**Press release**

**Fans out in force as Croatia Rally 2023 begins**

**Zagreb, 20 April 2023** – The National and University Library and Fountains in Zagreb provided a spectacular backdrop as the third Croatia Rally to form part of the FIA World Rally Championship got underway in the country’s capital city this evening.

In the late evening sunshine, crews were clapped over the starting ramp by thousands of enthusiastic fans from 18:30 local time with live television coverage beginning as the Junior WRC crews took the start from 18:49.

There was a poignant moment at 19:52. What would have been Craig Breen’s start time was used to pay tribute to the Irishman, who lost his life in an accident preparing for Croatia Rally seven days ago. Earlier, the Rally1 drivers joined local dignitaries, fans, team representatives and event organisers in observing a minute of silence in Breen’s memory. Olympic Committee President Zlatko Mateša and Minister of Tourism and Sport Nikolina Brnjac were among the VIP guests in attendance.

Looking ahead to the next three days, Shakedown pacesetter Kalle Rovanperä, the winner in Croatia last season and the defending world champion for Toyota Gazoo Racing, said: “Most of the rally is fully the same [as last year]. Already in the recce there were surprises and we need to change the pacenotes a bit on the cuts. There will be a lot of mud and dirt on the road all the time from the cuts. The level of grip is usually changing a lot, we have a lot of different Tarmac on the rally changing all the time.”

Rovanperä’s Toyota team-mate Sébastien Ogier won the Croatia Rally in 2021 by a slender margin of 0.6 seconds. He said: “In terms of driving it’s a challenging event and different from any other. You need to adapt again and trust your feeling. That is what is great. With these tricky conditions it’s nice to watch and it deserves to be in the world championship.”

The Ceremonial Start, which was completed under the cover of darkness, was the final action of day one of Croatia Rally 2023 and builds up to three days of intense competition over 20 demanding asphalt stages. Kicking off the action in the hills of Samoborsko Gorje, Žumberak and Karlovac west and southwest of host city Zagreb tomorrow (Friday) is the 19.29-kilometre Mali Lipovec - Grdanjci test from 08:03. That’s followed by the corner-rich Stojdraga - Hartje stage from 08:56, the rally’s longest at 25.67 kilometres, Krašić - Vrškovac (09:59) and Pećurkovo Brdo - Mrežnički Novaki (11:12). Following service at the Zagreb Fair, the morning stages are repeated in the afternoon with crews entering end-of-day service from 19:14.

**ENDS**

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