



REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA
NATIONAL CYBER SECURITY AUTHORITY

WESTERN BALKANS CYBERSECURITY MARATHON 2026

Participation & Implementation Guidelines

September 2026

1. OVERVIEW

The Western Balkan Cybersecurity Marathon 2026 is an annual initiative aimed at developing practical cybersecurity skills among students and young people through training, hands-on exercises, and cybersecurity challenges. Builds on the experience of the 2025 National Marathon in Albania, it expands this model at the regional level, covering Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, on a shared Capture the Flag (CTF) platform. The initiative is divided into two tracks:

- Western Balkans Cybersecurity Marathon for Students;
- Western Balkans Cybersecurity Marathon for Girls & Women.

The programme runs over a three-month period (September–December 2026), through a shared online platform, provided from Dream Group Company, combining theoretical preparation, hands-on labs, and Capture the Flag (CTF) challenges.

The programme for the Students Track unfolds in four progressive phases: Cybersecurity Fundamentals + OSINT, Blue Team, Purple Team, and Red Team. The programme for the Girls & Women Track combines technical training, practical labs and strategic leadership exercises across four phases, each closing with a CTF challenge or a Tabletop Exercise (TTX). Coordination is carried out through AKSK, in cooperation with the national CSIRTs/CERTs and universities.

Participation and Certification: Approximately 400 participants are expected across the region, with each economy nominating up to 50 students and 15 participants for the Girls & Women Track. Upon completion of the programme, all participants will receive certificates of participation.

Grand Finale Participation: Top-performing participants will be eligible for awards, coins and certificates, and selected finalists will be invited to the Grand Finale event in Tirana. Each economy will be represented by: the top five participants from the Student Track; the top two participants from the Girls & Women Track; the national coordinator; one representative from the CSIRT/CERT community; and, one from the university sector.

Awards: At the Grand Finale, one winner will be awarded in each track for each participating economy. In total, 12 prizes will be distributed across the two tracks.

2. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

2.1 Student Track

Applicants must be: age 16–25; enrolled in studies related to cybersecurity, information technology, computer science, computer engineering, telecommunications, or related fields; with interest and basic knowledge of cybersecurity; and, available to follow programme through all phases and activities over the three months. Prior CTF experience or similar activities is considered an advantage, but not a requirement. Each economy may nominate up to 50 students, drawn from several universities.

2.2 Girls & Women Track

Applicants must be: age 16–26; girls or women seeking to develop, upskill in, or transition into cybersecurity, prior technical background is not a prerequisite; with genuine interest in pursuing a career or specialization in the field; and, available to follow all phases of the programme (technical training, practical labs, leadership exercises and crisis simulations) over the three-month period. Each economy may nominate up to 15 participants through a public call.

3. ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The university will: disseminate and promote the call; inform students about the eligibility criteria, deadlines, and application process; appoint an institutional coordinator (contact person) for coordination with AKSK and the national CSIRT/CERT, who will submit the university's final list of students; and appoint a technical mentor responsible for supporting and guiding participating students throughout the programme.

4. ROLE OF THE NATIONAL CSIRT

Each participating economy designates one CSIRT/CERT focal point who serves as the main contact person for AKSK and as the single point of contact between AKSK, universities and students in that economy. National CSIRTs are responsible for:

- Distributing the call for participation to universities and relevant educational institutions;
- Ensuring inclusion of universities offering programmes primarily in cybersecurity, but also information technology, computer science, engineering, telecommunications or related fields;
- Coordinating the identification and selection of participants at the national level;
- Consolidating and submitting the final participant list, up to 50 students and up to 15 Girls & Women Track participants, to AKSK, together with a reserve list to replace any withdrawals; Each coordinator should make sure in every challenge, every week, the 50 slots for students and 15 for women/girls of each respective economy are used;
- Monitoring the participation of their national teams throughout the Marathon;
- Reporting any organizational or technical issues to AKSK.

5. ROLE OF AKSK

AKSK acts as the lead coordinator of the initiative and is responsible for: preparing the implementation calendar, participation criteria and standard documentation; coordinating the different phases of the Marathon; providing technical and organizational guidance; monitoring participation and communicating results together with the coordinating team; and maintaining regular communication with the designated national CSIRT focal points.

AKSK provides each participating CSIRT with an official information package containing the Concept Note, the implementation timeline, eligibility and selection criteria, competition rules, and relevant deadlines. In addition, selected Students and Girls & Women Track participants will be issued individual platform accounts and informed about the calendar, phases, and rules before the programme begins. AKSK also establishes and manages a waiting list for additional account requests beyond an economy's initial allocation, reviewed based on platform slots for each economy.

6. TIMELINE

Student Track

Activity	Date
Meeting with the Coordinators	September 9, 2026
Opening the call for students, at the Universities	Officially: September 9, 2026
Application deadline for students	September 18, 2026
Verification and selection of participants	September 21- 22, 2026
Confirmation of participants	By September 22, 2026
Marathon launch (Phase I begins)	September 24, 2026
Grand Finale	December 17, 2026

Girls & Women Track

Activity	Date
Opening the public call for applications	September 30, 2026
Application deadline	October 9, 2026
Launch of the Marathon (Girls & Women Track)	October 15, 2026
Grand Finale	December 17, 2026