

## **In Focus: Western Balkans' great progress transitioning into a digital economy**

### **The Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans**

In 2018, the EU launched the Digital Agenda in Sofia, Bulgaria at the [Digital Assembly](#). The agenda, one of the flagships of the EU strategy for the Western Balkans, aims to support the transition of the region into a digital economy.

“Bridging the digital gap between countries of the Western Balkans and the members of the European Union is the goal of the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans,” noted the Commissioner of the Digital Economy and Society at the time, Mariya Gabriel.

The Commission, together with Ministers from six Western Balkan partners – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia – committed to investing in broadband connectivity, increasing cybersecurity, trust and digitisation of industry, strengthening the digital economy and society, and boosting research and innovation as part of digital transition. Such investments are expected to bring economic growth, the creation of jobs and improved services for citizens living in the region.

### **Progress made**

The region has made headway on several of their digital actions.

From the 1st of July 2019, there was a substantial reduction in mobile roaming charges for citizens and businesses in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia thanks to the [all-inclusive Western Balkan Roaming Agreement](#). Calls became eight times cheaper and the cost for data dropped on average from €3/MB to €0.20/MB.

Mariya Gabriel said: *“The regional roaming agreement is an important signal of tangible regional cooperation and integration and I am satisfied that the European Commission was able to support this process with expertise gained from our own experience in introducing the EU’s ‘roam like at home’ rules.”*

Recognising the importance of digital skills to support the digital transformation, including the role of women in ICT, participants of the Digital Summit in 2019 in Belgrade agreed to support and promote the [Declaration on Gender-Balanced Company Culture](#) throughout the Western Balkans and the participation in the [EU Network for Women in Digital](#).

Adding to this, primary and secondary schools in the region were encouraged to participate in [EU Code week, 2019](#) as a way to bring programming and related technology skills to people of all ages. According to reports, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo\* more than doubled their activities compared to 2018.

Supporting the deployment of high capacity digital networks and the achievement of a Gigabit Society, including the establishment of Broadband Competence Offices, the European Union has made available several [funding and technical assistance](#) instruments. These aim to help with the design and implementation of broadband programmes and projects in the Western Balkans. This included € 30 million in EU grants for the deployment of broadband infrastructure in the region to mobilise strategic investments and foster socio-economic growth.

### **Looking towards the future**

The Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is organising the first regional [online Balkathon](#). RCC is seeking innovative solutions in smart tourism, digital learning platforms and online payments solutions with the aim of helping citizens and businesses in the region recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The RCC will support the best ideas for innovative digital solutions’ development with € 10 000.

# FOCUS ARTICLE

Further to this, there was an open call for session proposals for the Smarter Conference. This conference is co-organised by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre and RSA Europe, and will hold a [webinar series](#) that will look at connecting grand societal challenges with local goals in place-based innovation policy. The webinars will take place in September 2020.

The [STARTUP 3 project](#), also had an open call for innovators to participate in their Business and Growth Programme this year. Its vision is to build a smart spaces ecosystem which fosters deep tech startups & SMEs to scale and capture new opportunities for funding and business expansion.

The [3rd Western Balkans Digital Summit](#) was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This summit aims to showcase good practices in the Western Balkans, highlighting the achievements of the Digital Agenda as well as exploring opportunities to build partnerships with the private sector. Notifications for a new date will be sent in due course through the usual official channels.

[Click here](#) for more information on actions supporting the Digital Agenda for the Balkans.

June 2020