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Report

Focus group on June 24th, 2021 on institutional recommendations for future structuring of the EU policy office in Brussels

Executive summary:
- *The participants of the focus group recommend an institutional solution for the EU policy office that would include an independent legal entity, which operations could be run by a chapter: provided as an in-kind support of Wikimedia Germany.*
- *The question of fundraising needs further discussion: if it involves mainly applying for the EU grants, the office should consider incorporating a position of fundraiser officer. Otherwise it is recommended to seek out ways in which the chapters with extensive expertise could provide support in this domain.*
- *The discussion proved, yet again, that a broader, "identity-related" discussion needs to happen among the European community of Wikimedians. Issues of scope of the movement (geographical versus political definitions of Europe, etc.), flow of support, focus of policy priorities need to be clarified and agreed upon to provide a premise for further strategic discussions within the movement.*

Objectives and agenda

The goal of the focus group was to discuss diverse institutional solutions for the policy office based in Brussels. It was held in connection with the qualitative study of the EU policy activities conducted in the spring of 2021 (33 interviews with the Wikimedia community members and partners/diverse stakeholders).

The participants of the focus group, Executive Directors of five high-capacity organizations, engaged in conversation regarding the current institutional setting, as well as prospective desired directions, in which development could be possible.

The focus group discussion was divided into two sessions.
The first session concerned discussion regarding current institutional setting for policy work, i.e. "The Brussels Office". Participants reviewed potentials and limitations of current setting (outline provided to them in a separate document), and also discussed values and strengths they identify currently.

Formal representation and branding of Brussels operations
It came as a surprise to the participants that the Brussels office has not got legitimacy to state the official policy of the movement. This realisation, together with the issues of visibility (lack of a brand in advocacy and policy work) were discussed by all the participants. It is safe to say that this general issue strongly inspired the ultimate recommendations discussed in the second session.

Joint work with the chapters
Another issue discussed was the general characteristics of the Brussels Office's dynamic that posed questions regarding the "support flow": other than Anna and Dimi providing support, it is also needed that chapters become more proactive in performing the role of supporters. This led to a general question for the future: how to work out a synergy so that capacities (of chapters and the policy office) add up and not weaken or depend on one another.

Geographic scope
Another general question concerned the geographical versus EU-centers implications for the movement in Europe. The need to clarify these issues seems to be more and more urgent. It matters in order to effectively strategise the policy work serving the movement, yet was not continued this time due to time constraints.

Identity and values

Participants pointed at diverse values they consider critical when discussing the Brussels Office in its current capacity — they involved both the assets recognised by the discussants, and the questions to keep in mind regarding the office's characteristics. Among them were:

- agility and responsiveness of the team (Anna and Dimi)
- involvement of the team
- strong presence, serving as a natural gravitational center for numerous chapters
- togetherness provided in the discussions and the mode of operating
- making use of existing structures
- ensuring that the setting of the Office is not precarious for people hired (as it used to be, according to a discussant)
- the need to discuss how far should the Office continue its involvement and what policy areas should be left to other partners.

The second session involved participants working in small groups, reviewing two potential institutional settings for the Brussels Office: one involving expanding capacity of the current setting, with German Wikimedia being still the supporter on the operational level and another one — turning the Brussels Office into an independent legal entity, with both operations and management/program activity held autonomously (both examples outlined in a separate document shared with the participants).

Participants were to discuss possible settings that would best carry the values they had determined as important to them in the current setting.

Disadvantages of an independent structure

It was widely agreed that the variant proposing an independent policy unit with a separate legal entity and operations is not a favoured option. The discussants were pointing at the generally fragmented character of the European movement, as well as the challenges and threats awaiting for a new institution that would slow down the program-driven activity at the cost of drowning into operations. Moreover, the general

need to better use existing structures — rather than creating new ones — was articulated as another argument against individually run operations.

Advantages of an independent structure

On the other hand, many participants raised the question of a legal entity for the Brussels Office as a convenient and important step in both increasing visibility in approaching the EU institutions (brand positioning) and securing financial sustainability (grant writing).

Additional role in the team

The participants discussed fundraising and communication as a potentially merged additional role in the team that could help keep the office "light-footed" and yet provide critical services that were already pointed out as needed by numerous chapters during the evaluation research.

Objectives of fundraising

A question raised to be further discussed is the type of fundraising needed the most: whether it is about applying for grants or getting undedicated funds. Determining these proportions may affect the decision regarding best solutions for the Brussels Office: either a fundraising officer position added to the team (in case that acquiring new grants is considered as a major fundraising effort needed for the Brussels Office), or a way to get support from one of the chapters most successful in raising undedicated funds (Switzerland and Germany were mentioned as examples).

Values informed the outcome

While some discussants believed that the values articulated in the first session serve more to determine the general character of the Brussels Office, others suggested that they indeed affect the preferred institutional approaches for the future. It seems that a recommended solution: a separate legal entity with operations handled by a chapter was strongly affected by the values expressed in the first session: agility, light-footed-ness, responsiveness, and strong presence within the European movement.

Other comments

It seems that there has been the need to address general "identity issues" and have a look at the "Europeanness" of the Wikimedia movement on the continent. The issue continues to re-emerge in diverse contexts — and it is settling these issues that has to precede further discussions on policy work and advocacy work.

Another theme re-emerging in the focus group discussion is the network of relations within the movement, articulated as "support flow". How can the chapters benefit from one another's expertise, what activities, knowledge, and experiences can be shared and made accessible to numerous chapters, without the risk of centralisation — these questions emerged already during the interviews within the qualitative study as well as during the focus group. Steering this discussion process would benefit the structuring of the EU policy as well as the European movement at large.