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# LATINISATION OF KAZAKH ALPHABET HISTORY AND PROSPECTS

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## Abstract

The article presents the scientific and political arguments, as well as proposals for the transfer of the Kazakh alphabet to Roman script. Today independent Kazakhstan is a part not only of the United Nations but also of other international organizations. Since ancient times the Kazakhs used the Arabic script, and in the XX century, under the influence of Soviet power, they had to go through two alphabet reforms. Nazir Tyurakulov, a member of the CEC on the new Turkic alphabet preparing, gave evidence-based conclusions on the reform of the Roman script. The reforms, carried out in the Kazakh society in 1929-1940, have become a part of our culture and initially started to give results. However, since 1940 all the nationalities of the Soviet Union, together with the Kazakh, transited to Cyrillic alphabet. These reforms have slowed down cultural and social development of the Kazakh people. If the rejection of the Arabic alphabet led to a weakening of religious knowledge of people, the transition from Latin to Cyrillic is perceived as a distance from world cultural values.

*Keywords:* Latin, alphabet, Cyrillic, Turkic, nation

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to show results of carrying out Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet during the last 30-40 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also to discuss the role of the statesman Nazir Tyurakulov in this perspective. During the recent years in Kazakhstan increases the relevance of a subject in connection with questions of transition of the alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin. In a recent statement the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev declared that the people of the country are ready for the transition to a Latin alphabet [*The program of transition of the Kazakh alphabet to the Latin schedule is planned for 2025,*

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Tengri News, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/programma-perehoda-kazahskogo-alfavita-latinskuyu-grafiku-226905/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/programma-perehoda-kazahskogo-alfavita-latinskuyu-grafiku-226905/). According to scientists “transition to Latin — is not a scientific problem, but an everyday occurrence” [K. Matrekov, *The author of the future Latin Kazakh alphabet: “We are just coming back”*, 365 Info.kz, <https://365info.kz/2017/04/avtor-budushhego-latinskogo-kazahskogo-alfavita-my-vsego-lish-vozvrash-haemsya/>]. There is a hypothesis that in the closest 10 years the population of Kazakhstan will absolutely get used to the new conditions of the Latin alphabet.

On writing the article were used methods of historical knowledge such as objectivity, typology, comparative, structural and functional analysis. Let’s say that the methods we used helped us to achieve the goals and objectives.

## 2. Short description of the problem

All-Union Committee on the introduction of new Turkic alphabet (1927-1932) began its work in 1926 in Baku, and only on May 11, 1927, a resolution was accepted by the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (CEC USSR) “to take note of the formation of the All-Union Committee on the introduction of new Turkic alphabet”. On October 20, 1930, the Presidium of CEC approved the draft of the Regulations on the Committee for the introduction of a new Latinized alphabet among the national minorities of the RSFSR, which devolve into maintenance by the Committee of leadership of the RSFSR local committees for the new Turkic alphabet introduction. Due to the fact that before the formation of the All-Russian Committee, this work was carried out by All-Union Committee of the new Turkic alphabet, the Regulation on the All-Russian Committee has been given for the approval of the Presidium of the CEC USSR.

On March 27, 1932, the Regulation of the All-Union Central Committee of the new (Latinized) alphabet at the Presidium of the Soviet of Nationalities of the CEC USSR was approved. On February 10, 1935, at a meeting of the Presidium of the CEC, the integration of work of the All-Union and Russian committees of the new alphabet was considered as appropriate. According to the Resolution of the Presidium of the CEC USSR, from December 27, 1937, the All-Union Central Committee of the new (Latinized) alphabet was liquidated as completed its task. We were able to get acquainted only with the financial statements of the Central Committee, the explanatory notes and materials to them, book of current expenditure, books of accounts, general ledgers of accounting, register of charges of local institutions, cost estimates, transaction logs and credit books [GARF. F: R-7543, Opis’: 1, Ed. hranenija: 92, Delo: 92]. In the funds there were no documents on the activities of the Central Committee, which would give very important information about the scientific reconstruction of the history of Latinisation, and which was artificially interrupted by totalitarian power.

### **3. Historical practice**

The prominent statesman Nazir Tyurakulov declared for the transfer of the Turkic peoples to the Roman script, explaining that all the Turkic people need to communicate with each other on a common Latin script. In 1926, in Baku it was held the first All-Union Congress of Turkish studies, where many were for and against the transition to Latin script; nevertheless, such countries as Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and later Uzbekistan have passed to this alphabet. In his report, he briefly touched on all the advantages of taking the Latinized script, so he claimed that none of the participants of the First Turkological Congress could prove the availability of Arabic writing [Stenograficheskiy otchet pervogo plenuma vsesojuznogo Central'nogo komiteta novogo tjurkskogo alfavita, zasedavshego v Baku s 3-go do 7-go ijunja 1926 goda, Doklad Tjurakulova]. Imperfection and complexity of Arabic script has long been a matter of concern of many outstanding scientists and representatives of the progressive intelligentsia. Thus, to the complexity of the Arabic letter was paid attention by F. Engels, who was a lot and seriously engaged in linguistics. "Persian is not a language" - he wrote in a letter to Marx - "it is a real toy". "If it was not the Arabic alphabet, where constantly six consecutive letters look the same, and in which there were no vowels, I would undertake to explore all the grammar in the next 48 hours." [1] This is one of the judgments on the complexity of Arabic script consumption.

The expansion of Islam in Kazakhstan was a process that lasted several centuries. At first, the new religion penetrated into the southern regions by the end of the X century [2]. Islam was established among the settled population in Zhetysu and Syrdarya. History confirms that the Islamization of the region was peaceful. Since the adoption by the Kazakh people of Islam (IX century) [3], the use of Arabic script in the Kazakh writing in the first half of the early XX century has changed 3 times. Arabic script, that was used until 1929, by the decision of the CEC of the VI convocation of the IV session of the Kazakh Republic in December 1928, has been changed to the Latin script. Quite soon, in November 1940, at the V session of the Kazakh SSR Supreme Soviet, the law on the transition of the Kazakh alphabet from Latin script to Cyrillic was adopted. The idea of Latinisation among the Turkic peoples symbolized the European Art Nouveau, while the Arabic script was put on a par with the Koran and camels. In May 1926, one of the prominent Azerbaijani communists Agamaly-oglu announced romanization as "the central question of the revolution in the East" [Stenograficheskiy otchet pervogo plenuma vsesojuznogo Central'nogo komiteta novogo tjurkskogo alfavita, zasedavshego v Baku s 3-go do 7-go ijunja 1926 goda. s.18-19].

The use of the Latin alphabet in the country went hand in hand with industrialization, collectivization, forcible transfer of traditional Kazakh nomadic economy to sedentary farming type, political repression, as well as with such complex historical events as the cultural revolution. In 1929-1940, the process of Latinisation, formed on the basis of these events complexities,

replaced the traditional Arabic script, which existed for centuries, was accompanied by psychological difficulties. For the older generation that had learned to read and write in Arabic script - Latinisation brought enormous difficulties and preparedness, while the younger generation experienced the lack of textbooks identical to the Latin script.

But, we should highlight the socio-political and social achievements of Latinisation of the Kazakh alphabet. As an indication of the culture, writing is recognized by the quality and volume of the published books in the national language. In this regard, it is possible to make a book analysis, of those published in the Latin alphabet in 1929-1941. According to incomplete data, in this period there were published 4 books on Philosophy, Psychology and Logic, 5 books on atheism and religious subjects, 101 book on linguistic disciplines, 491 books on Natural sciences, 1580 books on Social and Political sciences, in total 2181 books [4]. Similarly, in this period, there were published 1538 books on Medicine, Agriculture, engineering, industry, art, sports, literature, Historical and Geographical sciences [5].

We noticed that the analysis of the publications in Kazakh language, written in Arabic and Latin scripts, began to cover a wide range of disciplines. The most important thing - the use of the Kazakh language in the Latin alphabet had a great covering. The social function of the Kazakh language has expanded; it has become the language of Science. The prominent politician, scholar and linguist Nazir Tyurakulov stated that the Turkological Congress, in this regard, was a very progressive revolutionizing fact for the whole Turkic world. There was not a single vote in favour of the old Arabic script. If all these speakers and presenters silently avoided this question, it would have to be understood in the sense, that the old Arabic script, the old Arab charter convicted history and rejected once and for all. So, he did not want to dwell on this issue, though, by the way, for our country, is of paramount importance as far as we still have the old Arabic script [6]. From this, it follows that Kazakh to Latin alphabet transition can be strategically justified in the long term. Nazir Tyurakulov was a visionary strategist of his time. In the 20-30's of the XX century, he knew that the Latinisation of Turkic alphabet is just a matter of time.

On August 15, 1930, Presidium of the Council of Nationalities of the CEC USSR adopted a special resolution on the report of the Central Committee of the new Turkic alphabet. The report summed up the results of the Romanization for the 1927-1930 period. Latin alphabet, as the resolution says, "it won a landslide victory over the Arabic script, covering 36 nationalities with more than 3.5 million workers". Latinisation of writing was described as "powerful tool of cultural revolution in the Soviet East". On the basis of Latin script, there were published a hundred newspapers, journals and literature in forty languages [7].

Today, the position of the Latin alphabet in the world is unique. As a result of large-scale expansion of European civilization during the XV-XX centuries, Latin alphabet has gained universal cosmopolitan character. Finally, the graphics system-alphabet, used in the national language, plays a key role in the system of symbols of the society, and has the strongest impact on the

formation of national identities. For this reason, the main motive of the alphabet reforms, carried out in different periods in different countries, has always remained a cultural and political factor [8].

It should be noted that the Latin alphabet is used in a number of Muslim countries abroad, with a leading position in the Muslim world: Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia. In addition, the Latin alphabet is currently implemented or is in the process of implementing in most of the Turkic-speaking countries of the CIS. In the non-Muslim part of the Asian continent, Latin is used by Vietnam and the Philippines, China and Japan, along with the hieroglyphic script. They actively use Latin transcription, in particular in this way the problem of computerization in these countries was solved. Finally, outside of Asia, Latin is used by all the countries of Latin America, as well as the most spoken languages of the peoples of Africa and Oceania [9].

The Kazakh language as state today has the right to have a broader mandate and full functioning, as any national language for its country. In Kazakhstan, the idea of transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet has been actively discussed after that, in October 2006; N. Nazarbayev stated the need to revisit this issue. In July 2007, the Ministry of Education and Science has prepared an analytical note 'On the transfer of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin', which discussed the experience of other countries and peoples of the East on the introduction of the Latin alphabet; it was justified by the need to transfer to the Latin script of the Kazakh alphabet. As the main argument of the Latin transition, the authors of the note considered the need to strengthen the national identity of the Kazakhs, but as the main result of this step, they would like to see the "change of Soviet identity, which still largely dominates in the national consciousness, to a sovereign identity" [*Predvaritel'naja analiticheskaja zapiska 'O perevode kazahskoj pis'mennosti na latinskiju grafiku'*, podgotovlennuju rabochej gruppoj Ministerstva obrazovanija i nauki RK v ijule 2007 g., [http://online.zakon.kz/m/Document/?doc\\_id=30112600](http://online.zakon.kz/m/Document/?doc_id=30112600)].

In Kazakh alphabet on the Cyrillic there are 42 letters. It is assumed that the new alphabet will not have more than 33. This will speed up and facilitate the development of the Kazakh language. In this connection, it is appropriate to recall back in 1926, in Baku, at the Turkological congress that professor N.F. Yakovlev warned: "The ease of the Latin alphabet introduction is inversely proportional to the development of national literature, that is, the more the literacy was before the introduction of the Latin alphabet, the harder it is to introduce the Latin alphabet" [10].

The benefits of the transition of Kazakh language to the Roman script are obvious. Currently, only seven countries in the world actively use the Cyrillic alphabet as the only accepted alphabet - Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Latin alphabet has also a leading position in the world as it is known and used by more than 4 billion of the world's population [*Poslanie prezidenta Respubliki Kazahstan Nursultana Nazarbaeva naroda Kazahstana*, 14.12.2012, <http://news.invest.kz/25977399-poslanie-prezidenta-rk-nursultana-nazarbaeva-narodu-kazahstana>]. In the case of

the transition to it, the Kazakh language will be available for the study, as well as helping our citizens in mastering foreign languages. And most importantly - Kazakhstan will be able to integrate into the world community faster. It is on these prospects once our compatriot pointed, but in 40's of the XX century, the country had to go a different way.

#### **4. The experience of other countries in the Latinisation**

##### **4.1. Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, in 1929, the traditional Arabic script was replaced by the Latin alphabet adapted to the Uzbek language. The Bolsheviks considered that the transition to the Latin alphabet will help Soviet Muslims to get rid of illiteracy and overcoming age-old backwardness. But, there were the ideological background of such a step. In Uzbekistan they were still pockets of resistance of Basmach rebel movement against the Soviet regime. They were supported by Muslim clerics and disgruntled former landowners, who used Arabic script [11]. Moreover, the Bolsheviks built an atheist state, and Arabic was associated with the Islamic religion. The Arabic alphabet, which served for the Uzbeks for 12 centuries, was declared hostile [12]. In parallel, in the same year, in Turkey, Kemal Ataturk reformed script, replacing the Arabic by Latin.

##### **4.2. Turkey**

Turkey switched to the Latin alphabet in the hope of being closer to the Europeans. Selecting by the Turkish leader Ataturk of the Latin alphabet meant replacing of the Ottoman imperial national identity by the Turkish identity. In April 1928, President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk established the Commission on alphabet. Updated Turkey became a secular state, and the president tried to get rid of traces of Arab influence, among which was the Arabic script. According to the estimates of the commission, transition of the whole country to Latin should have taken no less than five years; however, Ataturk decided to reform for three months. After production of the first version of the adapted Latin alphabet there was a massive campaign for its implementation. Ataturk took direct part, in three months all schools were transferred to the new alphabet; more than one million employees passed the exam in Latin. On November 3, 1928, the new alphabet was approved by state law [13].

Ideologically, the transition to the Latin alphabet can be interpreted as a step towards the exit from the Russian sphere of influence, and it should appeal to ethnic Kazakhs. All the above undoubtedly proves the enormous material and ideological advantage as well as the timeliness of a full transition of the Kazakh alphabet to new single international alphabet. Roman script is a specific tool, a vital necessity. If you manage to make the transition to new alphabet economically correctly, then it is more than can justify all the costs invested in it. In particular, most of the Turkic-speaking countries have switched to the

Latin alphabet - for example, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Turkey. Kazakh people have written in Latin script; it was in the late 20s of the last century [14, 15].

## **5. Transition of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin script**

Among the many arguments in favour of the transfer of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin script, the main and decisive is to strengthen the national identity of the Kazakh people. A few points can be highlighted. As the cultural history of a number of modern nations shows, writing is no less important for the formation of national identity than the language itself. For Chinese, hieroglyphs are the cultural code that unites the Chinese nation, the various parts of which express themselves in different variants of the spoken language, which is an essential obstacle to oral communication. For Russians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, Arabs script used by them is not just a graphic expression of their language, but also an expression of their religious, cultural and, more broadly, national identity.

In theory, the transition of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin script also seems reasonable. This refers to the well-known concept of imagined communities, “a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group”, of the American political scientist Benedict Anderson [8, p. 6-7]. In accordance with this concept, the nation is an imagined community, the appearance of which is made possible with the rise in the 15-16 centuries in Europe, the so-called ‘print capitalism’ [15]. Print capitalism becomes the source of the mass production of books, and then newspapers and magazines. From the cultural arena the Latin language gradually goes down, the national languages receive the impetus for their development - English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and in later periods of the popular languages of Eastern Europe, Asia and other regions. The main consumer of this product appears - the mass reader. Reading regularly one and the same printed products of newspapers, magazines, fiction, textbooks, etc., the readers form an imagined community; they develop a common identity, which becomes the basis for the formation of the nation [16].

Kazakh imagined community was formed in the late XIX century, but the October Revolution stopped its development. During the Soviet period, the development of the Kazakh imagined community took place based on its ideologization and related to its Russification, an element of which was the transfer of written Kazakh language in Cyrillic. Printed products, on the basis of which an imagined community is formed was fully recruited and continues to be recruited in Cyrillic in Kazakhstan. But writing as a material carrier of language in the formation of an imagined community is by no means of secondary importance. It has contributed and contributes to the orientation of Kazakh national consciousness towards the Russian language and Russian culture. As a result, Kazakh identity in itself remains largely uncertain. In this regard, the transition to the Latin alphabet will form a clearer national identity of the

Kazakhs. The transition to the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey and Kazakhstan has similar cultural and historical experience and it should be considered from this point of view.

Cyrillic alphabet, as the writing of the Kazakh language, bears the stamp of the colonial past of Kazakhstan. Selection of the Cyrillic alphabet was not a free choice of the Kazakh people; it has been implemented by top of a totalitarian state.

In other words, Latin for today is an universal international alphabet, the use of which is linked in a symbolic aspect with the entry of Kazakhstan into the world community as a full member. From this, it follows that the transfer of the Kazakh alphabet to Latin script can be strategically justified in the long term. Nazir Tyurakulov was a visionary strategist of his time. He knew that the Latinisation of Turkic alphabet is just a matter of time. In his work 'Islam and Communism' he shows the Islamic religion as the result of a revolutionary phenomenon. In turn, the revolution spreads among certain people in power contest. The power has some benefit from this, doesn't it? This point of view proves the establishment of the Islamic religion in a revolutionary way [17].

In the recent years, in the course of discussion on the transition to Latin script it is periodically offered to conduct a national referendum. However, the solution to this issue is in the competence of scientists in various fields of knowledge. The draft of new alphabet, spelling basics are prepared by linguists, developing new methods of teaching spelling the engaged teachers. For deciding on the possibility of transition to the Latin alphabet, primarily, the public authorities are responsible, the competence of which has the policy issues, economic and cultural development of the country as a whole. In the modern world, the state should be a tool for congruence of interests of various communities, including the religious ones. It requires special flexibility in the relations of the state and the religious communities. A consistent democratic solution to the problems of freedom of conscience on behalf of all members of society, both adherents of Islam and those who do not adhere to the Islamic religion, will promote the convergence of their civic positions and moral values, as well as a constructive dialogue between them for the benefit of consolidating Kazakhstani society [18].

The uniqueness of the Kazakh language, its grammar, pronunciation is expressed in the fact that today the descendants of Kazakhs scattered by the destiny of the whole planet, and not having years but even hundreds of years, are able to meet, communicate with each other and understand each other as yesterday their ancestors. This means that not the writing script is the basis of the nation unity, and the letters are only the signs that reflect the language on paper, but the nationwide Kazakh language [19]. At the same time, we know how the repeated change of writing affected the link between generations. How many Kazakhs do not have access to the history of those times, when the written Kazakh language was based on the Arabic script, and the language of their ancestors was based on the 'runes'. Here we understand that the written



language is the repository of the history of its time, and access to it is possible by means of the script of that era.

## **6. The role of the alphabet in the religious knowledge of the Kazakh people**

The written culture of the Kazakh people was associated with the Arabic alphabet for many centuries. As we know from the history of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Islamic religion began to penetrate the consciousness of the Kazakhs. In the course of this process, the ancient writing (rune) of Kazakhs lost its importance, and a new alphabet was formed - so-called Arabic. The Arabic alphabet dominated the religious knowledge of Kazakhs until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, the Soviet reform was aimed at creating an atheistic society in Kazakhstan. There has been a change in the relations of religion spheres and culture of the peoples of Kazakhstan in connection with these ideas. The rejection of the Arabic alphabet led to the disappearance of the religious soil of the whole population and thereby strengthened the efforts of the Soviet authorities to create a non-religious people.

## **7. Conclusions**

The history of the Kazakh people writing has changed in such a way that the language, since 1940, is developing on the basis of the Cyrillic script. We all understand that it was a fateful decision. Under these circumstances, the Kazakh language was able to save itself thanks to the work that was done by linguists and all those, on whom the continued existence and development of the Kazakh written literary language depended. During the period of development of the Kazakh language based on the Cyrillic script, a great job was done, never get it through.

History of changes of writing script bases shows us that any change affects the overall mentality and character of the nation. What is the world outlook to be formed in our descendants through the Latin alphabet? The first and the main argument for the transfer to the Latin script is that it is easy to transfer information through the Internet. These ideas and conclusions were formed over the years and were hammered into the consciousness of both the Russian and the Russian-speaking population of Kazakhstan and the Kazakhs in the country and throughout the former Soviet Union.

Experience shows that the XXI century will be the century of informative technology. Obviously, under these circumstances, the transition to the Latin alphabet is justified, because it is an internal need for the development and modernization of the Kazakh language. At present, paperwork proceedings are fully in Kazakh language. So the idea of switching to the Latin alphabet is perceived as unambiguously positive. It is necessary to take into account the following basic principles: (1) the transition to the Latin script should be evolutionary, gradually and incrementally; (2) Cyrillic should remain accessible, well-known as valuable and national and cultural heritage of all the peoples of

post-soviet countries, existing side by side with the Kazakh language in the Latin alphabet.

In addition, it is necessary to develop the concept of transition of the Kazakh alphabet to the Latin script with the definition of goal, objectives, stages of realization and program of action for its implementation. Through careful study and use of the experience of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Turkey, where the implementation of the alphabet reform was problematic due to many factors, it is necessary to develop our own national model, taking into account the specificity and features of Kazakhstan.

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