



Talking points of the RCC Secretary General
Western Balkans Digital Summit 2021, High Level Meeting,
13 October, Podgorica

Your Excellences,

Prime Minister,

Ministers,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

For nearly six hours on Monday, 10 days ago, the world experienced a forced break from Facebook's social networking tools.

We lived to tell the tale. But how did we feel in the process?

I bet some ancient regions in our brains were triggered to alarm us. At the beginning we were afraid of missing out on things, felt a sort of light panic from not knowing what's happening and losing connection to others, then relief followed because everybody was experiencing it.

How Facebook outage can draw your attention to my speech at the Western Balkans Digital Summit?

Well, truth said, RCC has nothing to do with Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp outage.

But implications of digital reality on the citizens of this region have to be considered. To a large extent.

There are more than 10 million active Facebook users in the Western Balkans.

Apparently, the WB outage episode showed not only how reliant we are on digital technologies and on social media to connect, to escape, to be devastated by a word of criticism or happy with a lavish praise, but it also painted a broad picture of the main impacts.

Digital technology governs people's moods, marketing campaigns, dominates news and politics, reorganises economies markets, education, transforms medicine, makes use of personal data for good or bad, reshapes people's jobs, inspires hackers and exposes all of us to the risk of cyber-attacks etc.

What do Western Balkans internet users use to get the online services they are looking for?

In July 2021, over 97% of active user accounts in the region accessed the social network via a mobile phone. Let me stop here.

A phone or better a smartphone is a need for everyone as it helps us to connect with each other and keep ourselves busy by browsing websites, playing games, listening to music, watching movies and working from anywhere.

Connectivity is a primary need for humans and if this stands true, as I am sure of, then Roam-Like-At-Home regime is **a digital service of public good**.

On 1st of July 2021 – Roam-Like-At-Home in the Western Balkans - **our joint success story**, entered into force. It was achieved through continuous efforts invested by WB Governments and Regulators, and through genuine cooperation and understanding among all stakeholders.

There was as political motivation to eradicate the so-called 'bill shock' as there was a clear market value in doing this. Business community highly supported this as beneficial, and

there is a gain for all citizens.

The same logic prevails today. I am happy that **a sound, balanced and pragmatic Roadmap, developed by RCC together with WB economies, was acknowledged as the way forward at the Brdo Summit**.

This document provides a reasonable and sustainable way towards lowering the roaming charges with the EU **that will see us nearing the domestic prices in 2027**. In practical terms, we will decrease the roaming charges by more than **90%** in the currently most expensive WB mobile networks.

Let me be clear. I know the politics favour caution too. But I hope a plurality of us think like I do.

There is no justification or market logic why a citizen from this region, not the richest one, should pay on average 103 euro per 1GB when roaming in the EU, while the cost of the telecom operator is only 8 euro. The telecom operator's retail margin or, simply said, the profit for all services, data, and sms, of above 700% again reflects no market logic.

We are aware that this Roadmap, designed to protect WB consumers from excessive prices, while allowing competition in the provision of roaming services, will require **an open, transparent and inclusive process of consultation** with mobile operators in WB and EU. And we will do this through a structured Regulatory Dialogue.

Distinguished Participants,

Yesterday, 6 winners of RCC trademark Balkathon competition - one from each WB economy - presented their digital solutions ready to be marketed.

Why have we at the RCC been putting our soul to support youth and innovation over the last two years?

Because our region is emptying! 61% of young people want to leave and if we do not think of creative, democratic and smart policies to keep them home, they, the innovators that are paving the way for more innovations to come, will leave our communities, our city, our economies.

The WB digital agenda that RCC is supporting contains multitude of regional actions across CRM components such as:

- **WB Digital Skills and Job Coalition**, we recently launched,
- preparing the region for 5G,
- **broadband internet connections for 95% of households in the next 3 years**,
- work toward faster, cheaper and easier cross-border transactions,
- expedite **free flow of data – fifth freedom of common market**, etc.

Digital platforms are recasting the relationships with customers; however regarding e-Banking and e-Shopping, **all WB6 economies are below the EU average¹ and range from 3% to 23% for e-Banking and 1% to 47% for e-Shopping;**

On average, **62% of WB citizens** indicate that they have used more online shopping during the pandemic, from which **85%** believe that they will continue to shop online even after the pandemic.

The bigger this becomes, the more reason there is to be cautious about our personal data use.

¹ EU average is 64% and 69% respectively

Dear ministers,

We are racing to reach high standards of EU MS. Despite trying to run with the same speed as EU MS, we started our race later and hence we can never reach EU unless **“phasing in” in EU policies** is duly implemented.

I am using this opportunity to propose to you, ministers responsible for digital agenda, to start a very demanding but beneficial process of creating **Digital Identity** with the objective to offer citizens and businesses digital **wallets** that will be able to link their national digital identities with proof of other personal attributes (e.g. driving license, diplomas, bank account). EU launched this process few months ago. Data is power and some countries are using digital infrastructure to empower people by data. Enabling citizens to have a trustworthy digital identity is one way to bring them to the formal economy.

I believe WB economies may seek opportunities to replicate this and we at the RCC are ready to support with any regional action needed.

One last note.

RCC is coordinating the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans. It will be a costly and a very challenging one. Our obligation to citizens requires dedicated work on greener region. Major advances in energy sources, electric transport and heating will not be enough to reach net-zero by 2050 unless cities and innovations are digitally interconnected for real impact.

We are open and committed to work further with governments, CSO, media, and business community to meet the challenges RCC has been tasked to coordinate.

Dear all,

WB has changed a lot. EU is changing day by day. We come face to face with the question: **is regional cooperation enough to make our economies and lives change for better?!**

You know the answer and you can name it. It is not enough. It cannot be successful without the process of Europeanisation of our economies.

But we should also remind all that faithfulness to our European challenge is the desire to talk, to make jokes, work together, compromise with integrity for the benefit of processes we are developing together, generate actions and achieve results. This can be our truth, our success. No losers, only winners in this.