

Check Against Delivery



SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL of the REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL (RCC)

Regional Butterfly Innovation Award

Tirana, 27 June 2022

Dear Commissioner Gabriel,

Dear Ministers and Mayor Veliaj,

And most importantly, our dear winners of the Butterfly Innovation Awards,

We had a long journey until this very last moment – Awarding Ceremony, and we could hardly fit all of you tonight in this room. That is a very good sign. It proves that innovation can bring together many bright and courageous minds – KUDOS TO YOU.

The present Ceremony is a highlight of a longer process that was officially launched last December during the Butterfly Innovation & Business Forum.

“*What is now proved was once only imagination*”- this Blake’s quote fits perfectly the **154 ideas** in six diverse categories applied in the competition - largely exceeded our boldest expectations. Almost half of the teams were led by women or had most women team members.

I would like to thank our jury members and their partnering institutions – European Institute of Innovation and Technology, COST Association and Enterprise Europe Network for making this process easier and transparent - coming up with 6 winners.

If I have to list or reflect on this journey of 1st Butterfly Innovation Awards I would say:

1. We do have a significant creative pool in the region. It must not be ignored and should be supported by all means.

The six winners in this room are the tip of an iceberg we will see tonight. Our region has never been short of innovators - such as Tesla, but we need to explore and support them.

2. We also learned that many innovative solutions are far from being commercially viable. Many entries were insufficiently developed and lacked robust business models - it shows that ***being innovative is simply not enough.***

Young innovators need advanced skills and the right knowledge to turn their ideas into successful and profitable businesses for them and the society.

We should invest efforts to proactively identify great innovative teams and find ways to encourage their growth. When doing this, we should steal from innovative minds who think outside the box.

3. Finally, as a rule of thumb, technology and research is advanced in the countries that have sophisticated instruments to support innovation ecosystems. We need to keep young innovative people in the region, creating potential to develop their creativity here.

The best way to predict the future is to create it. A regional innovation support mechanism would bring a change to the development of region's innovation ecosystem. That's what we have tabled two years ago to the economies of the WB.

Such an initiative would focus on supporting early-stage innovation teams to develop their potential through soft skills and small funds.

Last week we launched the Balkan Barometer 2022. Regretably, the innovation activity in the last year did not increased compared to the previous year.

This is not surprising. ***Only 1 in 10 (11%) businesses in WB received assistance from their governments*** to experiment with innovation, while ***a mere 6% received assistance from the EU or other donors.***

A good news is that we do have very good friends of WB in EU such as Commissioner Mariya Gabriel that has always pushed to close the gap between EU-WB. Recently, EU has increased significantly their innovation assistance for the WB. It would be ideal if our governments could match additional funds to create true waves around the region.

If we join forces to plant the smart seeds and nourish their growth around the region, our regional potential will grow.

As RCC, we have started slowly to support Research and Innovation in the region.

We hope the Butterfly Innovation Award will help the winners take their solutions to another level and will shine a light on the regional innovation community and its undiscovered potential.

Until next time, congratulations to the winners!