The Qazaqbet

A Proposal for a Qazaq Latin Alphabet

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Qazaq is a Turkic language with the Cyrillic writing system. It is the official language of Kazakhstan. The use of the Latin alphabet would foster closer cultural connections between Qazaq speakers and the speakers of languages with the Latin script. This is a proposal for a Qazaq Latin alphabet based on the English alphabet. We call it the Qazaqbet. The latest Latinized Qazaq script was published by the government of Kazakhstan in 2021. Our proposal improves on this work by reducing the number of diacritics from five to two and removing two new characters while accounting for all Qazaq letters. The Qazaqbet letters are easy to spell and write, and can be typed on any standard English keyboard. This makes the Qazaqbet easy to learn and use, which is crucial when introducing a new writing system.
Keywords: Kazakh Latin alphabet, Qazaq, Qazaqbet

Introduction

The Kazakh language, or Qazaq[2], is a Turkic language that currently uses the Cyrillic script, because Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union until 1991. The government of Kazakhstan recognizes the value of using the Latin script, which would facilitate cultural, scientific and technological exchange between Qazaq speakers and the speakers of languages with the Latin writing system. Currently, there is no consensus on how to write Qazaq in the Latin script. The same issue was raised by Ahmet Baitūrsynūly[3], the eminent Kazakh intellectual and the reformer of the Qazaq Arabic script, in the 1920s. The government introduced several versions of the Latinized Qazaq alphabet in the last few years, but none of them has been successfully adopted

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[2] We use the spelling "Qazaq" instead of the more common "Kazakh" because this is how you say it in the spoken language, with the accent on the second syllable. "Qazaqbet" is a pun, since "bet" means "face".
[3] There is currently no consensus on how to write his name in Latin, so we will write it in the Qazaqbet.

by the public. This is not surprising, given people's natural resistance to learning a new writing system, especially if it differs significantly from the old alphabet. When the Turkish government switched from the Arabic script to the Latin alphabet in the late 1920s, it ran into several challenges despite a highly coordinated effort, and cooperation of the press, army and schools (Yılmaz 2011). The transition took longer than expected, with the old script persisting into the 1940s. Some people never managed to learn the new alphabet and became illiterate.

When considering our proposal, we adopted a descriptive approach, and took into account people's reluctance to switch to a new alphabet. We need to ensure that literacy levels will not fall with the introduction of a new script. The best predictor of reading ability is the ability to spell and name the letters of the alphabet (Hammill 2004), so a new alphabet should be simple, with characters that are easy to spell and write. The Qazaqbet was designed with these features in mind, and it is in line with the wishes of Ahmet Baitūrsynūly. He outlined several aspects of a good alphabet: it must suit the language perfectly and be easy to write, teach and print (Salkynbay and Anarbekova 2020).

Qazaq script systems: current and past

The Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet contains 42 letters, of which 33 are Russian letters and nine are uniquely Qazaq letters (Table 1). The Qazaq letters are the vowels "ә" [æ][4], "i" [ɪ], "ө" [œ], "ү" [ʏ], "ұ" [ʊ], and the consonants "h" [h], "ң" [ŋ], "қ" [q] and "ғ" [ʁ].

A a	Ә ә	Б б	В в	Г г	Ғ ғ	Д д
Е е	Ё ё	Ж ж	З з	И и	Й й	К к
Қ қ	Л л	М м	Н н	Ң ң	О о	Ө ө
П п	Р р	С с	Т т	У у	Ұ ұ	Ү ү
Ф ф	Х х	һ h	Ц ц	Ч ч	Ш ш	Щ щ
Ъ ъ	Ы ы	I i	Ь ь	Э э	Ю ю	Я я

Table 1. The Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet with its 42 letters.

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[4] The characters in square brackets represent the sounds as per the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

The ancestor of Qazaq, Old Turkic, was written in Turkic runes, known from the Orkhon valley inscriptions. These inscriptions were deciphered by Vilhelm Thomsen in 1893. Thomsen detailed his findings in his book "Inscriptions de L'Orkhon Déchiffrées", published in 1896 (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. A list of Turkic runes from Thomsen's "Inscriptions de L'Orkhon Déchiffrées".

Due to the influence of Islam on Kazakh culture, Qazaq was written in the Arabic script for centuries. A version that was more suitable for Qazaq was introduced by Ahmet Baitūrsynūly in 1912, and was in use until the late 1920s. It includes all the Qazaq letters (Fig. 2, 3), and is still used by Kazakhs who live in China, Afghanistan and Iran.

Figure 2. The Qazaq Arabic script proposed by Ahmet Baitūrsynūly. Source: wikimedia commons.

Figure 3. An illustration from Ahmet Baitūrsynūly's book, published in 1927. The words from left to right are "aiaq" (a dish), "aina" (a mirror) and "ai" (the moon).

There have also been several versions of the Qazaq Latin alphabet, the earliest of which was introduced by the Soviet government[5] to replace the Arabic script, and was briefly used in the 1920s and 30s (Martin 2001). The latest Latinized Qazaq alphabet was proposed by the linguists

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[5] The latinization in the Soviet Union inspired the Turkish government to switch to the Latin script in the 1920s.

from the Ahmet Baitūrsynūly Institute of Linguistics, and was published by the government of Kazakhstan in 2021 (Fig. 4). It is based on the English alphabet and contains 31 letters.

Алфавит казахского языка, основанный на латинской графике

№	Буква	Название буквы	№	Буква	Название буквы
1	A a	а	18	O o	о
2	Ä ä	ә	19	Ö ö	ө
3	B b	бы	20	P p	пы
4	D d	ды	21	Q q	қы
5	E e	е	22	R r	ыр
6	F f	фы	23	S s	сы
7	G g	гі	24	Ş ş	шы
8	Ğ ğ	ғы	25	T t	ты
9	H h	һы	26	U u	ұу
10	İi	ій	27	Ū ū	ұ
11	Iı	і	28	Ü ü	ү
12	J j	жы	29	V v	вы
13	K k	кі	30	Y y	ы
14	L l	ыл	31	Z z	зы
15	M m	мы			
16	N n	ны		*Знаки C, X, W используются в иностранных словах на основе цитатного принципа	
17	Ññ	ың			

Figure 4. The latest Latinized Qazaq alphabet, published by the government of Kazakhstan in 2021. The title says: "The Alphabet of the Kazakh language based on the Latin script".

The letters "c", "x" and "w" have been dropped from the English base. Five diacritics are used to indicate seven Qazaq letters. An umlaut (◌̈) denotes the front vowels "ä" ("ə")[6], "ö" ("ө") and "ü" ("ү"), while a macron (◌̄) indicates the back vowel "ū" ("ұ"). A tilde (◌̃) is used to denote the velar nasal consonant "ñ" ("ң"), a breve (◌̆) indicates the uvular consonant "ğ" ("ғ"), and a cedilla (◌̧) — the postalveolar consonant "ş" ("ш"). The letter "i" ("İ" in uppercase) represents the close front vowel "и" [i] and the palatal approximant "й" [j], while the letter "ı" ("I") stands for the near-close front vowel ("i").

One can note several challenges to adopting this version of the Latinized Qazaq alphabet. Qazaq speakers have to memorize five new diacritics on top of learning the English alphabet, as well as two new letters that are not present in the Latin script, "İ" and "ı". The choice of these letters was most likely inspired by the Turkish alphabet, and may appear reasonable. However,

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[6] The Cyrillic letters are in parentheses.

given that people in Kazakhstan are more familiar with the English alphabet than with the Turkish one, they may need to extend mental effort to write these letters.

Our proposal: the Qazaqbet

Introducing a new writing system needs to be a gentle and gradual process. This means adding as few new symbols as possible on top of the English alphabet, and using some notation inspired by the Qazaq Cyrillic script. This is a proposal for a new Qazaq Latin alphabet, the Qazaqbet, that respects these two principles. The Qazaqbet is simple, elegant and easy to spell.

<div align="center">

Aa Ää Bb Cc Dd
Ee Ff Gg Ḡḡ Hh
Ii Ïï Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Ññ Oo Öö
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Üü Ūū Vv Yy Zz

</div>

Like the official version, the Qazaqbet is based on the English alphabet and has 31 letters. However, it uses only two diacritics, an umlaut (◌̈) and a macron (◌̄), to indicate seven Qazaq letters. The umlaut denotes the front vowels "ä" [æ], "ö" [œ], "ü" [ʏ] and "ï" [ɪ], while the macron indicates the back vowel "ū" [ʊ], the uvular consonant "ḡ" [ʁ] and the velar nasal consonant "ñ" [ŋ]. The consistent use of the umlaut for the front vowels highlights the vowel harmony that is present in Qazaq and other Turkic languages. It is easier to remember "ū" and "ḡ" because the Cyrillic equivalent "Y" and "ғ" have a horizontal line in them. One can note the consistency of the Qazaqbet by seeing that all the vowels indicated by the umlaut are the front ones, and all the sounds denoted by the macron are shaped in the back of the mouth (Fig. 5, 6).
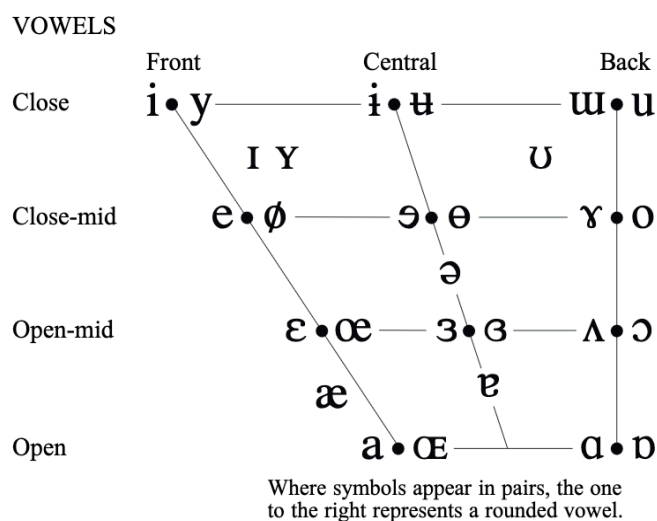

Figure 5. The 2020 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) vowel chart.

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	N		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

Symbols to the right in a cell are voiced, to the left are voiceless. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

Figure 6. The IPA consonant chart.

The Qazaqbet letters are easy to write and to spell, which should facilitate the transition from the Cyrillic script (Table 2).

The English Alphabet	The 2021 version	The Qazaq Cyrillic Alphabet	The Qazaqbet (Q)	IPA for Q	How to spell Q	Examples in the Qazaqbet (a noun, an adjective and a verb)
Aa	Aa	Aa	Aa	[a]	[a]	ana, aq, alu
	Ää	Әә	Ää	[æ]	[æ]	äke, ädemï, äkelu
Bb	Bb	Бб	Bb	[b]	[bɪ]	bala, belgïlï, beru
Cc		Цц	Cc	[ts]	[tsɪ]	cenzura
Dd	Dd	Дд	Dd	[d]	[dɪ]	dombyra, dämdï, dem alu
Ee	Ee	Ее	Ee	[je]	[je]	et, erke, emdetu
Ff	Ff	Фф	Ff	[f]	[fɪ]	futbol
Gg	Gg	Гг	Gg	[g]	[gɪ]	gül, güldengen, güldenu
	Ğğ	Ғғ	Ḡḡ	[ʁ]	[ʁɪ]	ḡylym, ḡajap, ḡashyq bolu
Hh	Hh	һh	Hh	[h]	[hɪ]	haiuanat, habarlandyru
Ii	İi	Ии, Йй	Ii	[i]	[i], [ij]	it, imandy, iteru, ai, oilau

	Iı	Ii	Ïï	[ɪ]	[ɪ]	ïrïmshïk, ïrï, ïru
Jj	Jj	Жж	Jj	[ʒ]	[ʒɪ]	jylan, jasyl, jatu
Kk	Kk	Кк	Kk	[k]	[kɪ]	kïtap, kök, köteru
Ll	Ll	Лл	Ll	[l]	[lɪ]	laq, laiyqty, laqtyru
Mm	Mm	Мм	Mm	[m]	[mɪ]	mektep, möldïr, maqtanu
Nn	Nn	Нн	Nn	[n]	[nɪ]	nan, näzïk, nazar audaru
	Ññ	Ңң	Ññ	[ŋ]	[ŋɪ]	teñïz, seniñ, jañbyr
Oo	Oo	Оо	Oo	[o]	[o]	ot, oqyḡan, oilau
	Öö	Өө	Öö	[œ]	[œ]	ömïr, ötkïr, ölu
Pp	Pp	Пп	Pp	[p]	[pɪ]	pïkïr, pysyq, paidalanu
Qq	Qq	Ққ	Qq	[q]	[qɪ]	qazan, qara, quanu
Rr	Rr	Рр	Rr	[r]	[rɪ]	raushan, riza, renju
Ss	Ss	Сс	Ss	[s]	[sɪ]	söz, sary, sekïru
	Şş			[ʃ]		
Tt	Tt	Тт	Tt	[t]	[tɪ]	tïl, tamasha, tartu
Uu	Uu	Уу	Uu	[u]	[u]	uaqyt, uaiymdau
	Üü	Үү	Üü	[ʏ]	[ʏ]	üi, ülken, üiretu
	Ūū	Ұұ	Ūū	[ʊ]	[ʊ]	ūl, ūzyn, ūmytu
Vv	Vv	Вв	Vv	[v]	[vɪ]	voleibol
Ww						
Xx						
Yy	Yy	Ыы	Yy	[ɯ]	[ɯ]	ydys, ystyq, yqpal etu
Zz	Zz	Зз	Zz	[z]	[zɪ]	zaman, zor, zertteu

Table 2. This table juxtaposes the Qazaqbet (in gray) to the latest Qazaq Latin alphabet, the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet, and the IPA, and highlights the ease of spelling the Qazaqbet letters.

Letters "ä" and "ö" are present in other languages such as Swedish, and they have the same sounds as "ə" and "ө". The latest official version of the alphabet already uses "ä", "ö" and "ü". It seems natural to extend the umlaut to "ï", since it is also a front vowel. Since "n̄" [ŋ] is a dorsal consonant, just like "ḡ" [ʁ], it makes sense to denote it with the macron. The latest version already uses the macron in "ū". The advantages of the Qazaqbet are outlined below (Table 3).

Features	The 2021 Latin alphabet	The Qazaqbet
Number of letters	31	31
Letters on top of the English alphabet	9 ("Ää", "Öö", "Üü", "Iı", "İi", "Ūū", "Ğğ", "Ññ", "Şş")	7 ("Ää", "Öö", "Üü", "Ïï", "Ūū", "Ḡḡ", "N̄n̄")
Number of diacritics	5 (ö̈, ō̄, ŏ, õ, o̦)	2 (ö̈, ō̄)
Easy to spell	No	Yes

Table 3. Comparison of the Qazaqbet with the 2021 Qazaq Latin alphabet.

Letters "x" and "w" are removed because they are not needed in Qazaq. "W" can be replaced by "u" whenever it appears, usually in words of Arabic origin such as "uaqyt". "X" is only needed in scientific and mathematical notation, or in borrowed phrases such as "Mister X".

Some letters that are present in the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet, such as "я", "ю", "ш" and "ч", are not included in the Qazaqbet proper. Instead, they are made by combining two existing Qazaqbet letters: "ia" as in "qoian", "iu" as in "aiu", and "sh" as in "shal" respectively. The "ia" and "iu" letter combinations are in line with Baitūrsynūly's suggestion in his script (Fig. 3). For a letter combination "ция" ("ciia"), which is present in some loan words and names of countries, we propose dropping an extra "i" in front of "a", as in "assimiliacia", "Francia" and "integracia". This does not significantly change the pronunciation and is easier to write.

The Cyrillic letter "ч" is not intrinsic to Qazaq, but the equivalent Latin letter combination "ch" allows some speakers to write their patronymic name the way it is written in Russian. The letter combinations "sh" and "ch" are already used in English, for instance "a shy child". In words with an "cx" consonant combination, such as "асхана" and "Асхат", "k" is placed in front of "h", as in "askhana" and "Askhat". This allows us to keep using "sh" to represent "ш", and to avoid adding another letter to the Qazaqbet.

The letter "i" represents both "и" and "й", as in "it" and "bai" respectively. People learning Qazaq as a second language just need to remember that if "i" appears at the beginning of a word or between two consonants, it is pronounced as [i], for instance, "iteru" and "bit". In all other cases, such as at the end of a word, between two vowels or between a vowel and a consonant, it is pronounced as [ij], for instance "qoi", "oiy" and "ait".

One can see that all the Qazaq Cyrillic letters are accounted for, either by having them in the Qazaqbet proper or by combining two Qazaqbet letters (Table 4). The Cyrillic letters that were not covered by the Qazaqbet are the Russian letters that are both absent in Qazaq and are not needed.

А а	Ә ә	Б б	В в	Г г	Ғ ғ	Д д
A a	Ä ä	B b	V v	G g	Ḡ ḡ	D d
Е е	Ё ё	Ж ж	З з	И и	Й й	К к
Ee		J j	Z z	I i	I i	K k
Қ қ	Л л	М м	Н н	Ң ң	О о	Ө ө
Q q	L l	M m	N n	Ñ ñ	O o	Ö ö
П п	Р р	С с	Т т	У у	Ұ ұ	Ү ү
P p	R r	S s	T t	U u	Ū ū	Ü ü
Ф ф	Х х	Һ һ	Ц ц	Ч ч	Ш ш	Щ щ
F f		H h	C c	Ch ch	Sh sh	
Ъ ъ	Ы ы	І і	Ь ь	Э э	Ю ю	Я я
	Yy	Ï ï			Iu iu	Ia ia

Table 4. Matching of the letters of the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet (in gray) with those of the Qazaqbet.

Generating the Qazaqbet

In order to generate the Qazaqbet, we take the following steps:

1. Use the English alphabet with its 26 letters as a base.

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee
Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj
Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

2. Remove the five letters that are absent in Qazaq: "c", "f", "v", "w", "x", leaving 21 letters.

Aa Bb Dd Ee Gg
Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq
Rr Ss Tt Uu Yy Zz

3. Add the seven Qazaq letters: "ä", "ï", "ö", "ü", "ū", "ḡ", "ñ". This is the basic Qazaqbet, which contains 28 letters.

Aa Ää Bb Dd Ee
Gg Ḡḡ Hh Ii Ïï
Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn
Ññ Oo Öö Pp Qq
Rr Ss Tt Uu Üü
Ūū Yy Zz

Each of the seven Qazaq letters is placed right after the English letter with the most similar sound. Unlike in the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet, the letter "ü" is placed before "ū", to be consistent with the overall structure of the Qazaqbet. Having the basic Qazabet allows us to differentiate between intrinsic Qazaq words and recent loanwords from Russian and other languages. One may note that many Qazaq words such as "kïtap" are also loan words. However, they do not require letters that are absent in Qazaq, and they have been part of the language for a significantly longer time than Russian loan words. Thus, they have become native Qazaq words.

4. Add back the letters that are absent in Qazaq proper but have become necessary due to the influence of the Russian language. These are "c", "f", "v". This is the expanded Qazaqbet, which has 31 letters.

Aa Ää Bb Cc Dd
Ee Ff Gg Ḡḡ Hh
Ii Ïï Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Ññ Oo Öö
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Üü Ūū Vv Yy Zz

The expanded Qazaqbet includes letters "c", "f", "v" because without them Qazaq speakers would have trouble writing their surnames. It is possible to go back to the traditional Kazakh way of writing our names, but that would cause friction. Besides, there are many names for people and places that require these letters, such as "Al-Farabi" and "Francia".

Testing the Qazaqbet

Let us test the Qazaqbet. Below is an excerpt of Tatyana's letter to Onegin, from "Eugene Onegin, A Novel in Verse" by Alexander Pushkin, translated from Russian into Qazaq by Abai Qūnanbaiūly (Table 5).

Written in the Qazaq Cyrillic Alphabet	Written in the Qazaqbet
Амал жоқ – қайттім білдірмей, Япырмау, қайтіп айтамын? Қоймады дертің күйдірмей, Не салсаң да тартамын.	Amal joq – qaittïm bïldïrmei, Iapyrmau, qaitïp aitamyn? Qoimady dertiñ küidïrmei, Ne salsañ da tartamyn.
Талайсыз, бақсыз мен сорлы, Еріксіз аттап ұяттан, Қорлыққа көндім бұл құрлы, Байқалар халім бұл хаттан.	Talaisyz, baqsyz men sorly, Erïksïz attap ūiattan, Qorlyqqa köndïm būl qūrly, Baiqalar halïm būl hattan.
Әлімше мен де ұялып, Білдірмен дедім өлсем де. Шыдар ем күйіп, мен жанып, Айында бірер көрсем де.	Älïmshe men de ūialyp, Bïldïrmen dedïm ölsem de. Shydar em küiïp, men janyp, Aiynda bïrer körsem de.
Болмады көріп қалуға, Есітіп біраз сөзіңді. Шыдар ем бір ай жатуға, Ұзақ түн жұмбай көзімді.	Bolmady körïp qaluğa, Esïtïp bïraz sözïndï. Shydar em bïr ai jatuğa, Ūzaq tün jūmbai közïmdï.
Қызықтан қашып бұл жерге Көңіліңіз суып келіпсіз. Мәнісін сұрап бірерге, Тілдесе алмаймын еріксіз.	Qyzyqtan qashyp būl jerge Köñïlïñïz suyp kelïpsïz. Mänïsïn sūrap bïrerge, Tïldese almaimyn erïksïz.

Table 5. Comparison of Qazaq text written in the Cyrillic alphabet and in the Qazaqbet.

Typing in the Qazaqbet

You can use any computer that has an English keyboard to type in the Qazaqbet. It is already possible to type "ä", "ö", "ü", "ï" and "ū" in MacOS by holding the base vowel key and pressing a specific number key. You need to press the key "2" to convert "i", "u", "o" into "ï", "ü", "ö" respectively. To type "ä", you need to hold "a" while pressing "4". Pressing "5" while holding "u" gives you "ū". The only challenge comes when typing "ḡ" and "ñ", but it is possible to overcome it by configuring some other key to stand for the macron for consonants. This minor technical difficulty should not stand in the way of considering the Qazaqbet for the role of the official Qazaq Latin alphabet.

Discussion

The main goal of a writing system is to represent a language in written form as clearly as possible. This does not mean that all the sounds and variations in accents will be represented. Rather, a good alphabet should be able to capture the major sounds of a language while keeping the number of letters to a minimum and using letter combinations to represent the remaining sounds. The Qazaqbet successfully achieves this goal.

The use of the Latin alphabet would enable foreigners to read and learn Qazaq more easily. Most importantly, it would facilitate the inflow of valuable information from Indo-European languages, especially English, which would revitalize Kazakh culture. It would also bring Qazaq speakers closer to Turkish speakers. Having fewer barriers to learning the Latin script will make it more likely for the public to successfully adopt it. The Qazaqbet should be easy to adopt because it is simple, elegant and intuitive.

A transition to a new writing system can be intimidating, especially for older and less educated people. Once again, we can learn from the experience of the Turkish government in adopting the Latin alphabet (Yılmaz 2011). The government established mandatory schools for citizens between the ages of sixteen and forty who lacked the knowledge of the new alphabet. Those who knew the alphabet could be exempted from attending the schools by taking a test. There was a coordinated effort by the press, schools and the army to disseminate the new script. Within a few months of passing the Alphabet Law in November 1928, all newspapers, books, political associations and institutions were mandated to use the new script.

While children and young adults can learn the new script in schools and universities, government-sponsored courses can help adults learn the new alphabet in a structured environment. Rather than having a sudden and possibly disruptive switch to the new script, it may be better to have a smooth transition through continued publications of books, journals and newspapers in the Cyrillic script while gradually making the same material available in the Latin script. In fact, it would be best for Qazaq, Kazakh culture and people if there were continued publications of some works available in all four scripts, Cyrillic, Latin, Arabic and Old Turkic. This would highlight our rich cultural heritage and flexibility, revive our ancestral way of writing, and foster close cultural ties with other users of these scripts.

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