

Kazakhstan embraces Latin script in break with past

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© AFP | Astana's school number 76 is one of several pilot schools in the city where a Latin alphabet consisting of 32 letters is being test driven for the country's state language, Kazakh, after nearly 80 years of using Cyrillic

ASTANA (KAZAKHSTAN) (AFP) - The classrooms of school number 76 in Kazakhstan's capital Astana are buzzing with change as old words take on new forms and teachers struggle to keep pace.

Number 76 is one of several pilot schools in the city where a Latin alphabet consisting of 32 letters is being test driven for the country's state language, Kazakh, which has been written in Cyrillic for nearly 80 years.

The long-planned return to Latin, which Kazakh was briefly written in from 1927 after the Bolsheviks phased out Arabic scripts for a number of non-Slavic languages, should be completed by 2025.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev has called the reform a modernising move to make it easier to use the internet and learn English.

The Soviet Union encouraged the use of Cyrillic letters in its republics and a move to the Latin alphabet would break symbolic ties with its former master, Russia.

The transition has been bumpy so far, sparking philological mudslinging -- notably over apostrophes.

But school administrations in the ex-Soviet country with close ties to Moscow have expressed confidence that the younger generation can take all the upheaval in their stride.

"Children understand the language of computers, they know some English. So they will grasp Latin script very quickly," Ernur Omarkhanov, the state-funded school's deputy director, told AFP.

For their class mentors, who spent their formative years living in the Soviet Union, it may be harder, Omarkhanov added.

"Tests showed that a task in Latin that might take a teacher two and a half hours can be completed by pupils in 20-25 minutes," he said.

When AFP correspondents visited the school in September, the class was preparing for a competition with the other pilot schools known as an Olympiad in former Soviet republics.

One of the participants in the competition that features a spelling contest using the new alphabet, among other games, 15-year old student Amirbek Talipbayev said he supported the switch.

Using a Latin alphabet would help him "understand more English" and grasp how speakers of other Latin alphabet languages speak, he told AFP, adding he expected people his age to "master it quickly."

Apostrophe soup

The reform has sparked heated discussions.

Some opposition has come from those who are happy enough to transition away from Cyrillic in a republic where Russian is also widely spoken but dislike the specific alphabet adopted by state philologists.

Arman Baikadam, whose business supports online education projects in the country, warned that Kazakhstan could be committing "a historic mistake" after introducing the latest 32-letter version of the alphabet in February.

"We should have a 26-letter alphabet like the German and English alphabets. Our alphabet needs to be in harmony with other Latin alphabets," he told AFP.

But if this latest version is seen as too bulky, it is at least free of the nine apostrophes that troubled its predecessor, introduced in October, and which conjured a storm of public criticism.

The apostrophes were the philologists' attempt to represent specific Kazakh sounds but were criticised as impractical in an era of computing.

Corruption and political risks?

Kazakh is a Turkic language with similarities to Turkish and other Turkic tongues like Uzbek and Turkmen, both of which shifted back to Latin after those countries gained independence from Moscow in 1991.

The language's short-lived, Soviet-era Latin alphabet had a keyboard-busting 42 letters and a return to that set was immediately discounted by policymakers.

But each of the recent attempts to better it has triggered furor on social networks like Facebook, which is popular in the Muslim-majority republic of 18 million people.

A trial-balloon alphabet preceding the ill-fated, apostrophe-laden version gained notoriety for its rendering of the Kazakh word for carrot as "saebiz", which read like a harsh Russian swearword.

The unhappy coincidence created such a buzz that it inspired entrepreneurs in the former capital, Almaty, to brand their new diner "Saebiz". The restaurant that cheekily sports a carrot as its logo has been busy ever since it opened last year.

More serious considerations include the cost of the whole exercise and "corruption risks", said Daniyar Kussainov, a visiting fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Oslo.

Kussainov pointed to a "high possibility" of misallocation of resources for changing signs, texts and other items in Cyrillic to Latin during the transition period.

The country's name, which appears everywhere, is spelled "Qazaqstan" in the new alphabet, for instance.

The analyst was less concerned, however, by the shift's geopolitical implications, which he believes are negligible despite speculation about Russia's disgruntlement.

Nazarbayev has reassured Russian speakers that their language's privileged status will not be affected and Kussainov believes Astana had a similar conversation with powerful ally, Moscow, before the switch was announced.

Had it not, the move would have been "reckless and even quite dangerous," he told AFP.