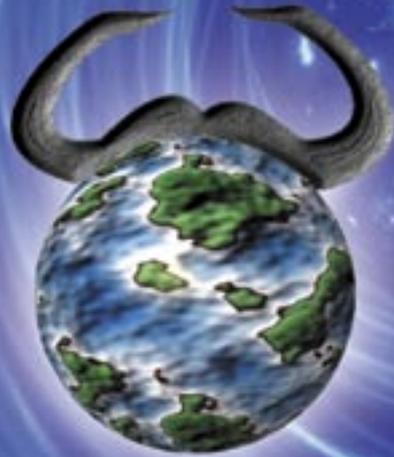


The Monthly GNU Column

BRAVE GNU WORLD

This column looks into projects and current affairs in the world of free software from the perspective of the GNU Project and the FSF. In this issue, we take a look behind the drapes at the FSFE Annual General Meeting.

BY GEORG C.F. GREVE



Welcome to a special issue of Brave GNU World focusing on the Free Software Foundation Europe (FSFE). The fourth Annual General Meeting of the FSFE took place in Vienna at the beginning of May 2005. This meeting was quite special in many ways. Not only was this the first full meeting of the European core team of the organization; it also marked the end of the European Executive's term of office. The European spin-off has now been around for four years – high time to look back at the highlights, polish the crystal ball, and peer into the future.

Battle against Software Patents

The focus of the FSFE's work continues to be the battle against the patentability of algorithms. There have been various activities at various levels. The patent battle also influences the case of Microsoft versus the European Commission.

If the community were to win its fight against software patents, and if the EU lost the case against Microsoft at the European Court, the open source devel-

oper community would not be a single penny better off. There would still be no way of ensuring the publication of interface data to achieve interoperability.

The free software community is well aware of the complexity of this issue, but

this discussion is also going on at another level, that is, in the United Nations, and more specifically, the World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS) and the World Organization for Intellectual Property (WIPO) – along

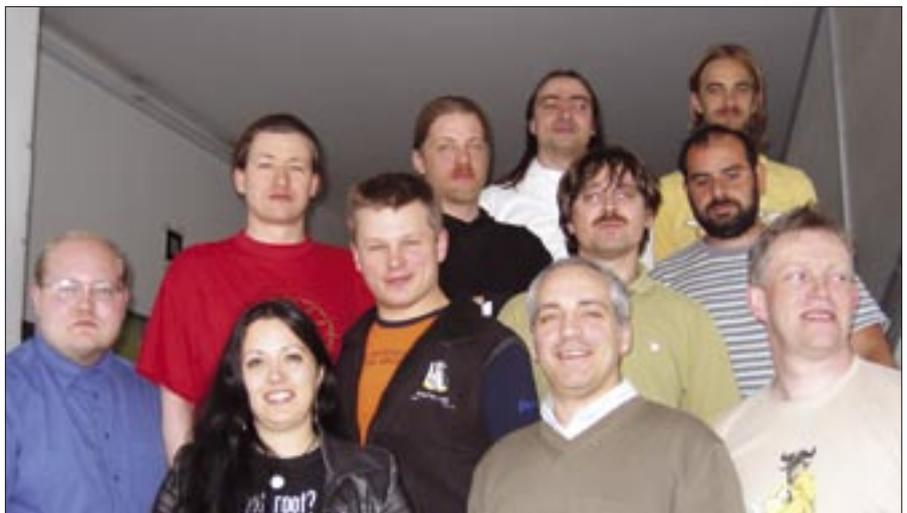


Figure 1: Some delegates who gathered for the FSFE Annual General Meeting. Rear: Jonas Öberg (Sweden), Bernhard Reiter (Germany), Georg Jakob (Austria), Reinhard Müller (Austria), Henrik Sandklef (Sweden). Middle: Georg Greve (Germany), Peter Gerwinski (Germany), Alessandro Rubini (Italy). Front: Karin Kosina (Austria), Stefano Maffulli (Italy), and Werner Koch (Germany).

with minor skirmishes at Unctad, UNDP, Unesco, and the World Bank. This process permits virtually no discussion – the influence of the free software community at European and national levels is extremely low, as evidenced by the European Copyright Directive (EUCD) and the second batch of copyright law reforms in Germany.

This prompted the FSFE to apply for accreditation as an official WIPO [8] observer, and to follow the discussions at the world summit closely [9].

A Successful Year

As in previous years, the Thursday and Friday before the weekend of the AGM were taken up with people making their way to the event, with the first discussions starting on Friday. While waiting for the formal part of the AGM to start, people spent their time analyzing and evaluating the events of the past year.

The national coordinators and other members made good use of this time. For example, Stefano Maffulli gave a detailed report on the FSFE's activities in Italy. Last year, an important "Free Software, Free Society Award" went to the Italian data protection expert, Prof. Stefano Rodata, who was one of the first to get involved with protection of digital privacy in Italy.

Henrik Sandklef talked about an organization for free culture and software, which was established recently as a cooperation between the FSFE and Creative Commons in Sweden. Georg Jakob reported on Austrian activities, focusing on the cooperation between the Linux Weeks and the work on defusing the European Commission's extremely controversial Intellectual Property Rights Enforcement Directive (IPRED). Although this directive may seem extreme in the way it criminalizes the users of p2p file sharing platforms, the original version went even farther.

The extended committee reported on its activities and gave account of the decisions taken in the last two years. The major item was international coordination, including coordination with affiliated organizations in the United States and the recently founded Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC).

The Free Software Foundation Latin America, which was announced just recently, played an important role. Georg

Greve in particular spent a lot of time at conferences in Latin America to promote cooperation and encourage exchanges.

Federico Heinz from Argentina spent some time in Europe last year and was on duty at the FSFE booth at the Linux-Tag in Karlsruhe.

The AGM approved the activities of the committee and re-elected the committee for another two-year period; Werner Koch will continue to be Head of Office, Jonas Öberg will be the Vice President, and Georg Greve will be the President of the FSFE Executive Committee.

Growing Basis

The plans, including prioritizing next year's activities, seem to be quite clear-cut, considering issues such as software patents, the Microsoft case, the second phase of the WSIS, and the process initiated with WIPO. The focus on free software in education is also important.

There are big plans for the Fellowship [10], in particular, a second meeting in or about October is being considered – including the complete FSFE team this time; there is an incomplete list at [11]. Volunteers and Fellows will be invited to the meeting, which may even include a workshop.

When and how this will be implemented depends on the available resources in every sense of the word, but there are at least preliminary plans to hold an event in Italy in October 2005. The Italian team, which is coordinated by Stefano Maffulli, will be taking care of organizing things in the next few months, so you can expect more details in the near future.

The organization will also be looking to intensify and improve the coordination of its press work in Europe. A meeting of all FSFE members and volunteers involved in press work will probably take place some time this year. Other plans concern various EU projects, including the plan to finally launch the GNU Business Network and to set up a Freedom Task Force.

Access to Knowledge

Directly following the FSFE AGM, I took a trip to London to visit a small conference entitled Access to Knowledge (a2k). A glance behind the scenes revealed a forum of very different participants, from consumer protection organizations,

through universities, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Free Software Foundation Europe, and the Society for Electronic Information in Libraries. But lobbies for musicians and authors, and even representatives of the Chilean government, also took part in the event.

The impetus for this unusual gathering was given by a suggestion put forward by Brazil and Argentina to establish a development agenda for the WIPO. There are two major topics at the current meeting: drafting an international agreement, which the participants will be presenting via the WIPO for ratification by as many countries as possible, and a global campaign designed to point to unsatisfactory states of affairs in this field.

At present, most of the details are on the Consumer Project on Technology (CPTech) website, as its director, James Packard-Love, is one of the major backers of the project; and CPTech, which was founded by consumer advocate Ralph Nader, will be taking care of coordination [12]. ■

INFO

- [1] Send ideas, comments, and questions to Brave GNU World: column@brave-gnu-world.org
- [2] GNU project homepage: <http://www.gnu.org/>
- [3] Georg's Brave GNU World homepage: <http://brave-gnu-world.org>
- [4] "We run GNU" Initiative: <http://www.gnu.org/brave-gnu-world/rungnu/rungnu.en.html>
- [5] Executive Summary 2001-2003: <http://fsfeurope.org/documents/reports/es-2003.html>
- [6] Executive Summary 2003-2005: <http://fsfeurope.org/documents/reports/es-2005.html>
- [7] Work against software patents: <http://fsfeurope.org/projects/swpat/>
- [8] WIPO reform: <http://fsfeurope.org/projects/wipo/>
- [9] UNO World Summit on the Information Society: <http://fsfeurope.org/projects/wsis/>
- [10] FSFE Fellowship: <http://www.fsfe.org>
- [11] The FSFE Team: <http://fsfeurope.org/about/team.en.html>
- [12] Access to Knowledge: <http://www.cptech.org/a2k/>
- [13] For a "World Organization for Intellectual Wealth": <http://fsfeurope.org/documents/wiwo.en.html>