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PC INDUSTRY SPECIALISTS FROM EAST AND WEST AGREE ON  
AN EASTERN EUROPEAN STANDARD

Budapest, Hungary -- 16 July 1990 -- Major Western companies in the computer software and hardware industry, in conjunction with leading East European developers, announced agreement today on a single character set for the Eastern European PC market. During a two-day workshop in Budapest co-sponsored by Ashton-Tate and Microsoft in late June, experts from East and West met to discuss the difficult question of establishing standards for character sets -- or "code pages" -- as well as keyboard layouts and other issues particular to each country. Representatives from IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Ashton-Tate, Lotus Development, Aldus Corporation, and Cherry Keyboards met with specialists from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia.

At the meeting, the delegates agreed on one single code page for Eastern Europe -- IBM's Code Page 852, also referred to as "Latin 2". Code Page 852 contains all of the Latin alphabet-based special characters needed in Eastern European languages -- letters with specific accent marks not found in English or other Western European languages. It does not contain Cyrillic characters.

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A code page defines the characters available to a computer program and is therefore a vital part of software and hardware development. Without the necessary Polish characters in the code page, for instance, it would not be possible for a PC to display Polish text on the screen.

Before the recent sweeping political and economic changes in Eastern, there was little interest on the part of major Western PC companies to support or invest in the small number of personal computers found in Eastern European countries. Strict export restrictions such as the COCOM regulations imposed by the US and Western European governments tended to discourage the development of high-tech standards there. As a result, a PC industry developed on its own in each country, often based on copies of Western technology, but without defined international standards. One area of PC development this affected was the definition of character sets -- each Eastern European country now has at least two -- sometimes a handful -- of competing code page standards.

"I was amazed to see the amount of variation between country specific solutions and at the special "tricks" that had been developed to fill the gap for these languages", commended Franz Rau, Systems and Hardware Manager at Microsoft's US-based International Product Group. " The challenge before all of us at the workshop was to sort out the "Tower of Babel" and arrive at a standard that will enable the PC industry in Eastern Europe to grow."

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Agreeing on Code Page 852 will be a major step in that direction, but it won't be without some pain. A veritable "code page perestroika" is, in fact, needed. In the absence of clearly defined standards, the home-made solutions in each country have proliferated: among programmers of local software, as pet standards of the trade press and some end-users, even in terms of the character sets supported by printer manufacturers. Many of the printers sold in Eastern Europe at this time do not contain the 852 character set, for example.

IBM, who developed the "one-size-fits-all" code page in 1986, itself acknowledges this problem, but stresses that now is the time for one standard to be agreed on and promoted. "We know acceptance of this decision will not occur overnight," admits Gerhard Chladt of IBM's Vienna office, which is largely responsible for the Eastern European region. "However, with the support of the Eastern European companies present at the workshop, and with promotion of this standard by major companies such as Ashton-Tate, Microsoft, Lotus, Aldus, etc., we feel that the industry will see the benefits of this code page and follow."

One of the major benefits is connectivity and compatibility -- key words for the Europe of the 1990s, East or West. In order for PC users to easily transfer files across borders, those files need to be based on one single standard. One critical piece of software for emerging Eastern European banks of businesses will be the database management system.

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Bruce Marquart of Ash-Tate, which is planning to introduce versions of its popular dBASE IV program in the local Eastern European languages over the next year notes: "Communication between those countries is a key issue. If you are an importer/exported in Prague and you need to send a data file over modem to your office in Warsaw, you need to be using an application based on a standard for both countries. Code Page 852 provides that standard, which is why Ashton-Tate has committed to base all Eastern European translations of our products on this character set."

Microsoft, also very active in Easter Europe, is underway with translated versions of its integrated product Microsoft Works. Aldus Corporation, with similar plans for its desktop-publishing standard PageMaker, and Lotus Development Corporation, are also stepping up their activities. All have pledged to base these products on Code Page 852.

Along with the introduction of adapted software with this standard at its core, delegates to the meeting were confident that definition of MS-Dos country codes for these countries by Microsoft, and rallying of printer manufacturer support by Hewlett-Packard, IBM and others would provide momentum for the industry and convince proponents of "alternate" standards that a potpourri of code pages is against their own interests.

"All of the Eastern European delegates to the workshop know that it will be difficult at first to convince their countrymen that 852 should be accepted as the standard," commended Dr. Janos Muth, Director of Novotrade SIX, Hungary's leading software import/export firm and host of the Budapest meeting. "Some of the alternate code pages are well-established at this time; but are in conflict with one another. Now is the time to make the jump, rather than later, when it is too late and the problem is more acute."

Delegates expressed surprise that an agreement was possible; many participants arrived in Budapest with their minds made up, only to change them in favor of 852 when they saw the larger issues of compatibility. One delegate pointed to the fact that the workshop had been deliberately kept small -- with 25 participants -- and cited this as the reason for its success. "It avoided 'death by committee'." Seminar organizers acknowledged that other Western companies were not present, but noted that the issues are well-known and the information would be well-distributed among the growing group of professionals in the industry focused on Eastern Europe.

"We left the Budapest meeting with a tangible feeling of success", noted Piotr Sienkiewicz, of the Polish firm MSP Ltd., based in Warsaw. "It's time the confusion was over in the industry. Now we agree on the standard, and we are ready to run with it."

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