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Alphabet Reform in the Six Independent ex-Soviet

Muslim Republics

JACOB M. LANDAU

Abstract

Like other elements of culture, alphabets have both practical and ethnopolitical integrating or differentiating significance. Hence, any alphabet change has serious political implications. This article will briefly consider the process of romanisation undertaken in the six newly independent Muslim states that were part of the Soviet Union (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan); and then evaluate its success or failure and attempt to explain the causes for these phenomena.

Introduction

Like other elements of culture, alphabets have both practical and ethnopolitical integrating or differentiating significance. Hence, any alphabet change has serious political implications.¹ This article will briefly consider the process of romanisation undertaken in the six newly independent Muslim states that were part of the Soviet Union (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan); and then evaluate its success or failure and attempt to explain the causes for these phenomena. Of these, only Tajikistan can be considered as close to Iran, linguistically, while the other five are essentially connected to the Turkish cultural sphere. The following observations are based on documents and accounts in several languages as well as on field work over a number of years, including a recent research visit, in April–May 2007, together with Professor B. Kellner–Heinkele of the Free University of Berlin.

The Language Issue

The six republics gained independence following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and all possessed elites ready and eager to share in nation building. These, whether part of the establishment or outside it, worked towards creating and strengthening a national identity. Most of them did not consider religion an important unifying factor, although a great majority of the inhabitants of these countries are Muslims and Islam continued to be relevant under Soviet rule. However, seventy years of atheism, strongly encouraged by the

¹Sergei A. Arutunov, 'Who's afraid of the Latin alphabet?', *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, XLVI (2007), I, pp. 117–125.

Soviet administration, had had its effect. The elites, political or intellectual, concerned in promoting a new national identity in state and society, invested huge efforts chiefly in the domain of national culture and its revival, particularly as regards the titular language, that is, the majority language whose name is identical with that of the republic.

In the fields of culture and literature, scholars, writers and poets sought to uncover and publish materials from the past. In the domain of language, a concentrated effort was made to elevate the titular language to a particular standing in public administration and education, generally at the expense of the previously privileged Russian language. Although not always acknowledged as such, these activities aimed at de-Russification as a part of de-Sovietisation and of nationalisation. Each of the six states differed in the intensity of its deployment in this direction, as I shall attempt to explain. Activity in the domain of language was usually expressed under one or more of the following heads: alphabet reform; 'purifying' the language of Russian terms; and changes in the planning of education, especially in the emphasis laid on language study and instruction at school and university. Here we shall discuss alphabet reform in the first eighteen years of independence.

Alphabet Reform

Total change from one alphabet to another is, of course, a complicated matter, demanding coordinated efforts directed by the top strata of the government and its agencies along with the mobilisation of public support and participation. History can show only a few instances of a total alphabet change, such as romanisation in the Republic of Turkey since 1928, in the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Cyrillic to Roman) and the 1940s (Roman to Cyrillic), a factor which complicated further the transition to a Roman script.² In many other states it was tried, often unsuccessfully. The issue of changing from the Cyrillic script to the Roman is discussed here in the six states, in several of which it was assiduously implemented.

Alphabet change is an arduous enterprise, requiring strongly motivated effort in various areas, primarily economic, cultural and linguistic. Economically speaking, it necessitates considerable investment in new printing machines and computer programmes as well as in new textbooks, the re-education of teachers and the general public, and replacement of public signs. Culturally, it implies a rupture with the legacy of past generations. Linguistically, it requires a trained body of experienced philologists, not always available at the time in all six states.³ It is remarkable that the financial argument was little used in the public debate on alphabet change, which was mainly political, with cultural arguments as well often being voiced.

Further, most or very many members of the elites in all six states were educated in Russian culture and find themselves still prone to employ Russian both orally and in writing, as they find it more natural. This is also the situation of the ethnic minorities in each state. Hence certain leading elites in several of the six states tended to oppose romanisation, while others favoured it due to their desire to dissociate themselves from Russian and its legacy, preferring to draw closer to the West.

²Johann Uhres, 'Le Point sur les alphabets utilisés pour les langues turciques', *Cahiers d'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*, XXIX (June-December 2000), pp. 287-319.

³Mark Sebba, *Ideology and alphabets in the former USSR* (Lancaster, 2003), pp. 1-24.

Those who opted for a change of alphabet did not always agree on romanisation. Iran (and probably Saudi Arabia) attempted to direct script change in the region towards the Arabic alphabet, that of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Iran is still sending Qur'ans and other works in Arabic-Persian script as gifts to the six states and most particularly to Tajikistan, whose language and culture are close to the Iranian. During the 1990s certain Islamic groups in Uzbekistan and elsewhere pressed for the adoption of the Arabic-Persian alphabet, conveniently forgetting that this alphabet has fewer vowels than the Turkic languages require (one Kazakh intellectual, Ahmet Baitursunov, suggested the inclusion of musical notes instead of new letters for the lacking vowels when adopting Arabic script). These efforts failed, however, while Turkish moves were more successful.

Turkey provided a model for the new republics whose languages are close to Turkish (this, again, left Tajikistan out) in the first years of their independence, as a westernised state and society which had successfully romanised its script. In Turkey itself, the authorities manifested considerable involvement in the newly independent states in the domains of public administration, economics, business, culture, education, mass communication, and aviation.

During the 1990s, Turkey's leaders also convened several international conferences to which ministers and other high officials of the five Turkic states (as well as representatives of other Turkic groups, the Tatars for example) were officially invited. In these meetings, the Turks energetically attempted to persuade their guests to adopt a common Roman script based on the Turkish alphabet (instead of the Cyrillic), with the addition of a few graphic signs representing the phonetic peculiarities of their respective languages. Several new dictionaries were compiled in Turkey for this purpose.⁴ Here an interesting process may be observed: the representatives of the new states acquiesced in the idea, but returned home to select separate Roman alphabets (with differing phonological symbols). For instance, in the Azeri script (the closest to the Turkish), the letter 'e' appears as an inverted 'e'. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan use different symbols in their new romanised scripts for the same phonemes – differing both from Turkish and from one another. The three other states took no serious steps to change their alphabets. These measures were no doubt motivated by a desire to strengthen every separate national identity by distancing it from Turkey and from each neighbour, but in different ways.⁵ Nevertheless, official Turkey set up several universities and a number of Turkish schools in the new Central Asian states, in which some Turkish was taught, presumably in its Roman alphabet.⁶

The following features may be noted:

1. In each of the six states, specialised committees were appointed to consider romanisation and the principles guiding its essence as well as the graphic rules to be adopted. They also had to watch the timetables of reform (and in this they often failed). The committees' work was closely supervised by the state president and the government. In practical terms,

⁴Ahmet Bican Ercilasun, *Örneklerle bugünkü Türk alfabeleri* (Ankara, 1997).

⁵Bayram Balcı, 'Coopération culturelle et éducative entre la Turquie et les républiques turcophones d'Asie Centrale', *Les Dossiers de l'IFÉA*, V (2001), pp. 27–41.

⁶Cennet Engin Demir, Ayşe Balcı and Fusun Akkok, 'The role of Turkish schools in the educational system and social transformation of Central Asian countries: the case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan', *Central Asian Survey* XIX (2000), 1, pp. 141–155.

replaced the Cyrillic alphabet with the new Uzbek Roman one which was introduced in the 1996–1997 school year, starting with the first grade. The 1995 law laid down that the procedures for introducing the Roman script should be completed by the year 2000, but a new edition of the law postponed the term to 2005. An observer remarked in 2007 that the two alphabets were being used concurrently.¹³ Many books and newspapers remain in Cyrillic, although children's newspapers appear in Roman script. Romanisation is increasingly employed in the logos of institutions and firms, in shop windows, billboards and street signs – sometimes side by side with Cyrillic symbols.¹⁴

- c. Turkmenistan's language debates started late in the 1980s and continued after independence. Very few advocated the adoption of the Arabic-Persian script, despite the geographic proximity of Iran – or perhaps because of it. The Law on Language of 1990 focused on instituting Turkmen as an official language, while a 1992 law in independent Turkmenistan declared the government's intention to switch from the Cyrillic to the Roman script within ten years. In April 1993, President Saparmurat Niyazov announced his support for romanisation in a decree approved by Turkmenistan's parliament the following month. This so-called 'New Turkmen Alphabet', revised by parliament in 1995, was followed by another decree and steps to enforce it countrywide. Further decrees in September 1994 and 1997, calling on all Turkmen to employ the new Roman script, were only partly successful, chiefly in bureaucratic use. The first Turkmen book in Roman script was a biography of President Niyazov, published in 1995. Dictionaries and textbooks for the first grade followed, as well as road signs, street names and a new currency. Shop signs and newspapers used both scripts for some time, then one day all Turkmen newspapers appeared simultaneously in Roman script – evidence of a strongly authoritarian regime. We lack detailed information about the situation today, particularly after Niyazov's death on 21 December 2006;¹⁵ but it is reported that Niyazov's successor President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov insists, no less than his predecessor, on the general use of romanised Turkmen.

Closely-related Turkic languages, both of independent states and of non-independent communities, like the Tatars,¹⁶ are written today in no less than twenty-one versions of the Cyrillic, Roman and Arabic scripts. Another complicating factor is that romanisation in the latterly-mentioned three states was modified after the first few years of its introduction. Azerbaijan made a few changes. Turkmenistan's President Niyazov initially decreed the use of

¹³A. A. Kosmarskii, 'How is it possible to speak for latinization?', *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, XLVI (2007), 1, pp. 68–74.

¹⁴*Novosti*, 23 May 2007. Vladimir Mesamed, 'Linguistic policy and the process of democratization in Uzbekistan', in *Democracy and pluralism in Muslim Eurasia*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (London and New York, 2004), pp. 233–244.

¹⁵Jacob M. Landau and Barbara Kellner-Heinkele, *Politics of language in the ex-Soviet Muslim states* (London, 2001); Victoria Clement, 'Alphabet changes in Turkmenistan', in *Everyday life in Central Asia*, ed. Jeff Sabadeo and Russell Zanea (Bloomington, Ind., 2007), pp. 266–280.

¹⁶For whose alphabet problems see Sergei V. Sokolovskii, 'Alphabets and elites: script in contemporary Russia as a political symbol', *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, XLVI (2007), 1, pp. 10–35; D. Sh. Suleimanov, 'The problem of restoring the Tatar alphabet on the basis of the Latin script', *Anthropology and Archeology of Eurasia*, XLVI (2007), 1, pp. 54–67.

several symbols based on the signs of the United States dollar, the British pound sterling and the Japanese yen – perhaps in order to employ symbols available in computer programmes; then these were altered again. Uzbekistan started with a new Roman alphabet which was improved in 1995, as mentioned above; it comprised the Turkish-style ç and ş, but when relations with Turkey soured, these were changed to English-style ch and sh.

The issue of alphabet change is a particularly difficult one for sub-national allegiances of minorities and tribes. The area under discussion is inhabited by many ethnic minorities, each with its own language and dialects.¹⁷ Some of these are large in number, like the Tajiks in Uzbekistan¹⁸ (although statistics in this matter are not always reliable), or the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan (about 14% of the inhabitants). Others are smaller, but still numerous; Kazakhstan alone comprises almost one hundred ethnic minorities. Officially, there were declarations of equal status; in practice, there remain serious differences between 'us' and 'them'. The public discussion of alphabet reform in the six independent states was focused on each titular language alone. This may be perceived as a step towards the legitimization of the titular language, perhaps at the expense of others.

All this means in essence that all non-titular languages would retain, for the time being, their extant scripts in almost all cases Cyrillic, and employ them at school or in the press. An exception is Karakalpak, a language close to Kazakh, used by the community in Uzbekistan¹⁹ – but this is due to its semi-autonomous status. Otherwise, romanisation has implied that in the near future, at least, two official scripts would co-exist in each state – Cyrillic for the non-titular languages and Roman for the titular in those states adopting it. No wonder that the idea of alphabet change was rejected *in toto* by some spokesmen of the ethnic minorities.

Conclusion

We are considering states in which important changes and uncertain transitions prevail simultaneously. This is a situation in which national decisions and moves for alphabet reforms are still fluid. Hence any conclusions we may draw are only provisional. The question of the success or failure of these policies is hardly applicable to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan,²⁰ where fewer language reforms have been carried out. In the case of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, one may speak of quite successful script reforms in their respective titular languages, even if these are not yet complete. At all events, debates about alphabet change continue in all six states, although in varying degrees of intensity.²¹

In concluding, one may perhaps briefly enumerate the factors and features for the success or failure of alphabet reform in the six states (some of these may apply to other countries

¹⁷Valerie S. Khan, 'On the problems of revival and survival of ethnic minorities in post-Soviet Central Asia', in *Prospects for Democracy in Central Asia*, ed. Birgit N. Schlyter (London and New York, 2005), pp. 69–80.

¹⁸Stuart Horsman, 'The Tajik minority in contemporary Uzbekistani politics', in *Ethnicity and democratization in the new Europe*, ed. Karl Cordell (London and New York, 1999), pp. 197–212.

¹⁹Birgit N. Schlyter, 'The Karakalpaks and other language minorities under Central Asian state rule', in *Prospects for democracy in Central Asia*, ed. Birgit N. Schlyter (London and New York, 2005), pp. 81–94.

²⁰Bhavna Dave, 'A shrinking reach of the state: language policy and implementation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', in *The transformation of Central Asia states and societies from Soviet rule to independence*, ed. Pauline Jorres Luong (Ithaca and London, 2004), pp. 120–155.

²¹Artyom Ulunyan, 'Novye alfavit i starye problémy', <<http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5079>> (accessed 23 April 2007).

as well). This we may do while keeping in mind that there have been very few instances of success, worldwide, in alphabet change on a national scale:

1. A dedicated national leader with great authority is essential, like Stalin in the Soviet Union or Mustafa Kemal in Turkey. The six states have indeed been led by authoritarian presidents, but their dedication to alphabet reform has varied from one leader to another.
2. Strong motivation of the leading elites and popular support are necessary. Again, this has varied considerably in the states discussed, with the general population generally showing little interest in the subject.
3. The economic factor is crucial for alphabet change everywhere, and, in my recent travels, I was told more than once that romanisation demanded a huge outlay (this is true, of course) and that the limited funds available ought to be invested, preferably, in socio-economic projects.
4. In some quarters, it was argued, academically, that the Roman script is not quite suitable, phonologically, to the languages discussed.
5. Some opponents of romanisation maintained that a change of alphabet would cut off access to the civilisation and literature of past years and consequently lower the cultural level and national identification of the population.
6. Some other people were apprehensive of the reaction of the Slav minorities in their own countries, or even of the reaction of the Russian Federation, which definitely prefers the Cyrillic script for titular languages in the six states as well as within the Russian Federation.²²
7. Members of the ethnic groups employing non-titular languages argued that Cyrillic sufficed for them and that a change of script would only add to their linguistic problems.
8. It was maintained, on the other hand, that romanisation would improve communication with the West and would facilitate the study of English, the global language.
9. Religion, an impediment to romanisation in other societies (such as Turkey in the 1930s and later) seems to have had only a minor role in the debates within the six states we are discussing, although certain Islamic groups have protested (and some still do so) against romanisation, arguing for script arabisation.

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²²Ayten Aliyeva, 'Russkiye v Azerbajjane bez problem, no s yazikom', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/russian_in_depth/newsid_6265000/6265714.stm> (accessed 27 July 2007).

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
3. C. E. Bosworth, "Ghaznevid military organisation", *Der Islam*, XXXVI (1960), pp. 40–50.
4. M. Sharon, "The Ayyubid walls of Jerusalem", in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. M. Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 179–195.
5. B. Z. Kedar (ed.), *Jerusalem in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem, 1979), p. 122.

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CONTENTS

Editorial Introduction: Romanisation in Comparative Perspective İLKER AYTÜRK	I
The Literatî and the Letters: A Few Words on the Turkish Alphabet Reform LAURENT MIGNON	11
Alphabet Reform in the Six Independent ex-Soviet Muslim Republics JACOB M. LANDAU	25
Politics of Romanisation in Azerbaijan (1921–1992) AYÇA ERGUN	33
Romanisation in Uzbekistan Past and Present MEHMET UZMAN	49
Romanisation of Bengali and Other Indian Scripts DENNIS KURZON	61
The Rōmaji movement in Japan NANETTE GOTTLIEB	75
Postscript from the <i>JRAS</i> Editor SARAH ANSARI	89
BOOK REVIEWS	91

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