

ACTOR-ORIENTED APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LATIN-BASED KAZAKH ALPHABET AND ITS SOCIAL ROLE IN MODERNIZING THE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE YOUTH

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Abstract: The article attempts to explain the causes of Kazakhstan's gradual transition from the Cyrillic-based Kazakh alphabet to the Latin-based script by 2025. This transition results from the multiplicative effect of an innovative breakthrough in science, education and technology and aims to foster future-oriented changes in Kazakhstani public awareness and targets mostly the youth. A key area in this transition is its focus on the society and people/actors who are its clients and, eventually, beneficiaries. A sociological snap survey aimed at examining expert opinions on the subject was conducted among forty-three experts fluent in the Kazakh language and in Latin-based foreign languages and residing in Astana, Kazakhstan. In general, the survey revealed the experts' positive assessment of the transition of the Kazakh alphabet from the Cyrillic to the Latin script. The reason they welcomed it is due to their long-term understanding of globalization processes taking place internationally. The study adopted a comparative approach using some post-Soviet states' experience of shifting to the Latin script (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan). The need to conduct this kind of expert surveys shows that the Kazakhstanis understand the importance of this shift to the Latin-based script, are interested in and ready for it. Sociological research on this topic makes it possible to look at the expert opinion of all concerned. **Keywords:** actor-oriented approach, transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, society, expert opinion, public awareness, youth.

1. Introduction

In compliance with the long-term objectives formulated by the Head of State in programmatic documents and articles for 2017, the transition of Kazakhstan's official language to the Latin-based script is a core application area aimed at integrating Kazakhstani science and education, as well as Kazakhstan's innovation development into the global intellectual community. This process will take place gradually and be systemic and dynamic in nature. A focus on the society with consideration to opinions of both experts and common people allows using the actor-oriented approach as the main approach in implementing the Latin-script Kazakh alphabet. In that sense, the actor-oriented approach, based on the client-centered model, refers to the actors' focus on assisting the 'client' according to their needs.

Currently, there is a need for interaction between actors, who are direct participants in the process of interaction regarding the transition of the official language to the Latin-based script.

In his Message to the People of Kazakhstan delivered on 31 January 2017 and entitled *The Third Modernization of Kazakhstan: Global Competitiveness*, President Nazarbayev set out strategic goals for further human capital development. To achieve them, it is necessary to implement advanced teaching techniques aimed at building independent search skills and at developing the capacity for critical thinking in the younger generation. Among present-day educational methods, it is trilingualism that shows the most clear and comprehensive educational and technological potential for the successful development of Kazakhstan's human capital quality indicators. In this regard, modern Kazakhstani school education plans a gradual transition to systemic and progressive trilingual training. A number of Grade 10 and 11 subjects are planned to be taught in English starting in 2019.

This innovation will be undertaken while maintaining and enhancing a full range of learners' communicative skills in the official language. The transition of the language spoken by the dominant ethnic group in Kazakhstan from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet will be of major importance for the development of the Kazakh language and the lifting of barriers to the integration of Kazakh native speakers and users into the global business and academic community. The Head of State exposed these large-scale transformations accompanied by the forward-looking modernization of public awareness in his policy essay titled *Looking into the Future: Modernizing Public Awareness* [Nazarbayev 2017]. This strategic plan sets up a series of transformative projects directed at bringing about goal-oriented changes in public awareness.

The project of a gradual transition of the Kazakh language from the Cyrillic to the Latin script since 2025 plays a key part in strategies for implementing the above-mentioned innovative transformations. In practice, this measure implies a shift to the Latin script in all areas of the Kazakh-speaking community. Documents, periodicals and textbooks will be published in the Latin script only. The introduction of the Latin alphabet into the Kazakh-speaking community is seen as the backbone of the state program for the modernization of Kazakhstan's public awareness. The expansion and consolidation of the English-speaking cluster in Kazakhstan is largely to the upcoming transition of the Kazakh language from the Cyrillic to the Latin script.

Work is in progress on promoting the languages spoken by all ethnic groups residing in Kazakhstan. As an example, there are schools where instruction is provided only in the mother languages of other ethnic groups. In other schools, the languages spoken by other nationalities are taught as a separate subject. According to information provided by the Statistics Committee affiliated with the Ministry of the National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as of 1 September 2017, ethnic Kazakhs and ethnic Russians are 67.3% and 19.9% respectively, and other ethnic groups in Kazakhstan are 12.8%. Kazakhstan is also actively promoting the idea of trilingual education. As noted by President of Kazakhstan, "fluency in three language is a ticket to global life and the secret of the person's success in life" [Message of the President of Kazakhstan 2015].

Being a major social and linguistic means for developing international contacts by breaking down barriers to communication, polylingualism will lead to a considerable increase in Kazakhstan's overall social capital. Consequently, the introduction of the Latin script will allow younger and future generations to learn English as an international language in an easier and, thus, more attractive and successful manner. Given that approximately five billion people on Earth use Latin-based scripts and exchange information in English [Beyisbayev

2017, p. 45], adopting a Latin-based script for the Kazakh language would be a logical step on the road to Kazakhstan's integration into the global information flow.

Kazakhstan's long-term development objective is to enter the top 30 leading countries of the world. The introduction of the Latin-based script would help to achieve that goal, as this script facilitates the adjustment of the scientific, technical and IT vocabulary to the official language of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A systematic and gradual transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin script will result in a crucial breakthrough in science, education and technology. An expert survey titled *The Social Role of the Latin-Based Kazakh Alphabet in Modernizing the Public Awareness of the Youth* was carried out by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

2. Methods

Primary information was provided by a snap survey involving experts fluent in Kazakh and Latin-based foreign languages. Among respondents were specialists in philology, education, the mass media, sociolinguistics, civil servants and businessmen, experienced linguists and Bolashak International Program graduates. The survey involving 43 respondents took place from 15 to 29 September 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan. Survey questions were assessed by civil servants, who work in state and local executive bodies, at the National School of State Policy of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The survey made it possible to specify major methodological indicators and thematic issues related to the transition to the Latin-based script. Furthermore, the study has revealed weaknesses in the implementation of the Latin-based script, which requires a more rational and systematic approach oriented towards the society as its end customer.

3. Results

The results of the survey revealed how heated discussions about the shift of the Kazakh alphabet to a Latin-based script are. Interestingly, this topic is a subject for debate among both experts and the general public, even in everyday conversations. When asked 'Why do you think Kazakhstan is shifting from the Cyrillic to the Latin script?', respondents pointed to a high rate of quality research studies in English. According to experts, a combination of the Latin-based Kazakh language with the English one will have positive implications on the exploration of new technologies. A number of experts indicated a positive impact of the Latin-based script on spelling. There are views that the transition to the Latin script will increase the number of study visits abroad and will foster the development of academic mobility inversely, that is, from abroad to Kazakhstan. All of the above will enhance Kazakhstan's competitiveness in terms of education. This view is consistent with opinions given by some prominent linguists [Zhunisbek 2017, p. 48].

Overall, experts commented positively on the ambitious social project of the Kazakh language transition to a Latin-based script starting 2025. The reason they welcomed it is due to their long-term understanding of globalization processes taking place internationally. The next questions dealt with experts' opinions on the initial project aimed at producing a single standard for the Latin-based Kazakh alphabet. Experts expressed concern that the introduction of digraphs into the spelling rules may render difficult the training process among the population. On 9 October of the current year, a new version of the single standard for the Kazakh language was adopted following an extensive discussion of this issue among experts and in various sectors of society and after a detailed examination of the pros and cons of

adopting the Latin-based script in other countries. Unlike digraphs, letters with apostrophes are easy to memorize and better recognized in writing.

As for the adoption of the Latin-based Kazakh alphabet at the initial stage, the surveyed experts highlighted the significance of outreach activities directed at promoting the image of a successful individual fluent in Latin-based Kazakh language. There are opinions on the need to produce TV programs and commercials with roller captions in Latin-based Kazakh letters and to provide thorough training to all sectors of the population. There is general consensus that a State program with specific targets and indicators is needed for the implementation of the Latin-based script nationwide. Experts stressed that the public takes a close interest in the upcoming changes and needs to be kept informed of the conduct and outcome of the program. In terms of the actor-oriented approach, the discussion takes into account public sentiment and prevents the emergence of negative scenarios.

Respondents were positive about the rebranding of top Kazakh companies, showing that many media personalities and the most followed bloggers are actively using the Latin script in social networks. The following step would be a massive marketing campaign aimed at promoting this trend in social advertisements, commercial signs and on television. The creation of attractive and high-quality trademarks, movies and other visual products will also have positive outcomes. According to the respondents, TV programs and movies in the Kazakh language with roller captions in Latin-based Kazakh letters should be broadcast in prime time, since these areas are most popular among the population due to Internet penetration into the regions and to Kazakhstan's overall digitization.

The main driving force behind the transition to the Latin script is, according to the experts, creative intelligentsia, popular opinion leaders, bloggers with a high number of followers, young people, teacher, IT specialists, media workers, businessmen and showbiz personalities. The above-mentioned categories are socially active and have the ability to influence the audience. As an example, experts indicate that youth organization members can start and actively promote a new trend towards the use of the Latin-based Kazakh language. This will be a major factor aimed at modernizing public awareness. At the same time, it is important to organize all kinds of competitions, events and festivals informing people of the progress achieved.

This being said, the initial stage entails certain risks, because the transition to the Latin-based script is a process of getting people out of their deeply-rooted habits [Akimbekov 2017, 8]. According to modern change management methodologies, such changes may encounter resistance on the part of the population. This is why an in-depth discussion of the standard Latin-based Kazakh alphabet will be a forward-looking and far-sighted choice. The debate on a single standard for the Kazakh alphabet involved a discussion that allowed different groups and communities to express their views on the subject, which is something unprecedented at the global level. The discussion of the project by leading public organizations, the academic community and the general public resulted in over 300 proposals. The working group on the transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin script examined and considered them all.

Other analytical centers indirectly confirm the date obtained from the respondents during research. Owing to the Government's consistent policy, the transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin script, the time frame for the elaboration of the new alphabet and the shift of document management and of printing to the Latin script did not come as a surprise to Kazakh citizens [Transition to the Latin-based Kazakh alphabet 2017]. The results of a sociological survey conducted by the Centre for Political Analysis and Strategic Research affiliated with the Nur Otan Party confirm the above. Thus, 93.3% of Kazakhstanis have heard of the transition of the Kazakh alphabet to the Latin script. The absolute majority of the

respondents informed of the reform (60%) welcome this innovation [Report of the Nur Otan Party 2017].

A high percentage of the respondents (44.6%) indicate that the main advantage of the transition to the Latin-based script is that it may serve to improve Kazakhstan's identification and image all over the world. At the same time, 53.9% of the respondents expressed concern about the need to get used to the new alphabet and 46.2% of the respondents were concerned about the preservation of original Kazakh phonemes and words. In 2015, Ahmet Baytursynov Linguistic Institute affiliated with the Committee on Science of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted research on 'Comprehensive Study of the Scientific Framework for the Transition of the Kazakh Script to a National Alphabet' [Report 2015]. The results of the research highlighted the relevance and need to shift to a new alphabet based on the Latin script, taking into account the existing language context in Kazakhstan. Socio-cultural and linguistic factors that had prompted the transition of the Kazakh language to a new script were described and main criteria and principles related to the new Latin-based Kazakh alphabet were developed.

Interestingly, the views of international experts differ from those of the respondents surveyed in our research. Their apprehensions about an eventual cultural and linguistic move away from the Eurasian Economic Union and about possible societal divisions are hardly worth mentioning [Sheludyakova 2017; Panfilova 2017]. A large-scale sociological study on the transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin-based script, which was undertaken in 2017 by the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies affiliated with the Committee on Science of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, also confirmed the results of our study. The report made it apparent that the number of Kazakh citizens feeling positive about the reform had grown from 27.4% to 52.2% in the past four years [Kurganskaya et al, 2017, p. 36]. This data correlates positively with the degree of awareness of the population regarding the upcoming linguistic reform. Furthermore, the expat communities in Kazakhstan not only support the transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin-based script, but also express their confidence that this process will be a success by referring to the experience of their home countries [Kadyrzhanov and Eshpanova 2017, p. 49].

4. Discussion

The breakup of the Soviet Union set the scene for a unique socio-linguistic experiment, in which fourteen countries, previous united by the same language and political system, participated in the nationwide development of new language policies [Pavlenko 2008]. "Respective language policies, which they say are central for development and modernisation, may show us much about the creative potential of choices of language anywhere in the world as well as problems connected with implementation" [Landau and Kellner-Henkele 2001]. This is why Kazakhstan is carrying out a careful examination of the experience of other post-Soviet countries, such as Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, in shifting their languages to the Latin script. Turkmenistan approved three times the Latin-based alphabet: in 1992, in 1993 and, finally, in 2000 with the approval of the population.

In 1993, the Turkmen president announced, with at least nominal support from the academic community, that over a three-year period, Turkmenistan would adopt a Latin-based "Turkmen National Alphabet." He explained that creating a new Turkmen alphabet based on the Latin script would hasten the young country's progress toward intellectual, cultural and social strength. Furthermore, it would expedite means for Turkmenistan's joining the world civilization and taking its own worthy place among developed countries [Turkmenbasy 1994, pp. 33-34]. Reformers based the New Turkmen National Alphabet on its own unique letters in

order to mark every single (Turkmen) phoneme" [Azimov and Söyegov 1996, p. 74; Clement, 2005]. Popular opinion about script choice 8. Although the state maintained full control over language and alphabet reform, Turkmenistan's population participated in the initial debates over whether the script should change and how.

Turkmenistan's transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin script took place relatively quickly, which had a negative impact on quality of education, since the implementation of new textbooks in schools and universities had not been taken into account. This situation lasted for 5 or 6 years since the start of the reform. The transition to the Latin-based script complicated the educational activities and reduced printing of books. Even today, few books are published in Latin letters, and the Latin script is mostly used in official newspapers and magazines intended for family reading [Annakulieva 2017, p. 56].

Uzbekistan, too, made three attempts at introducing the new alphabet. The transition process was planned to be completed by 2000 and was later deferred to 2005 and 2010, and it is yet to be completed [Shafirov 2007]. According to experts, the problem was that some sounds of the Uzbek language were transcribed as a combination of sounds, which made writing and reading in Uzbek highly difficult. Currently, the Cyrillic script is widely used in Uzbekistan even for writings in the Uzbek language. In other words, Uzbekistan is now going through a period of duality of power in terms of alphabet.

Three main modifications made to the Azerbaijani alphabet in the 20th century – from the Arabic to the Latin script, then to the Cyrillic script and, finally, back to the Latin one – echoed the assertions regarding the Azerbaijani identity and the changing social and political landscape. Each of these modifications constituted a voluntary or imposed decision related to the national loyalty, but none of them had any positive or adverse impact on the making of the Azerbaijani identity. The history of the Azerbaijani alphabet is based on three scripts, each of which was promoted by Azerbaijan's neighbors: Iran, Russia and Turkey promoted the Arabic, Cyrillic and Latin scripts respectively. After Azerbaijan became part of the Soviet Union in 1920, the USSR initiated the transition of the Azerbaijani alphabet from the Arabic script to the Latin one in order to sever the Soviet Azerbaijanis' ties with Iran and the Muslim world. Ten years later, the Soviets made Azerbaijan replace the Latin script with the Cyrillic one to distance Azerbaijan from Turkic republics [Hatcher, 2008, p. 106].

Azerbaijan's experience of introducing a new alphabet was much more successful after President Heydar Aliyev signed a decree on the use of the Latin script by all Azerbaijanis in all official government bodies and in print media [Fierman 2009, p. 95]. Historical, political, and cultural issues have resulted in a very complex language situation in Azerbaijan [Zuercher, 2004]. There are four main factors facilitating a widespread implementation of the Latin script. These include Azerbaijan's growing computerization; general interest in learning language, since the new alphabet is thought to facilitate the English-learning process; the government's use of the Latin alphabet in official documents; and the desire to integrate into the global community as quickly as possible. The latter is due to a large number of Westerners who live and work in Azerbaijan. [Bayatly 1997]. The state-owned television also plays a major role in this process. On television, Latin-script written texts have been used extensively since 1992. A lot of preliminary work was done on the written reform resulting in a smooth and successful transition to the Latin-based Azerbaijani alphabet. Extensive preliminary work was part of an effective strategy to ensure a smooth transition to the Latin-based script in Azerbaijan. As a result, the transition process ended in success.

In discussing the transition to a new Latin-script alphabet, experts from the above-mentioned countries stress that such a reform mainly targets the youth and the younger generation. Kazakhs' proficiency in the new alphabet will contribute to bringing the Turkic

and other peoples closer together. At the same time, experts are of the opinion that Kazakhstan has enough human and financial resources to deal with all issues arising from the transition to the Latin script. All the more, the example of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, which resolutely adopted Latin-based scripts for their respective languages during the crisis of the 1990s, shows that this transition had no negative impact on their economic situation. These countries' experience indicates that reading Latin-script texts rather than Cyrillic-script ones is much easier for representatives of nations other than the dominant nation [Beyisbayev 2017, p. 47].

In total, the transition to the Latin-based script has been undeniably advantageous for the youth in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, as it considerably speeded up their language acquisition in terms of English and other foreign languages. Consequently, the youth in these countries will find it easier to integrate into the global educational community, given that the transition to the Latin-script alphabet carries obvious integrational implications. It is of utmost importance for countries to interact in various fields of activity such as science, technology, industry, production, agriculture and pharmaceutical industry. All major documents, provisions, instructions, classifiers and indexes in these fields are initially written in English and later translated into other languages. Reading them is much easier if one knows the Latin alphabet. Importantly, Kazakh-speaking citizens have no difficulty in switching from Cyrillic to Latin letters when reading texts written in the Kazakh language. The younger generation study English since Grade 1 and throughout the school years and, consequently, their adaptation to the Latin script is not a matter for concern. Nevertheless, the difficulties faced by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which had switched to the Latin-based script previously, do give rise for concern due to the following reasons:

- Cultural and educational achievements of the past decades, all based on the Cyrillic script, risk being lost for the younger generations;
- The declining interest in reading leads to a decline in culture and education under the conditions of the expansion of Internet services;
- Non-native ethnic groups and older generations will have difficulty in studying the official languages;
- Disintegration and emigration processes will be painfully difficult.

In Kazakhstan, however, the transition of the Kazakh language to the new script is planned to be implemented gradually and smoothly until 2025. A specially established working group affiliated to the government of the Republic of Kazakhstan will monitor this process [Mukhamediuly, 2017].

To this effect, the working group intends to take the following actions:

- draw up a plan of actions for the gradual transition to the Latin script for years 2018 to 2020 and until 2025;
- set up a commission to deal with issues in spelling and language;
- harmonize the legal framework.

As part of these measures, new spelling rules and a big spelling dictionary of the Kazakh language will be written using the Latin script and the elaboration of teaching materials, textbooks, fiction and other printed matter will begin. At the same time, every stage of the transition to the Latin script will a subject for discussion by the academia, teachers, school principals, university professors and experts [Sagadiev 2017]. Assessment of these

materials in schools and among university students will take place after the Republican Terminology and Linguistic Commissions discuss the burning issues in the transition of the Kazakh language to the Latin script at their meetings. The last step will be to implement the Latin-based script directly into the education system by level. Regarding the risks of the decreasing use of the Russian language due to the linguistic innovations and the coexistence of the Cyrillic-script Russian language and the Latin-script Kazakh language, the Government of Kazakhstan guarantees the Kazakhstanis' cultural and historical unity, respect for the rights of Russian-speaking people, the Russian and other languages. It is now a time where information technologies are rapidly changing, the so-called third industrial revolution is approaching and the world is transforming into the post-industrial society. In this regard, people are obliged to change their attitudes towards their mother language [Akbalaeva 2017, p. 3].

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the actor-oriented approach as a main approach to the implementation of the Latin-based Kazakh alphabet considering public opinion and the voices of youth will become the cornerstone of the public awareness modernization program. The prospects of modernization of the public awareness of each person living in Kazakhstan, especially the youth, is related to the formation of socio-political, socio-cultural and educational values. Kazakhstan's further successful development depends on the ideological beliefs of the youth in conformity with the innovation-driven demands of the State.

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