best trademarks of RCC. Balkathon is a celebration of curiosity, perseverance, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial drive of our Western Balkans bright minds.

Being true to our focus on the region's human capital development – we embarked on RCC's Balkathon trademark journey three years ago.

What was initially a Covid lockdown-born idea – transformed into a sizable regional flagship initiative that is eagerly anticipated by our youth and start-ups.

In three (3) years, we are proud to have an initiative that:

-taps into the considerable potential of ICT sector to boost the added value and exports of services across the region,

-addresses unemployment in a region in which labour force participation rates remain low and youth unemployment is at a staggering thirty-three (33) percent (%) - more than double the EU average,

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-creates further opportunities in a region in which thirty-nine (39) percent (%) of citizens are considering leaving for better opportunities abroad.

Balkathon's core DNA is innovation. No doubt innovation is an avenue for encouraging, developing and recognising unique digital solutions and products.

And we couldn't have chosen a more fitting location for today's ceremony than vibrant Prishtina. A city epitomising our youth's ingenuity, unbridled enthusiasm, agility and adaptability, and inspiring us to do more and better through 'collaborative innovation'. Kosovo* has the youngest population in Europe and this gives it a considerable advantage. A vast number of world-class talents, the highest rate of internet users in the region, ninety-three (93) percent (%), with a huge number of companies registered in the ICT sector, around one thousand (1000).

And that is becoming an economic asset for Kosovo*. Last year one hundred thirty (130) million services regarding ICT products were exported.

And luckily internet has no borders. You are not asked for an entry visa to access it.

However, there is the other side of the coin, one that has accompanied hand-in-hand the young generation: unemployment. In the Western Balkans thirty three percent of youth is unemployed. In Kosovo* this stands at nearly forty (40) percent (%) and the situation is more alarming among young girls, as nearly one (1) in two (2) girls is unemployed.

But girls and young women are the ones pushing the envelope.

One of the categories of this edition of Balkathon is renewable/sustainable energy, the main theme of the day. This category didn't attract many applications - only one fearless team of girls from Kosovo* dared to apply in this. Girls showed impressive leadership in this Balkathon – out of twelve (12) finalists, seven (7) team leaders are girls. You are doing great ÇIKA!

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

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While the number of applicants from Kosovo* that participated during these three (3) years in RCC flagship initiatives such as Balkathon, Futourismo, Women Award and Butterfly Innovation, is ninety (90).

In the past two (2) years close to two hundred and fifty (250) applicants from all over the region have “tasted Balkathon’s magic” and competed, pushed boundaries and thought laterally. Nine (9) solutions have already been developed and marketed and this number will soon grow to fifteen (15).

In this edition our applicants competed in five different categories, with thirty-two (32) short-listed teams developing their ideas within two-day top-notch mentorship programme. And today we are happy to be joined by twelve (12) Balkathon finalists coming from all WB economies to present their digital solutions.

Our collaboration with the Balkathon community doesn’t stop here. Long-term dedicated mentorship programme continues to support the winners in finalising their digital solutions and translating their ideas into new products and services. Today’s innovations are the seeds of progress in the years to come.

RCC regional cooperation initiatives like Balkathon and similar ones (Butterfly Award, Youth Lab, Regional Network of Women Entrepreneurs, etc.) are our contribution to boosting our human capital and supporting the WB region moving forward.

Western Balkan citizens do support us in this process! Seventy six (76) percent (%) of citizens have acknowledged the positive correlation between regional cooperation and better political, security and economic situation and sixty nine (69) percent (%) of respondents focus on what brings the region together rather than what drives it apart.

We chose Prishtina for this awarding Balkathon edition for yet another reason. In a couple of weeks, Prishtina will host the Western Balkans Digital Summit. And we take pride in leading one of the most important regional agendas.

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The digital solutions we are to hear about shortly have one ultimate objective – to put into service products that would be of use to citizens of the region, regardless whether they come from Sarajevo, Tirana or Podgorica.

Youth, ideas, digital, innovation, regional cooperation – that is what Balkathon is all about.

I am eager to hear more about digitally developed solutions and announce the best ones later on.

Good luck to all, shine on and thank you for helping us shape and further enrich our Balkathon flagship.

Let this be the image and positive narrative of our thriving region in this exceptionally uncertain outlook!