

Interview with Tanja Maras, Expert on Digital Connectivity at the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) for Western Balkan Business

One of the activities you are implementing is Balkathon. Could you tell us what it is all about?

In the attempt to try and contribute to the Western Balkans efforts to fight the pandemic, in June 2020 Regional Cooperation Council organised the first ever regional digital innovation competition Balkathon. Everything was online, since travel and in-person gatherings were not possible. The turnout was excellent, our region is full of great ideas and competent young people who can and want to make something new, valuable and lasting. We had 88 applications from all over the region and three were awarded 10,000 EUR each for the best innovative idea in smart tourism, digital learning platform and online payment solution. The winners used the financial support to full develop their digital solutions within the given timeframe. [Here you can see](#) Alban, Miron and Eris, representatives of winning teams giving a brief presentation of their projects <https://www.rcc.int/balkathon/>.

Guided by this positive experience and the fact that a long and difficult road of economic recovery from the pandemic is ahead of us, this year too we organised this competition, adding a little something to its title – Balkathon 2.0, as we too have learned some lessons and endeavoured to make it more substantial this year, attracting even more participants. The award fund has been increased from EU 30,000 to EUR 54,000 and there will be total of 6 awards. The registration is opened since 5 May and will be closed on 19 May. The competition is open to all citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo*¹, North Macedonia and Serbia. This year we have four available topics to choose from: smart cities, green cities, e-health and e-entrepreneur. The final event and award ceremony will be held on 28 May online as gatherings are still now allowed. We hope it will be held in-person next time.

Who is Balkathon intended for and how can apply?

As I have already said, all Western Balkan citizens can apply, but **only as teams** of maximum 7 members. The teams can be composed of qualified persons, ICT companies, students, interested individuals from NGOs, education institutions, start-up companies, etc.

The call is basically open to all teams with an idea and a solution in one of this year's topical areas.

¹ * 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.

You mentioned this year's four competition topics. Based on the applications received so far, could you tell if a topic is more of interest and why?

Yes, this year will have four topics. The applications are coming in every day and the registration is open until 19 May at 15:00hrs. In terms of the number of applications the difference among the topics is minor. This could be attributed to well defined topics of this year's competition. In the past period we have seen great need for different solutions and their development and we have also seen an increase in implementation of different solutions. Each of the topics is of substantial importance and impact on the Western Balkan economies, and given the almost same number of applications received so far we could say that all are equally interesting to the young people from the region. We cannot rule out the fact that these topics are interlinked and jointly touch upon different needs of citizens, from the use of e-services, environmental care – green cities, to merging all this into smart cities.

The registration process is still open and all this can change by the end of registration, after which we will have the exact data on the most current topic.

The competition includes mentoring programme. How often do young people have the opportunity to learn from experts from start-ups, digital hubs, science parks, etc. Who are this year's mentors?

Knowledge is today more accessible than ever thanks to the technological development. However, once you start working to develop your idea you are not quite sure where to begin and what type of expert support you need. Once you identify this, you can seek specific support, which is the first and most difficult step. It is because of this that in the application process we have introduced questions related to the description of required support and development phase of the proposed idea, so if participants are in doubt as to which mentor to choose and unable to do this, we will be able to propose mentors for them based on their inputs.

The candidates will have the opportunity to work with twenty mentors from the entire region for two days. We have qualified experts from different fields with experience in programming, business plan development, business planning, marketing, implementation of solutions from topical areas of the competition, etc. Mentors are from organisations providing support to development of entrepreneurship, technological parks, software companies, international organisation.

We have people with different knowledge and skills who will help the candidates upgrade and finalise their ideas.

In addition to monetary prizes, what will Balkathon participants take with them from the competition and what will be of use for their further career development?

As I have already mentioned **the award fund is EUR 54,000. There will be four awards of EUR 10,000 each** for best ideas in four topical areas and **two special awards of EUR 7,000 each** for the youngest team and for the team with most women as members.

In addition to monetary prizes, the participants will have an opportunity to work with mentors from the entire region who will help them finalise their ideas. Perhaps the most valuable thing is the opportunity for networking and meeting other young people from the region and representatives of organisations which support entrepreneurial development.

Even if a team does not win the competition it will have sound basis for further development of their idea and seeking new opportunities.

Since this is a regional competition and that both mentors and judges are people who have been for years working in organisations which support development of entrepreneurship, our idea is to guide the candidates towards local contacts which will provide them support for further development through their regular programmes and activities.

In brief, they will have the opportunity to learn something new, meet other creative people focused on entrepreneurship, and recognise opportunities for development of their competencies and idea.

What do Balkathon winners need to have?

The teams who will be given the opportunity to enter the competition (work with mentors) need to have ideas that are original, quality, feasible and sustainable in terms of their implementation. The aim of the competition is to get ideas with potential to be implemented in the entire Western Balkan region.

The teams need to demonstrate that they have qualifications and will to fully implement their ideas. As mentioned, in addition to awards, Balkathon 2.0 provides mentorship support to the teams to help them in their work and implementation of their idea.

As for the criteria for ideas, these are available in [Balkathon Guidelines](#) As was the case last year, we will have judges from all over the region who will evaluate the ideas/solutions based on the set criteria and make a final decision on winners.

In the end, I would like to call all interested parties to apply. We are looking forward to seeing new fresh and innovative ideas, and hope the participants will be satisfied with the organisation of the completion, and its results, and that Balkathon will help them implement their ideas, whether winning or not. Good luck to you all!