

Op-ed

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Western Balkans Calling: We are Roaming Free

Delivering on promises: It took just over 2 years to move from signing the Regional Roaming Agreement to roam free across the region

Tomorrow is a historic day for the region. We are eliminating barriers, borders, and mobile phone roaming tariffs. The Balkans tomorrow will be roam-free. It is just the first step. What the RCC has succeeded in doing with mobile phones, we hope to do with people and businesses in the Balkans. We are working hard on opening borders, eliminating tariffs, increasing trade, and making it so not just for mobile phones, but also for people so they can travel and work without restrictions. Tomorrow we will be much closer to our common regional goals.

Today is the difference that makes the difference.

Well, that was my opening sentence at the Western Balkans Digital Summit in Belgrade on 4 April 2019 where all WB6 signed the new Regional Roaming Agreement (RRA)! I can say that again! Success is the difference that makes the difference!

It is needless to say how proud we at the RCC are to have been an inevitable ingredient of this success story. You all know the feeling.

We honour the commitment shown by all in making this happen. From WB6 leaders, European Commission, to national regulatory authorities and mobile operators. No room for modesty here. We have come a long way in short period of just over two years. Nevertheless, today, less than 24 hours to witnessing the roaming free Western Balkans, I need to say unpoetically, this was a tough row to hoe.

Today I can even share with you how nervous I was given the predictable unpredictability of last hurdles. Life is much like hurdling, I know and like all others, I am always eager to find the smoothest route without obstacles and roadblocks. However, alike most individuals, the fight to find solutions is all we've got to challenge the setbacks.

The night before the summit, 3rd of April, we had a long difficult session with national regulatory authorities from each WB6 economy to clarify bits and pieces of concerns expressed by mobile operators on the new Regional Roaming Agreement that was about to be signed in less than 12 hours. For both regulators and operators Roam Free in WB6 was almost impossible to happen in three-year time!

In the morning of the summit itself, at 8 o'clock, we called for a meeting with Ministers responsible for ICT and digital, in the presence of the EU Commission to pass the message that Roam Like at Home for the region will happen, whatever problems we are faced with.

With this cautiously optimistic feeling we entered the room of the summit, where another problem was pending. We were yet uncertain about the signature from ministers representing their economies in Belgrade.

You can imagine the feelings that came full circle. We have been preparing a lot for that moment, long hours of yearly negotiations among economies, examining each step, adjusting the language to respect the political differences of many forms present in the region, just to find the best solution that benefits all citizens equally. But, what if, was like the omnipotent question that usurped our minds.

Glad moment! Regional Roaming Agreement

As Einstein used to say: in the middle of difficulty lies an opportunity! RRA was signed and we were all living a crucial moment for this region!

That was a departure point! The story of the Roam-Like-at-Home Western Balkans is indeed a game-changer in the universe of walking the political talk in the reality of our citizens' concerns.

RRA was a gradual process but its benefits were valet-friendly for all citizens as the transition period itself brought reductions of roaming costs throughout the region of up to 96%, with them being completely eliminated on 1 July 2021 for the citizens of the Western Balkans wherever they travel within the region.

What does Roaming-Free Western Balkans actually entails

We are frequently asked what the Roaming Free Western Balkans actually means. I will say it is more than the value of money we save by having RRA in place. It is more about connectivity! People feel better creating deeper connections. Talking to a loved one over the phone or video call may not give the same level of happiness one gets from hugging, but its human and now will not cost a king's ransom, only what you would spend calling from next door. Social connections are a primary need for all humans.

Again, money is not irrelevant here. With a Free Roam regime in the WB6 citizens and businesses will get more value for their money.

I will try to illustrate it with my personal example. As you know, I am from Tirana, I work from the RCC Head Office in Sarajevo and I travel by car back and forth, including frequent trips to other WB capitals. Trust me, whenever I cross any of the borders on my travels, I have to check if my mobile data are on or off. And yes, being a boss does not come with a luxury of poor telephone bills management, despite the common belief.

And now, none of this is a concern any longer because as soon as crossing the border and changing the operator, I'm back on the grid, with the mobile data ON, paying not a penny more than I would normally pay for calling, texting or replying to loads of emails.

Important to note, to eliminate some misunderstanding: we still pay our telephone services to our operators, but this agreement ensures that we feel the roam-like-at-home no matter where we are in the Balkans. This does not mean you can watch a Netflix movie with your internet package!

Win-win

Demand for roaming services shows no sign of slowing down. Borderless connectivity is encouraging for all. From citizens, to operators, business community, up to the delight of holidaymakers.

Roam Like at Home is freedom to enjoy your travels without limitations, it gives you the means to ensure all is well at home and to interact daily with your loved ones.

Moving on

Having this agreement up and running takes us a step closer to lowering the roaming prices between the Western Balkans and the EU, as implementation of this regional agreement was a precondition to enable the lowering of roaming costs with EU Members States through a concrete and time-bound glide path. The RCC already prepared the ground for this and is fully ready to start working on this with the EU.

Are we done yet?

Yes! Roaming Free in Western Balkans is done!

I know WB is usually seen as a region that still doesn't keep up the pace with the technology of the most developed countries, but the successful roaming exercise has shown us how fast we can adapt.

Hence, our focus remains, **enhancing digital infrastructure and connectivity, creating a trustworthy regional space and competitive environment for innovative businesses AND working on digital upskilling.**

People connect on a deeper level than machines and they are the lifeblood of our work.

It might sound repetitive but we are in this together and the only way to achieve results is by acting together.

Can we do that? Of course we can! We have the joint Green Lanes established last year in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns to ensure supply of the essentials – food and medicine for the citizens, and the Regional Roaming Agreement is now in place too.

Both proving that we made it!

Coming together is the beginning

Staying together is progress

And working together is success

Henry Ford