**Press release**

**Leg one midday report: Drama for Ogier leaves Neuville on top in Croatia**

**Zagreb, 21 April 2023** – Thierry Neuville and co-driver Maritjn Wydaeghe hold an advantage of 16.1 seconds at the top of the Croatia Rally leaderboard following this morning’s all-action four-stage loop in the picturesque hills of Samoborsko Gorje, Žumberak and Karlovac west and southwest of host city Zagreb.

Sébastien Ogier, the winner of the first Croatia Rally to count for the FIA World Rally Championship in 2021, was fastest out of the blocks with a time of 11m57.7s through the 19.20-kilometre Mali Lipovec - Grdanjci stage, a performance that gave the Toyota GR Yaris Rally1 Hybrid driver a 2.6s lead over Neuville’s Hyundai i20 N Rally1 Hybrid.

However, the eight-time world champion’s advantage wouldn’t last when he was forced to stop approximately 12 kilometres into SS2 with a damaged front-left tyre, caused by striking a hole through a cut by the side of the road. Ogier and co-driver were stationary for a mere 1m07s as they changed wheels but the delay dropped them down the order and handed first place to Neuville/Wydaeghe.

But despite leading heading to the midday service halt at the Zagreb Fair, Neuville was frustrated not to be further ahead in the battle for Croatia Rally victory.

“We are more or less able to follow the times but I feel like if we would have a better car on Tarmac we would be much faster,” Neuville said after SS3. “I could go so much faster but the car doesn’t let me. We are trying different set-ups all the time, but I just don’t get the right thing. It’s very similar to Monte Carlo where the chassis is moving a lot and makes the car very nervous, especially when it’s a bit faster I struggle to control the car.”

Of his SS2 delay, Ogier said: “I avoid the cut, I really avoid as much as I could but still just the fact this compression made the puncture. For sure when you lose a minute and a half the race is different, it’s a shame but what can we do?”

Ogier hit back from his SS2 delay with the quickest time on SS3 and SS4, his stage-four best coming despite the fact he ripped off part of his rear spoiler on branches when he rand wide on a right-hander. He’s seventh overall, 1m27.1s down on leader Neuville.

Elfyn Evans is second overall for Toyota Gazoo Racing, the 2021 Croatia Rally runner-up overcoming the effects of a soft front-right tyre on SS3.

Ott Tänak and Martin Järveoja hold a steady third place for the M-Sport Ford World Rally Team. After dropping time with a stall at a hairpin on SS1, Tänak said: “I was losing the boost, then I stalled. After I really struggled with many things. We got some steering issue already on the road section. That was a big job.”

Esapekka Lappi, Takamoto Katsuta and Pierre-Louis Loubet are fourth, fifth and sixth respectively with world champion Kalle Rovanperä down in 12th position after he picked up a front-left puncture through the same section of SS2 where team-mate Ogier also came unstuck. The Finn was stationary for 1m58s and said afterwards it was a “stupid place to get a puncture”. Rovanperä added that he was “just struggling with the grip of the car too much. We need to find something on the service, otherwise it’s going to be a bit too difficult.”

Yohan Rossel leads WRC2 by 29.7s after taking his Citroën C3 Rally2 to the fastest time on SS1 and SS2. Nikolay Gryazin was quickest in his Škoda Fabia RS Rally2 on SS3 with Toksport team-mate Emil Lindholm doing likewise on SS4 after he’d fixed a gear selection issue on the liaison section between SS2 and SS3. Gryazin is second in the provisional order followed by Nicolas Ciamin.

Gryazin leads the WRC2 Challenger division with Laurent Pellier ahead in both WRC3 and Junior WRC for idendical Pirelli-equipped Ford Fiesta Rally3s run by M-Sport Poland.

Armin Kremer, co-driven by daughter Ella, heads the WRC2 Masters Cup standings. Željko Magličić is the top Croatian driver in 43rd position at the wheel of a Ford Fiesta Rally4.

Following a 40-minute service halt at Zagreb Fair, the morning stages are repeated in the afternoon from 14:45 local time with crews entering end-of-day service from 19:14.

**ENDS**

**Media contacts:**

Marko Šivak, press@rally-croatia.com

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