

Commission criticized over EU-wide emergency number

BY MARTIN BANKS

THE European Commission has come under fire for the “unacceptable way” it handled the introduction of an EU-wide emergency call number, which if promoted efficiently, could save up to 5,000 lives per year.

The number – 112 – was introduced to help Europeans get aid from emergency services when they are in another member state.

But the European Emergency Number Association says that 13 years after its introduction, there is still widespread ignorance that the number even exists. It urges the European Ombudsman to investigate its complaint that the Commission has been negligent on the number’s promotion.

Olivier Paul-Morandini, founder

of the association, said: “EU expansion has turned the Union into the biggest trading bloc in the world – but also probably one of the least protected in case of accident. If no action is taken in the field of 112, enlargement of the EU will only increase the frustrations of its citizens.”

According to the association, only one in every five EU citizens are aware of the number even though research shows that 65% of them feel unsafe while travelling in another member state. It also points to a recent survey in Portugal which found that calls in English (29%) and French (20%) had a significantly higher probability of not receiving assistance than those in Portuguese (15%) or Spanish (15%).

Paul-Morandini estimates that more effective use of the number could save the emergency services €5 billion.

“Every year there are more than 40 million emergency calls from mobile phones of which 3.5 million get a bad location information, resulting in the emergency services losing precious time searching for the victim. A further 2.5 million calls give no location information at all, meaning help cannot be sent to the victim. If more people knew about the emergency call number they would not have to use mobiles for such calls and would be more likely to get assistance.”

The association says nine countries – Austria, the UK, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy and Spain – have failed to transpose the directive which obliges member states to inform citizens about the number and locate the person calling the number.

martinbanks@economist.com