EU lawmakers end mobile roaming charges

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European lawmakers on Tuesday approved an end to loathed mobile phone roaming charges in the EU by 2017 and adopted rules to ensure open internet access.

"This abolition of roaming surcharges has been long awaited by

everybody: ordinary people, start-ups, SMEs and all kinds of organisations," said Pilar del Castillo, the Spanish MEP who helped steer the legislation through the European Parliament.

Roaming charges vary enormously between telecoms operators and many users have ended up paying exorbitant rates—often without knowing in advance—to make calls when travelling within the 28-nation European Union.

MEPs had before them a series of amendments to a telecoms package endorsed by EU member states earlier this year but they rejected them all, allowing the accord to go through unchanged without a vote.

Also included were rules to ensure what is known as "net neutrality," meaning unfettered access to the Internet, although critics said they do not go far enough.

Earlier this year, the US telecoms regulator put in place "open Internet" rules to prevent operators offering different rates of access depending on fees or the services offered.

The EU rules are similar but they do offer some leeway to operators to market different services but on condition this "does not have an impact on general internet quality."

A parliament statement said the new rules require internet providers to "treat all traffic equally" unless directed otherwise by the authorities, for example to prevent network congestion or combat cyber-attacks.

Any such measures must be "transparent, non-discriminatory and proportionate," and may not last for longer than necessary, it added.

"Thanks to this agreement, Europe will also become the only region in

the world which legally guarantees open internet and net neutrality," del Castillo told parliament in the eastern French city of Strasbourg.

"The principle of net neutrality will be applied directly in the 28 member states. It also ensures that we will not have a two-speed internet," she was quoted as saying in the statement.

Critics said the new rules were welcome but more should be done, especially on internet access so as to ensure that smaller companies are not crowded out by their larger peers.

Monique Goyens, head of the European Consumer Organisation, said that while "access to the open Internet is now a legal right for all EU consumers ... deficiencies remain."

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