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PRESS RELEASE

Freedom to choose your router in Belgium: what are we still waiting for?

Antwerp, 27 January 2023 – Will you soon be allowed to use your own modem? If it were up to VTKE, the European alliance of telecommunications terminal equipment manufacturers, then yes, you will! After all, the benefits are massive – just ask our neighbours to the north, because the Dutch have enjoyed “router freedom” for a year now. What’s the state of play in Belgium?

What does “router freedom” or “modem freedom” even mean?

Having a free choice of modem means that consumers can decide for themselves whether they want to use their own modem or the one supplied by their Internet provider. At the moment, end customers in Belgium are forced to use the modem given to them by their provider. Needless to say, this device will not always meet their requirements, as Lucas Lasota, Router Freedom Coordinator at the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE), explains: “Network operators impose restrictions on end users by prohibiting them from using their own routers or modems. Just like how you are allowed to choose your own smartphone in Europe these days regardless of who your provider is, you should be able to do the same with your router or modem.”

Belgium lagging behind

In 2014, Finland became the first country in Europe to allow customers to pick their own modem. Germany followed suit in 2016 and Italy in 2018, and people in the Netherlands have also enjoyed this freedom of choice since last year.

In Belgium, the BIPT (Belgian Institute for Postal Services and Telecommunications) is currently weighing up a similar move. At EU level, however, Regulation 2015/2120, which covers free modem choice, was adopted as long ago as 2015. A survey* has also shown that 77 per cent of Belgians believe that it is important to have a choice. As many as 24 per cent use their own device if their network operator permits it, while 62 per cent stick with their provider’s.

There have been some signs of progress in recent months, however, with the BIPT publishing an initial draft definition of the network termination point in October 2022. By establishing the network termination point as the “connecting socket to the line”, the draft would allow Belgian users to choose their own terminal device for all broadband technologies (fibre, cable and DSL). The BIPT does not see any technical reasons why freedom to choose one’s own modem cannot be granted.

Your modem, just how you need it

Being able to choose their own modem brings users manifold benefits. They can pick out a device themselves that meets their requirements 1:1 in terms of functionality, security, updates and many other factors such as incorporating smart home applications or certain security specifications. If they are free to choose, they can find a router that offers them precisely these features. Another aspect is the open competition that the move creates and that results in a wider selection of increasingly



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innovative and affordable products becoming available. “A ‘one-size-fits-all’ business model only allows the end user to benefit from a small handful of innovations,” a VTKE spokesman explains. “By contrast, the free market encourages innovation and gives users the power to decide based purely on their own needs and budget.”

** Survey commissioned by VTKE and conducted by the Kantar market research institute between 3 and 7 February 2022. Representative group in each country, age: 16–65*