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**Talking points by RCC Secretary General, *Majlinda Bregu*, at the opening of
the
FUTOURISMO
Riding the Digital Waves**

2 March 2021

Dear applicants,

Dear guest,

- In 2019 more than 12 million people visited Western Balkans, which brought us a profit of 7.2 billion euros.

- Tourism made 10.2% of the region's GDP and accounted for more than 25% of exports! On average, 11.4% of the total employees in the Western Balkans were from this sector, [55 percent of whom were women](#).

- These figures show that tourism was one of the fastest growing industries in the region. It was our ticket to faster pull up our region towards better living standards.



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- And then COVID-19 happened. It spread throughout the world like fire on a hot summer night, and took lives, jobs, plans – froze everything.
- The data is merciless. There was 75% decrease in international visitors in the first half of 2020 compared to 2019. Ours is the most affected region in Europe in terms of foreign arrivals. One of the reasons is that most of the WB6 economies were red listed. Participation of foreign visitors was over 50%, but this significantly dropped in 2020.

- Most of the bookings were cancelled, which jeopardised normal operations of many agencies. The difficulties were reflected in cutting off the staff numbers and business model changes, as the 2020 turnover was at the level of 35%. Through the RCC Tourism Project, we helped 36 grants.

- Had there not been a short-term EU-funded technical assistance some tourism businesses would not have survived. But as we all are well aware, the short-term assistance is not enough.

- Three years ago when we started this project thanks to EU funding, we didn't even dream that instead of adding to the thriving list by further developing a joint tourism offer in our region and promoting it, we would find ourselves in this dire situation.



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- The COVID-19 recovery and tourism restart in WB6 will require even more coordinated efforts to foster an innovative digital culture in tourism SMEs that can ensure the WB6 multi-destinations are all globally competitive.
- The current situation and inevitable transformation that will follow due to the pandemic necessitate new thinking about travel, new models of product development and advocate for contactless technology, new business practices and new approaches to supporting and building capacity in tourism including the digital empowerment of the workforce.
- **FUTOURISMO is “an exercise” of boosting digitalisation and the use of online marketing and distribution tools within the industry to meet new trends – new normal and consumer expectations.**
- We don’t know when the pandemic will be over. But it will be, eventually, and we have to prepare and make up for the lost time.
- **Last summer we organised the first ever regional competition, Balkathon – Smarten up for the future, as a response to pandemic outbreak, seeking the best digital solutions to help the region recover economically.**



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- #Balkathon brought together young people from Western Balkans, more than 88 applications received and many different areas of expertise from across the WB, united in their desire to offer their time, talent, and ideas to help find solutions to the coronavirus crisis. The best 3 won.

- So, we started 2021 with the new hope, and reinforced enthusiasm to help our region recover. **FUTUREISMO invited everyone who has a great idea, vision and skills to develop digital solutions including start-ups, digital innovation hubs, scientific parks, universities, SMEs and teams of young people, to present their innovative digital solutions that will help mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the heavily affected sector of tourism.**

- **And again the region did not disappoint, but it showed a thirst for innovation.** We got 84 applications from all 6 economies. And the best 17 projects, 2 from Albania, 4 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 6 from Montenegro, 1 from Kosovo*, 2 from North Macedonia and 2 from Serbia, you are to see today. Their innovative proposals vary from e-health tourism to winery apps and from one-stop shop platforms to fun applications. Thank you for your participation and bringing forward your ideas.

* 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.



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- The jury will have a tough choice to select the best 6, whose ideas we will support and help them to be implemented and become sustainable in the long run.
- But we will not stop there. FUTOURISMO can grow in the future and challenge young professionals to invest their energy and creativity in generating digital solutions that can help the tourism industry to grow.
- **RCC will continue creating a network of professionals in the region.**
- The competitiveness of WB6 tourism is strongly linked with sustainability and that will continue to be encouraged through our Common Regional Market.
- We know this is just a fetch in the enormous endeavour of bringing up our tourism back to its feet. But the longer the fetch, the larger the waves.
- I wish you success in the presentation of your smart solutions today.