
From the Researcher's Notebook

Cyrillic in the Geolinguistic Space

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Abstract—The position of the Cyrillic alphabet in the modern world and in historical retrospective is analyzed in this article. The causes and consequences of the rejection of the Cyrillic script by a number of countries are considered. Calculations of the number of users of the Cyrillic alphabet from the beginning of the 20th century and a forecast of changes in their number in the coming years are given. A steady decrease in the proportion of the users of the Cyrillic alphabet is anticipated compared to the number of those who use other alphabets (the Latin alphabet, Indic scripts, hieroglyphs, and the Arabic script). The functioning of world languages and alphabets in 2020, including on the Internet, is assessed. It is noted that the position of the Cyrillic script in the world is affected by the decrease in the number of those who speak Russian. Some proposals are made to support the Cyrillic alphabet and increase its role in civilizational processes.

Keywords: alphabet, Cyrillic script, Latin script, Russian language

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The topic of appearance of the first alphabets and written systems created on their basis and of the fate of various world languages that survived a period of wide distribution and subsequent decline (for example, Aramaic and Latin) is a too complicated to give exhaustive answers to it in a short article. Therefore, the author sets a more modest task: to assess in the most general terms the current state and prospects for the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in the world.

PAGES OF HISTORY AND THE PRESENT DAY

The Cyrillic script (Old Slavonic alphabet) appeared as late as the 9th century, much later than many other alphabets. It was created by Christian preachers Cyril and Methodius¹ and spread in the subsequent period not only over the territory of Russia and Eastern Europe but also in some states of Asia.

In 1900, Cyrillic was used by 111.2 million people (105 million in the Russian Empire and 6.2 million in Bulgaria and Serbia), or 6.7% of the world's popula-

tion (which at that time amounted to 1.65 billion people). The peak of the spread of the Cyrillic alphabet (as well as of the Russian language) in the world was reached on the eve of WWI, in 1914, when it was used by 149 million people, or 8.3% of the world's population (140 million in the Russian Empire, including residents of the *Privislinsky Krai* (Vistula Land) and Finland, as well as almost nine million inhabitants of Bulgaria and Serbia). However, since the end of the 20th century, Cyrillic has noticeably begun to lose its positions. Thus, in 1990 320.8 million people used the Cyrillic alphabet (including almost all citizens of the Soviet Union, 286.7 million, as well as Bulgaria, 8.6 million; Mongolia, two million; and Yugoslavia, 23.5 million), which totaled more than 6% of the planet's population (5.3 billion people), while 30 years later, in 2020, the share of the population of countries using the Cyrillic alphabet (mainly residents of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) had decreased to 3.3% of the total population of the Earth (7.8 billion people) (Tables 1, 2).

Even if we add to those who know Cyrillic those who to some extent speak Russian in the Baltic countries, Western Europe, and North America, as well as in Israel and some other countries (22.5 million people), the total share of its actual and potential users today is no more than 3.5% of the total population of humankind.

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¹ Around 863, at the direction of Byzantine Emperor Michael III, the brothers Constantine (Cyril) the Philosopher and Methodius of Thessalonica (Thessaloniki) streamlined the script for the Slavic language and used the new alphabet to translate Greek religious texts into Slavonic.

Table 1. Indicators of the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in 1900–2100 (assessment and forecast)*

| Year | Population of the Earth, mln people | Number of countries whose state language is based on Cyrillic | Population of countries using the Cyrillic alphabet, mln people | Share of Cyrillic users among the population of the Earth, % |
|------|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| 1900 | 1650 | 3 | 105 | 6.7 |
| 1914 | 1782 | 3 | 149 | 8.3 |
| 1990 | 5263 | 4 | 320.8 | 6.0 |
| 2020 | 7851 | 10+5 | 255.8 | 3.3 |
| 2025 | 8034 | 8+5 | 234 | 2.9 |
| 2050 | 9300 | 8+5 | 215.1 | 2.3 |
| 2100 | 11073 | 8+5 | 188.5 | 1.7 |

*According to the author.

Table 2. Indicators of using Cyrillic as the official alphabet in 2020 *

| Country | State languages using Cyrillic | Population size, mln people | Share, % |
|--|--|-----------------------------|----------|
| Abkhazia | Abkhazian | 0.2 | 0.08 |
| Belarus | Belarusian | 9.5 | 3.7 |
| Republika Srpska within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina | Serbian (official along with Romanized Bosnian and Croatian) | 1.15 | 0.6 |
| Bulgaria | Bulgarian | 6.9 | 2.7 |
| Kazakhstan | Kazakh | 19.0 | 7.4 |
| Kyrgyzstan | Kyrgyz | 6.5 | 2.6 |
| Mongolia | Mongolian | 3.35 | 1.3 |
| Transnistria | Russian, Moldovan,** Ukrainian (equivalent official languages) | 0.46 | 0.2 |
| Russia | Russian | 145.9 | 57.0 |
| North Macedonia | Macedonian | 2.1 | 0.8 |
| Serbia | Serbian (Ruthenian dialect in Vojvodina) | 6.9 | 2.7 |
| Tajikistan | Tajik | 9.5 | 3.7 |
| Ukraine | Ukrainian | 43.7 | 17.1 |
| Montenegro | Montenegrin (used also based on the Latin script) | 0.6 | 0.2 |
| South Ossetia | Ossetian | 0.05 | 0.02 |
| Total | | 255.8 | 100.0 |

*According to the author.

**Cyrillic variant of the Moldovan language.

CYRILLIC IN THE SOVIET UNION AND IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

The Cyrillic alphabet has suffered the greatest losses in the post-Soviet space. At the end of the 20th century, it was abandoned by Moldova (1989), Azerbaijan (1991), Uzbekistan (1993), and Turkmenistan (1993). In 2017, Kazakhstan also decided to switch to the Latin alphabet. Similar proposals were made in the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan. A return to Arabic script is being discussed in the social networks of Tajikistan, although the country has only introduced compulsory study of the Arabic language in schools thus far [1]. Mongolia has announced its plans to return to the traditional (Old Mongolian) alphabet by 2025.² Serbia and Montenegro, along with the Cyrillic alphabet, use the Latin script increasingly often. There are proposals to follow the example of these countries (that is, to use two alphabets in parallel) in Ukraine [3], especially considering similar precedents in it in the past.³ We can also mention Romania, where the Cyrillic alphabet was abandoned back in the second half of the 19th century.⁴

The languages of four of the five countries that abandoned the Cyrillic alphabet (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) belong to the Turkic language group, and until the beginning of the 20th century they used the Arabic script. After the collapse of tsarist Russia and the subsequent formation of the Soviet Union, in the context of the Bolsheviks' expectations of the world revolution, it was decided to create a single universal proletarian language based on the Latin alphabet, understandable to most peoples of Europe and the rest of the world. In addition, it was believed that the Latin alphabet was free from the colonial past of the peoples of tsarist Russia and, unlike the Cyrillic alphabet, from the burden of negative associations. In the same context, plans were discussed for transferring the Russian language to the Latin script (this idea was also supported by V.I. Lenin) [4, p. 69]. As a result, by 1928, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek had switched to the Latin script.⁵ The new alphabet began to be used in

educational institutions as well. To this end, new textbooks were developed, and relevant teaching staff was trained on a large-scale basis. Note that only a few percent of the population were literate in the abolished Arabic script in these republics by that time. Also note that the languages of other Muslim peoples of the Volga region, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, who used the Arabic script in a limited form, were also switched to the Latin alphabet. Colossal and intensive work also made it possible to create literary forms and writing systems based on the Latin alphabet for 50 unwritten languages, including for the Nivkhs, Nanais, Dunggans, Kabardians, Karachays, Ingush, Mansi, Negidals, Nogais, Orochs, Ossetians, Udeges, Khanty, Chukchi, Shors, Evenks, Evens, Eskimos, and Yakuts, and for peoples with an undeveloped writing system. A world record was set in cultural construction: the number of languages, primarily of small peoples, that received a written language in the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1930s exceeded the number of written languages created, for example, in Europe over the previous thousand years.

In the mid-1930s, the government took a course towards the Russification of educational institutions; in this connection, the Council of People's Commissars adopted a resolution on the gradual transfer of education to Russian. Simultaneously, from the second half of the 1930s, all Latinized alphabets of the peoples of the Soviet Union, including Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek, began to be transferred to Cyrillic; this process was completed by 1941. In 1940, after the inclusion of Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Hertsa region in the Soviet Union and the creation of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic on their basis, the Moldavian language, based on the Latin script and belonging to the Romance group, was also transferred to Cyrillic.

Note that the Cyrillic alphabets were successfully used in these republics in the next 50 years, until the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was during that period that the entire population of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldavia, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became literate based on the Cyrillic alphabet, and many school and college students, including those from families of the titular nations, were educated in Russian (Table 3).

For the national Soviet republics, Cyrillic, and above all the Russian language, became not only an effective means of communication but also a window to the big world, a guide to world culture and science. All national literature, textbooks, and scientific works starting from the 1940s were written and published in Cyrillic. Also note that reference books; dictionaries; manuals; and documentation in the field of technology, medicine, and natural sciences were published mainly in Russian due to the insufficient development of the corresponding terminology in native languages. Masterpieces of the republics' literature were created in excellent Russian language by such outstanding

² In Mongolia, which was planned to become the 16th republic of the Soviet Union, the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced in the 1940s. Cyrillic is still used today by three million citizens living in the country, while six million Mongols living in China (Inner Mongolia) continue to use the Old Mongolian script. By 2024, the media in Mongolia are expected to use two scripts and schools will increase the time for teaching the traditional writing system. Note that the compulsory study of the Russian language in schools was replaced by that of English back in 2003 [2].

³ In the 1990s, when Crimea was part of Ukraine, a Latinized alphabet was developed and legally approved for the language of the Crimean Tatars; it is currently used along with the Cyrillic alphabet.

⁴ The Cyrillic alphabet (Old Romanian Cyrillic) was used for the Wallachian and Moldavian languages in Wallachia, Transylvania, and the Principality of Moldavia until the early 1860s, when united Romania switched to a Latinized alphabet.

⁵ A universal Latin alphabet, Yañalif, was developed for all Turkic languages of the Soviet Union.

Table 3. Indicators of teaching in Russian in secondary schools of the Soviet republics in the 1989/1990 academic year*

| Republic | Total number of school students, thousand people | Number of students studying in Russian, thousand people | Share of students studying in Russian, thousand people, % |
|------------------|--|---|---|
| Azerbaijan SSR | 1363.6 | 255.0 | 18.7 |
| Kazakh SSR** | 3145.6 | 2079.4 | 66.1 |
| Uzbek SSR | 4297.0 | 636.0 | 14.8 |
| Moldavian SSR*** | 713.2 | 289.5 | 40.6 |
| Turkmen SSR | 794.0 | 127.1 | 16.0 |

*According to [5, pp. 123, 149, 158; 6, p. 167; 7, p. 100].

**Data for the 1990/1991 academic year.

***Including Transnistria.

word-painters as the Azerbaijani Rustam Ibragimbe-kov; the Kazakh Olzhas Suleimenov; the Kyrgyz Chinghiz Aitmatov; the Tajik Timur Zulfikarov; the Uzbeks Timur Pulat, Raim Farhadi, Sabit Madaliev, Sukhbat Aflatuni, and Bakh Akhmedov; and many others. In this series, one can also mention the outstanding Moldavian writer and playwright Ion Druță (Drutse) and the Moldavian film director, screen-writer, and teacher Emil Loteanu. Works created by writers and poets in their native languages were translated into Russian and published in mass editions [8, p. 8].

The reasons for the rejection of the Cyrillic alphabet in the CIS countries are primarily sociopolitical and, to a lesser extent, economic or cultural–linguistic. Russia remains the largest trading partner of almost all CIS countries, and its labor market is one of the most attractive for the economically active population of the former Soviet republics, while knowledge of the Russian language and the Cyrillic writing system has recently become mandatory for labor migrants coming to Russia. When hiring employees in the national republics, knowledge of the Russian language is welcomed, and in some areas (for example, tourism or oil and gas production) and management structures, it is even mandatory.

The transition to the Latin alphabet, in fact, led to a decrease in the general level of science, culture, and even the literacy of the population. Young people of these countries who do not know the Cyrillic alphabet to a certain extent have been cut off from the rich cultural heritage of the 20th century. It is not by chance that schools and classes with instruction in Russian in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are overcrowded: the number of students per teacher is usually much greater there than in schools with instruction in the state languages.

Great difficulties are experienced by the older generation, brought up in Cyrillic and not fully understanding the new inscriptions and texts in the Latin script; there is also a certain misunderstanding with

the younger generation. As a result of the ongoing language reforms, many representatives of the titular nations (in both younger and older age groups) speak the official Latinized literary languages increasingly more poorly. According to representatives of the Uzbek intelligentsia, “no matter how much, for example, English or Chinese are promoted, we do not know a single local author who would become famous for prose or poetry in these languages, which are worthy but still alien to the main population of our region” [cited from 9].

Note that, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, some former Soviet republics, as well as some autonomies within the Russian Federation, also tried to return to the Latin script. For example, in 1999 Tatarstan even passed a law on the restoration of the Latin alphabet, and in 2001 new textbooks in the Latin alphabet arrived at schools. Latinized street names appeared in Kazan and other large cities of the republic. However, in 2002, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted a law on the status of languages, requiring that all languages on the territory of Russia have a Cyrillic-based alphabet (except for the Karelians and Vepsians, who traditionally use the Latin script, like the Finns, who are ethnically close to them) [10].

CYRILLIC IN THE WORLD

In terms of the number of inhabitants of the Earth using various alphabets as official ones (there are 22 of them in total, less some original and cult ones) [11], the Cyrillic alphabet is increasingly lagging behind the Latin alphabet, Indic scripts, hieroglyphs, and the Arabic script (Table 4).

The most rapidly spreading alphabet is the Latin one: it has been adopted by residents of such populous eastern countries as Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Turkey, as well as most of sub-Saharan Africa. Knowledge of the Latin alphabet is facilitated by the mass study of English (mainly as the first foreign language) in schools in almost all countries of the

Table 4. Key alphabet performance indicators in 2020*

| Alphabet | Number of alphabet users, mln people | Share, % |
|--|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Latin | 3159.5 | 40.2 |
| Indic scripts (all) | 1774.3 | 22.6 |
| Hieroglyphs | 1617.3 | 20.6 |
| Arabic | 745.8 | 9.5 |
| Cyrillic | 255.8 | 3.3 |
| Abugida (Ge'ez script) | 125.6 | 1.6 |
| Hangul/Chosongul (Korean script) | 78.5 | 1.0 |
| Others (Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Georgian, etc.) | 94.2 | 1.2 |
| Total | 7851.0 | 100.0 |

*According to the author.

Table 5. Number of world language speakers in 2020 (estimate)*

| Language | Number of those who spoke the language as a native, second, or foreign language, mln people | Number of countries where the language is spoken |
|------------------|---|--|
| English | Over 1800 | 118 |
| Chinese | Over 1400 | 38 |
| Hindi/Urdu | 766.8 | 11 |
| Spanish | 542.9 | 31 |
| Arabic | 390 | 58 |
| Indonesian/Malay | 305 | 20 |
| French | 297 | 53 |
| Portuguese | 281.2 | 15 |
| Bengali | 267.7 | 4 |
| Russian | 238 | 27 |

*According to the author.

world (and this is many hundreds of millions of children). The Russian language (and the Cyrillic alphabet) outside of Russia is taught as a foreign language or academic subject by slightly more than 16 million people. As a result, the number of people who speak Russian in the world had decreased by 2020 to an estimated 238 million people (in 1990, 312 million people knew it to some extent) [12, p. 91] (Table 5).

If the existing demographic and linguistic trends continue, including the planned abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet in Kazakhstan and Mongolia, in 2025 the Cyrillic script in the countries indicated in Table 1 will be used by 234 million people, which will

total 2.9% of the world's population (8.1 billion people in 2025).

Of course, the role of an alphabet in civilization is determined not only by the number of its users. Of decisive importance are the level of economic and scientific and technological development of countries, which is key or basic for a given script, and areas of human activity in which the use of the corresponding alphabet is a priority. Considering publications in scientific journals, the share of articles in Cyrillic (over 95% of them are written by Russian scientists) is rather small. According to the data for 2019, the share of articles by Russian authors indexed in the Web of Science

Table 6. Leading languages in the global Internet space as of March 31, 2020*

| Language | Number of Internet users in 2020 by language, people | Growth of Internet users in languages in 2000–2020, % | Share of the total number of Internet users (4585578718 people in 2020) in various languages, % |
|------------------|--|---|---|
| English | 1 186 451 052 | 742.9 | 25.9 |
| Chinese | 888 453 068 | 2650.4 | 19.4 |
| Spanish | 363 684 593 | 1511.0 | 7.9 |
| Arabic | 237 418 349 | 9348.0 | 5.9 |
| Indonesian/Malay | 198 029 815 | 3356.0 | 4.3 |
| Hindi/Urdu | 186 000 000 | 11 200.0 | 4.1 |
| Portuguese | 171 750 818 | 2176.0 | 3.7 |
| French | 151 733 611 | 1164.6 | 3.3 |
| Japanese | 118 626 672 | 152.0 | 2.6 |
| Russian | 116 353 942 | 3653.4 | 2.5 |

*Compiled according to [16, 17].

database, although it has increased slightly in recent years, was only 2.94%, and in Scopus it was 3.17% [13, 14, p. 10]. Note that the mandatory rate of annual publications in this type of journals prescribed for Russian scientists and teachers makes them increasingly publish articles in English, that is, using the Latin script, and some of the domestic scientific journals have completely switched to English. English often becomes the working language of conferences and seminars held in Russia.

The global prevalence of alphabets is influenced by the Internet and its almost unlimited possibilities for communication. However, in terms of the number of users, Cyrillic in 2020 (125 million people) was only in fifth place after those using the Latin alphabet (over two billion people), hieroglyphs (more than one billion people), Indic scripts (370 million people), and the Arabic script (237 million people) [15, p. 16; 16, pp. 8–16]. Note that many users from countries with Slavic Cyrillic languages use the Latin keyboard for communications on the Internet. The Russian language, as the main pillar of the Cyrillic alphabet, still retains its place on the Internet in the top ten world languages (in 2013, in terms of the number of users, it ranked seventh; in 2019, ninth) [12, pp. 88–90]. However, the Russian language is being ousted due to a significant increase in new users who speak a number of Oriental languages and live in countries with a higher demographic population growth than in Russia (Table 6).

The inconspicuous presence of the Cyrillic alphabet in the most popular social network Facebook is

evidenced by the data in Table 7: the Russian-speaking members using the Cyrillic alphabet are quite far behind the network participants from European and some Asian countries in which the Latin alphabet dominates and are also inferior to the representatives of the peoples using the Indic and Arabic scripts. Note that almost all Internet users from the PRC (more than 900 million people in 2021) communicate in Mandarin hieroglyphics in Chinese social networks closed to the outside world.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

The Cyrillic alphabet has a rich cultural heritage (its contribution to world civilization is undeniable) and a colossal potential for further development. At the same time, over the past 30 years, among all the largest writing systems of our time, only the Cyrillic alphabet has reduced its distribution area because of various objective and subjective factors, including economic and demographic ones. The global position of the Cyrillic alphabet, which is used mostly in Russia, depends on the ability of the domestic economy to overcome in the coming years the raw materials bias and switch to the production of knowledge exports and the exports of educational and scientific and technical services, which are among the most promising and sought-after products of human activity. Hence, the priority development of education and science and the introduction of new technologies on their basis in the production sector of the Russian economy, without which it is impossible to increase its competi-

Table 7. Facebook users by language/alphabet (January 2021)*

| Language/Alphabet | Number of users, mln people | Share, % | Language/Alphabet | Number of users, mln people | Share, % |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|----------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------|
| English/Latin | 1100 | 50.4 | Javanese/Latin | 58 | 2.7 |
| Spanish/Latin | 340 | 15.6 | Thai/Latin | 55 | 2.5 |
| Hindi/Indic scripts | 180 | 8.2 | Turkish/Latin | 41 | 1.9 |
| Arabic/Arabic | 160 | 7.3 | Urdu/Arabic | 40 | 1.8 |
| Indonesian/Latin | 150 | 6.9 | Russian/Cyrillic | 36 | 1.6 |
| Portuguese/Latin | 150 | 6.9 | Italian/Latin | 34 | 1.6 |
| French/Latin | 120 | 5.5 | German/Latin | 33 | 1.5 |
| Filipino/Latin | 75 | 3.4 | Traditional Chinese/hieroglyphs | 29 | 1.3 |
| Vietnamese/Latin | 72 | 3.3 | Polish/Latin | 20 | 0.9 |
| Bengali/Indic | 72 | 3.3 | Japanese/hieroglyphs | 18 | 0.8 |

*Compiled according to [18].

tiveness,⁶ are the only way to increase interest in the Cyrillic alphabet, the Russian language, and Slavic culture. The volume of trade with industrialized and populous countries, as well as the scale of international tourism, which will inevitably widen after the end of the coronavirus epidemic, will continue to play a significant role in the geolinguistic and geopolitical confrontation of world alphabets and languages and their influence. The question is how Russia and the Russian language based on the Cyrillic alphabet can be useful and interesting for representatives of various countries and peoples.

Among the positive trends, noteworthy is the growth in the attractiveness of Russian (Russian-language) education among the youth of foreign countries, primarily from former Soviet republics. While in the 2009/2010 academic year there were 175 600 foreign students, interns, postgraduates, and students of preparatory departments in Russian universities, in 2018/2019 their number amounted to 355 400 people, of which almost two-thirds were representatives of former Soviet republics. In addition, 31 000 foreign students studied in institutions of secondary vocational education in the Russian Federation, and almost 172 000 children from families of foreign citizens, mainly migrants from the CIS countries, studied in secondary schools [20, pp. 34, 153].

The Day of Slavic Literature and Culture, celebrated annually on May 24, serves to support and popularize the Cyrillic alphabet. Considering that the reproduction of linguistic knowledge mainly relies on

the education system and the efforts of teachers working in it, it seems appropriate to establish the International Day of the Teacher of the Russian (Slavonic) Language, following the example of Francophone countries celebrating the International Day of the Teacher of French.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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⁶ The Global Competitiveness Index according to the World Economic Forum suggests that in 2019 Russia ranked 43rd among 141 countries in terms of the competitiveness of its economy [19].

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