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Speech by RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu

at the

Balkathon 5.0 Awarding Ceremony

3 October 2024, Tirana

Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

It's an absolute pleasure to welcome you all to the award ceremony of Balkathon, now celebrating its 5th year.

Tonight, we are here to celebrate more than just achievements; we are here to honour the spirit of innovation and the remarkable potential of young creators across the Western Balkans.

5 years ago, during a global uncertainty of the Covid pandemic, when the world was adjusting to a new reality, we asked ourselves:

What can we create?

What problems can we solve using technology? What ideas can disrupt the usual "cog in the wheel" roles and dive the region into problem-solving with freedom and creativity?

How to ensure cooperation will not be abandoned?

And we came with the idea of a hackathon called Balkathon-more than just a space for innovation, because to us it is a platform of cooperation.

Bringing people with different skills and perspectives to the same place, encouraging collaboration that goes beyond boundaries.

In 5 years what began as a response to a crisis has since evolved into a platform for transformation. Nearly 400 applicants have participated in 23 diverse topic, supported by 72 mentors and evaluated by almost 60 experts in digitalisation and ICT.

To date, we have awarded 22 ground-breaking solutions through Balkathon. Let me highlight a few of these remarkable ideas:

- Kosova Digital Association created an eHealth Clinic platform, enabling patients to book online consultations with specialists, saving time, money, and bridging distances;

- Sensoryc.AI from Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by a determined woman, supports the treatment of Sensory Processing Disorders in children by offering personalised recommendations for caregivers and parents;

- Frapple from Serbia developed an app that uses barcode scanning to inform consumers of potential health or allergy risks in everyday food products;
- During the first edition of Balkathon, Kallz Training Center from Albania developed a platform that connects children and teachers across countries, focusing on technology and foreign languages;
- We've also seen incredible transport solutions like POKUPI in Montenegro, an on-demand taxi service, and BeBeep which makes long-distance trips easier and more affordable through cost-sharing.

These are just a few examples of the creativity and drive that define Balkathon, with solutions ranging from green tech to business growth platforms.

According to the Balkan Barometer, over 80% of our citizens recognise the importance of digital skills, only 10% have used AI tools in the past year. This shows how much potential there is still to unlock.

This year, we had some 80 teams that applied for Balkathon, and today, 16 of them presented their ideas to our distinguished jury.
Given that we at RCC are creative enough there are some novelties to this edition
1. We now have a **special category for high school students**, inspired by last year's youngest winner, EcoPoint, whose environmental solution is making a real difference in schools. Tonight, we're lucky to have Ena from EcoPoint with us, while her teammate Nikola is preparing for the World Robotics Competition.
2. The quality of this year's proposals has been so impressive that, for the first time, we will be awarding 3 Special Awards to our young innovators.

3. Additionally, we'll be awarding 9 solutions tonight, instead of the usual six, reflecting the incredible ideas we've seen this year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Digitalisation is not just about technology—it's about empowerment.

To our finalists, tonight marks an important milestone in your journey, but it is far from the end. You have the power to make a difference, not just in your own lives, but in the lives of those around you.
This is the time to dream big and take risks. Don't be afraid to start small—many of the world's greatest tech companies began in someone's garage or with just a few lines of code.

No doubt, technology in all its forms is neutral until we decide its purpose. We are the ones who can either harness its power for good or misuse it.
Let's be mindful and responsible ensuring that AI and other advanced technologies are used to uplift, innovate and solve problems, not to create new ones.

Thank you.