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**LATINISATION IN THE SOVIET UNION:  
MEANINGS, FINALITIES, ACTIONS (1918–1940)**

**Abstract:** The paper presents the attempts of Soviet Bolsheviks, who, after the Great October Socialist Revolution, intended to replace the Russian writing and printing system with the Latin alphabet, unique for all peoples of the Soviet Union. In the vision of its promoters, this represented the first stage in the process of creating an international alphabet, with the purpose of securing the triumph of the world proletarian revolution. During the 1920s and 1930s, philologists and political leaders defended or opposed Latinisation, seen by its supporters as a strong weapon and by its contesters as a Trojan horse for the stability of the Soviet Union. The final decision belonged to Stalin, who rejected Latinisation and “saved” the Cyrillic script.

**Keywords:** Latinisation, Soviet Union, Bolsheviks, linguistic policy, script shift

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In this paper, the concept of “Latinisation” is not used with the meaning of introducing elements of Roman–Catholic theology and religious practices in non–Latin traditions. Latinisation is approached in the sense in which it was defined and used by the Bolsheviks, who intended to replace the Russian writing and printing system with the Latin alphabet, unique for all peoples of the Soviet Union. In the vision of its promoters, this represented the first stage in the process of creating an international alphabet, with the purpose of securing the triumph of the world proletarian revolution.

The problem is interesting from several perspectives. Firstly, the shift from Russian characters to the Latin alphabet, followed by a return to the Russian writing system, affected most Soviet peoples. During the interwar period, the populations who were Latinised had to be alphabetised three times. Secondly, this process also took place in the region eastwards of Dniester River, in the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (M.A.S.S.R.), an area inhabited by several hundred thousand Romanians, who, despite the Bolsheviks’ real purpose, had cultural and national benefits following their Latinisation. Thirdly, the issue of Latinisation,

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regarding the adoption of the Latin alphabet, is still contradictorily debated in the Russian Federation.

The interest for this topic came in the context of studying the genesis of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, created in 1924 on the left bank of the Dniester River. Sources prove that the tactics of “start lines” or “bridgeheads”, organised by Soviet Russia at the borders of neighbouring countries (M.A.S.S.R. at the border with Romania, the Karelian A.S.S.R. close to Finland or Belarus near Poland), were only a part of the tools employed for fulfilling the Bolsheviks’ main objective – the world proletarian revolution<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, it is clear that Latin script was to serve as an instrument for extending the Socialist Revolution at the scale of the whole world. On the other hand, it must be stated that the replacement of the writing system of the Moldavians from the M.A.S.S.R., from Russian letters to the Latin alphabet, was done later than in other areas of the Soviet empire.

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The issue of Latinisation was not new in Soviet Russia. This phenomenon was preceded by a two hundred year old history. The debates regarding the script of the Russian characters started in the Tsarist Empire as early as Peter the Great introduced the civil alphabet<sup>2</sup>. Later, pro-Western Russian intellectuals considered that the adoption of the Latin script for the Russian language completed the reformation of the Russian society in a European manner. On the other side, the Slavophile elements considered that the logical result of Peter the Great’s reform had to be the transliteration of all the languages of the peoples from the Russian Empire to the Cyrillic script<sup>3</sup>. With this purpose, a project was drafted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, aiming to replace the Polish writing system, in the territories occupied by Russia after the partition of Poland, to Russian script, and Tsar Nicholas I<sup>st</sup> formed a special committee that was to examine this question. Nevertheless, the Polish population, although lacking political independence and state organisation, reacted to all attempts which targeted their national pride, and the russification of Polish script could have become a serious cause for revolt or insurrection. Eventually, the reformation of Polish language was abandoned<sup>4</sup>.

But a different situation prevailed inside the Empire, where the reason for transcribing aboriginal languages in the Russian alphabet was represented by an event that occurred in 1840 in the guberniya of Kazan, where a large number of Christianised Tartars – Keräşens –, influenced by their Muslim brethren, reconverted to Islam. At the Imperial Court, this separation from the Orthodox Church was

<sup>1</sup> More details in Ion Şişcanu, “R.A.S.S. Moldovenească – o replică a Careliei sovietice executată de Kremlin [The Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – a Replica of Soviet Karelia made at Kremlin]”, *Analele Universităţii “Dunărea de Jos” din Galaţi – Seria istorie*, 9 (2010), p. 145-162.

<sup>2</sup> In 1708–1710, Peter the Great reformed the Russian alphabet and the contour of its characters. The introduction of the new letters aimed to make the aspect of Russian books and prints similar to those published in the West. The church characters, which copied the aspect of Greek letters, remained in use for ecclesiastic books.

<sup>3</sup> Evghenii Jirnov, “O latinizaţii russcogo alfavita [On the Latinisation of the Russian Alphabet]”, *Commersant Vlasti*, 2 (2010) (<http://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/21190281>).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

judged as inadmissible, interpreted as being caused by the fact that the Keräşens did not speak Russian and could not understand the message of the religious service<sup>5</sup>. In such circumstances, it was decided, in 1847, to translate the religious books in Tartar language and to print them in Arab script<sup>6</sup>. But this effort was completely futile, as the translations were not understood. This made Russian missionaries start writing with Russian characters the language spoken by the Tartars. This marks the birth of the Tartar script on the basis of the Russian alphabet, subsequently used in other areas of the Empire. The script for other non-Russian peoples, mainly from the Caucasus, was invented in a similar way<sup>7</sup>. But these Russian missionaries were not serving as cultural enlighteners. On the contrary, the writing system which they created was regarded as a tool for securing the russification and oppression of non-Russian peoples, used in the context in which the Russian alphabet itself needed significant changes.

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At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most Russian intellectuals accepted the necessity to reform the Russian language. New projects for shifting the Russian script to the Latin alphabet were formulated, but they did not enjoy much official support. The Tsarist Government, as well as the members of the Russian Academy, was not happy with this idea of Latinisation. Moreover, official circles postponed even the introduction of a new orthography of the Russian language, which was not completed until the Revolution of February 1917. The Provisional Government, appointed in the spring of 1917, did not persevere in this respect, so that the problem of reforming Russian writing system was inherited by the new Bolshevnik leadership, which also promoted a revolution in the linguistic field, whose essence was the shift to Latin script<sup>8</sup>.

In March 1919, the newspaper “Izvestia” published the article “On the Latin alphabet”, signed with the pseudonym “the Old Gymnasist”. The paper tackled a serious problem for the Russian society, stating that the Russian alphabet was so complicated and different from the Western European alphabet, that the foreigners were frightened. “We must adopt the Latin alphabet, which is simpler and more elegant, the same way in which we shifted from the Russian calendar to the European one and adopted the Metric system from pood and arshin”<sup>9</sup>. The author also explained how to render Russian specific sounds with Latin characters<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> N. Iacovlev, “Itoghi latinizații alfavitov SSSR [The Balance of the Latinisation of the alphabet in U.S.S.R.]”, *Revoluția i pismennosti*, 4–5 (1932), p. 25-43 (<http://www2.unil.ch/slav/ling/textes/Jakovlev32.html>).

<sup>8</sup> A. Lunaciarski, “Latinizația russoi pismennosti [Latinisation of Russian script]”, *Cultura i pismennosti Vostoca*, 6 (1930), p. 20-26 ([http://for-freedom.ucoz.com/blog/a\\_lunacharskij\\_latinizachija\\_russkoj\\_pismennosti/2010](http://for-freedom.ucoz.com/blog/a_lunacharskij_latinizachija_russkoj_pismennosti/2010)).

<sup>9</sup> Old Russian measurement units for mass and length.

<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Berdnic, “Abețedalo. Cac što po evropejschi [Abețedalo. How it would be in European style]”, *Ejenedelinik 2000, Svoboda Slova*, January 19, 2007 ([www://2000.net.ua/2000/svoboda-slova/13095](http://www://2000.net.ua/2000/svoboda-slova/13095)).

Contemporaries identified the possible author of the article as A. Lunaciarski or N. Buharin, the main “Red intellectuals” who, subsequently, were the most active propagandists of the “new alphabet”<sup>11</sup>.

But which were the real reasons for adopting the Latin script? The Russian revolutionaries were convinced that the common alphabet was one of the main instruments for creating the international community for the world Soviet Republic. This role belonged to the Latin alphabet, the alphabet of Western Europe, where, in the Bolsheviks’ view, the flame of the proletarian revolution was about to burst out and near the triumph of the world Socialist Revolution. Thus, the Bolsheviks granted Latinisation an international importance, considering that the Latin alphabet would facilitate the familiarisation of all peoples with the idea of World Revolution<sup>12</sup>. The Latin alphabet could ease communication between Western and Eastern proletarians, and, in perspective, – of proletarians throughout the world. Writing about this question, Larisa Masenco, a Ukrainian linguist, wrote that the “Bolsheviks aimed to unite the entire world, the world proletariat, they promoted the idea of uniting the entire Universe on the basis of Latin script”<sup>13</sup>.

The Society of the Amateurs of Russian Literature protested against this idea, and, on December 23, 1919, issued a declaration, stating that the Latin script would not facilitate, but, on the contrary, would complicate the learning of Russian by foreign citizens. Consequently, the shift of Russian writing system to the Latin script was not realised in 1920<sup>14</sup>.

Yet the Bolsheviks, with the support of several philologists, did not abandon the idea of Latinisation. The Soviet power recruited adherents, both in the capital and the peripheries, proving that it was prepared to offer the peoples of the Russian Empire all freedoms, including that of choosing the alphabet. Thus, the proletarian leaders proposed to Latinise, in the first place, the alphabets of non-Russian peoples, after which the transition of the Russian alphabet to Latin script was regarded as a technical problem<sup>15</sup>. Thus, in several places, the shift to Latin script commenced.

For the beginning, the Bolsheviks concentrated their activities on the peoples from Northern Caucasus and Middle Asia. The problem was that, after the institution of Soviet rule, the Bolsheviks aimed to isolate its Muslim ethnics, writing on the basis of an Arab alphabet, from the Islamic world and religion. On the other side, the Soviet Government wanted to cut off these peoples from their Turkic roots. For this, they invented the project of Latinising several areas of Russia. N. Iacovlev, one of the main ideologists of Latinisation, stated that “the struggle for Latinisation, started as a revolutionary fight of the working classes from the Soviet East for national culture, against the medieval obscurantism of clerics of Muslim and other religions,

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Teimur Ataev, “Politiceskii podtext latinizații pismennosti [The political subtext of script Latinisation]” ([http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world\\_ataev.htm](http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world_ataev.htm)).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Anna Petrosova, “Cac bâla spasena kirillîta. Iz istorii popâtoc latinizații russcogo alfavita [How the Cyrillic Alphabet was saved. From the history of the attempts to Latinise the Russian alphabet]” (<http://www.otechestvo.org.ua/main/20076/708.htm>).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

against nobles and local bourgeoisie, took a marked character of class conflict”<sup>16</sup>. In the information provided on this question by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (2004), it is stated: “This policy was mainly linking to the expectation of the coming World Revolution, after which a single alphabet, and then a single language had to be introduced in the entire world [...]. The choice of a script almost always depends on the cultural and political direction of the state and / or of the educated part of the population. In the 1920’s the Turkic Latinised alphabet was called by the press *the alphabet of October, the weapon of the Proletarian Revolution* and it was even announced that financial funds were being collected for building a plane for the *Alphabet of October*”<sup>17</sup>.

On the basis of this motivation, “the coming of the World Revolution” began in the regions inhabited by Turkic peoples. As early as 1917, the problem of replacing the alphabet based on Russian characters with the Latin alphabet (which was used only after the institution of Soviet power, in 1922) was raised in Yakutia<sup>18</sup>. In the same year, the simultaneous elaboration of the Latin alphabet was commenced in Northern Caucasus for the Ingush, Ossetic, and Kabardian languages, as well as for the Azerbaijanis from S.S.R. Azerbaijan. In 1923, at a conference devoted to the education of Northern Caucasian peoples, the project of Latin alphabets for the three mentioned peoples and for the Karachay language was approved, and in 1925 the alphabet based on the Russian script, created by colonising missionaries in Abkhazia, was replaced with a Latinised alphabet, made by academician N. Marr<sup>19</sup>.

N. Iacovlev stated that, in this first stage, the Latin alphabet served as a combat weapon which buttressed the missionary forms of the Russian alphabet or as a tool for creating a writing system for the peoples which, in fact, did not have any alphabet yet (Ingush, Kabardian). For Azerbaijanis, the Latin alphabet was a weapon against their Arab script<sup>20</sup>. Taking into account that the “experience of liquidating the Azerbaijan Muslim writing and school was subsequently used in the struggle for developing the socialist culture of peoples from the Soviet East”, Iacovlev considered that “Azerbaijan was righteously regarded as the pioneer of Latinisation in the U.S.S.R.”<sup>21</sup>.

In 1924 the efforts were concentrated on using the Latin alphabet for Kazakhs, Tartars from the Kazan region, Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Chechens, Adyghe and other

<sup>16</sup> Nicolai Feofanovici Iacovlev (1892–1974) – Russian philologist, specialist in Caucasian languages and in the field of applied linguistics. In 1926–1937, he led the “New Alphabet” Pan-Union Committee, with the mission to make a new alphabet for the Russian language.

<sup>17</sup> Elena Novoselova, “Grafomania. Azbuca – što prosto bucvî ili obiedenitelnâi simvol Rossiscoi Federatîi? [Grafomania. The ABC – Simple Letters or the Symbol of Unity of the Russian Federation?]”, *Rossiiskaia gazeta – Federalnâi vâpusc*, 3615 (2004) (<http://www.rg.ru/2004/10/28/azbuka.html>).

<sup>18</sup> N. Iacovlev, “Itoghi latinizaîi alfavitov SSSR”, p. 25–43 (<http://www2.unil.ch/slav/ling/textes/Jakovlev32.html>).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

peoples, so that, towards the end of 1925, Latinisation of the writing systems of Northern Caucasian peoples was, to a large extent, completed<sup>22</sup>.

A second period of Latinisation starts in 1926. In February–March 1926, the first Congress of Latinisation, also named Turkic, took place in Baku, with the participation of the representatives of all relatively large Turkic–Tartar peoples from the Soviet Union and of most peoples from Northern Caucasus and Dagestan, and also of the Kurds from Southern Caucasus Trans–Caucasia. In the following year, “at the initiative at peoples’ representatives”, there was created the central Pan–Union Committee of the new Turkic Alphabet (BIŪKHTA – Vsesoiuznâi Ţentralnâi Comitet Novogo Tureŷcogo Alfavita), from the title of which the word “Turkic” disappeared in 1931 (BIŪKHA)<sup>23</sup>.

In 1928, by a decision of the Central Executive Committee of Russia and of the Council of Peoples’ Commissars, the administrative structures were compelled “to secure the education in schools and alphabetising points, as well as the activity of state institutions which serve the Turkic–Tartar peoples on the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (R.S.F.S.R.), on the basis of the Latinised Turkic–Tartar alphabet, in the term stated by the Government of the R.S.F.S.R.”<sup>24</sup>. A. Lunaciarski, already removed from the office of Commissar for Education, expressed his concern: “The Commissariat for Education, having the task to resolve the problem of Latinisation, was advancing with special precaution. He understood very well that these innovations could be easily used against the Soviet power, being interpreted as a measure to remove the masses from their own culture and religion”<sup>25</sup>.

Things changed in 1928, when Turkey adopted the Latin alphabet. On this occasion, Lunaciarski stated that “the problem simplified with the adherence of the Turkish Government to this reform and the commencement of Latinisation. This fact created immediately the possibility of rejecting the political game in the framework of the ‘fidelity’ to the old culture, Muslim and Turkish, and of approaching Latinisation from the viewpoint of ‘persecuting’ this culture by the Bolsheviks. But, despite this support, granted by the Turkish government, Latinisation continued at a speedy pace”<sup>26</sup>. Thus, towards the end of the 1920s, the politics of the “cultural penetration” of the World Revolution, under the aegis of “Latinisation”, did not refer to Europe directly. The course of Latinisation was mainly directed towards Asia. In 1930, the meeting of the Korean Party and of the Communist Youth Organization (*Comsomol*) from the city of Vladivostok, recognised “the huge importance of Latinising the Korean writing system for the economic and cultural development of the Koreans”, asking for “an enforcement of the preparations with a view of

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “O latinizaŷii russcogo iazâca [On the Latinisation of the Russian language]”, *Jurnal Vlasti*, 2 (856)/18.01.2010 (<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1301421>).

<sup>24</sup> T. Ataev, “Politiceskii podtext latinizaŷii pismennosti” ([http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world\\_ataev.htm](http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world_ataev.htm)).

<sup>25</sup> “O latinizaŷii russcogo iazâca” (<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1301421>).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

introducing the new, Latinised alphabet of the Koreans<sup>27</sup>. On January 1, 1931, the commission with the problems of Latinising the Chinese writing system completed its activity and prepared the main thesis regarding Chinese Latinisation<sup>28</sup>. Following these actions, in 1923–1929, 50 languages spoken by peoples of the Soviet Union adopted the Latin alphabet, from a total of only 72 languages that had a written form in the U.S.S.R.<sup>29</sup>.

Encouraged by this success, the Bolsheviks re-launched the question of Latinising the Russian alphabet. In 1929, the Commissariat for Education from the R.S.F.S.R. formed a commission, led by N. Iacovlev, with the task of examining the problems of Latinising the Russian alphabet. The main ideologue of this campaign was A. Lunaciarski. In 1930, in the article “The Latinisation of Russian Script”, published in the journal *Culture and Script of the East*, he wrote: “From now on, our Russian alphabet estranges us not only from the West, but also from the East, which, to a great extent, we woke up [...]. In time, the books written in Old Russian letters will become an object of the past. Naturally, the study of Russian script will always be useful. It will be good for those interested in the history of literature. But, for the young generation, the Russian script will be little necessary [...]. The benefit of introducing Latin script is huge. Latin script secures our internationalisation, linking us not only with the West, but also with the East<sup>30</sup>.”

At the beginning of 1930, the activity regarding the Latinisation of the Russian alphabet was completed. At a meeting in January 14, 1930, the commission with the problems of Latinising the Russian alphabet, working within the education commissariat of the R.S.F.S.R., examining the results of its own activity, approved “The thesis regarding the necessity of Latinising the Russian alphabet”, presented by professor N. Iacovlev. Motivating the necessity of Latinising Russian writing, Iacovlev mentioned that the “lay Russian alphabet, along its history, is the alphabet of imperial oppression, of missionary propaganda, of Velikoruss national chauvinism, all these qualities manifesting themselves by their russifying role in relation to the national minorities of the former Russian Empire. In the same time, this alphabet is a means of propaganda of Russian imperialism abroad (Slavophiles, the struggle for the Straits etc.)<sup>31</sup>.”

In Iacovlev’s opinion, the Russian alphabet remained, after 1917, the alphabet of the Velikoruss bourgeois–nationalist ideology: “This is especially felt in the effort of the nations, which use the Russian script, to shift to Latin script, which is international and, from an ideological perspective, more neutral [...]. Thus, contemporary Soviet print reveals a huge contradiction between its international

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<sup>27</sup> T. Ataev, “Politiceskii podtext latinizații pismennosti” ([http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world\\_ataev.htm](http://www.idmedina.ru/books/materials/faizhanov/4/world_ataev.htm)).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> N. Iacovlev, “Itoghi latinizații alfavitov SSSR”, p. 25-43 (<http://www2.unil.ch/slav/ling/textes/Jakovlev32.html>).

<sup>30</sup> A. Lunaciarski, “Latinizația russoi pismennosti” ([http://for-freedom.ucoz.com/blog/a.lunacharskij\\_latinizacija\\_russkoj\\_pismennosti/2010](http://for-freedom.ucoz.com/blog/a.lunacharskij_latinizacija_russkoj_pismennosti/2010)).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

socialist content and its bourgeois–nationalist graphical cover”<sup>32</sup>. In the same context, Iacovlev was convinced that Latin script had already become the main international script, especially when, in the area of the Soviet Orient, and partially in the Foreign Orient, Latinisation was used as one of the main flags of cultural revolution. The unification of national Latin alphabets in the region of Soviet Orient represented, beyond several deficiencies, according to the Soviet philologist, a veritable step forward towards the creation of a single international alphabet.

Iacovlev also considered that the Latinisation of the Russian alphabet was part of the cultural construction of U.S.S.R., a very important issue from the perspective of polygraphic ideology, pedagogy and technology. The national–bourgeois script, inherited from tsarist times, had to be replaced with the alphabet of the socialist orientation. Iacovlev mentioned that it was not necessary to create a new version, national–bourgeois, of the Latin alphabet, similar to those from Western Europe. It was about the Latinised alphabet of socialism, created on the basis of the most recent accomplishments of materialist linguistics, of modern polygraphic technology and of Marxist pedagogy. The Soviet Union had to initiate this transition, which was to have a huge influence both in the East, and among the proletarian masses and the radical groups of the West. The Russian alphabet, he considered, “as well as other national scripts (Jewish, Georgian, Armenian etc.) complicated linguistic and cultural communication among the nationalities in the U.S.S.R. and obstructed the use of international terminology”. “On the contrary, the introduction of the international alphabet on the basis of Latin script, unique for all peoples of U.S.S.R., and meant to replace the national variants of the Latin alphabet from the whole world, will represent one of the fundamental premises which will facilitate the linguistic and cultural communication between peoples. In this regard, the international alphabet on the basis of Latin alphabet will constitute a step towards the international language. On the contrary, the Russian alphabet, as well as other national alphabets, is already in contradiction with the developing and using rhythm of the international vocabulary”<sup>33</sup>.

N. Iacovlev asserted that, in the conditions of the extension of the Soviet power, the Russian alphabet represented a graphical form not only alien to the act of building socialism, but also a main obstacle of Latinising both the national alphabets as forms (Jewish, Armenian, Georgian etc.), as well as the scripts based on the Cyrillic alphabet (Belarus, Ukrainian, etc.). The graphical form of the Russian alphabet, as well as the Russian orthography, even after the reform<sup>34</sup>, preserved the deficiencies of the class writing from before the revolution. The shift of the alphabet would have facilitated the radical rationalisation of orthography, according to the demands of Marxist pedagogy and of liquidating illiteracy. Thus, the international

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> We guess that, speaking of an international language, Iacovlev meant the Russian language.

<sup>34</sup> In 1917–1918, the Russian alphabet was reduced to 33 letters and a new orthography of the Russian language was introduced.

Latin alphabet was to become the alphabet of rational calligraphy, adapted to the necessities of total alphabetisation in the socialist society<sup>35</sup>.

Technical arguments were also considered. The Latin script corresponded, to a larger extent, to the level of modern polygraphic technology and the physiology of writing and reading. Compared to them, it was asserted that the graphical form of the Russian alphabet (as well as of other national alphabets from the East) corresponded to a low level of development of productive forces, and, consequently, of writing and reading techniques. Thus, “the forms of Latin characters are, compared to the Russian ones, more profitable, as they save space, are clearer and more appropriate for writing and reading, more beautiful and more convenient for artistic stylisation”<sup>36</sup>. The transition to Latin script had to secure, in the opinion of the commission, an economy of paper, metal and labour (10–15 %), the annual equivalent of tens of millions of roubles and would have facilitated reading and writing. On the other hand, following the introduction of the international standard alphabet, the polygraphic industry had to make a huge economy and to rationalise the productive process<sup>37</sup>.

The Commission decided that the Latinisation of the Russian alphabet had to be perceived as a transition of the Russian writing and print to the international Latin alphabet, unique for all peoples of U.S.S.R., a step that represented the first stage in the process of creation of the world international alphabet<sup>38</sup>. According to the Commission, the shift of the Russians, as shortly of possible, to the international, unique alphabet, based on Latin script, was inevitable and necessary from several viewpoints. “The alphabet on the international Latin basis was to consolidate and develop the unity between the Soviet proletariat and that from the West and the East [...]. Thus, the script will express the political unity of all peoples of the U.S.S.R. and the unity of the content of their culture, different by national forms”<sup>39</sup>. It was considered that the shift of the Russian alphabet to Latin script could be made, without expenses regarding the capital re-technologizing of the polygraphic basis, in a term of four years<sup>40</sup>. To support these conclusions and recommendations, the commission presented three drafts of the Latin alphabet for the Russian writing system, accompanied by explanations for applying the new characters<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> “Tezisî professora Iacovleva N. F. «O neobhodimosti latinizații russcogo alfavita» [The thesis of professor N. F. Iacovlev «Regarding the necessity of Latinising the Russian alphabet»], *Prineatâe v naceale rabotî podcomissii po latinizații russcogo alfavita pri Glavnauke* (<http://Tapemark.narod.ru/rus-latinica-1930.html>).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Protocol zacliucitelinogo zasedania podcomissii po latinizații russcogo alfavita pri Glavnauke NCP RSFSR ot 14 ianvarea 1930 goda* [The protocol of the session of the subcommission within the department of the People’s Commisariat of Education with the problem of Latinising the Russian alphabet] (<http://tapemark.narod.ru/rus-latinica-1930.html>).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

The conclusions of the Commission and the project variants for the Latin alphabets were presented to the Commissariat for Education, and Commissary A. Bubnov, in his turn, addressed them to Stalin on January 16, 1930<sup>42</sup>.

In the meantime, towards the end of the 1920's, the Bolsheviks' view on world socialist revolution changed. The idea of the World Revolution remained a fundamental guiding line. But the Soviet Government also elaborated a new platform, which had to secure the combination of the revolutionary ideology with the necessity of normalising the relations with the capitalist world. The interests of foreign policy forced the Soviet Government to establish diplomatic relations with the capitalist countries and to renounce to openly attack them.

Exactly in this context the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) examined the conclusion of the Commission with the problems of Latinising the Russian alphabet and reacted immediately. On January 25, 1930, the Political Bureau of the Central Committee adopted the decision "regarding the Latinisation", in which it proposed to the Research Department of the Commissariat for Education of R.S.F.S.R. to suspend the activity regarding the Latinisation of the Russian alphabet. As the decision was signed by Stalin, the Commission was dissolved, any activity regarding the Latinisation being stopped<sup>43</sup>.

Despite all these, on June 29, 1931, the journal *Vecerneaia Moscva* [*Evening Moscow*] published "The Project of Reforming the Russian Orthography", the result of the meeting of the Pan-Union Orthographic Reunion, which, on June 26, concluded its works and adopted the measures regarding the reformation of the orthography, punctuation and transcription of foreign words in Russian<sup>44</sup>. The Political Bureau reacted immediately, adopting, on July 2, 1930, the following decision: "1. To forbid any «reform» and «debate» regarding the «reform» of the Russian alphabet"<sup>45</sup>.

Subsequently, there were Bolshevik militants who continued the battle for the "alphabet of World Revolution". In 1932, Udmurt and Komi languages shifted to the Latin script. In the same time, the Moldavian language from the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, from the left bank of the Dniester river, also adopted the Latin script.

On May 15, 1935, C. Bauman, Director of the Department of Discoveries and Technical-Scientific Innovations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik), sent to the secretaries of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, A. Andreev and N. Ejoy, a "top secret" memorandum in which the activity of the Commissariat for Education and of A Lunaciarski was considered as a left deviation, "using anti-Soviet bourgeois-nationalist elements". Bauman expressed his conviction that "the enemies of the Soviet power attempted to use Latinisation with the purpose of splitting the workers of these republics and regions from the

<sup>42</sup> *Cac Stalin zaschitil russkii iazac* [*How Stalin Protected the Russian language*] (<http://stalinism.ru/Dokumenty/Kak-Stalin-zaschitil-russkiy-zazzik.html>).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

common family of the peoples of the Soviet Union. Under the cover of the debates regarding the international character of the Latin script, Bauman stated, these enemies imposed the direction towards the bourgeois culture of Western Europe, in opposition to a culture national as form and socialist as content<sup>46</sup>.

“With a few exceptions”, Bauman said, “Latinisation was done against the wish and will of the population. Only the Yakuts, Buryat–Mongols and Moldavians adopted the Latin alphabet<sup>47</sup>. [...] It got as far as to create Latin alphabets for very small communities, as the Kets – 1,400 persons, Udis – 1,400 persons, Selkups – 1,500 persons, Itelmens – 1,700 de persons”<sup>48</sup>.

Bauman mentioned that several new alphabets were called Latinised, as, for example, the Abkhaz or Kabardian, although, in reality, they were a mixture of Latin and Russian letters and of graphical signs recently invented, which, by their degree of complexity and confusion, reminded of the previous Arab writing. For example, if the Latin alphabet has 24 letters, there were 65 in the Kabardian language and 68 in the Abkhaz.

Bauman also drew the attention on the issue of the vocabulary of the peoples from the U.S.S.R.. The peoples from the periphery of U.S.S.R. were very vulnerable in this sense, as there Latinisation was an instrument of the large and small imperialists. “For example, in Soviet Moldavia [M.A.S.S.R. – I. Ş.], the Romanisation of terminology was promoted for several years, and in Soviet Karelia, during the previous leadership, was promoted the most active Finlandisation”<sup>49</sup>.

The campaign which aimed to restore the languages of the peoples of the U.S.S.R. to the Russian alphabet started in 1936. In 1938, the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolshevik) and the Soviet Government adopted the decision “regarding the compulsory learning of the Russian language in the schools from the republics and national regions”. All 50 languages, previously Latinised, were re-shifted to the Russian alphabet. In 1940, the action of liquidating Latinisation was considered as principally completed.

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As it was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there are contemporary debates regarding the opportunity of the decision to restore the languages from the Russian Federation to the Latin script. In 1999, Tatarstan<sup>50</sup>, an autonomous republic from R.S.F.S.R., declared that it will gradually shift the Tartar language – official language (as well as Russian) – to Russian script. Kremlin reacted promptly. Vladimir Putin, the president of the R.S.F.S.R. at the time, at the request of the

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<sup>46</sup> “Cu privire la alfabetul nou și la construcția lingvistică”, *Memoriul secretarilor C. C. al P. C. (b) A. Andreev și N. Ejov, 15 mai 1936*, in *Cac Stalin zașcitol russkii iazâc* (<http://stalinism.ru/Dokumenty/Kak-Stalin-zaschitil-russkiy-zazzik.html>).

<sup>47</sup> Wording according to the text of the source.

<sup>48</sup> “Cu privire la alfabetul nou și la construcția lingvistică”, *Memoriul secretarilor C. C. al P. C. (b) A. Andreev și N. Ejov, 15 mai 1936*, in *Cac Stalin zașcitol russkii iazâc* (<http://stalinism.ru/Dokumenty/Kak-Stalin-zaschitil-russkiy-zazzik.html>).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Tatarstan/Tataria is a Republic of the Russian Federation.

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Tartars, said *niet* (“no”), stating that the transition to Latin script, in the entire Russia, would be the equivalent of the Russian Federation’s dissolution. At the end of 2002, the State Duma of Russia adopted, and president Putin promulgated the law according to which the official language of the autonomous republics from within the R.S.F.S.R. would compulsory be the Russian script<sup>51</sup>. Despite all these, Serghei Arutiunov, a well-known Orientalist, corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation, Director of the Department for Caucasus Region in the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy, considers that “globalisation and computerisation will influence life so that, finally, in this century, Russian language will adopt the Latin alphabet [...]. If Russia wishes to go hand in hand with the civilised world and to be part of Europe, Russia has to adopt the Latin alphabet and, earlier or later, this step will be taken”<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Stanislav Artemov, “Latinița vs. Kirilița. Smana alfavita cac rezultat smenî politsistemî [Latin alphabet vs. Russian alphabet]” ([http://exlibris.ng.ru/kafedra/2004-07-01/6\\_alphabet.html](http://exlibris.ng.ru/kafedra/2004-07-01/6_alphabet.html)).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*