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Interview of Regional Cooperation Council Secretary General Majlinda Bregu for Politicki.ba

Bregu: Roaming free regime between the EU and Western Balkans is our next objective

After travel with ID cards only is made possible in the six economies of our region, which should happen by the end of this year, RCC is to begin working on phasing out of roaming with the European Union.

Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) Majlinda Bregu is convinced that three important agreements, agreed last week within the Berlin Process in the German capital, will be signed beginning of next month.

According to one of them, citizens of Western Balkans (WB) will travel in the region with ID cards only.

This should be operational by the end of the year at the latest.

RCC has already focused on the next step – reduction of roaming charges between the Western Balkans and the EU.

And is working intensively on this!

“We are uplifted that the three agreements RCC worked so hard during the last two years to see the green light, already endorsed last week by the WB Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Berlin, will be signed by leaders during the Berlin Summit,” she said at the onset for Politicki.ba.

She explains that the Agreement on Freedom of Movement with Identity Cards in the Western Balkans, Agreement on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications and Agreement on Recognition of Professional Qualifications for Doctors, Dentists and Architects “are on the right track to be signed on 3 November at the Summit of the Berlin Process by all six Western Balkans economies, including Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

“All citizens of the Western Balkans will be finally equally treated and will be having the right to travel with their ID cards within the territory of all six economies.

“Since this is an international treaty, it is subject to ratification procedure in all six economies and its implementation is to start 30 days after all economies submit the letter of ratification, acceptance, or approval to the Depositary – North Macedonia,” says Bregu.

In accordance with the RCC policy, the term “economies” is used to denote national jurisdictions of the Western Balkans given that Serbia does not recognise Kosovo*’s independence. And Kosovo* is (still) not recognised by Bosnia and Herzegovina either.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

“Given the importance of the issue, we hope that governments will exhaust the ratification procedure as soon as possible. RCC will set up a joint commission that will be overlooking the implementation of the agreement, thus making sure that we can remove all hurdles to the implementation,” explains Bregu.

Though she does not hide her satisfaction, she is cautious.

“As most processes related to our region are and will continue to be nerve-racking, taking more time, necessitating serious political and diplomatic capital invested on all sides, both from the WB governments as well as our EU partners, we at RCC are proud that the region has agreed on three RCC-coordinated centrepiece mobility agreements whose implementation, much like with the green lanes and regional roaming agreement, will very soon bring their own manifested impact on the ground.

I have no doubt that the respective Governments which have made such a serious commitment will do their utmost to ‘deliver’ this freedom of movement package to their citizens in the shortest possible period of time” she says.

Answering Politicki.ba question on the next steps in RCC activities and how far the process of roaming free regime between our region and the EU has progressed, she is not hiding her satisfaction:

“Reduction of roaming charges between the EU and Western Balkans is our next major objective.

And let’s not take anything for granted, and put things in perspective. Comparing second half of 2021, when Western Balkans became roaming free zone, with the first six months of the same year showed increase in outgoing calls by 82%, in incoming calls by 53%, Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens sent 25% more SMS, and internet use increased by 169%!

Having said that, we have already conducted several consultation meetings with mobile operators from the EU and Western Balkans on the ways forward.

This is a very complex process which is based on self-regulation and voluntary arrangements between the operators following the principles of all-inclusiveness and transparency. In addition, we are supporting the process of implementation of several policy reforms that would improve the business environment for the mobile operators and we are coordinating all the steps and activities with all Western Balkan economies.

We are aiming to see the first results in the roaming charges reduction for data by mid-2023; but to achieve this objective, intensified discussions with mobile operators will continue in November and December,” stresses Bregu.

She also announces a number of regional events to take place in the upcoming months like Investment Conference in cooperation with WB6 CIF, Butterfly and Business/Innovation Forum in cooperation with GIZ, and preparation of Donor Coordination Meeting on digital transformation in cooperation with EC and IFIs.

“The immediate steps after the signing of the announced 3 agreements relate to the preparation of necessary technical steps to support their entry into force and setting the rules of cooperation

among the economies to start the implementation in line with the provision of each agreement, etc.

So a lot to do, a lot of work, we do recognise and acknowledge this. And just to paraphrase Kobe Bryant - great things come from hard work, fights and perseverance.

No excuses,” concluded RCC Secretary General Majlinda Bregu in an interview for Politicki.ba.