20 November 2020

To The EuroPython Society,

It is with a heavy heart that I am writing to **formally resign from both the Board of Directors and the EuroPython Society**, to prevent any question of conflict of interest. I publicly outline my reasons below out of my grave concern for the interests and success of the Society.

The sole reason for my resignation is rooted in the toxic leadership style of Marc-Andre Lemberg. Over the last several months, I have observed a pattern of controlling behavior in his style, and in the often subtle contemptuous treatment he shows members of the Board and volunteers. Many have come to just accept this as "just Marc-Andre", and decide to "work around him" rather than risk a conflict by confronting this very real problem.

This need not be taken as "my word against his". All my exchanges with Marc-Andre have been in Telegram chat, of which I have logs, and in board meetings which were recorded.

Personally, I was attacked and belittled only for the following suggestions:

* Splitting the agenda document for board meetings, so we have one document per term, instead of one document for all board meetings in the entire history of the society. This was due to the document's sheer size, which can be difficult to load on some hardware and internet connections. When Marc-Andre insisted this was not necessary, I dropped the topic.

* Using DKIM and DMARC on the email servers, as is standard, including for mailing lists, to prevent our emails from getting classified as spam. Marc-Andre insisted these protocols are unreliable, unnecessary, and incompatible with mailing lists — all of which are provably false assertions, as even the Python Mailing List uses both. I quietly dropped my proposal at that time to prevent an escalation of the conflict. Unfortunately, this email server misconfiguration has an ongoing negative impact on the Society, as emails to potential sponsors and other recipients continue to be lost to spam filters.

* Using the UTC time zone when determining and listing event times. I believe this was particularly important given the international nature of the conference this year, and the potential for confusion regarding time zones; we saw some of this confusion in EuroPython 2020. Marc-Andre insisted on presenting his own interpretation of this to the board himself, rather than allowing me to be heard out directly, and I had to push for my original proposal to be even heard.

* Adding priorities to the task list — ultimately just 'Now' and 'Later' after some discussion — as well as a few tags, to help set priority and importance. As it stood initially, the task lists had only two statuses: 'To Do' and 'Done'. I cited my disability as one one several reasons I thought the change would be important, as I literally could not use the task list as it was. I attempted to present my idea informally in chat, in keeping with the spirit of the board, but Marc-Andre shot it down. When I asked for the feedback of other board members, Marc-Andre insisted I add it to the agenda and present during a board meeting. During this meeting, he further monopolized the discussion and belittled the validity of my concerns. At the conclusion of that meeting, he rebuked me for wasting the board's time, and insisted I should have used chat instead. He later stated open resentment towards me in chat for making the proposal at all.

In all cases, I presented my idea as calmly and informally as I could, and asked for input. I was open to modifying these ideas, especially the latter. In all cases, Marc-Andre immediately and strongly expressed a dislike of hearing the idea out at all. I have observed him respond this way to many other suggestions and proposals, including ones from returning board members.

Most recently, Marc-Andre stated that he felt "people were working against him" (please take note of the plural in his accusation). He admitted on one occasion to openly provoking me in chat, by grossly misrepresenting my agreement with another board member's idea, and then baselessly accused me of demanding others implement my ideas "just to make me happy." Again, this appears in chat logs.

As a volunteer configuring Discord for EuroPython 2020, and helping create the workflow for onboarding speakers, I felt like a welcome member of a team. I could have discussions, make suggestions, and ask questions without fear of being treated with contempt. However, since joining the Board of Directors, I have not felt welcomed or wanted as a member by Marc-Andre Lemberg. It become quickly evident that my knowledge and experience did not entitle me to basic respect, nor would my input be welcomed. I don't mind disagreement, modification of my ideas, or even setting my ideas aside given more information. I do, however, believe I have a right to make suggestions and have these conversations without fear of being belittled, attacked, or dismissed out-of-hand before others have a chance to weigh in. **As it stands, the Board of Directors is a toxic work environment, and it is having serious negative effects on my mental health.**

I have heard on numerous occasions about the "unreliability" of volunteers for EuroPython, and how Marc-Andre Lemberg has always picked up the slack for everything. This is puzzling to me, as I have served with volunteer organizations across many fields for more than half of my life. If the stories I hear of many volunteers quitting or not showing up are even partially true, either the EuroPython Society has unusually poor fortunes in regard to volunteers, or other causes of their departure must be considered. If volunteers are treated with half the subtle and systematic contempt I've personally observed Marc-Andre bestow on board members, myself notwithstanding, it is little wonder. His consistent anti-social manner of communication seems calculated. It is alarmingly difficult to spot on close inspection of a single incident, but shows a clear and unmistakable pattern of abuse when all incidents are considered together. When confronted, he dodges with varying claims of victimization or misunderstanding, although his patterns never seem to change.

I have far more lengthy reasoning, supported by my experience in intercultural communication and community management, but I do not wish to take up time explaining all the fine details of my concerns.

The reason I am resigning is to eliminate all possible concerns of conflict-of-interest in the following two matters:

1. Marc-Andre Lemberg's conduct towards me has violated the EuroPython Code of Conduct. I have been bullied and harassed. This letter is, therefore, also a formal CoC complaint. I reasonably expect Marc-Andre Lemberg to recuse himself, and for the other three members of the CoC to appoint a fourth board member in his place to handle this complaint. I would be hesitant to testify — my mental health already being affected severely by this — but I submit the Telegram chat logs from November 15 as evidence. If there is concern of these chat logs having been altered, I may be contacted by the board for my exported copy of the chat. Violation of CoC is always alarming, but even more so from the Chair of the Board and a member of the CoC Committee.

2. Marc-Andre Lemberg's habit of shooting down suggestions from others, however passive-aggressively, is an endangerment to the interests of the society. I strongly propose that the Board and the General Assembly carefully consider the actions of the Chair of the Board in regard to me, and the patterns many have observed and largely "worked around". I am not the first volunteer nor the first board member to quit, and I believe Marc-Andre Lemberg's role in those instances needs to be assessed. The Chair of the Board needs to adapt his leadership style to comply with the Code of Conduct and, further,

to universally respect and value the ideas, experiences, and input of other board members and volunteers, despite his personal prejudices. **If he is unwilling to do this, I strongly recommend his actions be evaluated in light of Article 20 of the EuroPython Society Bylaws.**

Additionally, I recommend that the General Assembly consider, at their earliest convenience, electing Stéphane Wirtel as my replacement on the EuroPython 2021 Board of Directors.

My sole interest is in the success of the EuroPython Society, and so earnest are my concerns that I am willing to leave both the Board and the Society to facilitate consideration of the above points. I love this conference, and it is with a heavy heart I recognize I must leave it, to eliminate any possible question as to my motives in bringing these matters to light. I do not wish harm to Marc-Andre Lemberg, and I hope this can be resolved with his growth as a leader. However, I cannot escape the firm conviction that his present actions jeopardize the interests and well-being of the Society.

My only complaint towards other members of the Board is the ambivalent attitude taken by many towards Marc-Andre Lemberg's abusive behavior. I attempted to resolve my concerns through discussions, but ultimately, it became clear that I would be expected to shoulder partial blame for my being belittled and attacked, which is not an appropriate response to such complaints. I did my best work in good faith, and was treated contemptuously by Marc-Andre Lemberg for it.

Not all problems are two-sided, and not all conflicts are mere miscommunications. I have had more than my share of miscommunications, even across cultural lines, and I've always been willing and able to resolve them calmly and amicably. I must strongly insist that this is one of those rare cases which is *not* a miscommunication.

If anti-social behavior is tolerated, it will only get worse. I recognize that I have been one of the more direct and outspoken board members, and perhaps this is why I was targeted more directly and forcibly. Marc-Andre Lemberg's role as chair has never been threatened by me or any other member of the board, and if the suggestions I made are indeed seen as a threat to him, that underlines a clear and dangerous misperception of his role with the Society.

If anyone wishes to interpret me as part of the problem, consider my departure from the society as a full and complete remedy for that. In departing, I assert that I have done all I could do under the circumstances, my disability considered, and that I have full confidence in the validity of my concerns. I did not arrive at them lightly, nor gladly. I have only observed the communication patterns exhibited by Marc-Andre Lemberg six other times in my career: in all six of those instances, the individual in question was always later found to be acting in bad faith.

I wish the EuroPython Society all the best, and I hope EuroPython 2021 is the best conference in the history of the Society. I regret that I will not be able to be part of future conferences in any capacity. I have come to respect and enjoy the company of nearly everyone here. I am leaving friends, whom I hope to maintain contact with outside of the Society, but this sacrifice is worthwhile if it means that the Society is made safe for all who wish to be a part of it.

Sincerely,

Jason C. McDonald