

Europe: it's all downhill from now

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The ski slopes of France, Austria, Germany, Italy and Spain may be a new battleground in the debate on the future of Europe.

Just as relation between its political leaders slide downhill faster than a Winter Olympic champion, the European Union is taking the first steps towards harmonizing rules on preventing accidents among an estimated 25m skiers and snowboarders.

Who pays for the rescue and treatment of tourists who come a cropper is proving an increasingly serious issue, according to researchers. It has been suggested there may have been 250,000 skiing accidents a year in the old 15-member EU, 90,000 in Austria alone.

A two-year project aimed at cutting the number of skiing injuries and deaths starts in September. The European Commission, which is providing 60% of the funds for the research led by Italian public health experts, hopes it will help bring in new EU-wide rules.

Claudio Detogni, project leader for BePraSA (Best Practices in Prevention of Skiing Accidents in Europe), said: "One of the problems is it involves tourists. Tourists are from different countries. Other countries do not have mountains but have a lot of citizens who are moving to the mountains".

British insurers recently warned that taking a completed E11 form to European slopes might not cover all the bills. It also reported an increase in "slope rage", with punch-ups on the piste a common cause of injuries.