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The impact of script reforms on turkic peoples' integration: 20th-21st century experience

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Abstract. This article examines the impact of script reforms on Turkic peoples' integration throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The transitions from Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and in some cases back to Latin scripts affected over 200 million people across Eurasia. Through comparative historical analysis, this study investigates how these orthographic changes influenced national identity formation, literacy rates, and political integration within multi-ethnic states. The research demonstrates that script reforms served dual purposes: as instruments of modernization and as tools of political control. The study examines Turkey's Latin alphabet adoption (1928), Soviet-imposed Cyrillic transitions (1930s-1940s), and recent re-Latinization movements in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Keywords: Turkic peoples, script reform, alphabet change, language policy, Latin alphabet, Cyrillic alphabet, Arabic script, national identity, Soviet language policy, orthographic transition, Pan-Turkism, post-Soviet transformation

Introduction. The 20th century witnessed one of the most dramatic linguistic experiments in human history: the systematic transformation of writing systems among Turkic-speaking peoples. Between 1928 and 1940, over 50 million people across the Soviet Union experienced mandatory alphabet changes, with some communities undergoing three complete script transitions within a single generation [Landau, J., 1995, p. 42]. This unprecedented orthographic engineering fundamentally altered how Turkic peoples accessed their cultural heritage and constructed national identities.

Turkey led the transformation in 1928 when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk replaced Arabic script with Latin alphabet as part of modernization efforts [Lewis, G., 1999, p. 27]. This influenced Soviet language planners, who initiated Latinization across Central Asia and the Caucasus between 1929 and 1932. However, by 1936, Soviet authorities reversed course, imposing Cyrillic scripts by 1940 to bring Soviet peoples "closer to Russian socialist culture". This transition severed younger generations from pre-Soviet literature, creating what scholars term "cultural amnesia".

The post-Soviet era brought renewed debates. Azerbaijan (1991), Turkmenistan (1993), and Uzbekistan (1993) transitioned to Latin script. Kazakhstan announced gradual Latin adoption beginning in 2017, with full implementation planned by 2031. These reforms reflect technological compatibility, geopolitical reorientation, and assertion of independent identities.

Yet script reforms carry profound costs. Each transition disrupts literacy and requires massive educational investments. The question remains: do the integrative benefits of script reforms outweigh their cultural costs? This article examines





Turkish, Soviet, and post-Soviet experiences, contributing to understanding of how orthographic policies shape nation-building in multilingual contexts.

Results. The Turkish Model: Modernization and Cultural Rupture

Turkey's 1928 alphabet reform produced significant literacy gains while creating lasting cultural discontinuity. Literacy rates increased from 10.6% (1927) to 32.5% by 1950, driven by intensive adult education campaigns through Millet Mektepleri (Nation Schools), which enrolled over 2 million citizens between 1928-1935. However, this success came at considerable cost. The reform severed access to Ottoman literary heritage, creating what Lewis termed a "catastrophic success" where younger generations could not read classical works or historical documents. The accompanying language purification campaign introduced approximately 80,000 new Turkish words, eliminating Arabic and Persian vocabulary that had connected Turkish to broader Islamic civilization.

Soviet Script Policies: Integration through Linguistic Control

Soviet alphabet policies progressed through two contradictory phases. Initial Latinization (1926-1936) promoted the Unified Turkic Alphabet (Yanalif) across 68 Soviet languages as part of anti-religious modernization. This produced dramatic literacy improvements: Uzbekistan rose from 3.8% (1926) to 52.0% (1939), Kazakhstan from 8.0% to 53.2% .

However, Stalin's 1936-1940 Cyrillization campaign reversed this progress for political purposes, aiming to bring Soviet peoples "closer to Russian socialist culture". The transition temporarily decreased functional literacy and systematically Russified Turkic languages. Cyrillic alphabets inadequately represented Turkic phonology—Kazakh's nine native vowels were forced into Russian's five-vowel system. By 1980, this policy created a linguistic barrier preventing pan-Turkic communication while integrating Soviet Turkic peoples into Russian-dominated frameworks.

Post-Soviet Re-Latinization: National Identity and Implementation Challenges. Post-Soviet states adopted divergent approaches to alphabet reform. Azerbaijan (1991), Turkmenistan (1993), and Uzbekistan (1993) legislated Latin script adoption, though implementation varied dramatically. In Uzbekistan, despite official policy, 95% of newspapers and 88% of books remained in Cyrillic as of 2005, with only 35% of teachers confident in Latin script instruction by 2004.

Kazakhstan implemented a more systematic approach, announcing gradual transition in 2017 with completion planned by 2031. Economic costs remain substantial: Uzbekistan estimated \$300-400 million for textbook reprinting alone; Kazakhstan allocated approximately \$664 million over fifteen years.

These reforms reflect geopolitical reorientation. States adopting Latin script explicitly emphasized ties with Turkey while reducing Russian-language education [Garibova, J., Language Problems and Language Planning, 2009, Vol. 33, No. 3, p. 217]. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan preserved Cyrillic, maintaining closer Russian alignment.





Integration Outcomes: Gains and Losses. Script reforms produced mixed integration results. Turkey achieved linguistic uniformity facilitating nation-state consolidation, while Soviet Cyrillization successfully integrated Turkic peoples into Russian-dominated institutions—by 1989, 94% of urban Kazakhs and 88% of urban Uzbeks were Russian-fluent. However, these gains occurred alongside profound losses. The most persistent problem remains "temporal illiteracy": generational inability to access earlier texts [Fierman, W., 1991, p. 198]. Post-2000 Uzbeks cannot read materials from 1990 (Cyrillic), 1930 (Latin), or 1900 (Arabic) without learning three additional alphabets. Post-Soviet re-Latinization strengthened national identities but hindered regional integration and severed communication between generations.

Discussion. The comparative analysis reveals that script reforms functioned as double-edged instruments: enabling political integration while fragmenting cultural continuity. Three key patterns emerge from the Turkic experience.

First, the relationship between script choice and national integration proves highly context-dependent. Turkey's Latin alphabet facilitated rapid modernization precisely because it accompanied comprehensive state-building reforms under a strong centralized government. The reform succeeded not through linguistic logic alone but through institutional capacity and political will. Conversely, post-Soviet transitions in Uzbekistan faltered despite similar motivations, revealing that orthographic change requires substantial state resources and societal consensus.

Second, script reforms invariably create winners and losers across generational and social lines. Soviet Cyrillization advantaged Russian-educated urban elites while marginalizing rural populations and older generations tied to Islamic textual traditions. Contemporary re-Latinization reverses this pattern, favoring younger, technology-oriented cohorts while disadvantaging those educated in Soviet institutions. This generational restructuring of literacy represents a form of "symbolic violence" where orthographic policy determines who possesses cultural capital.

Third, the tension between horizontal (pan-Turkic) and vertical (state-centered) integration remains unresolved. Soviet Cyrillization successfully prevented pan-Turkic solidarity by making mutual intelligibility difficult, even as it integrated Turkic peoples into Soviet structures. Post-Soviet re-Latinization aims to reverse this by facilitating communication among Turkic states, yet practical implementation remains incomplete. The persistence of Cyrillic in daily practice across Central Asia suggests that geopolitical aspirations often exceed institutional capacities.

These findings challenge simplistic narratives of linguistic modernization. Script reforms do not represent linear progress but rather political choices with profound distributional consequences. The question is not whether Latin, Cyrillic, or Arabic script is objectively superior, but rather who benefits from transitions and what cultural costs societies are willing to bear for political integration.





Conclusion. The century-long experience of script reforms among Turkic peoples demonstrates that orthographic change constitutes a fundamental tool of political integration with lasting cultural consequences. From Turkey's 1928 Latin adoption through Soviet Cyrillization to contemporary re-Latinization movements, alphabet policies have served dual functions: facilitating modernization while disrupting intergenerational knowledge transmission.

The evidence reveals no universal formula for successful reform. Turkey achieved its goals through centralized implementation, while post-Soviet transitions produced mixed outcomes depending on state capacity and political commitment. However, every transition created temporal illiteracy that severs populations from their documentary past, fundamentally restructuring cultural memory across generations.

Current re-Latinization efforts in Kazakhstan and debates in Kyrgyzstan demonstrate that alphabet questions remain politically salient, reflecting deeper struggles over national identity and geopolitical orientation. This study shows that orthographic systems represent contested political terrain where modernization, cultural heritage, and regional integration intersect. The Turkic experience offers valuable lessons: script reforms achieve integrative purposes only when political objectives align with institutional capabilities and when societies consciously address the cultural costs of severing connections to written heritage.

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