

24 September 2007

By: Marius Oiaga, Technology News Editor

Windows
Microsoft

[Linux to Finally Kill Windows in Europe?](#)

Customer choice must be promoted, but not with absurd strategies

In the future, Linux might very well have a fighting chance on European soil, against Windows. Following Microsoft's Senior Vice President and General Counsel, Brad Smith did not rush to anticipate a worry free outcome for the Redmond company over the pond. Although the dismissal of the company's appeal by the Court of First Instance of Luxembourg, was a clear indication of the full support of both the European Commission's 2004 antitrust ruling against Microsoft, and of the €497 million financial penalty, Smith argued that additional third-party claims could follow. In this context, the [Globalisation Institute](#), "a think tank developing policy options on issues related to the single market, environment, regulation, international development, and trade liberalization" in the European Union offered Competition Commissioner Neelie Kroes the suggestion that all original equipment manufacturers as well as system builders in Europe, renounce the Windows operating system in favor of nothing. This is obviously a plea for the open source Linux platform. However, camouflaged behind this initiative designed to promote consumer choice of Linux over Windows, is the actual need to cut back Microsoft's grip over the operating system market. "Neelie Kroes, the European Commissioner for Competition, has suggested that in a competitive market there should be "a significant drop in market share" for Microsoft Windows, highlighting her frustration that the operating system market does not seem to foster competitive spirits. Examining a more central issue - the lack of choice in desktop operating systems - is now needed if the Commission is to encourage a marketplace in which Ms Kroes' vision of thriving competition is enacted. This briefing argues for the Commission's thinking on Microsoft's operating system monopoly to go to its logical conclusion and support the "unbundling" of Windows from desktop computers," the report states. The Windows operating system is currently installed on over 94% of the world's machines, leaving the vast majority of the unoccupied percentages to Apple's Mac computers and something under 1% to Linux. Essentially, the Globalisation Institute has put forward the proposition that Windows be unbundled from every computer sold in Europe, and leave nothing instead. Now this strategy is naïve to say the least. The fact of the matter is that end users should be getting an active choice in the operating system they want. No customer should be forced to pay and adopt one operating system over the other just because it is preloaded by default on a machine. Still, selling barren computers is simply a bad idea. Already original equipment manufacturers such as Dell, HP and Acer are offering Linux preinstalled on computers along with Windows-based machines. This is a much more healthy approach than selling PCs with no operating system at all. First off, end users have a choice between buying a PC or a Mac. And secondly, with all the major OEMs delivering both Linux and Windows, consumers have can further choose their operating system. "Microsoft might argue that the measure would increase piracy, but it is worth noting that Windows already has "software activation", which prevents users from installing the product on multiple computers. Companies like Adobe and Symantec are very successful without needing bundling to prevent piracy. The threat to Microsoft is not that price-sensitive consumers would pirate, but that they would switch to lower-cost or free alternatives," argues the report. Well, despite having the Windows Genuine Advantage and the Activation mechanisms in place, the global piracy rate is still over 35% as of 2006. Selling machines without an operating system would only help increase this percentage. The fact of the matter is that a lot of Linux distributions are delivered free. But so are pirated copies of Windows. And end users have generally opted to use pirated materials. The fact that Linux has a market share of well under 1% despite the immense cost advantages it offers over

Windows is a clear indication that piracy will only thrive in the scenario envisioned by the Globalization Institute. Statistics released by the [Business Software Alliance](#) reveal the following piracy rates across European markets: Denmark 25%, Austria 26%, Switzerland 26%, Sweden 26%, Finland 27%, United Kingdom 27%, Belgium 27% and Germany 28%. And then again there are countries at the opposite poll, such as Romania with a piracy rate of well over 70-80%. In a recent move to curb Chinese piracy, the Beijing government ordered that all computers in the country be sold with an operating system preinstalled, either Windows or Linux. "The Windows monopoly imposes an extra cost on virtually every EU business, as the price of operating systems would drop in a more competitive market. Moreover, there are other costs: some argue that support costs are higher for Windows than other operating systems, particularly when one considers security vulnerabilities that have plagued Windows systems. Encouraging competition would help EU businesses, lowering their costs", the Globalisation Institute states. According to Symantec and its [Internet Security Threat Report - Trends for January-June 07](#), in the first half of 2007, Microsoft patched a total of 38 vulnerabilities in its Windows operating system. Linux distributor Red Hat plugged three times more security holes in its open source operating system in the same period. Now how will the costs associated with deploying patches for 91 vulnerabilities in Red Hat Linux be inferior to that of installing updates addressing 38 vulnerabilities in Windows? The Globalization Institute's math is way off to say the least. And to tap it all off, the Globalization Institute considers all users technical savvy to the point where all of them will be able to deploy an operating system, any operating system on an empty machine. "We do not believe this would add complexity for consumers. Consumers would simply be asked to insert an operating system DVD when they first turn on a new computer, which would then automatically configure itself," the Institute claims. Last I checked, things did not go this streamlined, but hey... When it comes down to promoting diversity and innovations, and customer choice, while there are but a few versions of Windows, and even less of Mac OS X, there are over [1,000 official distributions of Linux](#). Will a certain Linux vendor be preferred over the others? Wouldn't such a move create a monopoly in the Linux world, with some top developers such as Novell, Red Hat or Canonical getting the lion's share of the market while the others are pushed to the background? And who will test and give out usability certifications for over 1,000 different distributions of Linux on all the computers shipped by the OEMs? Does this mean that instead of one sticker that says Works with Windows, users will be able to buy machines with over 1,000 stickers in accordance with all the Linux distributions tested?