

Decaying Free Software Communities

What did we do wrong and (maybe) how not to repeat it: The story of Free Software Macedonia

Why this talk?

The Free Software activities in Macedonia begun with great enthusiasm and big plans. For the first time at a conference in Macedonia someone spoke about Free Software¹. The guest was David Sugar from the Free Software Foundation, who later wrote his impressions at the Linux Journal website².

It's been a long time since, and that is why at the beginning I think it's important to say that in the past six or seven years a lot of good things have happened in Macedonia regarding Free Software. I will mention some of them, but I think that the other more focused talks will give a better overview of the projects and their outcomes.

Nevertheless, the topic of this essay is dark and ugly, and it is so with a reason. At the time of writing, the most populated mailing list³ maintained by Free Software Macedonia, with a general topic on Free Software and the local community has few regular posters. The weekly community gathering named "*share knowledge*" is a meeting point for just 5 or 6 people. Volunteers are less and less interested in localizing Free Software into Macedonian language. Things seem to be in bad shape.

Short History of Major Events

The non-profit Free Software Macedonia was formed in late 2002⁴. It grew out of the community of people who used GNU/Linux and contributed in various ways. Their goal was to do something more with Free Software in Macedonia.

The main focus of the organizations in the early days was localization. FSM with help from other companies and NGOs organized few translation marathons. Some of the software that was localized, such as OpenOffice.org 1.0, was the first software of that type ever available in Macedonian language.

Then along came politics. In 2005 the Macedonian Government signed a strategic partnership agreement with Microsoft⁵. They paid a lot of money for licensing and ignored all of the appeals from Free Software Macedonia about looking at other options, even turning a deaf ear to the availability of the localized OpenOffice.org.

Despite this, the localization process never really stopped. Along with the office suite, other applications were translated, such as the Mozilla suite, and later Firefox, as well as KDE and GNOME. Still none of this was really

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interesting for the Government. However, the organization managed to catch the eye of the international free software community with its Free Software Flood⁶.

Almost at the same time, the organization had its first problems. It started to become very difficult to gather enough people to have a meeting, or reach a decision. This led to a change of structure and FSM aligned to the European Free Software Foundation by accepting its constitution and planed more effective work.

Some of the international recognition pushed the organization closer to the big NGO players in the country. Things started to get more serious in 2007 when we started working on a project with UNDP Macedonia⁷ and later with UNDP Albania⁸. And when the Government changed the too obvious support for Microsoft was gone as well. New plans for using Edubuntu in schools and open standards in government communication started to emerge and are now being implemented. The localized software is used throughout these projects.

There wasn't much much time for celebrating though. In 2008 USAID got involved in the Edubuntu project and offered to financially support the localization. The representatives of the American agency didn't even want to listen to FSM suggestions⁹ and of course didn't accept any of it. According to many involved in one way or another, the competition was carried out in an nontransparent and non fair way. The result is almost complete abandonment of localizations projects by volunteers.

All FSM's failures & some workarounds

1. Funding

Free Software Macedonia never managed to get any funding for its projects from the usual NGO donors. No matter where we applied, we got a big "No". Interestingly though, other NGOs managed to get the funding for similar, if not the same, projects.

As an exception, I must mention the funding from the Government. A fraction from our project and budged was granted to the organization for the purpose of localizing free software, just months after the USAID fiasco. Whether these two events are connected is an interesting question.

Nevertheless, the organizations was rarely without any money to fund some of its activities. This was mostly due to our participation on other projects (such as UNDP led ones), where some of the members got honorarium for their work, which they later donated for the general activities of the organization.

However, this was never enough, and even today FSM is without permanent office space. Most of the time its events are held in a garage that belongs to one of the members. The equipment used for the websites and other Internet infrastructure is one old Pentium III, and our main asset is a LCD projector bought with the help of donations from the public.

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2. Representation

Who or what is Free Software Macedonia, and what do we do? This is the most common question we are asked on every meeting and we have to answer it over and over again, and most of the time to the same people. Everyone seem to conveniently forget everything they learned from the previous encounters with the organization and its members.

Sometimes the ignorance goes even further. On one predominantly Free Software project led by a foreign agency, we were asked how can we possibly help with their project. Of course the obvious overlap of the name of the organization and the free software project was not enough to make the connection that it could be useful if FSM got involved.

So, we never managed to create a “name” or something that will be good enough sign to always think of our non-profit when when you are considering your next FLOSS project. This for sure is a big problem, but on the other hand FSM is one of the rare grass roots organizations in Macedonia. Most of the “famous” organizations actually are part of some umbrella organization, and of course this takes us back to the funding failure.

3. Community

At the end, the biggest problem in my view is the shrinking of the community. New people rarely join and many of the activists have just moved on. The organization and the community as a whole failed to attract new people. From the inside it seems that there are no barriers for entry, but we never really bothered to explore this issue and to see what is keeping people away.