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Press Release

Digital Society discussion event

## Need for education on the topic of "router freedom" remains high

2 July 2021 • This summer, the new Austrian Telecommunications Act will set the course for potential router freedom, and it will become clear whether or not consumers in Austria will be able to decide for themselves which terminal device they use on their internet connection. To mark this occasion, the Digital Society invited participants to a discussion event, which was attended by representatives of providers and the RTR regulatory authority, in addition to the Alliance of Telecommunications Terminal Equipment Manufacturers (VTKE). It turned out that there is still a need for clarification with regard to the consequences of the ISP lock/compulsory routers for consumers.

On 22 June 2021, the Digital Society hosted an online discussion on "Privacy, convenience, (network) security - Is router freedom coming?" In addition to Digital Society Vice President Roland Giersig and Dr. Gerd Thiedemann from the VTKE, the expert panel also included RTR Managing Director Dr. Klaus Steinmaurer, Alexander Stock, CTO at A1 Telekom Austria, and Harald Kapper, Managing Partner of internet service provider Kapper Network-Communications.

In her role as moderator, Barbara Steinbrenner from *Die Presse* newspaper noted that the political guidelines for the definition of the network termination point will be of decisive importance when it comes to the question of whether consumers will be allowed to use their own device on their internet connection in the future. The network termination point is the point at which the operator's network ends and that of the customer begins. In other EU countries it is already regulated that the network of the provider ends at the passive (no current/power) socket on the wall and that end customers can therefore determine for themselves which end device they use.

### Cascading compulsory devices and chosen devices is not router freedom

Without clear legal regulation of the network termination point, some providers interpret their own modem as the network termination point. It's only behind this compulsory device that customers can operate their own end device that meets their individual requirements. In these cases, two devices must be operated by the end customer, which, in the opinion of the VTKE, makes neither ecological nor economical sense, since one device would be sufficient. In addition, this means it is often not possible to use all of the chosen router's functions. Cascading a compulsory and a chosen device is not the same as actual free choice of terminal equipment.

### **Paragraph 49 will determine the decision**

Should paragraph 49 of the new Telecommunications Act - as per the current draft - contain the RTR's authorization to issue ordinances with regard to the definition of the location of the network termination point, this would merely be an "optional" provision, emphasized Dr. Klaus Steinmaurer during the discussion. The RTR would first have to evaluate whether regulation is necessary with regard to the location of the network termination point. Against this background (that according to the current situation, the RTR will be responsible for defining the network termination point) this means that future router freedom in Austria is anything but certain.

### **Disclosure of provider specifications**

For each (access) technology, there are specifications and standards that ensure interoperability between the end device and the provider network. Network operators are already required to publish additional technical properties of the respective network in so-called "interface specifications". As a representative of terminal equipment manufacturers, Dr. Gerd Thiedemann repeatedly emphasized that the interoperability between the provider network and privately purchased terminal equipment, which had been questioned by RTR and network operators, is guaranteed. In addition to the well-established standardization of network access technologies, the interface specifications of the network operators are also necessary for this. This information enables manufacturers to provide interface-compliant telecommunication terminal equipment on the market that is interoperable with the respective network. An increase in interference or security issues is then not to be expected when there is free choice of terminal equipment. RTR's managing director Steinmaurer asked the network operators whether there was anything to be said against publishing their interface specifications. The fact is, however, that network operators are already required to publish the specifications of their network access interfaces under currently applicable Austrian law (cf. § 16 TKG 2003 and § 7 TKG draft).

### **The crucial question of support**

One point of contention in the discussion was also the topic of customer service and support. The best possible customer service and support was central to both RTR and A1 Telekom. However, free choice of terminal equipment does not conflict with this service claim. This is because, similar to mobile communications, in the case of router freedom people in Austria can decide between the "all-round carefree package" including a terminal device and provider support and their own terminal device, for which the respective manufacturer then offers its own customer service, such as a service hotline that customers can contact.

### **Majority of Austrians would like to see an end to compulsory routers**

With the exception of Dr. Gerd Thiedemann, the panelists were convinced that most Austrian end users are largely indifferent to whether or not they have freedom of choice over the terminal device on their broadband connection. However, a recent representative survey commissioned by VTKE



member AVM shows just how important it is for Austrians to have free choice of terminal equipment, including for internet access.

Almost two out of three consumers in Austria (62%) find it "important" or even "very important" that their internet or network provider should no longer be able to make devices mandatory.

### **Free choice of terminal does not mean you have to use your own device**

It is therefore all the more important that the unique opportunity to define the network termination point with the new Telecommunications Act precisely at the "connection socket at the line" is seized. This is the only way to guarantee true router freedom in Austria. Whether an individual user uses this freedom or prefers to continue using a device from their provider will in the future be up to them. However, an end to compulsory routers would ensure that end customers can use the terminal device best suited to their individual needs.

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### **About the VTKE**

As an association of European manufacturers of telecommunications equipment, the VTKE represents the common interests of the companies and their customers. The Alliance was founded in 2013 with the aim of preserving the successes of the liberalization of the telecommunications market and today has more than 20 member companies. Find out more at [www.vtke.eu](http://www.vtke.eu)



