

# Bregu: Regional cooperation is becoming a steady pattern to EU's magnetic attraction

## Anticipating the Western Balkans summit in Poznan

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Less than 3 months ago, the region committed itself to and signed the agreement leading the Western Balkans to the Roaming Free Zone, alike the European Union's (EU) *Roam Like At Home*. Yesterday it became a reality – meaning our citizens will speak, surf, sms more and pay less, and in two years' time there will be NO roaming costs, when roaming within the region and much lower costs towards the EU. This was not given to us, but we worked hard to get here – hard and fast!

It is all about realistic expectations spiced up with lot of determination, strength and will coming from political region and genuine support from the European leaders.

Therefore, our expectations from the upcoming Poznan Summit, which is one of the Berlin Process summits of the Western Balkans series, which have started a few years ago on the initiative of German Government, are big. One of these summits, the one in Trieste in 2017 to be exact, brought us the endorsement of the Multiannual Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area (MAP REA), part of which is the new Regional Roaming Agreement.

But it is not only roaming what MAP REA is all about. The Berlin process has yielded in many good initiatives.

The region has come a long way in preparing the grounds for mutual recognition of **academic qualifications** across the WB6, thus making room for mobility of qualified people to look for a job, whenever in the region, simply and fast; aligning the national **investment policies** with the Regional Investment Policy Agenda (RIRA), with a joint design of the framework plan to promote the region as the welcoming investment destination, since, the Western Balkans needs a cocktail of domestic reforms, ownership of the EU-driven reforms and regional cooperation to become more attractive to **Foreign Direct Investments (FDI)**; developing a plan for advanced **integration of Roma** in the region, improving their lives by dealing with bare human necessities: housing, employment, education, health, civil registration; digital integration has already moved ahead in many areas – regional **Digital** Summits work (we are preparing for the third edition in Tirana next year, after the 2 successful ones in Skopje in Belgrade), joint work on cybersecurity issues, broadband policies, etc.

We owe it to the citizens, the citizens of the Western Balkans who live here and want to stay here – so we must outdo ourselves to make the region their desired destination. The latest edition of the Regional Cooperation Council's public and business opinion survey, Balkan Barometer 2019, shows what people want: they want jobs – 60% of them are concerned over unemployment but they also worry about corruption and brain drain, increasingly; 39% consider leaving the region to look for a job abroad. On the other hand, they believe in

benefits of regional cooperation (74%) and European integration (56% - over half of population, which is the first time in 5 Balkan Barometer editions; this is especially case with the youth – 61%). Businesses are even louder with their messages: 70% of them are satisfied with removal of roaming charges as it helps their businesses; 67% value quality of regional cooperation as beneficial and 64% think so about EU membership.

Yet there are a lot of headaches and disagreements in the region. But frankly no one was so naive as to believe that in less than three years of REA the interests will magically align. **This is now: the way I see REA today is more than a set of pillars, (true, not all together standing tall and firm), with room for new ideas to be introduced, but mostly I see it as a model of consciousness that the regional cooperation works in our best interest. Common values and shared interests have very soon to be translated in ownership and increased willingness to cooperate in lifting the existing barriers to regional cooperation. In the end, the ties that bind us are stronger than the individual choices that divide.**

To sum it up – on 1st of July, Roaming Reductions arrived. On 4th of July, the Western Balkans summit in Poznan will start. **EU is a magnetic attraction, while regional cooperation is becoming a steady pattern. For the future, let's look into the past because the unsavoury one is still a threat! But REA has a clear status with togetherness at its core. Let's give REA and regional cooperation the force to chart a sustainable long term Western Balkan reconciliation! Through economy, lifting all existing barriers!**