

Latinization of Kazakh - Implications for Language Policy, National Identity and Education in Kazakhstan

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After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, focused his policies on reinforcing the ethnic identity of Kazakhs and their dominance over other nationalities (Svanberg, 1994, as cited in Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022). This emphasis on national identity positioned language as a tool for decolonization (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022). The transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet represents a major shift in Kazakhstan's language policy, carrying long-term educational, social, and political consequences. While the reform aims to modernize the Kazakh language, strengthen national identity, and facilitate integration into the global economy, its implementation has raised concerns regarding teacher preparedness, accessibility for minority communities, and potential disruptions to literacy development (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022).

As the script change seems politically ambitious, it is slow in its implementation (du Boulay & du Boulay, 2021). Latinization is a step toward national modernization; however, its current implementation strategy lacks sufficient support mechanisms for educators and students, leading to challenges in adoption and inclusivity. The absence of a comprehensive transition framework has resulted in confusion among teachers, inconsistencies in instructional materials, and the marginalization of Russian-speaking and multilingual communities (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022). Furthermore, the reform risks educational disparities, as students from diverse linguistic backgrounds struggle to adapt to the new script.

This paper critically examines the factors and consequences of Latinization and its implication. By analyzing these factors, the study aims to provide policy recommendations to ensure a more equitable and effective transition to the Latin script.

Overview of the Research or Problem

Kazakhstan's ongoing alphabet reform, which seeks to replace the Russian-influenced Cyrillic script with a Latin-based system, represents a complex sociolinguistic and political implications. While officially framed as a move toward modernization and decolonization, the reform faces multiple interrelated challenges that threaten its successful implementation.

A primary concern is the lack of institutional preparedness, particularly in education. Teachers remain largely untrained in the new script (Seitkadyrov, 2020), schools lack adequate Latin-alphabet materials (Batyrbekyzy et al., 2018), and the rapid timeline risks leaving an entire generation in linguistic limbo (Kumar et al., 2022). This educational disruption exacerbates existing generational divides, with older Cyrillic-literate citizens resisting change while younger Kazakhs push for reform (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024).

The reform also struggles with linguistic technicalities. The proposed Latin alphabet has undergone multiple revisions, causing public confusion (Honkasalo &

Temirbekova, 2024), and critics argue it fails to accurately represent Kazakh phonetics (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022). This orthographic instability undermines standardization efforts and could perpetuate long-term literacy problems.

Political tensions further complicate implementation. While proponents view Latinization as a break from Russian dominance (Kumar et al., 2022), Russian-speaking minorities perceive it as exclusionary, potentially worsening interethnic relations (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024). The reform's geopolitical implications remain contested, with some framing it as pro-Turkic solidarity and others as Western-aligned modernization (du Boulay & du Boulay, 2021).

Economically, the transition imposes substantial financial burdens, from replacing government documents to overhauling digital infrastructure (Kumar et al., 2022). Perhaps most critically, the top-down implementation has lacked meaningful public engagement, resulting in widespread scepticism despite theoretical support for Latinization (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024).

Examination of the Findings

Multiple studies document substantial difficulties in executing the reform, particularly within education systems (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022; Kumar et al., 2022). A critical finding shows alarmingly low teacher preparedness, with only 15% of educators demonstrating proficiency in the new script (Kumar et al., 2022), compounded by frequent revisions to the proposed Latin alphabet that have created widespread confusion and undermined standardization efforts (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024).

Linguistic complications emerge as a persistent theme across studies. Researchers consistently identify fundamental problems with phonetic representation in the Latin script (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024; Kumar et al., 2022;), as the reform struggles to accommodate unique Kazakh sounds, resulting in orthographic inconsistencies. Digital adaptation presents additional unexpected hurdles, including technical challenges with keyboard layouts and Unicode support that hinder the script's implementation in digital spaces (Kumar et al., 2022).

The reform's social and political dimensions reveal complex dynamics. While the transition enjoys broad theoretical support, its practical implementation has generated significant public dissatisfaction (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024). Studies warn of risks exacerbating ethnic divisions, particularly between Kazakh and Russian-speaking populations (Kumar et al., 2022), with some analysts interpreting the change as primarily symbolic political manoeuvring rather than a practical linguistic improvement (du Boulay & du Boulay, 2021).

Comparative analysis with other Turkic states offers important lessons. Successful transitions elsewhere

required decades-long timelines (Bekzhanova & Makoelle, 2022; Kumar et al., 2022), while rushed implementations have historically led to dual-script chaos and generational divides. Kazakhstan's current approach appears to replicate problematic aspects of Uzbekistan's experience rather than emulating Azerbaijan's more successful, gradual model. These collective findings suggest the reform faces substantial obstacles in its current form, with implications for Kazakhstan's linguistic future and social cohesion.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Kazakhstan's transition to the Latin script requires a carefully structured, multi-phase approach to ensure smooth adoption across all sectors of society. The reform should be implemented gradually until 2040, maintaining parallel usage of both Cyrillic and Latin scripts during this transitional period (Kumar et al., 2022). Initial efforts must prioritize digital infrastructure modernization, including updating government websites and establishing standardized keyboard layouts, before introducing changes to the education system. Regional pilot programs (Batyrbekkyzy et al., 2017) will allow for testing and refinement of implementation strategies while minimizing nationwide disruption, acknowledging the significant cognitive and practical adjustments required by citizens across all age groups.

The education sector demands particular attention, with success depending on a comprehensive revitalization of teaching infrastructure. This includes implementing mandatory teacher certification programs with financial incentives (Kumar et al., 2022; Seitkadyrov, 2020), developing bilingual transitional materials for all education levels, and adopting a progressive implementation model that begins with preschools while maintaining Cyrillic literacy (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024). Special consideration must be given to providing specialized support for rural educators who face unique logistical challenges in remote areas.

Effective public engagement forms another critical pillar of the reform strategy. Building nationwide support requires coordinated awareness campaigns that clearly articulate the cultural and economic benefits of the transition. Regular forums incorporating diverse perspectives from educators, linguists, and minority groups (du Boulay & du Boulay, 2021), coupled with media literacy programs to combat misinformation, will foster greater public understanding. Maintaining transparent communication about transition timelines and expectations will be essential throughout the process.

Technological modernization must proceed in tandem with these efforts, including government-led Unicode standardization, investment in localized software solutions, development of mobile platforms for adult education, and digital preservation of Cyrillic historical texts (Batyrbekkyzy et al., 2017). These measures will ensure the population retains access to important cultural artifacts while adapting to the new script.

To maintain social harmony during this period of change, specific measures should be implemented to protect national unity. These include continuing the use of

Russian in official documents during the transition period, safeguarding multilingual education rights, developing inclusive language policies that address all demographic needs, and initiating community dialogue programs (Honkasalo & Temirbekova, 2024) to address concerns and foster mutual understanding across different segments of Kazakhstani society.

Kazakhstan's transition to the Latin alphabet requires sustainable implementation through four key pillars: cultural preservation, institutional coordination, international cooperation, and digital monitoring (Baimetov & Saidalin, 2025). Annual cultural impact assessments will safeguard linguistic heritage while literary translation projects maintain access to historical texts. An inter-ministerial committee will ensure policy continuity across administrations through five-year planning cycles. Kazakhstan will benefit from UNESCO expertise and Turkic state partnerships, with annual benchmarking against global best practices. Digital adoption will be tracked through social media analytics and keyboard usage statistics.

Critical success metrics include maintaining 98% adult literacy, achieving 90% youth Latin literacy by 2035, and securing 75% public approval. The phased approach prioritizes digital infrastructure (95% completion by 2032) and teacher training (100% certification by 2030). Quarterly reviews and biennial adjustments will ensure adaptability, balancing modernization with cultural continuity. This evidence-based framework aims for seamless script transition while preserving national identity and social harmony.

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