

**Opening speech by Elda Kalaja, Head of RCC's Office of the Secretary General
at the
3rd Regional Butterfly Innovation Award Ceremony
26 November 2024, Podgorica**

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Ivanovic,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Distinguished Guests,

Welcome to the third edition of Butterfly Innovation Award ceremony. After Tirana and Sofia, here we are in Podgorica.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Deputy Prime Minister for his support for the RCC and the Western Balkans. We seem to be in the right place tonight.

Montenegro has been at the forefront of fostering a vibrant innovation ecosystem. The recently inaugurated Science and Technology Park stands as a testament to this progress, promoting collaboration among researchers, entrepreneurs, and businesses.

Five years ago, Secretary General Bregu, who unfortunately could not join us tonight, made it a priority to champion innovation and young talents—researchers, innovators, and startups. This vision led to the creation of initiatives like Balkathon and Butterfly Innovation Forum. Over these years, more than 40 innovative ideas have received support.

So let's turn to the stars of tonight – the winners of the 3rd Regional Butterfly Innovation Award. We are here tonight to recognise the exceptional achievements and honour the brilliance that defines our region.

The Butterfly Innovation Award was created to spotlight our region's creativity and promote innovation across the Western Balkans. For the third time in a row, we seem to be on the right track.

Similar to the last year, we received 66 team and 21 individual entries, 87 entries in total across six categories.

The results are inspiring: women led 52% of individual entries and comprised 45% of all team members. For RCC, this is a milestone worth celebrating.

Another remarkable highlight is that the categories receiving the most applications—Industry and Green Innovation—account for two-thirds of submissions, reflecting the critical priorities of both regional and global needs.

On behalf of RCC I would like to thank all the applicants for their innovative solutions, spanning from the revitalisation of traditional industries to the deployment of AI in key sectors.

Dear guests,

The Butterfly competition underscores the incredible potential of our human capital to drive progress, even amid challenges. We were deeply impressed by the quality and originality of this year's submissions.

However, while progress has been made, challenges remain. As Yuval Noah Harari aptly reminds us: *"You can't allow tradition to get in the way of innovation."*

Though the region is gradually aligning with EU standards in research and innovation, progress is slow. For example, participation in Horizon Europe has grown modestly—from €30 million annually in 2020 to €36.7 million.

Still, our innovation performance lags behind the EU average by over 30%, and regional investment in research and innovation remains at just 0.45% of GDP—far below the EU's benchmark of 2.2%.

Even within the business community, innovation adoption is limited. According to RCC's 2024 Balkan Barometer, only one-third of businesses have embraced innovation, with just one in ten receiving government support.

Last month, Western Balkans leaders endorsed the Common Regional Market Action Plan, prioritising innovation through initiatives like deeper academic-industry partnerships, support for smart specialisation strategies, and the growth of Digital Innovation Hubs.

However, innovation cannot thrive on action plans alone—it requires nurturing and enabling potential. In our small but dynamic region, advancing technology and innovation is no longer optional; it is essential. True transformation demands collective action from all stakeholders in the Western Balkans.

To conclude on a positive note,

I would like to extend my deepest thanks: first, to our esteemed judges for their outstanding work in selecting the top six awardees, and second, to the RCC staff, particularly our innovation team, for their dedication to advancing this initiative.

Congratulations to all our exceptional winners. Each Butterfly Innovation Award recipient will receive €5,000 and promotion through RCC's social media platforms. We encourage you to use this support to create lasting impacts and leave a positive mark on our community.

Remember, success often grows from the lessons of failure. Let both inspire you as stepping stones to greater achievements.

Thank you!