

"Call from a Region in My Mind"¹: Bridging the Gap – The Roaming Revolution in the Western Balkans

By Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

I paraphrased the title of James Baldwin's essay "*Letter from a region in my mind*", which is not written about the Balkans, using a call instead of the letter, because nowadays phone communication has replaced the letters. .

Still, I find this title very compelling. In an era where uncertainty has become a constant, a region, my region in my mind is a canvas painted with the hues of diversity.

It is a place where people, cultures, religions, and histories converge. In this imaginative realm, strokes of pain and conflict, serve as a brushstroke, to portray resilience and progress.

But the reality looks difficult. Western Balkans is emerging again as yet another focal point of tension in an increasingly polarized global landscape.

Yet, within the challenges, a glimmer of hope resides and today I wish to share a positive narrative.

The October 2023 begun. The time we promised for the Roaming Prices between EU and WB are going down with leaves. And they did. In today's interconnected world, mobile phones have become an indispensable part of our lives. They keep us connected with loved ones, enable access to information and empower us with the tools to navigate our daily affairs. For businesses and entrepreneurs, reduced roaming charges are a game changer.

The world of telecommunications, borders have long been a barrier to staying connected. The dreaded roaming charges that accompanied cross-border travel served as a stark reminder that even in our hyper-connected world, boundaries still matter. However, a landmark agreement reached at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana on 6 December 2022, was set to change this paradigm. At the summit, 38 telecommunications operators from both the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans put pen to paper on a historic Roaming Declaration. This Declaration paved the way for a significant reduction in data roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans, set to take effect as of 1 October 2023.

The journey to this milestone began with the entry into force of Roam Like At Home regime in the Western Balkans in July 2021, based on the Western Balkans Regional Roaming Agreement. It is a testament to the unwavering commitment of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the European Commission (EC), and telecommunications operators from the EU and Western Balkans. A year-long negotiation process, facilitated by the RCC and EC, has borne fruit.

So, what does this agreement mean for citizens of the Western Balkans and the EU? The reduction in data roaming charges is nothing short of remarkable. Take, for example, a Bosnian citizen, who is a customer of one of the telecommunications operators from Bosnia and Herzegovina, travelling to Croatia. Previously, the regular cost of data transfer per just one

¹ The title "Letter from a Region in My Mind" borrowed from an essay by James Baldwin, 1962
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>

megabyte (without buying any roaming package while traveling to EU), the weight of one mid-quality photo or a document, was a staggering 2.09 euros, meaning, to send a mid-quality video of 1 GB would have cost you 2,090 EUR. Or if you were in Greece, it would be more than 9,000 EUR. But now, after the reduction took place, it will be a mere 0.017 euros per one megabyte - a reduction of more than 99 per cent. Using 1 GB of data in EU will no longer result in a jaw-dropping bill for all the customers of this operator; instead, it won't exceed euros. This is not a change specific to Croatia; it applies to all EU countries, including Switzerland, Turkey, and the UK for the same telecommunications operator from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Albanian citizens will see their data roaming costs drop significantly as well. The regular price of 1 GB for the customers of one operator, without buying any roaming package while travelling to EU, will no longer be a prohibitive 565 euros but a much more reasonable 23 euros. The same holds for Kosovan citizens, whose data costs from the regular price list of one operator are set to decrease by 147 times. . So sending a nice video while travelling somewhere in the EU to your family will not cost you like a used car - 2,500 euros, but 17 euros in case you are a customer of this operator. And these are only 'pay as-you-go' modes, meaning you don't have to buy any packages or look for special offers. These are regular prices, and they are charged by megabyte, so texting on WhatsApp or similar apps, will cost you few cents, like you were practically sending it from your own room.

If you are spending more days in travel, than special offers and packages are now even more affordable, depending on the operator throughout the region.² In Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia 1 GB of data to be used in the EU, in different roaming packages, goes from maximum 12 EUR, to, in some cases even lower than 2 EUR. These were a few good examples, but for Precise information on prices, packages and offer of roaming while in the EU, please contact your telecommunications operator.

This achievement is not just about reducing costs; it represents that vision of the power of regional cooperation. It is the foundation upon which this region in my mind is built a place where people draw strength from their shared sense of purpose.

It builds on the successes facilitated by the RCC, such as "Roaming Free Western Balkans", mobility agreements enabling free travel and workforce movement, and the establishment of Green Lanes during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Western Balkans region, is steeped in history and diversity, from security tensions to economic struggles driven by rising inflation and migration. Climate change, too, has made its presence felt through floods, wildfires, pollution, landslides, droughts, record-high temperatures, violent storms, lost crops, and more. In this context, the reduction in roaming charges is a testament to the power of collaboration and the determination to overcome obstacles.

Access to information is a fundamental right. With reduced roaming charges, as this 2023 October goes, the Roaming Declaration's fulfilment serves as a beacon of hope, not only as a profound step toward making Western Balkans-EU mobile connectivity more affordable and accessible for millions, but also for the potential of regional cooperation in addressing complex challenges.

² For more information on EU-WB roaming Declaration please check www.rcc.int.

It is a real change for both citizens from this region and our beloved ones living in the EU. It empowers both EU and WB citizens to bridge distances; it represents a profound shift in the way we connect with Europe. It is part of a thread intricately woven into the fabric of the Europeanisation of our countries.

And that is the vision of my region in my mind: One that exemplifies the belief that progress is not a solitary endeavour, but a collective venture a symphony of nations harmonizing their efforts.