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

Bregu: The roaming prices reduction with EU starts as of 1 October

What is going to happen this year, or 1 October this year to be precise, is the reduction of data roaming charges between the EU and WB. This comes as a result of more than a year-long groundwork and consultations, which included the strong engagement of the EU and Western Balkans telecommunications operators, dedicated support of the European Commission, Regional Cooperation Council, as well as region's authorities commitment. Finally, at the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Tirana on 6 December last year, the telecommunications operators from the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans signed a Roaming Declaration thus enabling the reduction of the data roaming charges between the EU and the Western Balkans as of 1 October 2023. This means that every Western Balkan and EU telecommunications operator, signatory of the Declaration, will consider introducing retail rate plans and options with lower data charges for their roaming users in mobile networks of other signatories with the first significant reduction of data roaming prices as of 1 October 2023

This will reduce cost of roaming for citizens of the Western Balkans travelling to the EU and vice versa as well as lower business operating costs and encourage doing business outside of their own borders. This initiative is remarkable, especially since it has been done on voluntary basis between telecommunications operators. But this is just the start of the process that in the coming years should go in the direction of further reductions, finally leading to prices close to the domestic ones.

The reduction of roaming charges between the EU and WB builds upon the success of the Roam Like at Home regimes in both the EU and the Western Balkans. The Roaming Free Western Balkans introduced some exciting changes. According to the statistics from the roaming data report 2022 which is soon to be published, a number of roaming users in the Western Balkans increased by 100%. When comparing the second half of 2021 to the first half of the same year, a number of minutes made in outgoing voice calls increased up to 237%, while incoming voice calls increased up to 173%. At the same time, volume of data traffic increased up to 459%.

The first question we were asked after the RLAH has come to action in our region in July 2021, was when the roaming prices with the EU will be lowered. And that is the first thing we have started working on after 1 July 2021. What we promised we delivered so, I'm happy the roaming prices between the Western Balkans and the European Union are going down with the leaves next fall.

This is also a sign of seriousness of EU policies towards the Western Balkans.

The period of just two years was used not only to reach Roam Like at Home regime in the Western Balkans, but also to, as promised, begin the process of data roaming reduction between European Union & Western Balkans, and begin the work that resulted in signing of the three mobility agreements, all while in a period of global turmoil and crisis.

At the end, the purpose of all our endeavours is to make people lives easier, better. That is what regional cooperation is all about, and it delivers.

When it comes to the Agreement on ID Cards, everything now is in the hands of governments and parliaments, which are responsible to ignite and finish accordingly the ratification procedure as envisaged in the Agreement. The length and complexity of that process will depend very much on the legal framework in each of the economies and this is something we cannot affect. We do believe,

however, that governments will abide by their commitments at the highest level and will deliver ratification instruments as soon as it is possible in accordance with domestic legal framework. When it comes to the details on the ratification process of each of the signatories of the agreement, I can say that we are in close contact with them; however they are the correct address when it comes to the answers on the dynamic as they are holding the keys of that process. It is in all our interest for this process to be finalized as soon as possible to the benefit of our citizens.