Universal service and '112' emergency number

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on universal service and the 112 emergency number.

Universal service: Members underline the importance of Universal Service Obligations (USOs) as a safety net for social inclusiveness where market forces alone have failed to provide citizens and businesses with basic services. They call on the Commission to provide guidelines on how best to implement and enforce Directive 2002/22/EC, as amended by Directive 2009/136/EC (Universal Service Directive or USD), avoiding market distortions and, at the same time, allowing Member States to adopt the provisions that best suit their national circumstances. Parliament states its support for the Digital Agenda?s ?Broadband for all? and calls on the Commission to give more financial support to local projects which provide digital access and to all communities which help disadvantaged groups to access technological devices by providing connections in public buildings offering free Internet access. However, making broadband availability obligatory will not automatically result in higher take-up. Parliament calls therefore on the Commission and the Member States to reinforce measures to drive demand and stimulate take-up, rather than just ensuring a connection. It also calls on the Commission to:

- complete the ongoing impact assessment and provide legislators with sound data on the existing take-up, the expected demand for and improvement of USOs through broadband, and an analysis of the most effective financing mechanism for Member States, consumers and undertakings for rolling out USOs while avoiding inefficient costs and excessive burdens;
- in parallel and in collaboration with the National Regulatory Authorities (NRAs), to monitor markets carefully to ensure that those Member States which are already able to, or wish to, provide USOs across the range of broadband technologies and speeds, are able to do so in cases of market failure without actually causing distortions in the market;
- examine the options for an even application of USOs and users? rights provisions which would assure accessibility for vulnerable groups, and especially for people with disabilities, not only through the introduction of special terminal equipment and affordable tariffs, but also through the availability of adequate information and a real choice for consumers of available services and after-sales services.

Parliament considers nevertheless that the basic provision for funding universal service, ensuring it is handled in a non-discriminatory and transparent manner, should remain in EU legislation and should be extended to cover data as well as voice obligations.

The 112 European Emergency Number: Members stress that the European 112 emergency number can be a life saving number and increases EU citizens? protection by serving as a major support system for citizens and consumers living within the Single Market. They underline the importance of ensuring the smooth operation of the 112 number throughout the Union, and regret that the European 112 emergency number is far from having reached its full potential: according to the Eurobarometer survey published in February 2011, only 26% of EU citizens can spontaneously identify 112 as the number to call for emergency services in the EU and 58% of EU citizens still disagree with the statement that people in their country are adequately informed about the existence of the 112 emergency number. Members urge the Commission and Member States to intensify their efforts to increase public awareness of the existence and use of the 112 number, namely through the development of a targeted and far-reaching communication strategy which addresses the preoccupations and queries that citizens have with regard to the mechanics of the system, and they make a number of suggestions in this regard.

Parliament regrets that Member States do not yet ensure that timely, accurate and reliable location information is provided to the 112 services. It calls on the Commission, in close cooperation with Member States, to improve significantly the accuracy and reliability of caller location information under the new EU telecoms rules and to upgrade technology with the ultimate goal of mandatory automatic localisation for all 112 calls, including those from roaming customers, within a few seconds in order to provide dispatchers and first responders with this crucial information. The Commission is asked to envisage taking action against Member States that do not fulfil their obligations in this respect. Members ask for the ICT-PSP funds indicated in the EU Budget 2009, 2010 and 2011 to be allocated to support the testing and implementation of innovative services (based on VoIP and IP-access to 112) that could be initiated through network-independent applications in anticipation of the establishment of a Next Generation 112 system in the EU.

Parliament goes on to recommend the establishment of an action programme to support experience sharing and exchange of best practices between the NRAs, Parliament emergency services and civil society organisations in the Member States, extending this exchange to organisations in EU candidate and neighbouring countries. It suggests that, to this end, a network of experts could be set up.

Lastly, Members call on the Member States and the Commission to promote the establishment of a ?reverse 112 system?, i.e. an EU-wide, universal, multilingual, accessible, simplified and efficient interconnected system for warning and alerting citizens in case of imminent or developing natural and/or man-made major emergencies and disasters of any type.