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An Exercise in Argumentative Writing: Arguing Both Sides of an Issue

ANDREY CHSHERBAKOV

Latinisation of the Kazakh Script: A Necessary Step to Reclaim Identity

Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet is well under way. The President has signed the Law; a working version of the new script has been approved; and responsible state agencies have been appointed. However, the reform continues to generate heated debates in the media, on social networks, and in the old-fashioned offline (kitchen) conversations. This is no surprise, as the rationales for the policy that are often voiced by officials and the majority of experts are vague and superficial: for example, Latinisation will help students learn English (my knowledge of the Latin script did not help me learn German); Cyrillic has too many unnecessary letters (well, get rid of them—no need to change the whole set); the Latin script will promote the integration of Kazakhstan into the globalised information space (but unifying alphabets will not make Kazakh and English mutually intelligible). They seem to avoid the real reasons for the reform, which are largely ideological, and thus fail to convince people in its necessity and garner genuine public support instead of the usual compliance with top-down initiatives. But if we look back at the recent history of alphabets in Kazakhstan (Latinisation in the late 1920s and the subsequent Russification just over a decade later), we will see why it is essential that the Kazakh script be re-Latinised, or, more importantly de-Russified.

“It was true then, and it is true now: an alphabet is not a neutral system of signs; it is an emotionally charged chronicle of oppression, and a tool for social, political and cultural propaganda.”

The first Latinisation of the Kazakh script (along with the scripts of all the other Turkic languages in the USSR) was part of the *Cultural Revolution* implemented by the Soviet government in the 1920s. In particular, it was aimed to eliminate illiteracy and undermine the influence of Islam. Both of these goals were served well by abolishing the Arabic script, which was difficult to learn and provided access to a large volume of religious literature, as well as means of communication with foreign Muslim states. When the time came to choose a new alphabet, the insightful Soviet ideologues were nearly unanimous: Cyrillic was not an option. Members of the specially formed committee saw the

strong association of the Russian alphabet with the tsarist Russification policies. A prominent Russian philologist, Evgeniy Polivanov, wrote in 1928: “hatred towards the missionary scripts [during Russification] was ... so obvious that proposing a Russian-based alphabet in this environment would be a utopia, to say the least.” A rarely discussed fact is that not only Turkic languages, but all the languages of the Soviet Union were planned to shift to the Latin script; there actually were serious, well-studied proposals for the Latinisation of Russian. A world-renowned linguist, and a member of the special sub-committee on Russian Latinisation formed in 1930, Nikolai Yakovlev recognised the enormous ideological power of alphabets and proposed this justification for Latinising Russian: “The Russian civil alphabet and its history is a script of the autocratic oppression, missionary propaganda, [and] Russian national chauvinism, which is particularly evident in the Russification role of this alphabet in relation to the ethnic minorities of the former Russian Empire.” It was true then, and it is true now: an alphabet is not a neutral system of signs; it is an emotionally charged chronicle of oppression, and a tool for social, political and cultural propaganda. It was clear then that Russian letters would be symbolic shackles for Kazakh, Uzbek, and other Turkic languages, but is it not so clear now?

The liberal approach to language planning in the USSR was abandoned by the end of 1930s, along with the plan to unify all languages of the country under the Latin script. Well, unification was still on the table, but this time under Cyrillic. All the Turkic languages switched to Russian alphabet within a staggering few months—the first step of a dramatic change that was particularly drastic in Kazakhstan: Russification of education, displacement of the Kazakh language from official and prestigious domains, and a severe language shift to Russian among the majority of urban Kazakhs. Russian imperialism was back and, armed by a ruthless machine

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of Soviet authoritarianism, bulldozed its way to universal literacy and linguistic unification, nearly destroying the Kazakh language in the process. And the Russification of the Kazakh alphabet is an important and graphic symbol of this violent abuse. Although there has been considerable progress in reversing the language shift in the years of independence, Kazakh still has not gained the strength of a true national language; Russian continues to dominate in business, culture, and even education. There is clearly a need for a symbolic act of shrugging off the imperialist shackles of Russian that perpetuate the subordinate position of Kazakh—a need to decolonise it and reinvent it as an independent language of an independent nation proud of its history, culture, and traditions, with a strong and distinct identity.

Naturally, in a multi-ethnic country like Kazakhstan, with a large Russian ethnic minority, and where most other minorities are also Russian-speakers, there is great concern over the fate of

the Russian language. Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet may look like a desire to sever cultural ties with Russia and promote linguistic assimilation. It is, however, unlikely that Russian in Kazakhstan will ever be threatened: it will continue to be a medium of instruction or a compulsory subject at all schools, and, given the expanding economic integration with Russia, it will go on being a popular language, as there is no stronger imperative than profit.

Thus, notwithstanding the fears of assimilation, Kazakh has to be de-colonised and lose its crippling ties with Russian. With a renewed image, free from the oppression of the past, and elevated from the subjugated position imposed on it by colonialist practices, the Kazakh language will become a powerful and attractive symbol of the unique Kazakhstani national identity, national pride, and independence.

Latinisation of the Kazakh Script: Questionable Motives and High Risks

Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet had long been in the plans of the government, and, after a decisive announcement by the President this April in his article “Course towards the future: modernisation of Kazakhstan’s identity”, it was finally put into motion in the usual top-down manner. According to the plan, teacher training and textbook writing will begin next year, but public opinion is still divided. The previous changes of the Kazakh script in the 20th century were clearly dictated by the Soviet government’s strategic goals to restrict people’s access to ideologically pernicious literature written in the Arabic alphabet and to diminish the influence of Islam. Both these goals were successfully achieved by making the population of Kazakhstan illiterate twice in just over a decade, and twice rendering a whole body of text written in the Kazakh language unreadable, effectively censoring it for ideological purposes. But what will be achieved by the current reform? I think, despite the slogans of modernisation, the result may end up resembling effects of the Soviet policy.

The potential benefits of Latinisation often proclaimed by its proponents are either incommensurate with the immensity and cost of the reform itself, or too far-fetched to be taken seriously. One common problem of the existing alphabet that Latinisation would solve is its cumbersome nature: they say there are too many letters, a quarter of which are not used, making it difficult to place them conveniently on computer and smartphone keyboards, or to find a suitable font for graphic design. Surely, a much smaller reform would suffice. Why not remove these redundant letters and alter the orthography of affected words accordingly? And the lack of fonts is just too silly to discuss. On the other hand, the expectations that the Latin script will support higher English proficiency, or indeed modernise our national identity and promote technological progress are totally misguided. Look at Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, who

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changed their alphabets a long time ago. Do they speak better English than we do? Or are they more modern or technologically advanced? Clearly, these perceived benefits are suspect at best; the risks, however, are enormous.

Instead of promoting the status of the Kazakh language, the reform may in fact hinder its development. First, there is a large number of Russophones whose motivation to learn Kazakh may diminish because it will immediately become more complicated due to an unfamiliar script. This may aggravate the existing linguistic tensions within the Kazakhstani society, or at least slow down its spread and popularisation. Second, it may have a dramatic effect on the reading culture in the country. It is not a secret that young people today do not read much in general, and they read particularly little in Kazakh—visit your nearest bookshop to see for yourself. For those who have learned to read in the Cyrillic script, Latinisation will make reading more demanding, and many will likely limit their contact with literature, reducing all their reading to the minimum functional necessity. And for the young ones who will learn to read in the Latin alphabet, there will not be much to read, because replacing all the existing literature published in Cyrillic will take more than a few years. And what are the chances they will grow to love reading later in life when books are abundant, if they have not developed the habit at a young age? Thus, we may end up with a whole generation of people who do not read for pleasure—a strong blow to the development of the language.

What is more worrying, Latinisation may lead to partial or full illiteracy in either Kazakh or Russian, which can severely disadvantage certain groups of the population, and lead to concrete economic losses. For one thing, people above a certain age are unlikely to adjust to the new alphabet. As a result, becoming illiterate, they

will be cut off from the contemporary printed (text-based) media, and have to rely on others to cope with documents and other official language domains—a humiliating position to be in at an old age. In addition, students of Kazakh-medium schools may graduate from school being illiterate in Russian (even if they have oral fluency in it). At the moment, learning to read in Russian is not a problem, as Cyrillic unites both languages, but with the introduction of the Latin script, and lack of proper Russian language instruction, they will be bilingual, but monoliterate. This is likely to affect rural schools and those in the predominantly Kazakh-speaking regions of the country, and may economically disadvantage the population, as finding a job in the city with low Russian proficiency is much more difficult than for more balanced bilinguals or even Russian

monolinguals. Finally, the reform will hit hard the employees of public and private organisations whose primary language of communication and document workflow is Kazakh. Busy as they are now, they would have to spend even more time and energy to transition to the new alphabet on the job, slowing down every bureaucratic process, and decreasing the overall efficiency.

Turkey, a country that is often cited as a successful example of alphabet reform, achieved true social modernisation from the remnants of a fallen empire into a democratic nation-state. However, at the time the reform took place, less than 10% of its population were literate; they had nothing to lose and much to gain from the introduction of the Latin script. Kazakhstan's population, on the other hand, is nearly 100% literate, and with the value that literacy holds in the modern economy, risking making a large portion of the population (even partially and temporarily) illiterate cannot be justified by the tired slogans of “modernisation” and “innovation”. What seems more likely is that Kazakhstan is trying to use a Soviet language planning tool to sever the ties with its Soviet past, e.g., to erase the Kazakh Soviet literature from its national canon. But the outcomes of such reform may be as dramatically detrimental as many Soviet policies were.

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