

The acceptance of the Latin alphabet in the Turkish World

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During the twentieth century, important changes have taken place in the Turkish World as various Turkic groups have changed their alphabets several times. On October 1, 1928, the Republic of Turkey enacted a law replacing the Arabic alphabet with a Latin-based orthography. Within two months, by January, 1929, Turks started to use the Latin alphabet. A few years later, this new alphabet was also adopted by the Turks in the Balkan Peninsula and Cyprus. The Turks in these regions have not changed their alphabet since then.

During 1927 to 1931, the Turks living in the Soviet Union likewise changed their alphabet from Arabic to one of Latin origin. This situation did not last for a long time, however, for during the years 1937 to 1940 these peoples were forced by the Russians to use the Cyrillic alphabet. Due to an intentional policy of the Soviet authorities, different versions of the Cyrillic alphabet were designed and adopted for different Turkic (Turkish) languages.¹

In 1959, the Uighurs and Kazakhs (Qazaq) of Eastern Turkestan also adopted an alphabet of Latin origin. This alphabet became official in 1965, but the introduction of a law on October 23rd, 1983, forced these populations to return to the Arabic alphabet. Unfortunately, the newly created Arabic orthographies for Uighur, Kazakh and Kirghiz (Qyrghyz), as used in China, were completely different from the earlier tradition of writing these languages with the Arabic alphabet.²

The Turks in Iran and Iraq did not change their original alphabet. Throughout the 20th century, within certain limits established by the laws and practices in their respective countries, they have been able to maintain their right to publish in Turkish. In their publications, they have always used the Arabic alphabet.

In 1991, with the emergence of five newly independent Turkic republics in the Soviet Union, the subject of the alphabet became an issue again and, as a result, the Turks in the former Soviet Union changed their alphabets for the third time in the 20th century. On December 25th, 1991, the Republic of Azerbaidjan, on April 12th, 1993, the Republic of Turkmenistan, on October 2nd, 1993, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and on

February 26th, 1994, the Karakalpak (Qaraqalpaq) Autonomous Republic, enacted laws to adopt orthographies based on the Latin alphabet.

On May 13th, 1993, Moldavia accepted the demands of the Gagauz Turks to use the Latin alphabet. The Krym (Qrym) Tatars also adopted a new Latin alphabet by a decree issued at the Second Krym Tatar National Assembly on July 31st, 1993.³

Finally, on July 20th, 1994, the Republic of Tatarstan (Tataristan) included the transformation of the alphabet into its government program. Nowadays the differences between the two alphabet proposals have been worked up and submitted to the parliament as a single bill. It is very likely that Tatarstan will adopt a new Latin alphabet very soon.

Most of the above-mentioned countries have already started to apply the Latin alphabet in practice. First-grade students began to be educated in the Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan during the academic year 1992–1993, and in Uzbekistan during the academic year 1996–1997. At present, the Latin alphabet is used from grades one through seven.⁴ In Turkmenistan the years 1993–1995 were scheduled to form a preparational period. The plan called for the full implementation of the new alphabet starting with January 1st, 1996.⁵ Uzbekistan plans to complete its transformation to the Latin alphabet by the year 2005. In the capitals of these countries many pictures and signboards can already be seen in the new alphabet. Also, the currencies (*manat*) of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have been printed using the new alphabet. The number of books published in the new alphabet is increasing all the time. The Latin alphabet is also used in the headlines of newspapers. Textbooks written in Latin-based orthographies have been sent by Turkey to Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. For example, Turkey has sent 425,000 volumes titled «Turkish Language 1, 2, 3» to Azerbaijan. Turkey has also sent a total of 3,945,000 volumes on 36 different subjects to Turkmenistan. The subjects covered include the Turkmen language and literature, the history of Turkmenistan, as well as physics, biology, and mathematics.⁶

Since 1991 official, semi-official and special meetings conducted in Turkey have played an important role for the acceptance of the new alphabets among the Turkic republics and societies. Specialists of the above-mentioned countries have been invited to these meetings. Among the participants there have been many famous linguists and authors: from Azerbaijan Prof. Dr. Elövset Abdullayev, Prof. Dr. Vagıf Aslanov, Prof. Dr. Afat Gurbanov, Dr. Bekir Nebiyev, Prof. Dr. Kemal Abdullayev, Prof. Dr. Firidun Celilov; from Turkmenistan Prof. Dr. Beşim Çaryarov, Prof. Dr. Sapar Kurenov, Dr. Cabbar Göklenov, Annaguli Nurmammedov; from Uzbekistan Prof. Dr. İristay

Kuçkartayev, Prof. Dr. Nizamiddin Mahmudov, Prof. Dr. Azim Hacıyev, Dr. Enver Cabbarov; from Kazakhstan (Qazaqistan) Prof. Dr. Abdülali Qaydarov, Prof. Dr. Kenesbay Musayev, Prof. Dr. Köbey Hüseinov, Dr. Erden Qajibekov; from Kyrgyzstan (Qyrghyzistan) Prof. Dr. Abdıgani Erkebayev, Prof. Dr. Salıcan Yiğitov, Prof. Dr. Çetin Cumagulov, Prof. Dr. Çenişbek Sıdıkov, Dr. Kadirali Konkobayev; from Tatarstan Prof. Dr. Mirfatih Zekiyev, Razil Veliyev; from Bashkortostan (Bashqurdistan) Prof. Dr. Zinnur Uraksin, Prof. Dr. Talmas Garipov; from Chuvashia (Chuvashistan) Dr. Nikolay Yegorov; and from the Gagauz Turks Stephan Kuroğlu.⁷ Some of these participants are acting as the heads of linguistic institutes in their respective countries. Prof. Dr. Abdıgani Erkebayev, who participated in a meeting in Kyrgyzstan, is currently President of the Parliament in his country. Prof. Dr. Firidun Celilov is a former member of the Azerbaidjan Parliament. He has subsequently become Minister of National Education, in which position he has played an important role in introducing the Latin alphabet.

In Turkey, the first meeting was organised by Marmara University in Istanbul on November 18th to 20th, 1991. The event was held under the name «The International Symposium of the Contemporary Turkish Alphabet».⁸ Later meetings in Turkey have followed the guidelines and principles adopted in the initial meeting. However, in spite of these efforts of unification, there are considerable differences among the alphabets adopted in the Turkic republics. Some of these differences will be surveyed in the following.

The «Common Turkish Alphabet» adopted by the participants of the above-mentioned meetings contains altogether 34 letters. Of these, 29 letters come from the official alphabet of the Republic of Turkey. The other five letters are **ä** (ə), **x**, **q**, **ñ** and **w**. In addition to this set of 34 basic letters, some general recommendations concerning the use of the letters have been adopted:

1. In the process of transferring to the Latin alphabet, each language should choose the necessary letters from the normative set of 34 letters. The total number of letters in any single language should not exceed 34.
2. Each sound should be represented by a single letter.
3. Identical sounds in different languages should be represented by identical letters.

Although these recommendations restrict the maximum number of letters, they do not regulate how many letters (out of 34) should actually be used in any given orthography. The primary objective is that there should be a unified set of letters that is used across political borders for

the writing of the various Turkic languages. Selected examples of how this is done are given below.

Azeri

The republic of Azerbaidjan decided to follow the principles of the «Common Turkish Alphabet» with one exception, and chose 32 letters for its new alphabet. The exception is that the symbol **ə** (instead of **ä**) is used for the wide front vowel. This decision is motivated by practical considerations, in that the wide front vowel has a very high frequency in Azeri, and the symbol **ä**, with its two dots, would be cumbersome in actual use. The advantage of the letter **ə** is that it can be written with one single hand action, and also that the Azeri people are already used to it from their former Cyrillic alphabet. For these reasons, the Azeri people reacted rather strongly against the letter **ä**. These objections were officially accepted by the «The Permanent Turkish Language Assembly», the second meeting focussed on the «Common Turkish Alphabet» and organised on May 4–8, 1992, by the the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Turkey.⁹

There are two more letters in the Azeri alphabet which are used in special functions, different from the recommendations of the «Common Turkish Alphabet»: **x** and **q**. Both are used for velar sounds. The letter **q**, in particular, denotes a voiced back-velar (velar-uvular) obstruent which corresponds to the similar unvoiced consonant in other Turkic languages. Since this unvoiced consonant, for which the letter **q** would normally stand, is absent in Azeri, there is no possibility of confusion. It would have been more complicated to adopt an extra letter for Azeri than to extend the function of the already extant letter **q**.

Turkmen

The new Turkmen alphabet has 30 letters. Among the letters adopted directly from the «Common Turkish Alphabet» there are **ä**, **ñ** and **w**. However, there are five other letters which deviate from the principles of the «Common Turkish Alphabet». These are:

Common Turkish Alphabet		New Turkmen Alphabet	
C	c	J	j
J	i	£	ƒ
Ş	ş	\$	¢
I	ı	y	y
Y	y	¥	ÿ

There is no doubt that these five letters of the Turkmen orthography severely violate the principle of «same letter for same sound» of the «Common Turkish Alphabet». They also create a lot of confusion. For instance, the letter **j**, understood as denoting a fricative sound in the other Turkic languages, is used for a stop sound (*c*) in Turkmen. Similarly, the letter **t**, denoting a semi-vowel (*y*) in the other Turkic orthographies, stands for a vowel (*ı*) in Turkmen. The letters **£**, **\$**, **¥** are unknown for all Turkic groups. As a first step towards unification with the other Turkic orthographies, in the end of the year 1994, the Turkmen abolished the letter **\$** (*ç*) and accepted the letter **Ş** (*ş*) of the «Common Turkish Alphabet».

Uzbek

The Uzbek Latin alphabet, which was accepted on October 2nd, 1993, consists of 31 letters and one extra symbol, the apostrophe. The use of the letters **q**, **x**, **ñ** in this alphabet is in line with the «Common Turkish Alphabet». However, there are two letters which contradict the principle of «same letter for same sound». These are:

Common Turkish Alphabet		New Uzbek Alphabet	
C	c	J	j
J	j	Ƶ	ƶ

The letter **c** is used in Uzbek to denote an unvoiced dental affricate (*ts*), which mainly occurs in Russian loanwords. For this reason, the voiced palatal affricate written by the letter **c** in the «Common Turkish Alphabet» has to be expressed by the letter **j**. In turn, the fricative sound for which the letter **j** would normally stand has to be expressed by a special letter in Uzbek.

As far as the vowels are concerned, the new Uzbek alphabet uses the letter **ö** for the rounded mid-high front-vowel. Since this sound had no special letter in the Cyrillic orthography of Uzbek, the new alphabet may be regarded as more advanced with regard to the need of communicating with other Turks. Unfortunately, no letter **ü** was adopted for the new Uzbek alphabet. The Uzbek Latin alphabet of the 1930s did have a special letter for this function.

While there was some hope to remedy the inconsistencies and deficiencies in the new Uzbek alphabet, the actual changes that were made in a revision of the orthography on May 6th, 1996, also violated the principles of «same letter for same sound». Thus, the single letters **ç**, **ñ**, and **ş** of the 1993 alphabet were now replaced by the double letters

ch, **ng**, and **sh**, respectively. Also, the letters **c** (for *ts*) and **j** (for the fricative consonant *j*) that had existed in the former alphabet were abolished in the reform. As a result, the Uzbek alphabet today contains 26 single letters and 3 double letters as opposed to the earlier alphabet, which contained 31 single letters.

Other languages

The new Karakalpak alphabet consists of 32 letters, including **x**, **q**, **ñ** and **w**, which do not occur in the regular Turkish orthography. The letter **c** of the «Common Turkish Alphabet» is not used in Karakalpak. The Karakalpak alphabet also includes one double letter, **sh**, which contradicts the principle of «single letter for single sound».

Among the 30 letters of the Gagauz alphabet **ä** is accepted for the wide front vowel (*ä*), while **ê** is used for the narrow *e*. This alphabet does not contain the letter **ğ**.

The new alphabet of the Krym Tatars has 31 letters, including **ñ** and **q**. All letters are used in accordance with the recommendations of the «Common Turkish Alphabet».

As can be seen, since 1991 rapid developments have taken place in the Latinization of the Turkic literary languages. It can be assumed that these developments will continue in the future, as the issue of orthography reform is actualized in countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Bashkortostan.

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