

# Script Reform And Post-Soviet Identity: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, And Azerbaijan In Comparative Perspective

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**Abstract:** This study examines alphabet reforms in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan as critical components of post-Soviet nation-building and identity formation. Following independence in 1991, all three nations initiated transitions from Cyrillic to Latin scripts, yet their implementation strategies and outcomes differ markedly. Using comparative case study methodology and analyzing three decades of policy documents, educational reforms, and sociolinguistic data, this research explores how script reform serves as both symbolic break from Soviet legacy and practical assertion of cultural sovereignty. The findings reveal distinct approaches: Uzbekistan's gradual thirty-year transition, Kazakhstan's planned shift toward 2025, and Azerbaijan's rapid decade-long implementation. Despite shared motivations—de-Russification, modernization, and Turkic integration—each pathway reflects unique historical contexts, demographic structures, and geopolitical considerations.

**Keywords:** Script reform, post-Soviet identity, nation-building, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Cyrillic-Latin transition, linguistic nationalism, de-Russification, symbolic politics, language policy, Central Asia, South Caucasus, alphabet change, cultural sovereignty, Turkic identity, state-building, orthographic reform, post-colonial transition.

**Introduction:** The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered profound transformations across fifteen newly independent republics, unleashing unprecedented processes of nation-building and identity reconstruction. Among the most symbolically charged manifestations of this transition was alphabet reform—a deliberate reimagining of how national languages would be written and how national identities would be articulated. For Turkic-speaking nations that had endured decades of Russian linguistic hegemony, the choice of writing system became far more than a technical decision; it emerged as a powerful instrument of cultural sovereignty and a tangible break from colonial legacies.

Three nations—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan—initiated comprehensive transitions from Cyrillic to Latin-based scripts following independence. Despite sharing common historical experiences under Soviet rule and membership in the broader Turkic linguistic family, their implementation pathways have diverged remarkably. Uzbekistan adopted legislation for Latin script in September 1993, yet implementation

has extended over three decades with multiple revisions. Kazakhstan announced its commitment in 2017, establishing 2025 as the completion target through a phased approach. Azerbaijan moved swiftly, passing legislation in December 1991 and completing mandatory transition by 2001.

The Soviet regime had previously imposed multiple script changes—from Arabic to Latin in the late 1920s, then to Cyrillic in 1939-1940 under Stalin. These transformations served explicitly political purposes: severing cultural ties to the Islamic world, isolating Turkic peoples from Turkey, and facilitating Russification. When independence arrived, alphabet reform became inextricably linked to decolonization and linguistic autonomy. The contemporary Latinization differs fundamentally in representing voluntary state policy rather than external coercion, yet it carries multiple symbolic dimensions: signaling distance from Russia, facilitating global integration, strengthening ties with Turkey and the Turkic world, and enabling alignment with Western standards.

Despite the significance of alphabet reform in post-

Soviet nation-building, comparative analysis remains underdeveloped. The divergent trajectories of these three nations offer a unique opportunity for understanding how similar initial conditions can produce different outcomes. The puzzle lies in explaining why nations with parallel motivations—de-Russification, modernization, national identity assertion—have pursued dramatically different strategies. Uzbekistan's protracted transition features multiple alphabet revisions and simultaneous use of both scripts. Kazakhstan emphasizes careful planning and public consultation. Azerbaijan accomplished transition within a decade through strong presidential leadership.

These variations illuminate fundamental questions about post-colonial state formation, symbolic transformation politics, and cultural reform implementation. Script reform affects educational systems, intergenerational communication, access to heritage, and daily life. Concerns include older generations' literacy challenges, diaspora isolation, replacement costs, and generational gaps. Proponents argue Latin script facilitates English acquisition, digital communication, and liberation from Soviet legacies.

The research situates alphabet reform within theoretical frameworks of nation-building, symbolic politics, and post-colonial identity formation. Drawing on constructivist nationalism approaches, it examines how orthographic systems function as representations of "imagined communities" that shape collective membership. The analysis engages post-colonial theory's insights into negotiating imperial legacies, understanding Latinization as linguistic decolonization—though paradoxically adopting Western script rather than returning to pre-colonial forms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Script reform in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus is analysed through theories of nationalism, nation-building and identity formation. Following Benedict Anderson, nations are treated as "imagined communities" sustained by shared media and standardized written language, making alphabet change a reconfiguration of the symbolic infrastructure of belonging rather than a merely technical reform. Ernest Gellner's modernization theory links standardized literacy and mass education to the functional needs of modern states, framing script reform as a tool for producing culturally homogeneous, administratively legible populations. Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented traditions" highlights how appeals to pre-Soviet or pan-Turkic heritage in Latinization debates rely on selective memory, legitimizing present-

day projects more than reviving an "authentic" past.

The immediate backdrop is Soviet language policy, which both promoted titular languages and entrenched Russian as lingua franca, while successive shifts from Arabic to Latin in the 1920s and to Cyrillic in 1939–1940 weakened Islamic cultural ties and reinforced Soviet authority. After 1991, new states inherited multilingual societies in which Russian remained crucial in administration, higher education and labour markets. Alphabet reform thus unfolds within a structural tension: Latinization and elevation of titular languages symbolically distance states from Moscow, yet risk disadvantaging Russian-speaking groups and those socialized in Cyrillic literacy. As a form of symbolic politics, writing systems signal geopolitical alignment and historical orientation. The move from Cyrillic to Latin is framed as linguistic decolonization and cultural sovereignty, marking a break with Soviet legacies and an opening towards Western modernity, global information technologies and the wider Turkic world. However, replacing Cyrillic with Latin also substitutes one historically imperial script for another; non-restoration of Arabic is justified in terms of modernization and international integration, even as reformers invoke Turkic heritage to domesticate Latin.

Comparative Turkic experiences clarify these dynamics. Turkey's 1928 reform under Atatürk serves simultaneously as model and cautionary tale, demonstrating the power of a centralized state to transform literacy rapidly while severing routine access to Ottoman and Islamic textual traditions. Soviet-era script cycles showed that large-scale orthographic shifts are technically feasible given extensive resources and coercive capacity. Contemporary post-Soviet reforms differ because they operate under tighter budgets, pluralized media environments and varying degrees of political centralization. Azerbaijan's relatively rapid, comprehensive Latinization reflects strong executive leadership, a smaller population and a more limited Russian-speaking constituency, whereas larger and more heterogeneous states such as Kazakhstan face deeper coordination challenges and stronger resistance from Russian-speaking communities.

Within broader debates on post-Soviet state-building, alphabet reform functions as a key instrument for redefining national boundaries and historical narratives. Ethno-national approaches foreground titular languages and scripts as markers of legitimate membership, while post-colonial perspectives interpret reform as linguistic decolonization from Soviet and Russian dominance. Yet the Soviet legacy of codifying and promoting national languages complicates simple colonizer–colonized binaries,

producing hybrid institutions and identities. Scholars disagree over whether script reform has far-reaching socio-economic consequences—reshaping education, labour markets and cultural transmission—or operates mainly as a high-visibility symbolic gesture that can obscure unresolved governance and inequality. Existing research on post-Soviet language policy has concentrated on status planning, language choice and Russian–titular dynamics, often treating alphabet reform as secondary or examining it within single-country studies. This project addresses that gap through a systematic comparison of alphabet reforms in three post-Soviet states from 1991 to 2025, which share similar historical starting points but diverge in demographic structure, state capacity and geopolitical orientation. By integrating nationalism theory, language policy scholarship and post-colonial perspectives, it conceptualizes script reform as both symbolic and material. It argues that while de-Russification, modernization and claims to cultural sovereignty are widely shared motives, contrasting

implementation strategies—from rapid, centralized reforms to prolonged, incremental transitions—generate distinct patterns of literacy practices, generational divides and linguistic hierarchies, illuminating how transitional states deploy language policy to construct nationhood and reposition themselves in an unequal international order.

**METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative, comparative-historical study examines alphabet reform in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan from 1991 to 2025. The three Turkic, formerly Soviet republics are treated as a “most-similar systems” set: they share core historical and linguistic legacies (Cyrillic literacy, Soviet language policy, post-1991 independence) but diverge in state capacity, demographic-linguistic structure and geopolitical orientation. This design holds key backgrounds constant to explore how political choices and structural constraints produce different reform trajectories.

Dimension	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Azerbaijan
Overall outcome	<b>Dual-script stability</b>	<b>Ongoing, largely symbolic transition</b>	<b>Completed transition</b>
Depth of Latin consolidation	Medium: strong in schools and digital, weaker elsewhere	Low–medium: mostly in symbolic and future-oriented domains	High: Latin dominates public and official use
Role of Cyrillic	Still important in media, bureaucracy, informal writing	Still dominant in most everyday and professional contexts	Largely residual and associated with the past
Main function of reform so far	Signal de-Russification while managing constraints	Nation-building and modernisation project still in progress	Consolidated cultural and geopolitical reorientation
Key lesson from the case	Gradualism creates durable dual-script environments	Symbolic leadership outpaces practical implementation	Clear goals plus strong capacity enable full script shift

The empirical base combines official documents (constitutions, language and education laws, decrees, orthographic standards), educational materials (curricula, textbooks, primers), media and political discourse (press coverage, speeches, campaigns), and demographic and survey data on language use and attitudes. Where available, expert and elite perspectives from linguists, educators and policymakers are added through targeted qualitative material. State-language and Russian sources are central; translations are cross-checked to limit interpretive distortion.

Script reform is operationalised via comparable indicators: legal status (extent of formal Latinisation), institutional implementation (use of Latin in schools,

administration, media and signage), and social uptake (everyday practices and reported literacy). Implementation trajectories are reconstructed through process tracing, identifying critical decisions, revisions and delays and relating them to shifts in domestic politics and external alignment. Cross-case comparison then links variation in outcomes to differing configurations of state capacity, demographic profiles and foreign policy orientation. Triangulation across source types, combined with cautious, contextualised interpretation, is used to mitigate uneven data and the dominance of official narratives.

**Case studies.** The case studies examine Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan as closely comparable yet divergent examples of post-Soviet alphabet reform. All

three are former Soviet republics with Turkic titular languages and a shared experience of Soviet Cyrillicisation, but they differ sharply in the timing, pace and depth of their transitions to Latin. These contrasts show how state capacity, demographic structure and geopolitical positioning condition the implementation of similar symbolic projects.

In Uzbekistan, a 1993 law mandated a gradual shift to Latin, revised in 1995 as the alphabet was stabilised for education. Schools largely moved to Latin textbooks from the mid-1990s, creating a younger Latin-literate generation alongside older Cyrillic-dominant cohorts. Yet deadlines were repeatedly postponed, a new reform announced in 2019, and implementation decrees in the 2010s–2020s sought to “accelerate” an incomplete transition. Latin now dominates education and much of the digital sphere, while Cyrillic remains common in print media, bureaucracy and informal writing, producing a durable dual-script environment that signals de-Russification without overburdening limited administrative resources or alienating Cyrillic-literate citizens.

In Kazakhstan, reform began later but was framed as a central nation-building and modernization project. A 2017 presidential decree ordered a switch to Latin by 2025; an apostrophe-heavy alphabet was quickly criticised and replaced in 2018, then superseded by a 2021 diacritic-based version closer to the Common Turkic Alphabet, as the deadline was pushed to 2031 and the shift redefined as gradual. Official rhetoric links Latinisation to identity consolidation, technology and “opening to the world”, but implementation is slowed by elite disputes over orthography, the entrenched role of Russian in urban and professional domains and the sheer scale of converting signage, educational materials and documentation. Cyrillic therefore remains dominant, while Latin operates mainly as a future-oriented symbol used in branding, new media and state communication.

Azerbaijan has pursued the fastest and most comprehensive transition. Parliament moved to a modified Turkish-style Latin script soon after independence, and President Heydar Aliyev’s 2001 decree set a firm deadline that effectively completed the reform: official documents, signage and media shifted to Latin, and Cyrillic largely vanished from the public sphere. Early and consistent alignment with a Turkish-influenced Latin standard reinforced cultural and geopolitical ties with Turkey and the wider Turkic world, and today Latin is hegemonic in public life, with Cyrillic surviving only in older materials and among Soviet-educated or diasporic communities.

Together, the three cases map a spectrum of

outcomes: Azerbaijan approximates a completed transition with strong legal, institutional and social consolidation of Latin; Uzbekistan illustrates a partially implemented, repeatedly revised reform that stabilises as dual script; Kazakhstan is undergoing a state-led but still prospective shift in which Latin remains more symbolic than operational. These patterns support the broader argument that shared post-Soviet motives—de-Russification, modernization and the assertion of cultural sovereignty—translate into divergent trajectories depending on governments’ ability to mobilise resources, manage linguistic diversity and embed script reform within wider nation-building and geopolitical strategies.

**The comparative studies** of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan shows how similar post-Soviet motivations in alphabet reform can yield divergent outcomes. All three emerged with Cyrillic-based literacy, Turkic titular languages and Soviet-style managed multilingualism, and all presented Latinisation as de-Russification, modernisation and cultural sovereignty. Yet differences in state capacity, demography and geopolitical orientation produced distinct paths. Azerbaijan represents the “high-capacity, high-consolidation” pole: early, unambiguous adoption of a Turkish-style Latin script, backed by strong presidential authority and a relatively small Russian-speaking population, enabled a rapid and near-complete transition. Latin now dominates education, media and public space and is tightly linked to an outward orientation towards Turkey and the wider Turkic world.

Uzbekistan instead exhibits a durable “dual-script equilibrium”. Despite early laws and the gradual introduction of Latin in schooling, repeated alphabet revisions, shifting deadlines and soft enforcement have entrenched the coexistence of Latin and Cyrillic. Younger generations move easily in Latin, while older and Russian-oriented groups remain anchored in Cyrillic, generating layered literacy regimes and segmented access to texts and media. Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate but distinct position: Latinisation is framed as a flagship nation-building and digital-modernisation initiative, but the centrality of Russian in urban, professional and interethnic communication, together with disputes over orthographic design, has slowed implementation. Successive redesigns and postponed timelines mean Latin currently functions more as a forward-looking symbol of identity and geopolitical repositioning than as a fully institutionalised script, with the country’s larger, more heterogeneous and heavily Russophone environment raising the costs of rapid change.

Dimension	Comparative insight across the three cases
Role of alphabet reform	More than a technical change; reorganises the symbolic infrastructure of nationhood and how communities imagine past and future
“Linguistic decolonisation”	Aimed at de-Russification and reconnection with Turkic and global (especially Western) spaces, but replaces one imperial script with another
Alignment needed for effective reform	Clear orthography, strong implementation capacity, and favourable linguistic-demographic structure must converge for full transition
Typical outcome when alignment is weak	Hybrid, stratified writing environments with dual or liminal scripts, rather than a clean, unified national script
Distribution of agency	Reforms are co-produced: elites set policy, but teachers, authors, journalists and digital creators decide actual script use
Social risks	Literacy gaps, intergenerational breaks, new dependencies and internal boundaries of inclusion/exclusion if reforms are symbolic or poorly coordinated

Across the three cases, alphabet reform sharpens generational and sociolinguistic stratification. Azerbaijan’s near-total shift maximises symbolic rupture with Soviet textual culture while minimising everyday script competition. Uzbekistan’s drawn-out process institutionalises a divide between Latin-educated youth and Cyrillic-literate older cohorts, and Kazakhstan’s incrementalism risks prolonging a liminal state where policy discourse outpaces routine practice. More broadly, the cases suggest that script reform works best—both as symbolic politics and as practical language planning—when clear orthographic choices, concentrated implementation resources and favourable linguistic-demographic conditions align. Where this alignment is partial, reforms tend to produce hybrid, stratified writing environments that reflect, rather than resolve, the tensions of post-Soviet nation-building.

At a broader level, Latinisation emerges as a powerful but ambivalent tool. It reshapes the symbolic infrastructure through which nations imagine themselves and situate their past and future, broadly confirming theories that link script and literacy to modern nationhood while also echoing the idea that “traditions” mobilised for reform are selective, contingent and oriented to present needs. In all three countries, Latin is cast as a route away from Russian hegemony, back to Turkic heritage and into global modernity, digital technologies and English-dominated knowledge. Yet this “linguistic decolonisation” does not simply exit imperial hierarchies: Latin replaces one imperial script with another and can deepen reliance on Western-centric norms. The different choices made in Baku, Astana and Tashkent show elites negotiating overlapping hierarchies of prestige, not stepping outside them.

Implementation is co-produced from above and below.

Legal decrees and elite rhetoric matter, but teachers, textbook writers, journalists, publishers and digital creators decide which script is normal in classrooms, media and online spaces. Uzbekistan’s persistence of Cyrillic in newspapers and informal writing alongside Latin in primary education, and Kazakhstan’s experimentation with Latin on social media alongside Cyrillic in official domains, both show how everyday practice can stabilise dual or liminal regimes. Normatively, the analysis warns against treating alphabet reform as a straightforward instrument of emancipation, modernisation or cultural authenticity. Its effects depend on sequencing, resourcing and integration with wider policies on education, minority rights and development. Excessively symbolic or poorly coordinated reforms risk literacy gaps, intergenerational breaks and new dependencies even as they proclaim national self-assertion. Future work could use micro-level studies of literacy practices, diasporic and cross-border script use, and comparisons beyond the post-Soviet world to clarify when alphabet change supports more inclusive and sustainable nation-building.

### DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan shows that similar post-Soviet motivations for alphabet reform—de-Russification, modernization and the assertion of cultural sovereignty—have generated markedly different outcomes. Azerbaijan exemplifies a high-capacity, high-consolidation model in which an early, unambiguous adoption of a Turkish-influenced Latin script, backed by strong executive authority and a relatively limited Russophone population, produced a rapid and near-complete transition. Uzbekistan, by contrast, has stabilised into a durable dual-script equilibrium: successive revisions, shifting deadlines and soft

enforcement have entrenched the simultaneous use of Latin and Cyrillic across domains, with younger cohorts socialised into Latin and older, Russian-oriented groups remaining anchored in Cyrillic. Kazakhstan occupies an intermediate position, where Latinisation is framed as a flagship nation-building and digital-modernisation project but currently functions primarily as a forward-looking symbol; the entrenched role of Russian, disputes over orthographic design and the high costs of conversion have slowed material implementation.

Across these cases, script reform emerges as a powerful yet ambivalent instrument of post-Soviet statecraft. On one level it confirms theories that treat writing systems as core components of the “symbolic infrastructure” of nationhood: changing the alphabet helps recode how nations imagine their past and future, who is included in the political community and which external partners are privileged. At the same time, the reforms illustrate the paradoxes of “linguistic decolonisation”. Moving from Cyrillic to Latin is presented as an exit from Russian hegemony and a reconnection with Turkic heritage, digital technologies and English-dominated global knowledge, yet it also replaces one historically imperial script with another and reinforces new hierarchies of prestige centred on Western-oriented norms.

The findings underline that the effectiveness of alphabet reform depends less on formal declarations than on the alignment of three factors: clear and socially legitimate orthographic choices, sufficient state capacity and resources to implement change, and a linguistic-demographic structure that does not generate prohibitive resistance. Where this alignment is strong, as in Azerbaijan, Latin can become hegemonic in education, media and public space and decisively break with Soviet textual culture. Where it is partial or contested, as in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, reforms tend to yield hybrid, stratified writing environments in which dual or liminal scripts mirror existing social cleavages rather than resolving them. Generational and sociolinguistic stratification is particularly pronounced: Latin-educated youth, Cyrillic-literate older cohorts and Russian-speaking minorities navigate different literacy regimes and access different textual worlds, with implications for equity, participation and intergenerational communication.

Finally, the study highlights that script policy is co-produced from above and below. Presidents, parliaments and language commissions design alphabets and timelines, but teachers, textbook authors, journalists, publishers and digital content creators decide which script becomes normal in classrooms, newsrooms and online spaces. Normatively, the evidence cautions against treating

alphabet change as an inherently emancipatory or purely technical instrument. Its concrete effects depend on sequencing, resourcing and integration with broader policies on education, minority rights and socio-economic development. Short, symbolically driven reforms risk producing literacy gaps and new forms of exclusion, whereas carefully sequenced, well-resourced strategies can use script change to underpin more inclusive and sustainable forms of nation-building.

## CONCLUSION

The comparison of alphabet reforms in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan demonstrates that similar post-Soviet goals—distancing from the Russian linguistic sphere, asserting national sovereignty and aligning with global communication norms—produce divergent script trajectories. Azerbaijan’s early, coherent and well-resourced transition consolidated a Latin-based regime that largely displaced Cyrillic from public life. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, by contrast, have generated hybrid script ecologies: shifting deadlines, contested orthographic choices and the enduring functional role of Russian have slowed full implementation and normalised dual or transitional practices across key domains.

These findings underscore that alphabet reform is not merely a technical intervention but a complex socio-political process contingent on state capacity, linguistic demography and societal consent. Script change can support nation-building and symbolic decolonisation, yet it also risks deepening generational, regional and socio-economic divides if implementation is uneven or inadequately resourced. Future policy design in Central Asia should therefore integrate alphabet reform with broader strategies in education, digital infrastructure and minority language management. For research, the cases highlight the value of treating writing systems as evolving infrastructures of power, identity and access, rather than as static artefacts of language planning.

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