

From Göktürk Runes To Latin Reform: Writing Systems Of The Turkic World And The Quest For A Common Alphabet

Rajabov Mahmud Panji o'g'li

Master's student at the Department of Turkish Language and Literature, Karabuk University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article explores the historical development and contemporary transformation of writing systems used by Turkic communities, with a particular focus on the growing debate over a Common Turkic Latin Alphabet. It begins by defining writing systems as conventional visual representations of spoken language and emphasizes that no alphabet is inherently “advanced” or “backward”; rather, scripts are tools that provide orthographic unity and support the development of a standard written language. The study then traces the succession of scripts employed by Turkic peoples—from Runic (Göktürk), Manichaean, Uyghur, Brāhmī, Sogdian, Tibetan, Hebrew, and Arabic to Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic—and highlights their functional and sociopolitical contexts. Special attention is given to the Soviet period, during which the Unified New Turkic Alphabet (a 34-letter Latin-based system) was briefly used across all Turkic communities before being replaced by a set of mutually divergent Cyrillic alphabets designed to hinder inter-Turkic literacy.

In the post-Soviet era, independent Turkic republics and other Turkic communities have increasingly turned to Latin-based scripts, producing a complex landscape in which multiple, often incompatible Latin alphabets coexist. The article analyzes current reforms and controversies in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tatarstan, including the technical and linguistic problems posed by apostrophe-heavy orthographies and unnecessary deviations from shared Turkic conventions. It argues that the ultimate goal should not be merely “Latinization,” but alphabetic and orthographic convergence through a scientifically grounded, 32–34 letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet. Such a shared system, the article contends, is crucial for enhancing cultural, social, economic, and political cooperation, and for strengthening mutual intelligibility among the many Turkic languages.

Keywords: Turkic writing systems; Common Turkic Latin Alphabet; alphabet reform; orthographic unity; Soviet language policy; Cyrillic and Arabic scripts; Latinization; Kazakhstan alphabet debate; Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan; Bekir Çobanzade; Unified New Turkic Alphabet; language planning in the Turkic world.

Introduction: A writing system is the representation of spoken language in written form by means of predetermined and conventionally accepted symbols (letters). For this reason, a writing system is a medium of communication. All of the world's languages can, in principle, be written with different alphabets, or even with non-alphabetic writing systems. There is no intrinsic hierarchy among alphabets in terms of “advanced” or “backward,” “modern” or “non-modern.” Therefore, an alphabet by itself neither advances a society nor causes it to regress. What an

alphabet does is to provide orthographic unity within a community, thereby serving as a crucial instrument in the development of the official written language. At the same time, frequent alphabet changes within a society can lead to serious cultural problems. The negative consequences of multiple alphabet changes within a short period are particularly severe.

Most of the alphabets used in the past and present around the world ultimately derive from a common source, the ancient Sumerian writing system: the Sumerian script, Etruscan script, Runic (Scandinavian),

Orkhon (Göktürk), Uyghur, Sogdian, Latin, Greek, Cyrillic (Russian), Phoenician, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets, among others.

Various Turkic communities living in different regions of Eurasia have used different alphabets throughout history. Some of these alphabet periods were long-lasting and important in that they were shared by many Turkic tribes, whereas others were relatively short and limited to only a few communities. These phases can be listed in chronological order as follows:

1. Runic (Göktürk) Alphabet: Used in the Göktürk, Uyghur, and Kyrgyz khaganates and in gravestones and inscriptions in the Altai–Siberian region. Several inscriptions whose historical dating is uncertain were also written in this script.

2. Manichaean Alphabet: Used in a limited way in the Uyghur khaganates (eighth–ninth centuries).

3. Uyghur Alphabet: Widely used in the Uyghur khaganates (eighth–fourteenth centuries) for state documents, religious texts, and literary works. In later centuries as well, the Uyghur script appears in works from various regions: for example, the Fergana manuscript of Kutadgu Bilig (fourteenth century), Mi'rācnāme, some decrees of Amir Timur, and certain documents preserved in the Ottoman court.

4. Brāhmī Alphabet: Used in a limited way in the Uyghur khaganates (eighth–ninth centuries).

5. Sogdian Alphabet: Used in a limited way in the Uyghur khaganates (eighth–ninth centuries).

6. Tibetan Script: Used in a limited way in the Uyghur khaganates (eighth–ninth centuries).

7. Hebrew Alphabet: Employed by the Khazars (seventh–tenth centuries), although no surviving Turkish texts are known. The Karaites (approximately sixteenth–twentieth centuries) used this alphabet in religious texts, official documents, and examples of folk literature in Crimea, Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania.

8. Arabic Alphabet: From the Bulgar khaganate and the Karakhanids down to the present (tenth–twenty-first centuries), this has been the most widely used alphabet in Turkic history in terms of geographical spread and the number of Turkic groups employing it.

a. Between 1921 and 1926, in some Muslim Turkic communities (Uzbek, Kazakh, Tatar, Turkmen, Kyrgyz), a “simplified” Arabic alphabet adapted to Turkic phonetics was used instead of the traditional Arabic script. This reformed alphabet consisted of vowelised letters corresponding to the nine vowel phonemes (a, e, ä, i, ı, o, ö, u, ü) of Turkic and marked them fully in writing [this alphabet later came into use in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as well].

b. Today, the Arabic alphabet used in the Azerbaijani and Turkmen regions of Iran differs phonetically from the Arabic-based scripts used by Uzbeks, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang.

9. Latin Alphabet (thirteenth–twenty-first centuries):

a. By Non-Turks: The special Latin-based alphabet used in the Codex Cumanicus, a compilation of the Cuman language prepared by Venetian–Genoese merchants and German Franciscan monks at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, was not employed by the Cumans themselves or by other Turkic communities. In addition, from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth century, European grammars and text samples of Ottoman Turkish were written using the Latin alphabets of those countries.

b. By Turks: Between 1926 and 1938, all Turkic communities in the Soviet Union used a Common Turkic Latin Alphabet. After 1991, different Latin-based alphabets began to be employed in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and the Gagauz Autonomous Region in Moldova.

10. Greek Alphabet: Used by the Orthodox Christian Karaman Turks within the Ottoman Empire.

11. Cyrillic (Russian) Alphabet: Introduced in the eighteenth–twentieth centuries among non-Muslim Turkic communities (Chuvash, Krashen Tatars, Yakuts, Altai, Khakas, Tuvans) through the efforts of Russian missionaries and Orientalists in the Russian Empire. In the Soviet period, the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet used from 1926 to 1938 was replaced, between 1938 and 1940, by about twenty distinct Cyrillic alphabets designed for separate Turkic varieties.

When we look at the writing systems used by Turkic communities around the world today, the current situation can be summarized as follows: The Republic of Turkey, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the Turks of the Balkans (in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo) use the Turkish Latin alphabet. In the Republic of Azerbaijan, two alphabets are encountered: first, the Azerbaijani Cyrillic alphabet, which remains widely used; second, the Azerbaijani Latin alphabet, which was used for a shorter period. In addition to the Azerbaijani Cyrillic script, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have also adopted Latin alphabets. However, in both of these republics, publications are typically produced in both the old Cyrillic and the new Latin scripts. Turkmenistan prints its new currency in Latin letters, and in Uzbekistan some shop signs and road signs are also written in Latin script. In Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the new Latin alphabets are taught to pupils in schools.

The Kyrgyz Republic has not yet taken an official decision to transition to the Latin alphabet, but a significant portion of the Kyrgyz intelligentsia supports such a change. The alphabet commission established in Kazakhstan has been actively working on this issue for the last six or seven years; members have visited Turkey and other countries, holding consultations and seeking expert opinions on alphabet reform. In meetings I held in Istanbul, Astana, and New York, I also expressed the view that the adoption of the 34-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet would be the most appropriate solution. However, some Kazakh intellectuals oppose the transition and argue for preserving the current Kazakh Cyrillic alphabet. It is stated that a final decision on the alphabet issue will be taken in Kazakhstan in 2025.

Recent developments in Kazakhstan are both encouraging and troubling: on the one hand, Kazakhstan's initiative to transition to the Latin script is commendable; on the other hand, the Latin alphabet drafted for submission to the Kazakh Parliament, in which a large number of vowels and consonants are marked with apostrophes, is highly problematic. Instead, it is to be hoped that the alphabet proposed by the National Academy of Language in Kazakhstan will be approved by parliament in 2018. Many linguists, writers, poets, intellectuals, and scholars in Kazakhstan have expressed their opposition to the problematic Latin alphabet currently under discussion.

Similarly, in the Republic of Tatarstan and in other Turkic republics and autonomous regions within the Russian Federation, the number of intellectuals who support a transition to the Latin alphabet is quite substantial. However, attempts by the Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan to adopt the Latin script have been blocked by the authorities of the Russian Federation.

In conclusion, among the independent Turkic republics that emerged after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, and among Turkic communities within Russia, the general tendency is to move from the old Cyrillic alphabets to Latin-based scripts. The Gagauz in Moldova adopted the Gagauz Latin alphabet in 1996 (a system very close to the Turkish Latin alphabet, differing only in a few letters).

Only the Turkic communities in Iran, Afghanistan, and China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region continue to use the Arabic alphabet. The Arabic-based script used in Xinjiang differs significantly from that employed by Turkic peoples in Iran and Afghanistan.

When we focus solely on those Turkic republics that have already adopted, or plan to adopt, the Latin script, we are confronted with the following problem: Is the

primary goal merely to switch to some Latin alphabet, or is it to achieve alphabetic and orthographic unity among the various Turkic communities worldwide? The fact that these communities are abandoning their current Cyrillic scripts and moving to Latin systems requires careful evaluation. For it is noteworthy that, during Stalin's time, even a difference of a single letter was sufficient grounds to prevent orthographic unity, and thus to block integration.

What, then, was the alphabet issue in the Stalin era? As is known, prior to 1938 all Turkic communities in the Soviet Union used a common Latin alphabet. This 34-letter system was called the "Unified New Turkic Alphabet."

The initial proposal for this Latin alphabet was put forward by intellectuals such as Bekir Çobanzade from among the Crimean Turks, along with scholars from other Turkic communities; it also had its opponents.

The Unified New Turkic Alphabet, introduced in 1926, was used until 1938 by Azerbaijanis, Karachay-Balkars, Kumyks, Nogays, Crimean Tatars, Kazan Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Altai, Khakas, Tuvans, and Yakuts.

However, after 1938, on Stalin's orders, the shift to the Cyrillic script began. Yet instead of a common Turkic Cyrillic alphabet, separate Cyrillic alphabets were created for each Turkic community. The explicit aim was to prevent Turkic peoples from reading one another's written texts.

The key question that now needs to be answered is this: when the independent Turkic republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan adopted Latin alphabets, why did they choose systems that differ from one another and from that of Turkey? In earlier alphabet congresses held in Turkey, consensus had been reached on accepting the 34-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet, and joint declarations had even been signed to this effect. However, the decisions taken at those meetings and symposia remained on paper and were never implemented. What are the reasons for this? Perhaps we can search for an answer together.

Today we face an undeniable reality: in the Turkic republics that have adopted the Latin alphabet, there is considerable confusion. In the Azerbaijani Latin alphabet, there is uncertainty about whether to use the umlauted a (ä) or the turned e (ə) to represent the open-mid front vowel; in some places ä is used, in others ə. Furthermore, in the Azerbaijani Latin alphabet, the letter q (as in English q) is preferred for the back (velar/uvular) /q/ sound common in Turkic. Is this really necessary, or would it be more appropriate to represent this sound with the letter g?

Even so, the Latin alphabet adopted in Azerbaijan is relatively close to the Turkish Latin alphabet. However, the Turkish Latin alphabet currently in use lacks four letters: the closed e (ə), the guttural h (x), the nasal n (ñ), and the back velar consonant (q). By adding these four letters to the Turkish Latin alphabet, it would be possible to create a common Turkic Latin alphabet for all Turkic literary languages.

When we turn to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the situation becomes more complex. These two countries have not been able to settle definitively on the set of Latin letters, and in the last five years they have made at least two major changes to their Latin alphabets.

In the first Turkmen Latin alphabet adopted in 1993, there were six letters that diverged from the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet. With a minor revision in 1995, this number was reduced from six to five. The mapping can be summarized as follows:

Common Turkic Latin Alphabet – 1993 Turkmen Latin Alphabet – 1995 Turkmen Latin Alphabet:

c – j – j

j – ƒ – ž

ş – sc – ş

y – y – y

ı – Yy – y

As can be seen, letters such as c, j, ş, ı, and y, which are common to all Turkic literary languages, were replaced by unnecessarily different symbols in the Turkmen Latin alphabet. If Turkmen linguists were to change these five letters in the existing Turkmen Latin alphabet, it would become compatible with the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet.

In Uzbekistan, the Latin alphabet was first adopted on 2 September 1993, and changes to the letters were introduced on 6 May 1995. When both versions are compared with the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet, the following divergent letters are observed:

Common Turkic Latin Alphabet – 1993 Uzbek Latin Alphabet – 1995 Uzbek Latin Alphabet:

a – o – o

e – a – e

ə (closed e) – e – e

c – o' – o'

ç – j – j

ğ – g – g'

j – j – j

ş – ş – sh

The changes introduced in the 1995 Uzbek Latin alphabet moved it even further away from the

Common Turkic Latin Alphabet, making the system more complex and difficult to use. Moreover, the 1995 Uzbek Latin alphabet is not well suited to the phonetic structure of the Uzbek literary language. In particular, from a scientific standpoint, how can one justify the use of digraphs ch and sh instead of the letters Ç and Ş, which are common to all Turkic literary languages? Or what is the rationale for writing the guttural, back-of-the-throat consonant (traditionally represented by ghayn in the Arabic script and by a common g-like letter in Turkic orthographies) as g' (g plus apostrophe)? According to some colleagues in Uzbekistan, one person reportedly argued: "When communicating with the world via computers and the internet, it is impossible to write the letters ç, ş, and ğ with tails or circumflexes, because these are not found in the English-based e-mail alphabet. Therefore, we must adapt these letters in the Uzbek Latin alphabet to English spelling."

I will not dwell further on the Uzbek alphabet. We have a particular request for the esteemed linguists in Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which have adopted the Latin script: although these three republics have abandoned the old Cyrillic alphabets in favor of Latin-based systems, they have each designed their Latin alphabets separately from one another and from Turkey. Therefore, we kindly ask our Azerbaijani, Turkmen, and Uzbek colleagues to work together to correct the points we have highlighted—namely, the use of divergent letters instead of those common to all Turkic literary languages—in the Azerbaijani and Uzbek Latin alphabets.

Moreover, although no official decision on a Latin transition has yet been taken in Kyrgyzstan, or in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and other Turkic republics and autonomous regions within the Russian Federation, we hope that linguists there will prepare national alphabets for their literary languages that are compatible with the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet.

The problematic Latin alphabet currently proposed in a bill being prepared for submission to the Kazakh Parliament has distressed us as much as the Uzbek Latin alphabet did—indeed, it is even more problematic. The proposed Kazakh Latin alphabet is as follows (for clarity, the corresponding letters in the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet are given in parentheses):

Single letters:

a – b – d – e – f – g – h – i – j (j) – k – l – m – n – o – p – q – r – s – t – u – v – y – z

Letters with apostrophes (digraph-like forms):

a' (ä) – g' (ğ) – i' (ı) – n' (ñ) – o' (ö) – s' (ş) – c' (ç) – u' (ü)

– y' (yw)

Yet the Kazakh Institute of Linguistics proposed the following Latin alphabet:

a – ä – b – v – g – ğ – d – e – j (j) – z – y – k – q – l – m –
n – o – ö – p – r – s – t – w – u – ü – f – h – x – ç – ş – ñ
– i

Although this system differs from the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet in a few letters, it is far superior to the earlier apostrophe-laden proposal.

As noted at the outset, in the 1920s and 1930s all Turkic communities in the Soviet Union used a Common Turkic Latin Alphabet that closely resembled the Latin script adopted in the Republic of Turkey. Stalin had separate Cyrillic alphabets prepared for each Turkic community in order to culturally separate them; as a result, Azerbaijanis could not easily read the writings of Uzbeks, Uzbeks those of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz those of Tatars, and so on. Today, however, the Turkic communities of the former Soviet Union are independent in matters concerning the development of their national cultures.

Our views on the desirability of a Common Turkic Latin Alphabet for all Turkic communities worldwide are nothing more than a wish and a proposal. Each Turkic community will make its own decision on this matter. Nevertheless, the greater the compatibility of national Latin alphabets with the Common Turkic Latin Alphabet, the more beneficial this will undoubtedly be for our shared cultural relations.

Let us then ask the following question: why is a single Common Turkic Latin Alphabet necessary for the Turkic world?

1. To enhance cultural, social, economic, and political cooperation among all Turkic states and communities;
2. To develop, over time, the affinity and mutual intelligibility among all Turkic languages;
3. Because neither the Cyrillic nor the Arabic scripts can any longer function as a common alphabet for all Turkic peoples;
4. And because Turkic states and communities are gradually transitioning to Latin-based scripts, a Common Turkic Latin Alphabet is needed.

The proposed 32-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet is as follows:

Nine vowels: a, ä (ə), e (é), ı, i, o, ö, u, ü

Twenty-five consonants: b, c, ç, d, f, g, ğ, h, x, j, k, q, l, m, n, ñ, p, r, s, ş, t, v, w, y, z

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