SOC’s European Bureau had an extremely active year in 2014, working in countries as diverse as Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Germany, Russia, and Estonia. They tackled issues ranging from net neutrality, copyright, privacy, and the “right to be forgotten,” as well as doing capacity building and development projects.

That said, some the Bureau’s biggest successes took place in Turkey, says Frédéric Donck, the Brussels-based Regional Bureau Director, where the Bureau hosted an important INET event, and welcomed a new ISOC Chapter that is now active, vibrant, and dedicated to our mission.

In May, ISOC partnered with Bilgi University to engage key stakeholders at the INET Istanbul for a multistakeholder discussion of important issues. Not only did the event successfully engage with the Turkish business community, most notably telecom operators, it was also where they organized a series of panels and meetings after the Turkish government announced a plan to block several social media sites, including YouTube and Twitter.

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— FRÉDÉRIC DONCK, Regional Bureau Director, Internet Society
“What we wanted is the Government to understand that what they were doing was so detrimental to the health of global Internet as well as the human rights of its citizens, and it would not solve the issues they wanted to solve through censoring the Internet,” he says.

Frédéric noted that being able to help people working on the ground in places like Turkey, and in the regions where a free and open Internet isn’t always a given, is an important opportunity for ISOC.

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He added that ISOC’s presence at these panels meant a freer dialogue between the government and those who criticize them. It also gave ISOC officials the ability to tell the government why their plan to ban the social media sites was a bad idea for both the global Internet and their country.

“We had great feedback from people telling us that they were happy that we were there, and that we gave civil society a great platform to express concerns and criticism,” he says. “The ambassador to the European Union too was invited and delivered a remarkable keynote which expressed the European Union concerns.”

Frédéric continued, “This is, for me, my big story for the year, because it was not easy to organize such an event in such a difficult environment, in a country where ISOC was not present in before. If I was to remember one thing, it’s that we were able to speak about freedom of speech, to speak about censorship of the Internet there in Istanbul with the government in the room.”

The ISOC event in Istanbul was also very helpful as a lead-up to the ninth annual Internet Governance Forum meeting, which took place in Istanbul in September. Frédéric says taking part in such a big event—including government officials, civil society activists, engineers and telecom companies—is critical to advance our ideas of an open Internet and the value of the multistakeholder model.