

Interview by Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Majlinda Bregu

Closing in to Europe: lowering roaming prices between Western Balkans and EU

On Europe Day, Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council, in an interview for Zëri, gives the first details of one of the concrete achievements for the citizens of the Western Balkans.

Q: It was announced last week that roaming prices between Western Balkans and EU will be lowered as of October. What does it mean exactly? What are the price caps?

MB: It means that as of October this year we expect the Western Balkans and European Union citizens, including our diaspora which counts in millions, to be able to use mobile internet while in roaming for at least one third less on average at regional level **of what they are paying now** through various packages, add-ons, etc.

But let me go a step back to explain better this complex negotiation process that is still ongoing.

What has been announced last week is that EU and Western Balkans (WB) operators agreed on the price cap of one gigabyte while in roaming starting October 2023. Price caps represent the upper or maximum retail price level for data roaming telecommunication operators will offer to their customers, namely citizens of our region and the EU.

So far, a total of **38 telecommunication operators** from Western Balkans and the European Union are part of this agreement and others are welcome to join at any time. So all of them have their own packages and prices, some lower, others higher, and some in the EU go even up to **500 EUR per gigabyte** in the packages they are offering. Standard prices go even higher, up to whopping **21,000 EUR per gigabyte**. The fact that in this negotiating process 38 telecom operators, respecting their business plans but also a political call, agreed a fair deal to have a unified maximum price cap of **18 EUR per one gigabyte** as of October 2023 is quite an accomplishment, even if some will have to reduce more than others. In the case of Kosovan operators for example, prices range between 13 and 30 euro per gigabyte in the packages they currently offer. The prices differ from operator to operator, so everyone will have to adjust accordingly.

Q: Do we know how much of a reduction we are talking about now for Western Balkans? Does this mean our gigabyte will cost 18 EUR?

MB: No it doesn't. It only means that the price cap, or the maximum price per one gigabyte in the operators' offers cannot exceed 18 euro as of this October. Then, the price cap will be lowered to **14 EUR in 2026, and in 2028 to 9 EUR**. However, the maximum cap does not imply it being the actual price but only that the price must be lower than that, and as I already said we expect it to be lower by at **least one third for citizens of our region**. This agreement will affect the market and initiate a challenging competition amongst those that are part of the Declaration, but even those that are not yet part of it. It will affect even those whose prices are at this moment lower than the agreed caps.

Now, due to rules and laws of fair competition, operators cannot negotiate the prices of offers of every single operator.

What we could do, together with the EC, was to **gather operators, initiate and facilitate this process they all voluntarily entered in and entrusted us with the role in the negotiation**. It was not a small feat to get the operators to sign the Roaming Declaration and then negotiate lowering of price caps amongst several dozens of profit-driven companies. I have to say it was not an easy or simple process. And it still isn't over. Because as of now and until October this year we expect the operators, which have their own business challenges, to rise up to their promise made in the Declaration and adjust and **enable more favourable offers with significantly lower prices of roaming for the citizens of the Western Balkans and EU**. We certainly will hold them to that promise, and I expect citizens will do too.

Q: I understand this is a result of a Declaration that telecommunication operators signed at the Tirana Summit last year?

MB: Yes, after a year-long difficult negotiations the culmination happened with the signing of the EU and Western Balkans (WB) Roaming Declaration at the Berlin Process Summit held in Tirana last year in the presence of all prime ministers, those from our region included, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and President of the European Council Charles Michelle.

This was a **triumph of regional cooperation** that has been happening through the Common Regional Market Action Plan, as sort of a follow-up to the success of the Roam Like at Home regime that is also a regional cooperation success we have been all enjoying as of July 2021. But that was just a first step. I have to say that the real work began after that December signature with months of tough negotiations amongst all operators, facilitated by the European Commission and the RCC. The recent announcement on lowering the data roaming price caps represents the second step in this difficult process.

And now we are entering the next phase, the most important and most sensitive one, and that is **the process of implementation of what has been agreed on**, which we will follow closely.

It is in the core of RCC mission to bring our region closer to the EU. And this is part of it. Our contribution to the Europeanisation of this region. As one of the fathers of EU said: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements".