

Roaming free? Downloading...

By Majlinda Bregu, Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council

Right now, over half of the world's population is online. More than two-thirds of it has a mobile, with most people now using a smartphone.

Although, it's not just the number of people using the internet that has increased. What adds weight to the message is that the amount of time people spend on the internet has also gone up over the past 12 months.

The average internet user now spends around 6 hours each day using internet-powered devices and services¹.

More than 76% of South East Europe (SEE) citizens are internet users, while 40% of them use all social media apps from their mobile and the majority of those are young people.

70% of SEE businesspeople consider the removal of roaming charges will help them spur trade².

More than 12 million tourists entered last year the Balkans and they were altogether concerned about roaming charges.

Young people from WB consider the slash of roaming charges as beneficial as free movement, with the power to convince them to travel frequently and connect them easily with their peers.

All and everybody are tuned that slashing roaming tariffs will be to citizens' and economic development best advantage.

I'm navigating to the above mentioned figures, because this is to an important degree part of my job and duties³.

In a colourful pageant region, it's a position of privilege to work on strengthening it socially and economically, but also to make its citizens proud of it, unfolding the real potential of this European area.

¹ The latest data from GlobalWebIndex

² Data from RCC Balkan Barometer 2019

³ Majlinda Bregu is the Secretary General of the Regional Cooperation Council. She was the longest serving Minister of European Integration in Albania (March 2007 to September 2013). Mrs. Bregu has been elected as Member of Parliament of Albania for three consecutive legislatures (2005-2017).

It is the indelible debt that we owe to citizens in this region, people who have endured a mountain of sufferings for more than half a century, people who have put out their faith for the transformation of their lives to Europe.

It is even because I am personally quite aware of this debt, that I prefer tangible results instead of promises.

After all, I am myself, a citizen of the Western Balkans, coming from Albania, who knows by direct experience, the ups and downs, the cantilena of the word Balkans within the region itself, and the echo of that sound outside.

My home and family are in Tirana, my office headquarters is in Sarajevo and my job involves a lot of travelling. Staying in touch and connecting with people privately and professionally, therefore, is crucial.

It is indeed clumsy and awkward juggling with SIM cards, changing them when crossing the border, or chasing WIFI so to check you messages, or simply turning off your mobile data transfer, all in an effort to keep your phone bill within reasonable limits and still finish your business tasks no matter where you are or call your loved ones to say you arrived safely. Many of my friends, colleagues, business partners....ordinary citizens just like you and me have been through this.

Tiresome, complicated and expensive.

Clearly, Western Balkans is not an economically well-developed region. Unemployment is high, brain drain is getting higher. People lost jobs, for different reasons, and now on they will live at risk that the advancement of technology will even eat up more of their jobs. We live in a world which barely leaves room for people without digital skills. It has become a narrative, whether you are online or offline. Social connections, feelings, activities, adventures, business, politics, governments, all truly proficient truth of our existence is online based.

A year ago, a Regional Roaming Agreement initiative was embraced by the WB leaders at EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia to envisage the roaming free regime for Western Balkans.

Governments of Western Balkans, with us, the RCC as facilitator, and European Commission assisting in the process, have worked tirelessly for the past year on

this agreement⁴, which once signed, means taking the measure or immeasurable benefits of one policy whose success does not stand only at further reduction up to zero costs of roaming (2021) for the WB region, but in treating citizens of this region fairly and equally, setting also the process of reduction of roaming prices between the Western Balkans and the European Union.

It means you would be able to speak, SMS or surf more, wherever in the region you find yourself in, and pay much less. No more worries about making sure that your data is off when you cross the border.

From an economic perspective it means a huge deal for all six economies in the region – it connects businesses to businesses faster and cheaper, it connects workers to their potential employers easily, it is a feature that attract tourists as they can not only visit and enjoy the stay at our numerous cultural or adventure tourism sites but can also share their experiences easily.

Besides bringing the positive effects to our region it also brings the reason for all of us to understand that Europe is a mind-set and European integration should augur and encompass real transformation of our region. In the world in which the future is, dim and misty, at best, but more likely uncertain we need to increase the ownership of regional cooperation.

Any chance not taken here and now as a serious sign of ownership on our future, is a chance missed. As Pierre Bourdieu articulated, “to design the future, a hold on the present is needed.”

Since the present-day commitment stands in the way of the next day opportunities, it is high time to deliver together, with a shared vision of a collective mission, embraced by default that this region is our home.

Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is an organisation that promotes regional cooperation with the purpose of European integration of South East Europe

⁴ The new Regional Roaming Agreement is part of the deliverables in the area of Connectivity of the WB Multi-annual Action Plan for the Regional Economic Area (MAP REA) that the region’s leaders committed to at the WB Summit in Trieste in July 2017 and the priority agenda endorsed at the 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Sofia. It is also in this context that the Second Western Balkans (WB) Digital Summit is to take place on 4-5 April 2019 in Belgrade, Serbia.