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Ideology and Alphabets in the former USSR

by

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RUSSIAN LANGUAGES MUST USE SAME SCRIPT

The Russian lower house of parliament, the Duma, has adopted a law requiring all state languages in Russia to be based on the Cyrillic alphabet. Russian TV said deputies made the move because they believe that using the same alphabet will unite the country.

Regions still wanting their languages to use the Latin alphabet will need to apply for a separate federal law.

One opponent of the change said that no Tsar, nor even Ivan the Terrible had tried to 'attack the people's writing' (BBC Monitoring report, CEEFAX p. 143 6th June 2002)

Introduction

In November 2002 the Russian parliament passed a law requiring all official languages within the Russian Federation to use the Cyrillic alphabet. The legislation caused great controversy and anger in some quarters, especially in Tatarstan, the Russian republic whose switch from Cyrillic to Latin¹ script provoked the new law. Even the international media gave it some attention (see above). This paper will examine the background to these recent events in the former Soviet Union, showing how they provide a compelling and very contemporary illustration of the ways that linguistic (specifically: orthographic) issues can interact with ideologies at the political and social levels. The paper is organised as follows. In the remainder of Section 1, I give first a brief historical overview and then a more detailed account of the history of orthography in the relevant regions over the last century, up to the end of the Soviet period. In Section 2, I describe the moves among speakers of Turkic languages to return to the Latin alphabet in the immediate post-Soviet period. Section 3 deals with the decision by Tatarstan to introduce the script change, and the resulting backlash from the government of the Russian Federation, in the form of a new language law. Section 4 is for analysis and discussion, and Section 5 for the conclusion.

1.1 Historical overview

Imperial expansion during Tsarist times meant that the Russian Empire included a great many non-Russian peoples, some of whom had long traditions of literacy in their own languages, while others had no written language of their own. In particular, along its southern flank, the Russian Empire incorporated a swathe of peoples, mainly Muslim and speakers of closely related Turkic language varieties, living in what have today become independent countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), or autonomous parts of the Russian Federation (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Tuva) or parts of other states which made up the former USSR (the Crimean Tatars in what is now Ukraine, the Karakalpaks in an autonomous region of Uzbekistan).

The past century has been a period of orthographic instability for these regions. During the Tsarist period, the Turkic languages mainly used the Arabic script. During the 1920s, there was an ambitious programme of alphabetic reform which led to the introduction of Latin script for all of them by 1930. Scarcely had this programme become effective, when the Latin script was replaced by Cyrillic in the late 1930s, a move which is inextricably linked to Stalin and his policies towards the non-Russian population of the USSR. Thus the Latin script, in use for only about a decade, served as transitional between the Arabic and the Cyrillic, and three scripts were in use in the space of a single generation.

With the demise of the USSR, many of the newly-autonomous or sovereign states decided to return to the Latin script, though not always to the version in use in the 1930s. Within Russia itself, the decision of the government of Tatarstan to do this provoked a backlash, leading to the law which in effect established Cyrillic as the 'official script' for all official languages in the Russian Federation in 2002.

1.2 The Tsarist period

Language policy during the Tsarist period was not very coherent and was aimed at promoting Russian as the official language of the Empire (Alpatov 1997: 28). Where language planning and development took place for the non-Russian languages it was more likely to be an initiative of the orthodox Church than the government and was in many cases 'linked to missionary activity and assimilating policies' (Reznik 2001).

During the 19th century some language development work on the Turkic languages was carried out by missionaries who were also linguistic scholars, for example N.I. Il'minskii, an expert in Turkic languages and former linguistics professor, who believed that using local languages as tools of instruction would facilitate Russification and Orthodox education (Reznik 2001). According to Paksoy (1989 Chapter 2 pp. 2- 3) Il'minskii attempted to separate Tatar and Kazakh dialects and establish a Cyrillic alphabet for the latter. 'Il'minskii strove to emphasize tribe-specific and regional vocabulary, using Cyrillic characters to stress differentiation visually and codify variations in pronunciation, however minor.'

Thus even before the Bolshevik revolution, the Turkic languages were the subject of orthographic intervention from Russia. This was to intensify during the Soviet period.

1.3 The early Soviet period

Following the Bolshevik revolution a re-evaluation of scripts took place. According to Winner (1952: 134), the Arabic script is 'characterised by a great variety of forms in which one and the same sound can be represented according to its position in the word and by the absence of symbols for vowels' and so is 'poorly adapted to the Turkic languages, particularly to those which have preserved the principle of vowel harmony'. Nonetheless, there were reasons for retaining the Arabic script. Henze points out that the lack of vowel symbols meant that some dialect differences were obscured in the written language, giving it wider currency (1977:373). Furthermore, the Arabic script was of cultural importance: 'The Arabic alphabet had both symbolic and practical significance for the maintenance of religious and cultural ties – potentially political ties as well – with the countries of the Middle East and with other more advanced Moslem peoples in the Russian Empire' (Henze 1977:373).

In this period there was debate about whether to retain the Arabic script, with improvements, or to Latinise. Modified Arabic alphabets were introduced for some Turkic languages in the early 1920s. Muslim clergy and some of the local intellectuals argued for retaining the Arabic script. The connection between the Tsarist Russification programme, Christian proselytising and the Cyrillic script meant that Cyrillic was ruled out as a possible script for the Turkic languages. 'In the local press it was frequently pointed out that the Russian script was too reminiscent of the old Russification policy, but that, as one article put it, "the Latin script does not have any of this feeling attached to it"' (Winner 1952:137).

In the debates about scripts, linguistic arguments were important. It was pointed out that the Arabic script was unsuited to the Turkic languages, in particular because of its lack of vowel symbols. However, not all the arguments were linguistic. Some reformers used an internationalist argument: 'The Moslem world needs an international alphabet. the Latin alphabet is not only international... it is known also to those nations which, like the Russian, do not use it' (quoted by Winner 1952:136). Others favoured the Latin alphabet because it would make it easier for Russians and others to learn the Turkic languages, thus improving understanding among individual nationalities of the USSR (Peskov, quoted in Azerbaijan International 2000).

The movement towards Latinisation among the non-Russian peoples of the USSR needs to be seen in the context of wider positive attitudes towards the Latin alphabet. So strong was the association of the Latin script with modernisation and technological progress that during the 1920s and 1930s there was a serious debate in Russia over whether the Latin alphabet could replace Cyrillic in the Russian language itself². In 1929 a Commission was set up to promote the Latinisation of Russian, under the chairmanship of the distinguished linguist Iakovlev. It included several other famous linguists (Reznik 2001). According to Winner, 'the project of Latinising the Russian language was vigorously supported by a number of leading government officials, among them the first People's Commissar of Education, A. Lunacharsky' (Winner 1952:137).

In spite of all this, Russian did not Latinise, but the Turkic languages did. Both before and after the Revolution, Azerbaijan, the most westerly and most industrialised of the Muslim Turkic-speaking territories, led the way in the movement towards Latinisation (Winner 1952:135). Alphabet reform had already been a topic of discussion in Azerbaijan during the 19th century. The transition to Latin script was recommended as early as 1922 by the Soviet government of Azerbaijan, sparking discussion in the other Turkic-speaking areas of the USSR (Winner 1952:135). The Latin alphabet was introduced in Azerbaijan in 1924 and made compulsory for newspapers and official use in 1925, though the Arabic script continued in concurrent use until 1929 (Henze 1977:376).

In 1926 the First Turcological Congress was held in Baku (Azerbaijan). During eight days of debate, the merits of retaining the Arabic script were compared with the benefits and costs of converting to the Latin alphabet. The Latinists won the day, and the Latinisation of all the Turkic languages of the U.S.S.R. was proclaimed official policy (Henze 1977:376).

1.4 The New Turkic Alphabet

One outcome of the First Turcological Congress was a blueprint for a unified alphabet for all the Turkic languages. The New Turkic Alphabet (known as the Yanalif from the words for 'new' and 'alphabet') was eventually agreed by the All-Union Central Committee on the New Turkic Alphabet which met in 1927 – 28. It was basically the standard Latin alphabet with a few supplementary letters and diacritics to meet the requirements of the Turkic language varieties. The Unified Turkic Latin Alphabet was adapted to all the Turkic languages of Soviet Central Asia between 1927 and 1930 - Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Karakalpak and Kirghiz (Henze 1977:377). By 1929 use of the NTA effectively became compulsory and the import of typographical material in Arabic was forbidden (Winner 1952:143). The introduction of the New Turkic Alphabet was effectively completed by 1936.

The Azerbaijani reforms provided a model for Turkey's transformation from Arabic script to its own variant of the Latin alphabet in 1928, which formed a key part of Ataturk's modernisation programme. The alphabet used in Turkey was similar to the Yanalif, but not identical. According to Henze, (1977: 377) Romanisation in Turkey probably had the effect of speeding up the pace of romanisation in the USSR, as Turkic-speaking intellectuals in the USSR were very interested in developments in Turkey.

The development of the Yanalif was a step towards the creation of a unified Turkic language in Central Asia, by minimising the differences between the written forms of local varieties. Henze writes (1977:376): ‘The very concept of a unified Turkic alphabet meant that its proponents aimed at achieving the fullest possible degree of linguistic uniformity among speakers of Turkic languages in the U.S.S.R., with the intention of facilitating contact among them and creating a sense of unity and common purpose.’³ During this period, such feelings of unity could still be expressed within the USSR, though only ‘in linguistic and cultural terms’.

However, political changes were already in the wind. Trends towards closer relationships between the various Turkic-speaking groups – and particularly, links between the Turkic-speaking peoples of the USSR and Turkey itself – attracted suspicion in Moscow. The cultural link created by the simultaneous Latinisation of Turkey and the Central Asian communities of the USSR may have set alarm bells ringing in Moscow and turned the policy of the Communist Party in favour of Cyrillicisation, which followed almost as soon as Latinisation was complete.

1.5 The change to Cyrillic

From 1937 onwards there began a rapid shift towards use of Cyrillic scripts for the Turkic languages. Henze⁴ suggests that the decision to change the Turkic alphabets to Cyrillic may have been made in the early 1930s, following the success of the Latinisation programme in Turkey.

The goals and the rhetoric of the Cyrillicisation programme were very different from those of the Latinisation of the previous decade. The keystone of Latinisation had been the New Turkic Alphabet, the Yanalif, with its potential for creating a unified written Turkic language. By contrast, Cyrillicisation was about facilitating the Central Asian peoples’ learning of Russian and their assimilation to Russian culture. Khatskevich, secretary of the Soviet of Nationalities of the U.S.S.R., argued in 1937 that ‘the creation of new written languages should facilitate international understanding’. The drawback of the Latin script, he pointed out, was that it separated the smaller nationalities from the ‘basic’ nationalities of the USSR (Winner 1952: 145), i.e. Russia. Or, as Pravda put it in 1939: ‘the transition to the Russian script will contribute to an even greater unification of the peoples of the USSR, to an even greater strengthening of the friendship of the peoples of the USSR’ (Winner 1952: 146).

There was also an argument based on the availability of education. Since most higher education was available only in Russian, knowledge of Cyrillic would eliminate the need to learn two alphabets and make it easier for people from the minority nations to learn Russian (Winner 1952:146), something that the Russians viewed as wholly positive and necessary⁵. Reflecting on these developments in 1952, the eminent Soviet Turcologist Baskakov wrote: ‘The adoption of the Russian script by most of the languages has not only contributed to their development, but has been of notable assistance to the various nationalities of the Soviet Union in their successful mastery of the Russian language and in the assimilation of Russian culture’ (quoted by Henze 1977:381).

While the Latinisation programme had been able to draw on the unified Yanalif model for all languages, there was no unified Cyrillic Alphabet, so each language Cyrillicised separately. According to Henze (1977:382), the Communists were unwilling now to allow the Turkic peoples even ‘the semblance of alphabetic unity’. Borovkov, a Soviet linguist writing in 1956, ‘gave a vivid picture of variations in the use of letters and application of spelling principles in the various Soviet Turkic languages. While in addition to the normal Cyrillic alphabet, the Kirghiz language employs three supplemental letters, Uzbek uses four, Kazakh nine, and Uigur as written in Kazakhstan eight; the revised Karakalpak alphabet required six additional letters’ (cited by Henze 1977:389).

Borovkov called attention to how these orthographic variations in effect produced different languages: 'The phonetically extremely similar Karakalpak and Kazakh languages [...] are completely different in writing: The alphabets in both languages are different; the orthographic solution of identical features is accomplished in different ways' (cited by Henze 1977:388-389).

According to Paksoy (1989) this orthographic differentiation of similar language varieties had begun in Tsarist times with the interventions of Il'minskii (see 1.1). 'Distorting the phonological aspects of local usages constituted a step toward the later Soviet policy [...] of recording such differences in subsets of Latin, then Cyrillic orthography, and dubbing each product a "separate language.'" In the Soviet period, Paksoy writes,

a language policy was implemented in Central Asia which strove to establish the various dialects as separate languages. The current Uzbek, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Turkmen and other Central Asian 'languages' [...] so rigidly favored by the Soviets were [...] inspired by Il'minskii's work.

The formulation of 'new' alphabets (actually the addition of new symbols to the Latin, then the Cyrillic alphabets) for each 'language' is yet another aspect of this policy [...] In essence, this practice amounts to no more than changing the spelling rules and calling the final product a 'language.' (Paksoy 1989 Chapter 2, p. 7, footnote omitted).

The principle of Turkic alphabetic unity having gone out the window, another principle was introduced. Inevitably, the introduction of Cyrillic script would make it easier for the Turkic languages to assimilate Russian words. 'The rule was soon established that all words taken from the Russian must be spelled exactly as in Russian' even where some phonological adaptation would be expected (Henze 1977:383). This paved the way for the mass importation of Russian vocabulary, unadapted, into the Turkic languages. Once again, this was seen as a positive achievement, attained by paying due attention to linguistic principles. Baskakov wrote (1952, quoted by Henze 1977:381):

The exceptional importance of the Russian alphabet calls for special care in its use. The task of the simultaneous inculcation of literacy in both the native and Russian languages can only be successfully performed by achieving the maximum equality in the value of the letters. In the alphabets based on Russian devised for each language, there should be as little conflict as possible between the value of those symbols and letters common to both the native language and the Russian, which are used only for the phonemes of the national language, and other symbols and letters, also common to both, which are used only for loan words.

Looking back more than half a century later, the Latinisation and Cyrillicisation programmes can be seen as two very different kinds of activity, with different goals, different levels of popular participation, and differently perceived by speakers of the languages involved. While Latinisation was controversial and not without its problems, it was thoroughly debated and phased in with the involvement of local intellectuals and the public. Cyrillicisation is nowadays almost always described as having been 'imposed' (often 'imposed by Stalin')⁶.

Although there were many problems associated with implementing the Cyrillic scripts in Soviet Central Asia (see Henze for a discussion), and there were some reforms and discussions about reform from the 1950s onwards, the Cyrillic scripts endured until the end of the Soviet era. Unsurprisingly, however, the end of the Soviet Union brought about another re-evaluation of the Cyrillic scripts and a fresh set of changes.

2 The post-Soviet era: moves towards Latinisation in the Turkic-speaking states

As the Soviet era drew to a close, the component parts of the USSR began to assert their independence. As early as 1990, Moldova changed from Cyrillic to Latin script, making the written Moldovan identical with written Romanian (see photograph). Even before this, moves towards Latinisation had begun among the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. During the late 1980s and early 1990s most of the Turkic-speaking republics formed alphabet commissions, which recommended a return to the Latin script (Nissman and Hill 1997). New language laws were promulgated in most of the republics, redefining the relationships between the local languages and Russian, and setting timetables, in some cases, for the introduction of Latin script. According to Schlyter (2001, 3.5) 'transition periods of around 10 years' were envisaged in most cases, but have since come to be seen as unrealistic.



[photo here]

August 1990: Moldova celebrates a national festival to mark the return to Latin script (Photo: the author)

The new drive to Latinise is taking place in a very different context from that of the 1920s. At that time, most of the entities involved were constituent parts of the Soviet Union (Turkey being the main exception). Now, there are a number of independent countries - Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan - each with their own linguistic problems, agendas, funding priorities and political systems. In addition, there are a number of more or less autonomous states or communities which form parts of other states: Tatarstan in the Russian Federation, the Crimean Tatars in what is now Ukraine, and the Karakalpaks in an autonomous region of Uzbekistan. Each is moving towards alphabetic reform, if at all, at a different pace and within a different legislative framework.

As in the first Latinisation movement, Azerbaijan set the pace: its parliament voted to adopt the Latin script shortly after independence from the USSR in 1991. In 2001 a presidential decree was published to make the change complete: 'From now on, no official or commercial document should contain a single character in the Cyrillic alphabet' (Peuch 2001). The change was not without problems. Rather than comply with the decree, one newspaper started publishing in Russian rather than Azerbaijani, while another simply continued to publish in Cyrillic. At the same time a presidential decree instructed the government to institute penalties for 'covert and open propaganda against the state language and resistance to the use of the state language and Azerbaijani alphabet' (RFE/RL Newswire, 20 June 2001).

The Russian media reported on 2nd August 2002, perhaps with a touch of *schadenfreude*⁷, that the change to Latin in Azerbaijan 'after initial successes, had encountered serious difficulties' including much-reduced print runs for periodicals, and that it had proved impossible to eliminate Cyrillic from television programming (Ogorodnikov 2002)⁸.

Elsewhere, according to Schlyter (2001), Kazakhstan and Kirghizistan have made no recent legislation on alphabets, although 'the change-over to Latin script is subject to commissioned discussions and work' (Schlyter 2001:3.3). In 2001 Kazakhstan was reported to be looking

seriously at a new proposal for a Latin-based alphabet (RFE/RL Central Asia Report 27 July 2001).

In Turkmenistan, 'a Turkmen Latin alphabet was adopted in 1993 which included some inconvenient special letters not found in any other Turkic Latin alphabet' (Schlyter 2001:3.7). In Uzbekistan, 'two alphabets that have been so far proposed for Uzbek in 1993 and 1995 respectively, have been heavily criticized even by the Uzbeks themselves, including Uzbek linguists' (Schlyter 2001: 2.2); while a similar modified Karakalpak Latin alphabet was introduced in 1995 (2001:2.1). The Parliament of the Crimean Tatars of the Ukraine approved a Latin script in 1997 for gradual introduction by 2002 (Republican Crimean Tatar library, http://www.geocities.com/ai320/q_education.htm).

Clearly, there is not even a 'semblance of unity' in the move towards Latinisation this time round. The existence of the New Turkic Alphabet in the 1920s and 1930s has enabled states to draw on a discourse of 'returning' to Latin script after decades of 'imposed' Cyrillic, but in practice, there has not been a return to the unified Yanalif, nor is there a new common standard. According to Schlyter (2001:4.1),

The first in a series of alphabet conferences in Turkey was held in November 1991 at the Marmara University in Istanbul (Devlet 1992). The basic Turkic alphabet adopted there has appeared from time to time in publications where it is presented as the valid new Turkic Latin alphabet. However, as things now stand, not only Uzbekistan, Karakalpakistan included, but also Turkmenistan and possibly also Kazakhstan have introduced alternative alphabets that are not just modifications of the basic Turkic alphabet but alphabets which differ on certain fundamental points from the Turkic one.

She adds that though Turkey has retained an interest in these matters, it 'seems to have become quite disenchanted by the recent developments' (Schlyter 2001:4.2) .

Against this background of international moves towards Latinisation we turn now to look at developments in Tatarstan.

3 The Tatarstan script change and its consequences

3.1 Tatarstan moves towards Latinisation

Tatarstan is one of the constituent republics of the Russian Federation. Only a minority of speakers of Tatar live there; more than 60 percent of ethnic Tatars live outside its boundaries. The Tatars are Russia's second largest ethnic group, after the Russians themselves (Khasanova 1997). Within Tatarstan, the Tatars constitute about half the population and Russians around 40% (see Leprêtre 2002)⁹. Tatars are also the second largest ethnic group (after Russians) in the neighbouring republic of Bashkortostan, ahead of the titular nationality, the Bashkirs. Tatars also live in other countries which were part of the former USSR, and many emigrated at various stages in the last century and settled in other parts of the world.

As mentioned in Section 1, the Tatar language was the subject of linguistic missionaries' interventions even during Tsarist times. During the Soviet era, Tatar followed the same path as the other Turkic languages. From being written mainly in the Arabic script, it underwent a conversion first to the Latin alphabet in the 1920s¹⁰ and then to Cyrillic about a decade later. While Tatars within the boundaries of the former USSR continued to use the Cyrillic alphabet up to the present, emigrant communities use the Yanalif Latin script.

In the late 1990s, the Tatarstan government took steps to restore the Latin alphabet to the Tatar language. Given that a minority of Tatars live within its jurisdiction, the government of Tatarstan could not be expected to legislate on the Tatar language entirely on its own. The decision to change to Latin script for writing Tatar was made after the Second World Congress of Tatars in Kazan on August 26-30, 1997. In an appeal to Tatarstan's president Mintimer Shaimiev, Congress delegates said that: 'We, the participants of the Second World Congress of Tatars, believe that the transition to the Latin alphabet for the Tatar language is a measure whose time has come.... This would permit all Tatars to have one written language, which is of primary importance in uniting the people.' (Khasanova 1997).

3.2 Implementation of the changes

According to Khasanova (1997), this resolution by the Second World Congress of Tatars, whose delegates 'were elected by Tatar communities in twenty countries and sixty Russian regions' conferred legitimacy on the action of the Tatarstan government in initiating the conversion of Tatar to the Latin alphabet. The State Council of Tatarstan adopted an alphabet for the Tatar language based on Latin script in 1999. The law went into effect in September 2001, with the new orthography being introduced gradually. Both the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets were to be in use until 1 September 2011 (RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly, 20 November 2002). An amount of US\$700,000 was made available to cover the costs of the project's initial stages (Crescent International June 1-15, 2001).

A commission was set up to oversee the process and transliteration and spelling rules were approved in July 2000, enabling schools in Tatarstan to introduce the Latin script for written work in the national language as early as September 2000 (Goble 2000). An Education Ministry spokeswoman was quoted as saying that 'this return to the Latin script both permits a better representation of the national language's sound patterns and will help Tatar students to learn English and other European languages' (Goble 2000). Textbooks were rewritten for the experimental stage, which began in March 2001, and by the end of 2001 all first-graders in the republic's schools, whether ethnic Tatars or Russians, would be required to learn Tatar in the new alphabet. The entire project was expected to take 10 years to complete and to cost about \$7 million. (Crescent International June 1-15, 2001).

3.3 The backlash

The move to Latin script soon provoked a response from the government of the Russian Federation. During September 2001, as the Tatarstan laws came into effect, deputies in the Duma began putting forward amendments to the Federal language laws to outlaw the Tatarstan proposals. The Unity faction in the Duma proposed an amendment stating that 'Russia's state language and the state languages of the republics use Cyrillic-based alphabets. Other alphabets may be introduced only by federal law' (Tatnews.ru, 18 September 2001, cited in the *Jamestown Monitor* 25th September 2001). Unity called on Tatarstan's leaders to review the potential political fallout that would allegedly result from their decision to switch to the Latin script.

The rhetoric of the debate made it clear that Tatarstan was being accused of nothing short of disloyalty to the Russian Federation. The pro-Kremlin media called Tatarstan's proposed switch to the Latin alphabet 'a threat to the integrity of Russia' (Strana.ru, September 19). The spectre of Turkish involvement was raised in various ways. The chairman of the subcommittee for language policy, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples, Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei, warned that Tatarstan was showing a dangerous tendency toward rapprochement with Turkey. (*Jamestown Monitor* 25th

September 2001) It could not, he said, be ruled out that other republics in the Russian Federation might follow suit. There had been earlier suggestions in the press that Zakiyev, the director of the Ibrahimov Institute of Linguistics, Literature and Arts in Tatarstan, had lobbied for the script change with the aid of Turkish money (Panorama-Forum 2000, No. 23). Bicheldei saw it as significant that Tatarstan did not plan to return to its old (1927) Latin alphabet but was preparing to introduce an alphabet based on the Turkish one. 'This is a frightening tendency' he told the media, 'as if the Republic is turning towards Turkey' (Malyutina (2002a) = Gazeta.ru, 15 November 2002)¹¹.

In September 2001 a petition from residents of Kazan was presented to the Tatarstan parliament. The petition 'warned of the 'threat to national security' contained in Tatarstan's plans to revise its script. It expressed 'alarm for the fate of our native Tatar language' and concern that 'traditions will be destroyed, new textbooks will have to be printed, new teaching methods developed, books translated, teachers retrained. Huge funds will have to be spent on all of this.... It will cause a split in our society. It will be difficult for people to learn how to read and write anew.... The link between generations will be broken'' (Jamestown Foundation Monitor 25 September 2001, citing Interfax and Polit.ru as sources). However, 'fewer than fifty people' signed this appeal (ibid.) Simultaneously, a petition signed by famous and high-ranking Tatars living in Russia outside Tatarstan was published in a Russian newspaper, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. This petition cited 'deep alarm for the fate of the native Tatar language, ...the language that helps us maintain and strengthen the spiritual link with our historical motherland, to feel ourselves an integral part of the great Tatar people.' The change to Latin script threatened 'the literacy and education of our rising generation, access to knowledge and literature, scientific investigation, ...in sum, the development of Tatar national culture beyond the borders of the historical motherland' (Jamestown Foundation Monitor 25 September 2001, citing *Vechnyaya Kazan* and NNS.ru as sources).

The Tatar media responded by casting some doubt on the genuineness of the petition. Newspapers reported that one alleged signatory denied signing it, while another was reported to have apologised to his friends, saying he was pressured to sign although he agreed with the switch to Latin. Another signatory was reported to be mentally ill. The Tatarstan government claimed that the protests were orchestrated by Moscow and that the petition had been organised 'by the staff of the Russian President' (RFL/RE Weekly Review from Tatarstan 21 September 2001).

In March 2002 the State Duma Council voted to include in its legislative programme an amendment to the Russian language law, stating that: 'The official language of the Russian Federation and official languages of the constituent republics thereof shall use alphabets based on the Cyrillic.' The amendment was initiated by the presidential administration as a response to Tatarstan's decision to restore the Tatar Latin alphabet, according to its main proposer, Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei. He claimed that all 29 of the members of the Russian Federation had discussed and accepted the draft, apart from Tatarstan. Among 10 deputies who proposed the draft in the Duma, there were three from Tatarstan. One of these, Shashurin, was quoted as saying that the Tatar switch to Latin would 'threaten Russia's national security and integrity via Turkish expansion'. He called forth images of backwardness and poverty, by saying: 'Now we switch the Tatar language to Latin and then we will ride donkeys like in Afghanistan'. Fandas Safiullin, a deputy from Tatarstan, put down an alternative amendment, to allow nationalities to solve issues concerning their languages on their own; it was rejected. He told the assembly that the approved draft amendment 'has nothing to do with linguistic science, but is purely politically motivated.' In Safiullin's words, the draft 'accused the entire Tatar nation [and] its intelligentsia by declaring them a collective Turkish spy' (RFL/RE Daily Review from Tatarstan 13 March).

The amendment received its first reading in June 2002 and was passed by 343 votes to 15. Supporting the bill, Andrei Loginov, governmental envoy to the Duma, said that the refusal of

republics to use the Cyrillic script would damage Russia's integrity and could require 'the difficult psychological adaptation of millions of people' to get used to the new scripts. He said that writing can be regulated by the law inasmuch as it is an element of a social contract and if everyone invents his or her own writing, it would lead to chaos in the state. ¹² (Prokhorov 2002 = *Gazeta.ru*, 6 June 2002). He told journalists Anatoli Nikitin of the nationalities committee said that the existing federal legislation left a gap where languages and their alphabets were concerned. The new bill filled in the blank spot. Writing unified throughout Russia will promote its cultural and educational unity, he pointed out in a co-report on the issue (*Pravda.ru*, 5th June 2002, RFL/RE Daily Review from Tatarstan, 6 June 2002).

The bill had plenty of opponents. One deputy claimed that the amendment was aimed at fictitious threats to national security from the Turkic nationalities, designed to distract attention from the real problems like corruption. Others, including Presidential representative to the State Duma Aleksandr Kotenkov said the adoption of the draft would result in the growth of nationalism in Russia. Andrei Vulf of the Union of Rightist Forces said the proposed amendments would be harmful to the development of federalism in Russia and were a means of suppressing national languages and national identities which would result only in bitterness toward Russians. (RFE/RL Weekly Review from Tatarstan 7 June 2002). Similar points were made by the Tatarstan government and its supporters: Deputy Fandas Safiullin claimed that it would reduce the chances of former Soviet republics reuniting with Russia, since Russia 'would force its subjects to use the Cyrillic script' (RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan 7 June 2002). The Tatar political commentator and government adviser Lev Ovrutskii went further. Writing in the weekly *Moskovskii Komsomolets v Tatarstane*, he called the Duma's decision a means of 'destroying the unity of multiethnic Russia...by calling the evil spirits of the [Russian] empire back from the past...and taking a truly totalitarian approach' (RFE/RL Weekly Review from Tatarstan 14 June 2002).

For the Tatarstan government, the Tatarstan Deputy State Council Chairman Robert Minnullin called the bill 'one more slap in Tatarstan's face' and a warning from Moscow. He expressed regret that representatives of national minorities, not Russians, initiated this draft, among them Tatars, Tuvins¹³, Bashkirs, and representatives of the Caucasian peoples. (RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan 10 June 2002). Fandas Safiullin claimed that the amendments 'contradict several provisions of the Russian Constitution and discriminate against the Tatar language in comparison with non-state languages in the country, since these would be allowed to continue using non-Cyrillic scripts.' He insisted that the draft legislation was 'so weak that it won't have any serious consequences for Tatarstan.' (RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan 7 June 2002).

The bill had its final reading and was approved by both houses of parliament in November 2002. In the Duma 336 deputies backed the document, while the liberal Union of Rightist Forces and the Yabloko faction refused to take part in the voting altogether, claiming that the bill was aimed against the peoples of Russia. Its main proposer, Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei, professed himself satisfied: 'It went fairly smoothly' he told the media. 'We have protected the rights of citizens to education and access to information' ((*Gazeta.ru*, 15 November 2002).

Supporters of the change to Latin script pointed out various ways of circumventing the legislation. Tatarstan could remove the official status of Tatar and introduce Latin script without infringing the law. Deputy Safiullin claimed the law would be ineffective anyway: how and who will be punished for writing a holiday postcard in the Latin alphabet? And if the whole population starts to write in Latin script, will they be deported or repressed? The situation could be taken to absurd lengths, he pointed out, for example, by publishing books and newspapers in the [adjacent] Mari Republic, where Tatar is not official and so can legally be written in any alphabet. 'Though we are not planning to do that' he said. He predicted that the law would rally more people to the cause of the Latin script (Malyutina (2002a) = *Gazeta.ru*, 15 November 2002).

Not only Tatars were upset by the new law. Though aimed at Tatarstan, it would also affect Karelia, a region adjacent to Finland where Karelian, similar to Finnish, is used (though currently not official). Federation Council member Viktor Stepanov from Karelia was reported as saying: ‘Teaching Karelian on the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet will practically destroy the Karelian language. In my opinion, we are intruding -- just like Lysenko was intruding on genetics -- we are intruding on the genetics of human consciousness¹⁴’ (Knox 2002b).

Opponents of the law now raised objections on the grounds of constitutional and human rights violations. Nasif Mirikhanov, Tatarstan's representative to the Russian Federation, called the amendment passed by the Duma a ‘violation of human rights.’ Boris Panteleev, a legal expert for the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, argued that the Cyrillic-only law violates several articles of the Russian Constitution, including one which states that ‘the Russian Federation guarantees to all peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create the conditions for its study and development’ (RFE/RL Russian Political Weekly, 20 November 2002). The Tatar ethnologist Damir Iskhakov said he believed that the law contradicts the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages, which aims to protect, preserve, and promote linguistic diversity (Knox 2002b), although the Charter does not specifically mention the use of scripts. Fandas Safiullin told the media that the law ran counter to seven articles of the Russian Constitution which enshrine the right of preservation and development of national languages, and violated international law - in particular, the Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

On 28 November 2002 it was reported that the Tatarstan government was preparing to take the issue to the constitutional court if necessary, or even to international organisations. A journalist pointed out wryly that the Tatars would be relying on the Greek goddess of justice, Themis, who might not be well-disposed towards Latin (Ivashko 2002 = *Gazeta. Ru* 28 November 2002).

On 29 November 2002 the Tatar State Council passed a resolution asking the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, to veto the law. Deputies said it contradicted articles 15, 73, and 76 of the Russian Constitution, adding that, ‘issues regarding the native languages of the titular peoples of the republics of the Russian Federation, which are fixed in their constitutions as state languages, and their alphabets come under the jurisdiction of the republics [themselves]’. At the same time, the World Tatar Congress Executive Committee issued an appeal to President Putin, saying that the State Duma had created a new situation in which the ethnic majority was violating the ethnic and cultural rights of national minorities, among them Tatars. The congress said the amendment had caused serious harm to federative relations in the country and had shaken the foundations of Russian statehood. (*Gazeta. Ru* 29 November 2002, RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan, 2 December 2002).

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

Laws establishing official languages are common, but legislation requiring all languages within the boundaries of a state to use specific alphabets is rare. Even during the Stalin era, Cyrillic was imposed on each nationality separately, if at all; there was no attempt to legislate for a single national alphabet. Indeed, at that time it would have been all but impossible, since languages of the USSR like Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian used the Latin script, while others like Georgian and Armenian had their own scripts with long histories. The law requiring Cyrillic for all official languages within Russia is therefore something new in the region's history, but is also more or less unprecedented anywhere in recent times¹⁵.

Schieffelin and Doucet rightly say (1994:176), ‘orthographic debates are rich sites for investigating competing nationalist discourses.’ In the disputes over Haitian orthography which they study, choice of orthography is seen as reflecting an orientation to the Francophone world or to independence and anti-colonialism. In Galicia, according to Herrero Valeiro (1993), choice of orthographic conventions reflects alignment with a discourse of ‘differentialism’ (Galician is a language independent of Portuguese), or of ‘reintegrationism’ (there is no linguistic basis for calling Galician an independent language from Portuguese) in various degrees. Eira (1998) takes the notion of ‘competing discourses’ as fundamental to understanding choices and disputes over orthography, arguing that ‘the basis for orthography selection is fundamentally a question of the location of authority, which is in turn a function of the prevailing discourse’ (1998: 172). ‘At base, the authority which directs this process reflects a configuration of cultural discourses. Disagreement and imposed change can be explained in terms of conflict within or between discourses; choices which appear inexpedient according to the framework of one discourse become comprehensible from the perspective of the discourse that motivates them’ (1998: 171).

Eira’s framework is useful in understanding the Tatar alphabet dispute because it addresses itself in particular to disagreements over orthography choice: ‘differences of opinion at all levels reflect the underlying discourse in which they are framed [...] an argument framed in terms of one Discourse is incoherent against an argument framed within another’. A mismatch of discourses may lead to ‘problems in mutual understanding and respect’ (1998:174).

If there is self-evidently a ‘problem in mutual understanding and respect’ between Moscow and Kazan, we may try to trace it to the discourses with which each party is operating.

Eira mentions six ‘discourse fields that impinge on orthography issues’: scientific, political, religious, technological, historical, and pedagogical. In the Tatar orthography dispute, we can find elements of all of these, though it is not easy to disentangle them. According to Eira, ‘In practice, discourses do not occur as predictable and neatly separable bases of opinion, but are interwoven in ways peculiar to each culture’. In the remainder of this section I want to examine some of the competing discourses in this debate, using a somewhat different notion of ‘discourse’ from that used by Eira, to explore what they tell us about how orthography has been conceptualised and deployed in the Tatar alphabet debate.

4.2 Unity and membership: the discourse of belonging

Scripts have always had strong associations with religions and the literacy practices connected with those religions. This was certainly true within the Russian orbit, where the association between the Orthodox religion and Cyrillic was very powerful¹⁶. This was a major factor preventing the introduction of Cyrillic to replace the Arabic script in the 1920s. The association of the Arabic script with Islam is also strong. In the present dispute over the Latinisation of Tatar, however, we can see that the associations of alphabet with nationhood and international relationships are much more important than the associations with religion. Interestingly, the Latin alphabet is seen as being *neutral* in the sense that in this context, it does not have strong associations with one particular group – for example, Khasanova (1997) believes that ‘today’s Tatars have a positive view of the Latin alphabet, which they see as an alphabet that is used throughout the world and which has been adopted voluntarily by many peoples as their national alphabet’. At the same time, however, the Latin script is seen as being European as opposed to Russian. Thus Damir Iskhakov from the Kazan Institute of History is quoted as saying that Latinisation reflects Tatars’ belief that they belong to ‘Europe-oriented civilization’ (Knox 2002a).

In spite of its global neutrality, in this particular context, the Latin script is now seen as closely linked with the other Turkic languages, and a necessary part of any modern attempt to create a unified Turkic written language. According to the Tatarstan president Shaimiev: 'Tatars are part of the Turkic world, and it would be wrong to remain outside this general trend' (Khasanova 1997). The Director of the Ibrahimov Institute of Linguistics, Literature and Arts, Mirfatykh Zakiyev, made a similar point in a newspaper interview: a change [to Latin script] will help to unify the written language of the Tatars with the written language of other Turkic peoples. The change to Latin script would not hinder this project, since the Cyrillic alphabet was unsuccessful in unifying the form of many words in these languages (Ivashko 2002 = *Gazeta. Ru* 28 November 2002).

Here we can identify a discourse of 'unity' with a specified group of people: 'Europeans' or the 'Turkic peoples'. A similar discourse is used by the pro-Cyrillicists. On the one hand the Cyrillic orthography is linked to the integrity and unity of the Russian Federation: thus supporters of the legislation emphasised that it would 'allow for the protection of the unified cultural and educational space' (Prokhorov 2002 = *Gazeta. Ru* 6 June 2002). The alphabet change was condemned as a threat to the integrity of Russia (with the specific implication that Turkey was somehow involved). At the same time it is argued by some that retaining Cyrillic will maintain the unity of the Tatars themselves: Latinisation 'will cause a split in our society' in the words of the Kazan petitioners. According to Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei (himself a Tuvian, not a Tatar), 'if Tatarstan goes over to the Latin alphabet, then only 2 million people, those living in the Republic itself, will write that way. But 4 million Tatars who live elsewhere will not be able to do that, since the Latinisation law will only apply on the territory of that region [Tatarstan]' (Malyutina (2002a) = *Gazeta.ru*, 15 November 2002). Even Tatar President Shaimiev expressed some doubts about the script change on the grounds that it could keep Tatars living in other Russian regions away from Tatarstan, since no one would introduce the Latin script outside Tatarstan. "I signed the law on the gradual change to the Tatar Latin script, but I'm still not quite sure it will be good for the Tatar people," he was quoted as saying (RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan, 24 June 2002).

Russia's supreme mufti, Talgat Tadzhuiddin, used the same argument to claim that 'the introduction of the Latin script could destroy the integrity of the Tatar nation and cause other nations in Russia to oppose Tatars'. He went further by drawing on a *historical* discourse by adding that he is 'proud of the fact that Cyril and Methodius, the founders of the Cyrillic script, were Bulgars, and [that Tatars] share historical roots with them' (RFE/RL Daily Review from Tatarstan, 23 July 2002).

Thus both proponents and opponents of the script change draw on a discourse of unity and belonging. The Latin script serves various symbolic functions: it represents, depending on the discourse, (1) globalisation, (2) European civilisation, (3) Turkic language unity or (4) an unhealthy leaning towards Turkey (see below). Cyrillic is linked discursively to (1) the Tatars, (2) the Russian Federation as a united entity and/or (3) ancient historic links between Tatars and Slavic peoples.

4.3 Technology and globalisation

The discourses of technology are closely linked to discourses of globalisation and difficult to separate from them. According to Khasanova (1997), computer specialists have come out in favour of the Latin alphabet in preference to the Cyrillic alphabet, 'with its relative isolation from the world computer information system'. Using the Latin alphabet 'would make it possible for the Tatar language to enter that system and to become an international language, and Tatar-speakers would be able to use the Internet without having to change fonts'. Moreover, she says, there is currently a shortage of people with computer skills in Central Asia. Tatarstan universities offer training in this area, but changing to the Latin script 'will give Tatar specialists a chance to exploit this advantage and become leaders among the Turkic peoples in the area of information technology'. The director of the Ibrahimov Institute of Linguistics, Literature and Arts, Mirfatykh Zakiyev makes related

points: 'The Turkic peoples who have attained some degree of independence are gradually entering into the global information system. But this is simpler to do on the basis of the Latin alphabet than the Cyrillic. Furthermore, the Tatars can accomplish a changeover of this type considerably more easily than, for example, the Russians or Chinese, for whom the cost of changing scripts will be excessively high' (Ivashko 2002 = *Gazeta. Ru* 28 November 2002).

Another reason for favouring the Latin alphabet may be the global pressure to learn English. 'The enthusiasm for learning English' is mentioned as one factor in the take-up of Latinisation in Azerbaijan (Bayatly 1997), because 'the new alphabet is seen as a means to facilitate learning it.'

The script change is thus explicitly linked not just to greater efficiency in terms of accessing the internet and information technology, but to a more entrepreneurial desire to 'race ahead', to steal a march on users of other languages which have less internet-friendly scripts. Here we see also a discourse of *commodification* surrounding the Latin alphabet: a discourse which is also familiar in connection with *literacy*, whose benefits are "classically represented in terms of economic 'take off' or in terms of cognitive skills" (Street 1984:2).

4.4 Cultural heritage: change and permanence

A discourse about maintenance and loss of cultural heritage is a predictable part of every dispute over orthographic change. Opponents of the script change argue using a discourse of cultural loss: 'traditions will be destroyed, new textbooks will have to be printed, It will cause a split in our society The link between generations will be broken,' in the words of the Kazan petition (Section 3.3). In the German orthographic reform of the 1990s, which led to a constitutional 'crisis' in Germany itself (Johnson 2000), exactly this argument was used although the proposals only affected an estimated 0.5% of the lexicon (Johnson 2000:116) or 0.05% of all words in running text (Institut für deutsche Sprache, Mannheim: <http://www.ids-mannheim.de/reform/richtig.html>).

In Germany many professional writers and members of the public opposed the changes on the grounds that they would lead to a 'culture break'. In Tatarstan, the debate has a more specifically political twist, according to Khasanova, as this argument is often put forward by Communists, who fear that the script change will be used to erase the history and culture of the Soviet period. According to her, the Tatar literati and intelligentsia favour a transition to Latin as 'a position of principle, since these writers are not concerned that their own literary works, written in the Cyrillic alphabet, could be lost to posterity if the Latin alphabet is adopted'. Nevertheless it is also reported that 'the change has been bitterly opposed [...] by some members of the older generation, especially those members of the Tatar intelligentsia whose life's work is written in the Cyrillic script and who fear, with some justification, that it will be lost to future generations if the alphabet changes' (*The Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 175, September 25, 2001).

Clearly, this particular aspect of the change has caused problems for some of the intelligentsia, who stand to lose personally. It is also true that alphabet changes have sometimes been proposed for the purpose of expunging an undesirable body of literature¹⁷, so the fears may not be unjustified.

The fact that all the Turkic republics used the Latin script during the 1920s has conveniently allowed proponents of the change from Cyrillic to adopt a discourse of *permanence*: since the Latin script was already adopted in 1927 in Tatarstan, the present-day script change is not really a change at all. Rather, the Cyrillic period is treated as a sort of temporary detour. According to the ethnologist Damir Iskhakov, since the use of Latin script was already agreed in 1927, 'although this can look like a change, in actual fact it's just about a return to the line of development chosen by Tatar society in the 1920s' (Knox 2002a). From this perspective, Tatar is not making a 'culture break' but returning, after an interval, to a (modernising) past.

4.5 Cyrillic as ‘defective’; Cyrillic as a conduit for Russian lexis

According to Khasanova (1997), the Tatar intelligentsia and literati ‘have always considered the main defect of the Cyrillic alphabet to be that it does not correspond to the rules and peculiarities of the Tatar language and distorts its pronunciation, creating conditions under which Tatars start mispronouncing their own language and native speakers of Russian have trouble learning to speak Tatar properly’ (Khasanova 1997).

There are actually three parts to this argument. (1) Cyrillic does not suit the Tatar language; (2) as a result ‘distortions’ come about in the way Tatar is pronounced even by native speakers; (3) native speakers of Russian are misled by the similarities in the alphabet into mispronouncing Tatar.

To take the arguments in order: according to Tatar intellectual Rafail Khakimov, who is a political consultant of the Tatar President and the director of the Institute of History of the Tatar Academy of Sciences, ‘no language can tolerate certain sounds not being represented. But with Cyrillic we lose three sounds. It’s not at all suited for Tatar’¹⁸, (Panorama-Forum 2000, No. 23).

This argument is reminiscent of the argument that the Arabic script is ‘unsuited’ to the Turkic languages due to having insufficient vowel symbols. Though it appears to deploy hard linguistic ‘facts’ (‘we lose three sounds’) and thus to be justified on linguistic grounds, the rhetoric (‘no language can tolerate’) belies this. The same ‘facts’ could be used as grounds for advocating retaining Cyrillic but reforming the orthography, for example, by using digraphs, diacritics or adding some characters.

The second argument, that using Cyrillic leads Tatars to ‘start mispronouncing their own language’ is also used by Rafail Khakimov: ‘What happens, when different sounds are represented by one letter? Urban children have started carrying a Russian pronunciation over into Tatar. What’s more, a generation of teachers has grown up who speak Tatar with a Russian accent’¹⁹, (Panorama-Forum 2000, No. 23).

In this case, Cyrillic is being accused of being a conduit for Russian influence on the phonology of Tatar. It is certainly the case that scripts can play an important role in facilitating lexical borrowing in the written register. This is because words which already have a standard spelling in the same script as the borrowing language may be (though they do not have to be) incorporated without being respelt to reflect the pronunciation in the new language. At an earlier stage in the development of Tatar, ‘use of the Arabic alphabet for the Central Asian Turkic languages facilitated the introduction of Persian and Arabic words and the diffusion of Persian and Arabic cultural influence throughout Central Asia’ (Henze 1977:373); the same was true for other languages written in the Arabic script, such as Malay, which was originally written in the Arabic script and drew heavily on Classical Arabic for its vocabulary. The large-scale incorporation of foreign words into a written language can impact on the phonology of the spoken language, as long as there are bilinguals in the population who have access to the phonology of the source language. According to Vikør (1988:47). ‘The Classical Malay written language, as we know it, was to a large extent the product of an Islamic culture inspired by medieval Arabic civilization [...]’. Arabic loan words permeated this Austronesian language, bringing the sounds of Arabic with them: of the 28 consonant phonemes in Classical Arabic, 14 did not appear in Malay prior to the Arabic influence (Vikør 1988:47).

It was Soviet policy that Russian words should enter the Turkic languages spelt exactly as in Russian, ‘even though the phonetic requirements of the local languages might normally demand that changes in spelling should be attempted to conform to native pronunciation’ (Henze 1977:383).

The mass importation of Russian vocabulary, written exactly as in Russian even when pronounced differently in Tatar, results in Cyrillic being seen as promoting Russian pronunciations of Tatar words in a context where most Tatars are bilingual and biliterate in Tatar and Russian.

It seems significant that here again the Cyrillic alphabet is blamed, rather than a process of language shift which has turned Tatars into bilinguals and made them in some cases more comfortable speaking Russian than Tatar. The 'generation of teachers' who stand accused of speaking Tatar with a Russian accent is surely more directly responsible than the writing system for any inadequacies in pronunciation.

The third argument, that Cyrillic is the cause of bad pronunciations of Tatar by first-language Russian speakers, is mentioned in a newspaper interview by the director of the Ibrahimov Institute of Linguistics, Literature and Arts, Mirfatykh Zakiyev:

The use of a Cyrillic alphabet in the Russian and Turkic languages leads to the fact that the Turkic speakers get accustomed to their own way of pronouncing Cyrillic letters and their combinations, and automatically transfer this pronunciation to the same letters or their combinations in the Russian language. As a result, when Turkic speakers speak Russian they have bad pronunciation. Incidentally the same happens when Russian (or Russian speaking) people pronounce words in Turkic languages. But changing to the Latin alphabet will remove this misunderstanding. (Ivashko 2002 = *Gazeta. Ru* 28 November 2002).

No doubt it is true that many Russians pronounce Tatar badly, and many Tatars carry over Tatar phonology into Russian; but it is significant that the use of Cyrillic is blamed for this, rather than, say, a lack of will on the part of the speakers to apply themselves to improving their pronunciation, or insufficient exposure to the languages pronounced correctly²⁰. Other sociolinguistic possibilities, such as the development of local varieties of Tatar and Russian, are not part of this discourse either.

While couched in the language of (popular) linguistics, the accusations against the Cyrillic script can be seen as part of a discourse which seeks to make Cyrillic responsible for problems which at bottom are issues of second language learning and language shift. We are reminded that in a previous era, the Latin script was blamed for a similar problem, cf. Serdyuchenko's account of why the Latin script was dropped in favour of Cyrillic in the 1930s (see endnote 5): 'schoolchildren were learning the Roman script for lessons in their mother tongue and the Cyrillic alphabet for work in Russian; they were often writing exactly the same words in the two different scripts. This did not make the learning of languages any easier' (1962:28).

Clearly, it is strongly felt by some that 'changing to the Latin alphabet will remove this misunderstanding' and allow Tatar to be pronounced as Tatar and Russian as Russian; but given that the real problem seems to lie elsewhere, it is likely that the proponents of Latinisation will be disappointed on this score.

4.6 Latinisation as a threat to the integrity of Russia / the Russian language

The Moscow administration and its supporters did not shrink from calling the Latinisation of Tatar a threat to Russia's national security and integrity²¹. But how was an issue, ostensibly of linguistics, discursively turned into a matter of national defence?

A number of linguistic researchers have recently pointed out how issues within a society, which have in themselves nothing to do with language, can be displaced on to language, making it the apparent focus of disputes which in reality are over something else (e.g. Cameron 1995; Jaffe 1999;

Johnson 2000). Where there is unease within a society about aspects of social change, rather than debate these directly, people may use language as a scapegoat – or rather, as a symbolic battlefield. In Germany, for example, ‘Orthography appeared to have become embroiled in a wave of more general anti-reform sentiment. For this was only one of a number of reforms undergoing extensive, controversial and frequently inconsequential discussion at the time, e.g. [tax reform, health service reform, pensions reform, academic reform, land reform]’ (Johnson 2000: 123).

We can see this working in a fairly literal way in the case of the Tatar script dispute, as a perceived threat from Turkey (and perhaps more generally, from the Islamic world) was symbolically ‘neutralised’ by making it illegal for Tatarstan to use its preferred script for Tatar. However, we may see it on a more subtle level as well, for it turns out that language – in particular, the Russian language - has recently been constructed as a national problem by politicians in Russia.

The Moscow Times of 27th June 2001 reported that ‘The government has approved an ambitious if still vague program to promote the Russian language and prevent a further slide in how the language is written and spoken, especially by today's politicians and journalists [...] In presenting the program to the Cabinet last Thursday, Education Minister Vladimir Filippov called for Russian to be purged of slang and foreign words and for governmental officials, political figures and journalists to be required to pass a spelling test’ (*Johnson's Russia List*, 27 June 2001).

A year later, almost at the same time as the first reading of the Cyrillic bill, the ruling party introduced a bill aimed at regulating the public use of Russian and purging it of foreign words. The *Christian Science Monitor* on 4th June 2002 quoted the bill's main author, Alexei Alexeyev, thus: ‘The Russian language is under attack from without and also from within. There are more than 100 native languages spoken by the peoples of the Russian Federation, and in some of the larger ethnic republics attempts have been made to replace Russian as the official language [...] We need a law to regulate language use.’ America is singled out as the source of the ‘attack from without’: Yevgeny Chelishchev, a member of the Language Council set up by President Putin, is quoted as saying: ‘It's one thing to borrow words that express economic and cultural changes, but this aggressive Americanization is something quite different [...] Measures are long overdue.’ According to a government adviser, Mikhail Fyodorov, a co-author of the bill: ‘You may say that other problems, like the economy, seem more important than this, but we are convinced that it is crucial to restore respect for the state language in Russia.’ (Weir 2002 = *The Christian Science Monitor* 4th June 2002)

The bill had its second reading in December 2002, soon after the Cyrillic bill. It was approved by 371 votes with no votes against and only two abstentions – remarkable for a piece of legislation in which, according to one journalist, ‘Russian parliamentarians [...] showed the world their feeble-mindedness by passing the most curious law about the Russian language, which never will begin to work’²² (Malyutina 2002b = *Gazeta.ru* 14th December 2002).

The bill requires Russian officials, journalists and advertisers to speak and to write literary Russian, on pain of fines for failing to observe rules, swearing, or using foreign words where Russian synonyms already exist. Specifically forbidden are ‘vulgar, derogatory and abusive words and expressions’²³, not just in official talk but also in ‘public appearances, inscriptions on signs, geographical names and the designations of organizations’. Between the first and second readings the bill softened somewhat: journalists will now be allowed to deviate from the standard language for artistic reasons (not defined in the bill). The bill does not set penalties for transgressions. Obscenity is already subject to prescribed penalties, but as for using colloquialisms or foreign words, legislators will still have to determine the punishments (Malyutina 2002b = *Gazeta.ru* 14th December 2002).

The discourse of this language bill is quite similar to that of the bill on Cyrillic: its authors – one of whom is Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei, the proposer of the legislation on Cyrillic – describe its aim as ‘to protect and develop the Russian language in the territory of all Russia, which will promote the augmentation and mutual enrichment of the spiritual culture of its peoples’²⁴. We find here again the language of unity, of the ‘unified cultural and educational space’ with the Russian language at its heart.

The intense activity surrounding language in the Russian parliament not only suggests that there is a good deal of insecurity about the condition of the Russian language. It also seems to reflect insecurities about other aspects of the social structure in the much-changed former Soviet state. We can now see the law enforcing Cyrillic as part of a more general attempt to ‘restore respect for the state language in Russia’ in the face of threats from ‘within’ (for example, Tatarstan) and ‘without’ (the U.S.A. and the Islamic world).

5 Concluding remarks

At one level we can interpret the row over scripts for Tatar as a struggle between an imperial centre and a wayward peripheral state which the centre felt it must bring to heel. In this case, the struggle is over symbolic goods – cultural property – rather than, say, the oil with which Tatarstan is well supplied, and which is of great importance to the Russian economy.

From a different perspective, the dispute can be seen as a debate over the rights and obligations of states, language communities and individuals. An often-used argument against the Tatar script change is that Tatarstan, having only a minority of all Tatars as its citizens, cannot legislate for a language which is widely spoken beyond its jurisdiction. The government of the Russian Federation has finessed this further by insisting that although citizens have a constitutional right to use and develop their native language, the state has an *obligation* to regulate language for the public good. A major reason given for introducing the law on Cyrillic was to preserve a unified cultural and educational space, or as Kaadyr-ool Bicheldei put it, ‘protecting the rights of citizens to education and access to information’ ((Gazeta.ru, 15 November 2002). Moreover, they would say, the state’s interventions in this area are legitimate: in Loginov’s words, ‘writing can be regulated by the law inasmuch as it is an element of a social contract and if everyone invents his or her own writing, it would lead to chaos in the state’.

There is clearly an issue of interpretation here. If linguistic minorities have the right to use and develop their own languages, is this overridden by a duty to know and use the main official language as a language of wider communication? Does the state have no obligation, or at most a limited obligation, to provide education and services in minority languages? That seems to be the implication, for otherwise, one might argue, citizens’ ‘rights to education and access to information’ could best be exercised in their native languages. The argument that minorities are best served by being required, even forced, to use the majority language is an old one, currently being reinvented in many countries including Britain and the United States.

Street (1984) identified competing models of literacy which he calls ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’. In Sebba (1998) I argued that it is possible to identify ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of orthography along similar lines. For Street, the “autonomous” model of literacy is based “on the assumption that [literacy] is a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts” (1984:1). This model “isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences... classically represented in terms of economic ‘take off’ or in terms of cognitive skills” (Street 1984:2). An alternative model of literacy, which Street calls ‘ideological,’

focuses on the ‘specific social practices of reading and writing,’ recognising ‘the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of these practices.’ (Street 1984:1)

I argue that an autonomous model of *orthography* treats phonology as if it were the only aspect of linguistics relevant to writing systems. Scripts themselves are treated as capable of evaluation and deployment independently of social or cultural considerations²⁵. Rather than being seen as an integral part of the language culture of the community concerned, the writing system is thought of as a neutral technology which can be adapted and altered to serve the needs of its speakers. The dominant discourse within this model favours phonemic writing systems above all other types. The most important criterion by which suitability of a writing system is judged, is the extent to which it provides a one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and characters. Only when this criterion is satisfied are extralinguistic factors sometimes brought into consideration.

It follows from this dominant view of orthography that where several competing alphabets are available, the choice should be made first on the grounds of how well they satisfy the criterion mentioned above. In the debates of the first part of the 20th century, the Arabic script was an early casualty largely because it failed to provide sufficient vowel symbols.

Choosing between Latin and Cyrillic, on the other hand, is more difficult because in both cases, linguists attempted to provide a reasonable fit between the available symbols (introducing additional ones where necessary) and the sounds of the language concerned, though with varying degrees of success. The Cyrillic alphabets developed for the Turkic languages, as well as some of the alphabets based on the Latin one²⁶, have been criticised as deficient in this respect. However, there is not a big difference between the two writing systems in terms of their potential adequacy for representing the Tatar language. Nor has either alphabet a very long history of use for writing Tatar (though Cyrillic has the edge over Latin in this respect). In order to make a case for or against supplanting one with the other, each side has needed to develop discourses which support its case.

The readiness of the Russian Federation and Tatarstan to introduce legislation regulating the form of script to be used indicates that both the Russian and Tatar authorities subscribe to an autonomous model of orthography. It may be that the recent history of the Central Asian languages, with three different alphabets in use in the first half of the 20th century, has given an impetus to this view of alphabets as ‘detachable’ from the cultures which use them. Certainly, it is hard to imagine most other multilingual states coolly imposing an alphabetic regime the way that the Russian Federation has just done.

Far from being ‘neutral technologies,’ scripts have symbolic power which transcends language itself. We can see this in virtually every dispute over alphabets, orthography or spelling reform. Orthographies readily become symbolic of national or group identity (Schieffelin and Doucet 1994, Bird 2001, Eira 1998, Johnson 2000). In the case of the Tatar alphabet changes, the two writing systems have come to stand in symbolic opposition to one another. Whether the Russian Federation’s legislation is successful in curbing the Tatar script ‘rebellion’ or not only time will tell. What we can certainly say is that even if the World Tatar Congress Executive Committee has overdramatised a little by saying that Moscow’s law on Cyrillic has ‘shaken the foundations of Russian statehood’, the consequences of Tatarstan’s attempted alphabet reform go far beyond the realms of phonology.

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¹ In Russian the Roman and Cyrillic scripts are referred to by the nouns *latinita* and *kirillitsa* respectively. In the context of the former USSR conversion to the Roman alphabet is usually called 'Latinisation' rather than 'Romanisation' though the terms are identical in meaning.

² Alphabet reform had been an issue in Russia for some time, and the Cyrillic alphabet itself had been reformed almost immediately after the first of the 1917 revolutions (before the Bolshevik (October) revolution). Progressive individuals had in practice already implemented these reforms privately.

³ In other words, there was a project to create a common 'print-language' in the sense of Anderson (1983/1991).

⁴ Henze cites Sir Olaf Caroe, diplomat and colonial administrator, as the source of this hypothesis.

⁵ Cf. the following account by G.P. Serdyuchenko (1962:28): 'These written languages in the Soviet Union were originally formulated in Roman script. The end of the thirties, however, saw much more attention being paid to the teaching of Russian in schools, and this meant that schoolchildren were learning the Roman script for lessons in their mother tongue and the Cyrillic alphabet for work in Russian; they were often writing exactly the same words in the two different scripts. This did not make the learning of languages any easier, and at the end of the thirties nearly all the peoples of the Soviet Union formulated their written language on the basis of the Cyrillic'.

⁶ For example, Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiev told the the Second Congress of Tatars in Kazan in 1997 'how, in 1939, "without any discussion, and without consulting the Tatar intelligentsia, the Tatars were forced to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet which, in large part, does not conform to the rules and spirit of Tatar speech."' (Khasanova 1997)

⁷ Gazeta.ru ironically headlined the article using Latin script: 'U Azerbaijana problemy s latinsey' (Azerbaijan has problems with the Latin alphabet).

⁸ A more positive account of the alphabet change in Azerbaijan, and some recent historical background, can be found in an online account by Bayatly (1997).

⁹ According to Leprêtre (2002), the Russian Federation is made up of 89 entities of which 32 are defined according to ethnic terms. However, the titular nationality (group from which the state takes its name) constitutes the majority only in 8 of the 21 Republics.

¹⁰ According to Reznik (2001), 'at the First All-Union Turcological Congress in Baku in 1926 the delegates from the Tatar Republic fought vigorously for the retention of the Arabic script for the Tatar language, in spite of the universal campaign for Latinisation. Polivanov wrote in 1928 that Kazan, with its long traditions of Arabic script writing and publishing, remained the stronghold of the opposition to Latinisation (Polivanov 1928 as cited by Alpatov 1997: 65)'.

¹¹ Tatarstan deputy Fandas Safiullin explained in response to this accusation that there would not be a return to the 1927 alphabet simply because it was not completely suited to the contemporary Tatar language, as it had too many artificial signs. So letters of the Turkish alphabet would be incorporated into the national language. (Malyutina (2002) = Gazeta.ru, 15 November 2002).

¹² Логинов [...] заявил, что письменность «можно регулировать законом, поскольку это является элементом общественного договора», а «если каждый будет изобретать свою письменность, это приведет к хаосу в государстве».

¹³ The bill's main proposer, Kaadyr-Ool Bicheldei, is a Tuvin.

¹⁴ Presumably the government of Karelia could also have objected on the grounds of cost and disruption to its education programmes while a Cyrillic script was developed for Karelian.

¹⁵ There was, however, a precedent for enforcing Cyrillic on a subject people. Kolarz (1946:21) mentions that 'in 1863 the Tsar decreed that the Lithuanians should adopt the Cyrillic alphabet' but his measures failed, as 'the people preferred to forego all literary activity rather than use the symbol of the Orthodox Church.'

¹⁶ Cf. Kolarz (1946:21), on 'the National and Religious Symbol of the Alphabet' in Eastern Europe. in particular, states that 'the alphabets connected with certain Churches have been a supplementary factor uniting or dividing the peoples. Almost every alphabet was identified with a particular creed; consequently a change of alphabet was sometimes regarded as abandoning a creed.

¹⁷ For example Baker (1997:109) cites a proposal by Trevelyan dating from 1834, to impose romanisation throughout the Indian subcontinent, with the benefit that

All the existing Mahammadan and Hindu literature will gradually sink into disuse, with the exception of such portions of it as are worthy of being turned into the new letters. This would produce a great moral change in India in the course of a generation or two. Nothing keeps India in a state of moral and intellectual debasement so much as the false religion, false morals, and false science contained in the sacred and learned books of the Mahammadans and Hindus; and by getting rid of these we shall stop the polluted stream at its source. (Trevelyan et al. 1854:40)

¹⁸ Translations by MS. In the original: «Ни один язык не потерпит, чтобы какие-то звуки в нем не обозначались. А в кириллице мы теряем три звука. Она вообще для татарского крайне неподходящая..»

¹⁹ «Что происходит, когда одной буквой обозначаются разные звуки? Городские дети начинают русское произношение переносить на татарский. Более того. Выросло поколение учителей, которые говорят по-татарски с русским акцентом»

²⁰ It seems unlikely that anyone would take seriously a suggestion that, say, native speakers of English would be able to improve their pronunciation of French if one of the languages were written using a different alphabet, or that their pronunciation of Greek is assisted by the difference in scripts.

²¹ Script innovators and reformers are often labelled as traitors: the accusation that ‘the entire Tatar nation [and] its intelligentsia [are] a collective Turkish spy’ echoes accusations made in other orthographic disputes. In the Polish orthography reforms of the 1930s ‘for some this challenge to Polish cultural traditions was a threat from the East [i.e. the communist Soviet Union] while for others it was a Jewish plot (Rothstein 1977:229). Similarly in Haiti the proponents of certain letters have been accused of being agents of American imperialism (Schieffelin and Doucet 1994).

²² «Российские парламентарии в очередной раз показали миру свое слабоумие, приняв курьезнейший закон о русском языке, который никогда не станет работать».

²³ «просторечные, пренебрежительные, бранные слова и выражения»

²⁴ «защищать и развивать русский язык на территории всей России, что будет способствовать приумножению и взаимообогащению духовной культуры народов».

²⁵ cf. Bird (2001): ‘It is almost universally assumed that phonological study alone is what informs orthography; other areas of linguistics are simply out of the picture [...] the use of a linguistic argument often counts as incontrovertible support for a particular orthographic proposal. (Bird 2001:152)

²⁶ Though Cyrillic is compared unfavourably with the Yanalif, it must be pointed out that the new Tatar alphabet is different from the Yanalif and relatively untried at the moment. Other updated versions of the Yanalif have been found to be unsatisfactory, e.g. in Uzbekistan (cf. Schlyter 2001: 2.2).