Words in Space and Time

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Published by Central European University Press

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Words in Space and Time: A Historical Atlas of Language Politics in Modern Central Europe.


Project MUSE. https://doi.org/10.7829/9789633864180.
After the two world wars, genocide, massive ethnic cleansing, and forced assimilation, in today’s Central Europe the frontiers of nation-states overwhelmingly overlap with language borders (see Map 33). The written and oral use of one national-cum-official standard language typically stops at the state frontier, while another national-cum-official standard language is in exclusive employment on the other side of a given frontier. A similar overlap was achieved between the region’s nation-states and their official scripts (writing systems). Unlike in the case of the official languages, the region’s scripts are not claimed as “national,” with the lone exception of the Greek alphabet. To a degree, resurgent Russia, with its traditional Pan-Slavism now reinvented as the novel ideology of Russkiy Mir (Russian World) has attempted to claim Cyrillic as the Russian national alphabet since 2014. However, this claim is contradicted and denied by the use of Cyrillic for writing and publishing in numerous languages across Eurasia, including Belarusian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian, and Ukrainian in Central Europe. On the other hand, Moscow’s insistence on the national ownership of Cyrillic in the post-Soviet space is strengthened by the replacement of this script with the Latin alphabet for writing and publishing in Azerbaijani, Turkmen, and Uzbek, the national-cum-official languages of the ethnolinguistic nation-states of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, respectively. Furthermore, in 2017 Kazakhstan announced that by 2025 the Latin alphabet would have superseded Cyrillic for writing and publishing in the nation-state’s national and official language of Kazakh. As a result, beginning in the mid-2020s, few post-Soviet states will employ Cyrillic in official capacity, perhaps, only Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. In accordance with the ideology of Russian World, the Kremlin considers Belarus and Ukraine as part of Russia’s “true” Orthodox historic ethno-cultural space (Lebensraum!), which in the eyes of some Russians makes Cyrillic appear to be a “Russian alphabet.”

The gradual breakup of Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2008 in the wake of the fall of communism and the wars of Yugoslav succession transformed the multiethnic federalism’s opposed poles of biscriptalism into national monoscriptal regimes, namely, the Latin alphabet-based ones in Slovenia and Croatia, and the Cyrillic-based one in Macedonia. Although in Serbia the 2006 constitution recognizes Cyrillic as the country’s official and national alphabet (Article 16), in practice half of the publishing industry’s Serbian-language output is in Latin letters (Marušiak 2017). However, the state administration prefers to stick to Cyrillic quite rigorously. The scriptal divide tends to trace the country’s political division. Users of the Latin alphabet side with the ideals of open society, liberalism, secularism, and the European Union. Those who prefer Cyrillic opt for the “traditional values” of ethnolinguistic nationalism, Orthodox Christianity, and an unshaking political alliance with the world’s sole Orthodox power, namely, Russia. A similar situation is observed in Montenegro, though this nation-state’s constitution (Article 13) proclaims both Cyrillic and the Latin script as the equal scripts of the country’s national and official language of Montenegrin. In Kosovo, both Albanian and Serbian are the polity’s official languages, but in reality, instead of entailed biscriptalism, the Latin alphabet-based monoscriptalism dominates, because in official use Serbian tends to be written in Latin letters, with the exception of the enclaves with Serbian majorities. In Bosnia, officially trilingual in the post-Serbo-Croatian languages of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian, the polity’s official biscriptalism is actually expressed through two spatially separate monoscriptalisms. The exclusively Cyrillic-based Serbian is employed in the Republika Srpska, while the exclusively Latin alphabet-based Bosnian and Croatian in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union transformed the non-national communist polity’s fifteen union republics into the same number of fully recognized nation-states, all of them either fully ethnolinguistic in their socio-political character or aspiring to this model of statehood organization. In Central Europe’s post-Soviet ethnolinguistic nation-states, Russian, alongside Cyrillic, was removed from official use in the Baltic nation-states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where the Latin alphabet-based official monoscriptalism was enforced in the corresponding national languages of Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian. These three Baltic polities are bordered by the post-Soviet nation-states of Belarus and Russia, where Cyrillic is official. Further south, post-Soviet Ukraine was almost monoscriptal in Cyrillic, bar autonomous Crimea, where in 1992 the Latin alphabet replaced Cyrillic for writing and publishing in Crimean Tatar. In reality, to this day Crimean Tatar-speakers employ both Cyrillic and Latin letters for this purpose. Following Russia’s 2014 violent seizure of Crimea, Ukraine became a de facto monoscriptal polity, its official and national language of Ukrainian written exclusively in Cyrillic. In 1989, in Soviet Moldavia the Latin alphabet superseded Cyrillic for writing and publishing in Moldavian, which was simultaneously
Writing systems in 2009

- Latin
- Cyrillic
- Greek

Significant presence of Cyrillic:
- Self-governed regions
- Italian regions
- Autonomous regions
- State capitals

Vojvodina: Names of autonomous regions, members of federations and unrecognized states.
renamed as Romanian. These decisions in the sphere of language politics became the flashpoint of sociopolitical conflict in post-Soviet Moldova. The subsequent 1992 civil war ostensibly fought on the question whether the Moldovan (Moldavian) language is Romanian, Moldova should reunite with Romania, or remain an independent nation-state in its own right led to the emergence of the de facto polity of Transnistria. Transnistria, as a Russian client state, is fully monoscriptal, all three of its official languages of Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian are written in Cyrillic. Moldova is officially biscriptal because of the autonomous region of Gagauzia, where Gagauzian and Russian are co-official with the state language of Moldovan. Russian is obviously written in Cyrillic, while in 1996 the Latin alphabet replaced Cyrillic for writing and publishing in Gagauzian. The post-Soviet Russian Federation was on the way to becoming a multiscriptal polity, when in 1999 autonomous Tatarstan adopted a law for transitioning the Tatar language from Cyrillic to Latin letters. Three years later, in 2002, the Russian Duma (Parliament) adopted a federal law that enforces the employment of Cyrillic for all the country’s languages in official use, that is, for Russian and the official languages of its twenty-one autonomous republics. Beginning in 2014, Moscow counts Crimea as Russia’s twenty-second autonomous republic, but in light of international law, Crimea remains part of Ukraine, though under illegal Russian occupation. In practice, the 2002 Russian law has been extended to Crimea, meaning the enforcement of Cyrillic for publishing and writing in Crimean Tatar.

From the geopolitical perspective, the European Union (EU) almost perfectly overlaps with the area where the Latin alphabet is used for writing and publishing in the official languages of its member states. Central Europe’s sole three nation-states (almost) monoscriptal in Latin letters that remain outside the EU are Albania, Moldova, and Turkey. However, two of them, Albania and Turkey, are members of the Western military alliance NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), closely related to the EU. Among the EU’s current (2018) twenty-eight member states, two are monoscriptal in different writing systems, namely Bulgaria in Cyrillic and Greece in the Greek alphabet. Apart from Bulgaria and Greece, NATO is also almost exclusively monoscriptal in the Latin alphabet, though in 2017 this alliance was joined by Montenegro, which is officially biscriptal in Cyrillic and Latin letters. At present (2018), similarly biscriptal Bosnia and Kosovo, de facto biscriptal Serbia and monoscriptal (in Cyrillic) Macedonia remain outside of the EU and NATO. Without the Balkans, Central Europe’s area of Cyrillic monoscriptalism tightly overlaps with Belarus, Russia, Transnistria and Ukraine. This fact, in accordance with the ideology of Russkiy Mir (Russian World), allows the Kremlin to legitimize, at least in the eyes of the Russian public, Russia’s more or less veiled claims to Belarus and Ukraine as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence. Some radical Russian nationalists see these two nation-states even as “rightful parts” of “true Russia,” often equated with the Russian Empire at its height of territorial expansion in 1914.

When surveying the policy of script in Central Europe, Cyprus also needs to be mentioned. After gaining independence from Britain in 1960, the island state adopted Greek and Turkish as its official languages. As a result, the polity became biscriptal in Greek and Latin letters. However, after the 1974 division of the island into Greek-dominated (southern) Cyprus and the internationally unrecognized de facto polity of Turkish-dominated Northern Cyprus, a Bosnian-style scriptal apartheid obtains in this country. (Southern) Cyprus is de facto monolingual in Greek and monoscriptal in the Greek script, while Northern Cyprus is officially monolingual in Turkish and monoscriptal in the Latin alphabet. Since 2008, Cyprus’s two official languages and scripts have mingled only on the Cyprus Euro coins, on which the name of country is given in Greek and Turkish, as Κύπρος Κύπρος and Kıbrıs, respectively. Furthermore, in the autonomous monastic republic of Mount Athos in Greece, apart from dominant Greek, Cyrillic is employed in some monasteries with historical and current links to the Slavophone Orthodox Churches of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Recently, the near-monoscriptalism of the European Union in Latin letters seems to have been additionally breached by the unlikely revival of the Old Turkic Runic-like (that is, incision-style) script. In the Middle Ages, it was used by historic Hungary’s Magyars (Finno-Ugric-speakers) and survived through the seventeenth century among Transylvania’s Szeklers. At the turn of the 2010s, in Hungary, the previously scholarly and antiquarian interest in this script spilled over to the general public and gradually became associated with Hungarian ethnolinguistic nationalism. The right-to-left script became widely known as an “Old” Székely–Hungarian alphabet (székely–magyar rövidírás), and since 2010, Viktor Orbán’s increasingly populist, authoritarian, and anti-EU government have adopted it as an expression of “true Hungarian patriotism.” Hungarian-language websites have been created with the use of this script, books and maps have been printed in it, and in 2011, the entire Hungarian-language Bible was published with the use of this Hungarian alphabet. Many Hungarians master reading and writing the Hungarian alphabet in order to prove their credentials as “good patriots.” In 2015 Unicode secured a full set of standardized fonts for this script, so the Hungarian alphabet can be now freely employed in a variety of functions across cyberspace. Subsequently, the Hungarian alphabet visibly entered the public space when the ruling party allowed road signs with the names of localities in this script to be erected, under the regular road sign with the locality’s name given in the Latin alphabet-based Hungarian. A similar revival of the Old Slavic script of Glagolitic in Croatia commenced already in the 1990s. Some school textbooks of Glagolitic for writing Croatian were published, and this script is taught as an optional school subject, but its use remains largely symbolic, limited to jewelry, logos, decorative flourishes, commemorative plaques, monuments, and occasional bi-scriptal names of administrative offices. But as in the case of the Hungarian alphabet, a set of standardized Unicode fonts was adopted for Glagolitic in 2002. Hence, potentially, in cyberspace Glagolitic can be used as widely as the Hungarian alphabet. In 2006 an Old Church Slavonic Wikipedia was launched, which allows for the use of Glagolitic, but Church Cyrillic remains this Wikipedia’s dominant script.