

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 a 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 official 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 easier to spell and write than those of the official version. While the 2021 version requires a new keyboard layout, the Qazaqbet 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 Qazaq², is a Turkic language that uses the Cyrillic script, because Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union until 1991. The government of Kazakhstan recognizes the value of having a 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 a Latin script. The same issue was raised by Ahmet Bajtұrsynūly³, 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 were successfully adopted by the public. This is not surprising, given people's natural resistance to learning a new writing system, especially if it

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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.

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 Bajtürsynüly. 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

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

А а	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 һ	Ц ц	Ч ч	Ш ш	Щ щ
Ъ ъ	Ы ы	І і	Ь ь	Э э	Ю ю	Я я

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

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, which were deciphered and published by Vilhelm Thomsen in 1893. A more extended version, "The Deciphered Orkhon Inscriptions", was published by him in 1896 (Fig. 1).

	Orkh. III.	Iénisséi.		Orkh. III.	Iénisséi.
↯ a, ä		" ↯ ʎ	᠑ j ²		" ρ (P)
↱ y, i		" ↱	᠓ i		— (ξ XXXVII)
> ʏ o, u	ʏ	"	↱ ñ (ng)		" ↱
↯ ʊ ö, ü	ʊ	" ʊ) n ¹		"
↯ ʌ q (k ¹)		"	᠎ n ²		" ᠎ ᠊
↯ q devant ou après y		— (᠔ XXXVII)	᠓ m		"
↯ q devant ou après o, u		↑	᠕ r ¹		" ᠕ ᠕
↯ r (g ¹)		᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎	᠎ r ²		"
↯ k (k ²)	↯	" ᠎ ᠎	↯ l (l ¹)		" √
↯ k devant ou après ö, ü		᠎	↯ l (l ²)		"
↯ g (g ²)		" ᠎ ᠎ ᠎	᠎ č		" λ
᠎ t ¹	᠎ ᠎	᠎	᠎ č		?
᠎ h t ²		"	᠎ s ¹		— (comp. š)
᠎ d ¹		" ᠎ ᠎ (᠎ ᠎ ᠎)	᠎ s ² (š)		"
᠎ d ²		"	᠎ š	᠎	᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎
᠎ p		"	᠎ ᠎ z	᠎	" ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎
᠎ b ¹		" ᠎ ᠎ etc. ᠎ ᠎	᠎ nd	᠎	᠎ ?
᠎ b ²	᠎	᠎ ᠎	᠎ nč		" ᠎ ᠎ ᠎ ᠎
᠎ j ¹		" ᠎ ᠎	᠎ ᠎		— (XXXIII, XXXVII)

Figure 1. A list of Turkic runes from "The Deciphered Orkhon Inscriptions" (Thomsen 1896).

Due to the influence of Islam on Kazakh culture, Qazaq used the Arabic script for centuries. A version that was more suitable for Qazaq was introduced by Ahmet Bajtursynuly in the 1920s. There have also been several versions of the Qazaq Latin alphabet, the earliest of which was briefly used in the 1920s and 30s. The latest Latinized Qazaq alphabet was proposed by the

linguists from the Ahmet Bajtursynūly Institute of Linguistics, and was published by the government of Kazakhstan in 2021 (Fig. 2). 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	a	18	O o	o
2	Ä ä	ä	19	Ö ö	ө
3	B b	бы	20	P p	пы
4	D d	ды	21	Q q	қы
5	E e	e	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	уу
10	Ii	ий	27	Ü ü	ү
11	İ i	i	28	Û û	ұ
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			
17	Ŋ ŋ	ың			

*Знаки C, X, W используются в иностранных словах на основе цитатного принципа

Figure 2. 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 (ö) denotes the front vowels "ä" ("ä")⁵, "ö" ("ө") and "ü" ("ү"), while a macron (ō) indicates the back vowel "ū" ("ұ"). A tilde (ñ) is used to denote the velar nasal consonant "ñ" ("ң"), a breve (ğ) indicates the uvular consonant "ğ" ("ғ"), and a cedilla (ç) — the postalveolar consonant "ç" ("ч"). 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 ("ı").

There are several barriers to adopting the official version of the Latinized Qazaq alphabet. First, Qazaq speakers have to memorize five new diacritics on top of learning the English alphabet. Since the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet already has the letter "i", using the same character to represent two different letters is inadvisable. The uppercase "İ" is highly unusual and

⁵ The Cyrillic letters are in parentheses.

can cause confusion. Also, not being able to differentiate in writing between two distinct sounds, "й" and "и", would cause spelling and reading difficulties, especially for foreigners.

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. It is simple, elegant and easy to read and write. All of this makes for a smooth adoption. Like the official version, the Qazaqbet is based on the English alphabet and has 31 letters. However, it uses only two diacritics, an umlaut (ö) and a macron (ō), to indicate seven Qazaq letters. The umlaut denotes the front vowels "ä" [æ], "ö" [œ], "ü" [y] and "ı" [ɪ], while the macron indicates the back vowel "ū" [u], the uvular consonant "ġ" [ɣ] and the velar nasal consonant "ñ" [ɲ]. 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. 3, 4).

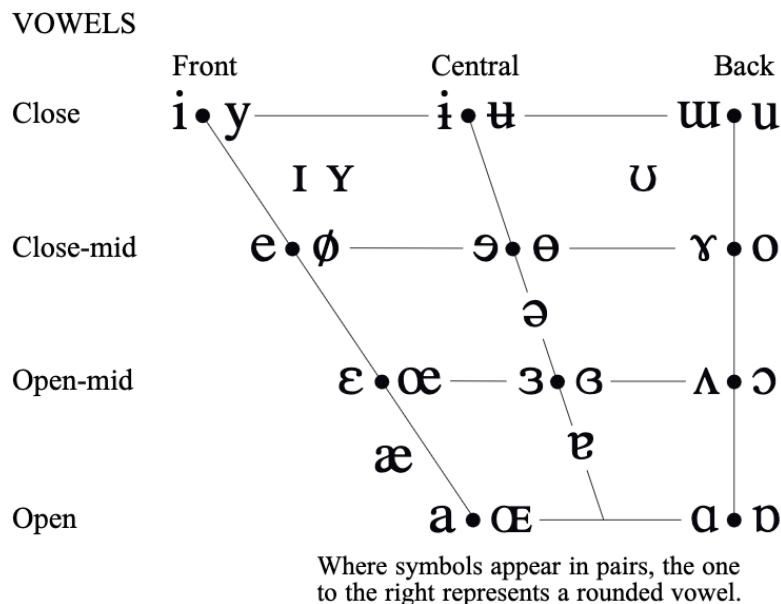


Figure 3. The 2020 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) vowel chart.

	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	ɴ		
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 4. The IPA consonant chart.

The Qazaqbet letters are easy to spell, unlike those of the 2021 official Qazaq Latin alphabet (Table 2).

The English Alphabet	The Qazaqbet (Q)	The 2021 version	The Qazaq Cyrillic Alphabet	IPA	How to spell Q	Examples in the Qazaqbet (a noun, an adjective, a verb)
Aa	Aa	Aa	Аа	[a]	[a]	ana, aq, alu
	Ää	Ää	Әә	[æ]	[æ]	äke, ädemī, äkelu
Bb	Bb	Bb	Бб	[b]	[bɪ]	bala, belgīlī, beru
Cc	Cc		Цц	[ts]	[tsɪ]	cenzura
Dd	Dd	Dd	Дд	[d]	[dɪ]	dombyra, dāmdī, dem alu
Ee	Ee	Ee	Ее	[je]	[je]	et, erke, emdetu
Ff	Ff	Ff	Фф	[f]	[fɪ]	futbol
Gg	Gg	Gg	Гг	[g]	[gɪ]	gūl, güldengen, güldenu
	Ġġ	Ġġ	Ғғ	[ɣ]	[ɣɪ]	ġylym, ġajap, ġashyq bolu
Hh	Hh	Hh	Һһ	[h]	[hɪ]	haiuanat, habarlandyru
Ii	Ii	İi	Ии	[i]	[i]	it, imandy, iteru

	İi	Iı	Ii	[ɪ]	[ɪ]	İRİMŞİK, İRİ, İRU
Jj	Jj	Jj	ЖЖ	[ʒ]	[ʒɪ]	jylan, jasyɫ, jatu
Kk	Kk	Kk	КК	[k]	[kɪ]	kİtap, kök, köteru
Ll	Ll	Ll	ЛЛ	[l]	[lɪ]	laq, laiyqɫy, laqɫyru
Mm	Mm	Mm	ММ	[m]	[mɪ]	mektep, möldİR, maqtanu
Nn	Nn	Nn	НН	[n]	[nɪ]	nan, nÄzİK, nazar audaru
	Ññ	Ññ	ҢҢ	[ŋ]	[ŋɪ]	teñİZ, seniñ, jañbyr
Oo	Oo	Oo	Oo	[o]	[o]	ot, oqyġan, ojlaw
	Öö	Öö	ӨӨ	[œ]	[œ]	ömİR, ötkİR, ölu
Pp	Pp	Pp	Пп	[p]	[pɪ]	pİKİR, pysyq, pajdalanu
Qq	Qq	Qq	ҚҚ	[q]	[qɪ]	qazan, qara, quanu
Rr	Rr	Rr	Рр	[r]	[rɪ]	raushan, riza, renju
Ss	Ss	Ss	Сс	[s]	[sɪ]	söz, sary, sekİru
		Şş		[ʃ]		
Tt	Tt	Tt	Тт	[t]	[tɪ]	tİL, tamasha, tartu
Uu	Uu	Uu	Уу	[u]	[u]	uaqyt, uaiymdau
	Üü	Üü	ҮҮ	[ʏ]	[ʏ]	üj, ülken, üjretu
	Ūū	Ūū	ҰҰ	[ʊ]	[ʊ]	ūl, ūzyn, ūmytu
Vv	Vv	Vv	ВВ	[v]	[vɪ]	volejbol
Ww						
Xx						
Yy	Yy	Yy	ЫЫ	[ɯ]	[ɯ]	ydys, ystyq, yqpал etu
Zz	Zz	Zz	Зз	[z]	[zɪ]	zaman, zor, zertteu

Table 2. Mapping the Qazaqbet letters to their Cyrillic counterparts as well as the IPA sounds. The latest official alphabet is also included for comparison. Most letters are accompanied by the examples of a noun, an adjective and a verb starting with that letter.

Letters "ä" and "ö" are present in other languages such as Swedish, and they have the same sounds as "ə" and "ø". The official version of the alphabet already uses "ä", "ö" and "ü". It seems natural to extend the umlaut to "ı", since it is also a front vowel. The macron is intuitive, and thus easy to remember, because the Qazaq Cyrillic "Ғ" and "Ң" have a horizontal line in them. Since "ñ" [ɲ] is a dorsal consonant, just like "ğ" [ɣ], it makes sense to denote it with the macron. The official version already uses the macron in "ū". The advantages of the Qazaqbet are outlined in the table below (Table 3).

Features	The 2021 Latin alphabet	The Qazaqbet
Number of letters	31	31
Qazaq letters on top of the English base	Nine: "Ää", "Öö", "Üü", "İı", "İi", "Ūū", "Ğğ", "Ññ", "Şş"	Seven: "Ää", "Öö", "Üü", "İi", "Ūū", "Ğğ", "Ññ"
Number of diacritics	5 (ö, ȫ, ӱ, ӱ̄, ı̇)	2 (ö, ȫ)
Number of additional letters	2 ("İi", "Iı")	0
Easy to spell	No	Yes

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

The Qazaqbet details

Letters "x" and "w" are removed because they are not really 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 Cyrillic alphabet ("ч", "ш", "я", "ю"), are not included in the Qazaqbet. Instead, they are made by combining two existing letters: "ch" [tʃ] as in "Kanatovich", "sh" [ʃ] as in "shash", "ya" as in "qoyan", "yu" as in "ayu". These letter combinations are already used in English, for instance "a shy child", or when transliterating words from other languages, such as "Yamnaya" and "yurt".

The letter "j" is the only letter in the Qazaqbet that is pronounced differently depending on its position in a word. In the beginning of a word or before a vowel, it is pronounced as [ʒ] ("ж"), for instance "jat", "äje", "Oljas". At the end of a word or before a consonant, "j" is

pronounced as the palatal sound [j] ("й"), as in "baj", "ajtys". This is consistent with the IPA representation of "й" in the Russian alphabet. In words where "й" precedes a vowel in Cyrillic ("ойы", "күйіп"), the letter "i" is used instead ("oiy", "küiip"), because it is modified enough by the following vowel to produce the desired sound. Having these rules allows us to avoid adding a new letter or a diacritic to the Qazaqbet. Simplicity is the guiding principle of this proposal.

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", "ı", "ö", "ü", "ū", "ġ", "ñ".

This is the basic Qazaqbet, which contains 28 letters.

Aa Ää Bb Dd Ee
Gg Ğğ Hh İi Ĭ ĭ
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.

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 Ğğ Hh
Ii İi Jj Kk Ll
Mm Nn Ññ Oo Öö
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Üü Ūū Yy Vv Zz

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 "kītap" 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. The expanded Qazaqbet includes letters "c", "f", "v" because without them Kazakhs would not be able to write their patronymic names and 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 Abaj Qūnanbaev (Table 4). On the left is the text written using the Qazaq Cyrillic alphabet, and on the right — the same text written in the Qazaqbet.

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 – qajttym bildirmej, Yapyrmau, qajtip ajtamyn? Qojmady dertiñ küjdirmej, Ne salsañ da tartamyn.
Талайсыз, бақсыз мен сорлы,	Talajsyz, baqsyz men sorly,

Еріксіз аттап ұяттан, Қорлыққа көндім бұл құрлы, Байқалар халім бұл хаттан.	Eriksiz attap ūyattan, Qorlyqqa köndim bұл qūrly, Bajqalar halim bұл hattan.
Әлімше мен де ұялып, Білдірмен дедім өлсем де. Шыдар ем күйіп, мен жанып, Айында бірер көрсем де.	Älimshe men de ūyalyp, Bildirmen dedim ölseм de. Shydar em küiip, men janyp, Aiynda birer körsem de.
Болмады көріп қалуға, Есітіп біраз сөзінді. Шыдар ем бір ай жатуға, Ұзақ түн жұмбай көзімді.	Bolmady körіp qaluğa, Esitip biraz sözindі. Shydar em bir aj jatuğa, Ūzaq tün jumbaj közimді.
Қызықтан қашып бұл жерге Көңіліңіз суып келіпсіз. Мәнісін сұрап бірерге, Тілдесе алмаймын еріксіз.	Qyzyqtan qashyp bұл jerge Köñilñiz suyp kelіpsiz. Mänisin sūrap birerge, Tildese almajmyn erіksiz.
Келмесең егер сен бізге, Сау болмас па ем, әлбетте? Болмасам ашына мен сізге, Түспес ем мұндай бейнетке.	Kelmeseñ eger sen bızge, Sau bolmas pa em, älbette? Bolmasam ashyna men sizge, Tüspes em mұndaj bejnetke.
Асау жүрек қайнамай, Жуасыр ма еді кезінде? Елден бір жақсы сайламай, Бармас па ем ерге өзім де?	Asau жүrek qajnamaj, Juasyr ma edі kezінде? Elden bir jaqsy sajlamaj, Barmas pa em erge özim de?

Table 4. 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 "ġ" 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 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 adolescents 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, and foster close cultural ties with other users of these scripts.

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