

1. Where did the *Balkathon* idea come from? Was Covid-19 an important catalyser in implementing this idea?

Encouraging innovative ideas, promoting digital solutions and creating room for the introduction of new ideas are the daily efforts on the part of RCC, its mindset not only in terms of thinking but also in terms of acting. It goes without saying that Covid-19 did provide an incentive, for instance when realizing how much more the private sector was using digital solutions. The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) found its inspiration for *Balkathon* in the efforts made by EU Member States and Western Balkan economies to adjust their way of life in light of the new reality, starting off with the printing of 3D masks, the creation of online teaching and learning platforms, the creation of applications that facilitate online shopping, etc.

The RCC expert team came up with this idea during one of our weekly staff meetings in which we have found that the discussion of new ideas and challenges or the identification of various needs comes naturally. At first, we did hesitate since this is not the natural RCC “territory” because the actors we interact with are government institutions in the Western Balkan (WB) economies. However, just like any other challenge, the RCC embarked upon this initiative in good faith and with the will to do something different, something we had not done before, with the engagement of the whole team assigned to the organization of this process, and with the conviction that this innovation would promote new ideas or would develop even more the ideas we already had.

Balkathon should not be seen as an activity, but rather as a process that promotes interaction, that encourages new ideas and innovation, an activity that fosters different ways of thinking outside the box, outside the national frameworks and limitations.

2. Is this the first competition of its kind? What were the challenges you faced and what surprised you the most?

In actual fact, this was the first competition of its kind and, as such, it did have its challenges. The decision to go ahead with the process was not easy one, in particular because other than the full dedication of RCC staff, it also required the engagement of the Western Balkan economies, partners in the private sector, universities, and so on. The balanced participation of all of the said economies and transparency were the starting point of all of the steps and decisions that we took *ad continuum*.

Special thanks to all Western Balkans, to our partners in public institutions for their immediate engagement and support provided in the organization of this process, whilst chambers of commerce, specialized organisations in each and every economy, universities, media outlets, etc., were amongst the main actors in our joint success.

The challenges were numerous, a few at times unsurmountable, but at the end of the day they brought about a final activity through which citizens of the region spoke in a digital fashion. In terms of past challenges, let me mention a few, the most important ones, those that produced hours and hours of discussion and required that brave and courageous decisions were taken.

- *Selection of the appropriate categories* – digital tourism, teaching through digital platforms and online payments were three of the selected categories. But why were these categories selected as opposed to others?

Because Covid-19 hit tourism considerably hard, causing complete stagnation in this sector in the first half of 2020. We also learnt from the 2020 Balkan Barometer that only 30% of the WB residents use the internet to learn, while the pandemic forced millions of people to replace regular physical classes with online ones. Online payments became a real challenge, too. In some cases, this was about purchasing basic daily foodstuffs. As a result, there were many applications – digital tourism (39), digital online teaching platforms (37) and online payments (12).

- *Extensive participation/applications by all economies* – given the nature of our organization and the type of actors we interact with the challenge to draw the attention of the Western Balkan applicants was enormous.

In order to promote *Balkathon*, we established a dedicated website, and then used an extensive social media information campaign, followed by direct interviews in the visual and print media outlets. We also made use of direct electronic communications and “the word of mouth” method to ensure that the information would be as widely disseminated as possible. The extensive participation from all Western Balkan economies still came as a lovely surprise: 23 from Albania, 21 from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 16 from Kosovo, 9 from Montenegro, 10 from North Macedonia and 9 from Serbia. In other words, there was a total of 88 applicants, the vast majority of whom were young people.

- *Selection of member of the jury* – far from the bureaucratic models but focusing on the technical know-how rather than the political or administrative operators; leaders from the private sector and academia.

The decision on the type of jury was not an easy one because we wanted a jury free from influences, a jury that was professional and open-minded. In this respect, the assistance of the institutions dealing with digitalization in each of the WB economies was a decisive factor. Their quick and rather professional response was the key to the success we achieved in the composition of the jury. Each economy’s proposal for jury members had to be done in line with certain rules and principles that had already been laid out by the RCC. Therefore, every Western Balkan economy recommended a jury member, who was in turn joined by an RCC representative, the RCC’s IT expert. It is quite obvious that *post festum* this sounds like a rather straightforward task though I must admit that establishing a professional jury was far from an easy task or a simple challenge to deal with.

- *Method of evaluation* – a challenge that required a smart and transparent solution free of influences.

The simultaneous evaluation undertaken by each jury member whilst the activity was taking place, in a wholly automatic manner and without the possibility of outside influences seemed impossible at first, but in a digital marathon like *Balkathon* nothing is impossible. The IT

experts established a simple evaluation model based on “google sheets”, easily accessible by the jury members, in other words simple yet safe.

3. What’s in store for the 3 finalists/winning projects and their creators?

The winners of the first regional competition will be RCC partners until the full development of their ideas and the wider application of their solutions in the WB economies. Each of the competition winners must develop their ideas further and facilitate its easy and straightforward application in the whole region.

Each winner has signed a statement with the RCC to continue with the further development of the proposed solutions. In order to facilitate a sustainable process for the development of ideas, the RCC plans to carry out periodic meetings with the winners until the project is finalized. The final deadline is December 2020.

4. Will *Balkathon* become a tradition? Will it turn into an annual competition?

When we first began this initiative, we considered it to be a direct response to the Covid-19 situation without thinking of turning it into a tradition. However, in our own thinking and mindset *Balkathon* is already a tradition – so much so that we were already thinking about the process of the following year the day after the final activity.

There is an idea of turning *Balkathon* into an annual tradition that is organized by the RCC as part of the Digital Summit. Its activities will, of course, be carried out in complete partnership with the economy that will organize the Digital Summit whilst enjoying the support of the other WB economies. The categories and disciplines that will be part of *Balkathon 2021* shall be determined jointly by all participants and shall reflect the new needs and challenges arising from digitalization.

The winners of the previous edition of the competition will have the possibility to present their entire journey from the beginning of their venture to its complete implementation by way of solutions, thus creating a new chain of experiences, networks and young creators from the Western Balkans, therefore turning challenging dreams or ideas into reality.

This decision came as a result of the tremendous interest shown by the WB economies, and the ambition and willingness demonstrated by each participant in the first *Balkathon*.

5- What would some other regional projects that include young people be?

I know that for some this might seem like an easy job, but this year we embraced the most difficult challenge of all for us: to break the taboo of an organization that works primarily with institutions, and an organization whose results are not clearly visible. Young people are part of this challenge. RCC employed 14 young men and women in a single year.

For the first time ever, we started an Internship Programme for students coming from different economies – I am convinced that both parties will benefit from this cooperation. We also have a project with the UNPD to support the participation of girls and women in STEM, which stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. In addition, we are preparing the regional map of young men and women and policies that each economy needs to adjust in time in order to provide access to young men and women to the labour market, whilst examining the new needs that the market has today. *Balkathon* was one of these very ideas. Don't push us too much though as I do not want to share all the news with you in a single day :) Just follow us!

And last but not least, Youth Lab, the newest project that is funded by the European Union and implemented by the RCC, will support young men and women in important issues such as employment, entrepreneurship, education, etc.