

From Baku 1926 To Baku 2024: Continuities And Controversies In The Debate On A Common Turkic Latin Alphabet

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Abstract: This article examines the historical and contemporary debates surrounding the creation of a common Latin-based alphabet for the Turkic world, taking the First Turkological Congress in Baku (1926) and the 2024 meetings of the Turkic World Common Alphabet Commission as two key milestones in a century-long process. It first revisits Umar Aliyev's eight principles for a unified Latin alphabet—centered on one-to-one phoneme–grapheme correspondence, Latin-based symbols, minimal use of diacritics, and the avoidance of digraphs and foreign letters—and argues that these criteria remain strikingly relevant for present-day alphabet reform efforts in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other Turkic republics. The article then analyzes the ambivalent position of Fuat Köprülü, whose diplomatic stance in Baku contrasts with his early public criticism, and later acceptance, of the Latin alphabet in Turkey, thereby illustrating the tension between ideological reservations and pragmatic cultural policy.

In the contemporary context, the study evaluates the phonological, political and sociocultural dimensions of the 34-letter Common Turkic Latin Alphabet proposed in 2024, which seeks to accommodate the sound systems of diverse Turkic languages while maintaining compatibility with the Turkish and Azerbaijani alphabets. By classifying current Turkic communities according to their use of Latin, Cyrillic and Arabic scripts, the article demonstrates how script plurality complicates linguistic unity and cultural integration. It concludes that the adoption of a shared Latin-based alphabet—rather than the specific graphic form itself—is a crucial precondition for strengthening linguistic cohesion, educational cooperation and cultural connectivity across the Turkic world.

Keywords: Turkic world; common alphabet; Latinization; First Turkological Congress (1926); Common Turkic Latin Alphabet; Fuat Köprülü; language policy; script reform; Uzbekistan; Kazakhstan.

Introduction: A major milestone in the alphabet debates within the Turkic world was the First Turkological Congress, held in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, between 26 February and 5 March 1926. At this congress, the transition to the Latin alphabet was approved by the overwhelming majority of representatives of the participating Turkic communities. One of the delegates, Umar Aliyev, emphasized the importance of basing a common Latin alphabet—one that could be adopted by all Turkic peoples—on the following eight principles:

1. Each phoneme must correspond to a single symbol (letter).

2. This symbol must be of Latin origin.

3. Characters derived from Russian should be avoided.

4. No special letters should be added for sounds foreign to the local language (particularly those specific to Russian).

5. No phoneme should be represented by more than one letter (as in the Arabic script).

6. Diacritics should be kept to a minimum.

7. Digraphs such as ou, ae, ch, sh should be avoided.

8. Special signs for soft, velarized, or long vowels

should be excluded.

The principles presented by Umar Aliyev at the 1926 Baku Congress remain relevant even ninety-two years later. These principles need to be considered particularly in the ongoing processes of developing new Latin alphabets in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. This situation raises the following question: Is the goal merely to adopt a Latin alphabet for each Turkic community, or to create a common Latin alphabet for the entire Turkic world? While the idea of a “common Turkic Latin alphabet” was central at the Baku Congress, today some intellectuals in certain republics appear to favor developing entirely distinct alphabets tailored to each community rather than pursuing uniformity. Although the number of scholars advocating a common Latin alphabet is not negligible, political authorities in some Turkic states persist in creating their own unique Latin-based systems—distinct from those of other Turkic peoples—and remain largely indifferent to criticisms on this matter.

The Uzbek linguist Halid Said Hocayev, who lived in Azerbaijan, met with Prof. Fuat Köprülü, a young visitor from Turkey, at the Yeni Avrupa Hotel in Baku the day before the congress. Hocayev asked: “Mr. Fuad, you are naturally here regarding the new alphabet question. You must be familiar with the opinions of Turkish public and political circles on this matter.” After drawing a few marks on the notebook in front of him, Fuat Bey replied: “Sir, the current situation in Turkey is well known. We have emerged from a long war, and our economic conditions are far from satisfactory. Moreover, we are undergoing a major revolutionary transformation. Despite this, our scientific circles are not indifferent to the new alphabet proposal put forward by Azerbaijan. A commission was recently formed under the Ministry of Education. The commission is working on orthography and letters. No definitive decision has been reached yet. I believe these studies may continue for several more months.”

When Halid Said responded, “In that case, the Anatolian Turks will not take a position for or against the new alphabet at the congress,” Fuat Köprülü stated: “Certainly. We have no reason to vote against the new alphabet, but we are not yet prepared—nor do we have government instructions—to vote in its favor.”

Unsatisfied with this answer, Hocayev pressed further: “Very well, sir. May I learn your personal views on the matter? If we Turks of the East adopt the new alphabet, will the Anatolian Turks continue with the old one? Is such an outcome possible?” Köprülü replied: “In that case, despite all the difficulties and economic burdens, we would be compelled to adopt the new alphabet as well. This is, of course, my personal opinion. I cannot

speak for the government... We must strengthen our cultural ties with the Eastern Turks. Modern technology necessitates adopting the new alphabet... If the [Alphabet Commission of the Turkological Congress] finds the Latin alphabet appropriate, it is likely that we will adopt it too. However, I cannot yet state anything officially.”

The statements attributed to Fuat Köprülü by Halid Said Hocayev show that Köprülü adopted a highly diplomatic tone in Baku and did not explicitly express his true feelings regarding the Latin alphabet. Yet, various sources indicate that Köprülü opposed the Latin script and argued for the preservation of the traditional Arabic script in Turkey. For instance, Hüseyin Yorulmaz’s work *Alphabet Debates from the Tanzimat to the Republic* (Kitabevi Publications, Istanbul 1995, pp. 233–236) discusses Köprülü’s views in detail. Particularly striking is Köprülü’s criticism of the Latin alphabet in his article “The Christianization Incident and the Cultural Crisis,” written three months after the “Alphabet Reform” of 1 November 1928. In this article, published on 9 February 1929, Köprülü wrote: “We tried to adopt the institutions and values of modern European societies only superficially as a result of conflicts between social conditions. Those who now wish to abandon the Arabic script and adopt the Latin script in order to complete our revolutions are the clearest examples of this formalistic mentality.” (Fuat Köprülü, *Hayat*, 9 February 1929; Hüseyin Durukan, *How Turkey Was Secularized*, Şule Publications, Istanbul 1991, p. 358). Yet, in another article written in 1938, Köprülü praised the benefits and success of the Latin alphabet: “In short, an immeasurable progress has been achieved in every field of cultural life compared to the past... The alphabet reform generated major breakthroughs in the cultural sphere and yielded highly productive, positive results.”

Efforts to create a common alphabet in the Turkic world have historically aimed at strengthening linguistic unity, fostering cultural and scientific cooperation, and preserving the rich heritage of Turkic languages. The year 2024 marked an important turning point in this regard. The work of the Turkic World Common Alphabet Commission—carried out in cooperation with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the International Turkic Academy, and the Turkish Language Association (TDK)—reached a concrete stage during the third meeting held in Baku, Azerbaijan, between 9–11 September 2024. This text evaluates the 2024 Common Turkic Alphabet initiatives from phonological, historical, and sociocultural perspectives.

The idea of a common alphabet took shape in the late 19th century within Ismail Gasprinski’s principle of “unity in language, thought, and action.” At the First

Turkological Congress in Baku in 1926, the foundations of a Latin-based common alphabet were laid; however, this process was interrupted when the Soviet Union imposed distinct Cyrillic alphabets for each Turkic variety between 1938 and 1940. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Turkic republics (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) began transitioning to Latin scripts, yet the development of divergent alphabets hindered orthographic unity. The primary aim of the 2024 initiative is to eliminate this fragmentation by establishing a standardized Latin-based common alphabet capable of accommodating the phonetic diversity of Turkic languages, while also fostering unity in education and cultural integration.

During the Baku meeting, which brought together representatives from various Turkic states, the results of two years of collaborative work were evaluated, and a 34-letter Latin-based common alphabet proposal was discussed. The commission conducted comparative analyses of the phonological systems of Turkic languages, based the draft on an updated version of the 34-letter alphabet proposed at the 1991 Istanbul Symposium on Contemporary Turkic Alphabets, and incorporated Unicode compatibility and digital accessibility into the process.

From a scientific perspective, phonological analyses, comparisons of historical alphabet experiences, the views of Turkologists and linguists, as well as educational and technological suitability were taken into account. Notably, the alphabet includes sounds specific to certain dialects, such as /ŋ/, /q/, /ɣ/, and proposes systematic alternatives to technically problematic symbols such as apostrophes.

The 34-letter common alphabet agreed upon during the meeting covers a large majority (80–90%) of Turkic languages. It remains compatible with the 29 letters currently used in Turkey and Azerbaijan while adding five letters specific to other Turkic varieties (Ñ, Q, X, Ə, Ū). Its implementation is seen as a strategic step for achieving orthographic unity and fulfilling the cultural integration goals outlined in the Turkic World Vision 2040.

When we examine the alphabets used in the Turkic world from past to present, several significant developments become apparent. Today, various Turkic republics, autonomous regions, and communities use Latin-, Cyrillic-, or Arabic-based scripts. These communities can be classified into five main groups based on the scripts they use:

1. Turkic Communities Using Only the Latin-Based Alphabet

– Republic of Turkey: The Latin script has been the

official writing system since 1928.

– Republic of Azerbaijan: Since the adoption of the “Law on the State Language” on 21 July 2001, only the Azerbaijani Latin alphabet is used.

– Turkmenistan: The Turkmen Latin alphabet, used since 1993 and modified in 1999, remains in use today.

– Gagauz Autonomous Region (Moldova): The Gagauz Latin alphabet (since 1996) closely resembles the Turkish Latin alphabet as well as the proposed common Turkic Latin alphabet.

2. Turkic Communities Using Both Latin- and Cyrillic-Based Alphabets

– Uzbekistan: The Uzbek Latin alphabet adopted in 1993 and revised in 1995 diverges from the common Turkic Latin alphabet by including apostrophized vowels (e.g., o') and digraph consonants (ch, sh, g'). Its usage is limited; newspaper headlines appear in Latin, but articles are often printed in Cyrillic.

– Republic of Tatarstan: The Tatar Latin alphabet was officially approved in 2001 but faces restrictions due to Russian policies. Cyrillic remains predominant.

3. Turkic Communities Using Cyrillic but Transitioning to Latin

– Kazakhstan: On 12 April 2017, the president announced the country's transition to the Latin script by 2025. Draft alphabets presented in 2017 and 2018 generated debate due to digraphs and apostrophes. The 19 February 2018 draft was approved by parliament, yet further revisions are expected before 2025.

4. Turkic Communities Using Only Cyrillic – Kyrgyz, Bashkir, Chuvash, Nogay, Kumyk, Karachay-Balkar, Altai, Khakas, Tuvan communities, and Uzbeks in Tajikistan.

5. Turkic Communities Using Only Arabic-Based Alphabets – Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (East Turkestan) – Uzbek and Turkmen communities in northern Afghanistan – South Azerbaijan and the Turkmen regions of northeastern Iran

This classification highlights the diversity of scripts in the Turkic world and the complexities underlying the common alphabet debate.

Between 1926 and 1938, Turkic communities within the Soviet Union used a common Latin alphabet for twelve years. Known as the “Common Turkic Latin Alphabet,” this system closely resembled the Latin alphabet adopted in Turkey in 1928, differing by only a few letters:

Vowels:

Aa – Ee – Əə – İi – Əə – Oo – Uu – Yy

Values: a – e – ä – i – o – ö – u – ü

Consonants:

Bb – Cc – Çç – Dd – Ff – Gg – Ğğ – Hh – Jj – Kk – Ll – Mm

Values: b – c – ç – d – f – g – ğ – h – j – k – l – m

Nn – Pp – Qq – Rr – Ss – Şş – Tt – Vv – Xx – Yy – Zz – Zz – [ʔ]

Values: n – p – q – r – s – ş – t – v – x – y – z – ž – ŋ

Disturbed by the similarity between the alphabets used by Turks in Turkey and those in the Soviet Union, Soviet authorities created separate Cyrillic alphabets for each Turkic group—with differing letters—to culturally distance these communities from one another. These various Cyrillic alphabets have continued to function as writing systems for several Turkic communities since 1938–1940.

Finally, I turn to the issue of a common alphabet in the Turkic world. After using the Göktürk/Orkhon script, the Old Uyghur–Sogdian script, and other writing systems, Turks employed the Arabic alphabet from the 9th to the 20th century. However, these scripts could not adequately represent the vowel system of Turkic languages. I will not elaborate on this issue here. In early 20th-century Central Asia, a modified form of the Arabic script—adapted (“simplified”) to reflect Turkic vowels—was developed and used. This alphabet remains in use today in the Uyghur and Kazakh writing systems of East Turkestan.

Nevertheless, the common Turkic Latin alphabet used in Soviet Turkic languages between 1926 and 1938 and the Latin alphabet adopted in Turkey in 1928 were almost identical, differing by only four or five letters. The 34-letter common Turkic Latin alphabet proposed by some Turkish intellectuals and linguists after 1985—and supported by the Turkish Language Association—appears to be the most suitable alphabet for all Turkic writing traditions.

It must also be emphasized that one of the most essential conditions for the Turkic world to unite culturally and in other domains is the adoption of a common alphabet. What the specific alphabet is matters less than the fact that it is shared. Like all languages, all Turkic languages can be written in any alphabet. Since returning to the old Arabic script or to the Göktürk–Orkhon script is no longer feasible, the 34-letter common Turkic Latin alphabet is the most appropriate option. The alphabet used in Uzbekistan since 1995 unfortunately does not fully represent the phonemes of the Uzbek language and is not entirely compatible with the Turkish Latin alphabet. Nevertheless, it constitutes the first significant step toward a common alphabet in the Turkic world. The Azerbaijani Turks have adopted an alphabet based on

this 34-letter model, and Turkmenistan is moving in the same direction. Among the Turkic languages that currently use the Latin script, the most suitable shared system is the 34-letter common Turkic Latin alphabet. Kazakhstan is attempting to align its Latin alphabet (adopted in 1993) with this model, although full implementation has not yet been achieved.

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