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## **KAZAKHSTAN SEEKS TO ACCELERATE SWITCH TO WESTERN ALPHABET**

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For more than 75 years, the Kazakh language has been written in Cyrillic, the alphabet of Russian and other Slavic tongues. But President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who led Kazakhstan to independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, is accelerating plans to switch to the Roman alphabet used in Western Europe, even as Russia steps up efforts to exert regional leadership.

Nazarbayev, who is keen for Kazakhstan to gain a higher global profile, last month directed officials to complete plans for the switchover by the end of 2017, with the target of a full conversion by 2025. The process could cost government agencies \$300 million in training and new signage.

Proponents play down the international significance of the move, but critics in Kazakhstan and Russia see it as the government turning its back on the "Russian World," a concept pioneered by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2006. They also see it an attempt by Kazakhstan to facilitate global integration at the expense of cooperation with Russia.

Yerlan Karin, head of the state-run broadcaster, and a former head of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, a think-tank, described the move to the Roman alphabet as a "civilizational choice" in favor of an open and globalizing world.

The idea was first floated in Kazakhstan in 2006 after nearby Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan made the switch in the 1990s. Nazarbayev said the new alphabet "is not a whim" but a requirement. "I hear all kinds of concerns," he said, but added that "we won't forget Russian culture and [the] Russian [language]."

There has been little reaction to the latest Kazakh timetable from the Kremlin, which appears to see the move as a domestic issue rather than a shift in Kazakh foreign policy. Kazakhstan remains a member of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, which groups Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Armenia in an integrated single market.

But the Kremlin has shown its irritation before in relation to independent policymaking by Kazakhstan. In August 2014, following Moscow's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine, Nazarbayev said Kazakhstan reserved the right to leave the economic union if its political independence was threatened. Putin reacted furiously, saying: "Kazakhs didn't have statehood [before Nazarbayev]." His statement was seen as a veiled threat to seize northern parts of Kazakhstan, where there is a sizeable Russian minority, if Astana deviates from Russian foreign policy goals.

But Putin's "Russian World" concept has come under wider strain among member states of the

EEU. Analysts say there is a sense of dissatisfaction with Russian dominance over the bloc, and with Moscow's belief that it can dictate conditions for integration. Despite the EEU's stated aim of boosting trade, Kazakhstan's total two-way trade with member states fell to \$13.6 billion in 2016 from \$16.5 billion in 2010, when a Eurasian customs union was established to prepare the ground for the EEU.

The EEU has become an "incompetent and unpromising" project like the Commonwealth of Independent States, a loose political grouping of nine former Soviet republics, and will eventually die out, said Rasul Zhumaly, an Almaty-based independent analyst. However, Zhumaly said the new alphabet "has nothing to do with member states' dissatisfaction with the EEU," and was intended to help Kazakhstan adapt to a more open economy.

The Roman script is already in widespread use in Kazakhstan. Many businesses, banks and even Russian-language theatres use Roman letters in their names to project an image of openness to a wider world, departing from what they perceive to be the parochialism of Cyrillic.

Many Kazakh businesses use Romanized names to project an image of modernity. (Photo by Naubet Bisenov)

Kazakh vehicle license plates and postal codes use a combination of numbers and Roman letters, while the Ministry of Emergency Situations sends out text warnings in Kazakh and Russian using Roman letters. Almaty, Kazakhstan's biggest city, has adopted a new logo with its name written in the Roman alphabet for tourism purposes.

"Writing Russian or Kazakh words in Roman letters is a fad among young people. This is a new trend when names and brands stress the local color and simultaneously has an international projection because English [Roman alphabet] letters look more stylish and advanced," said Adil Tudiyarov, a 22-year old marketing specialist. "Major banks and companies deal with international markets so they need recognizability."

If the switch to the Roman alphabet goes ahead it will be the third change of Kazakh script in the past century. Arabic script was used until Turkey and the Soviet Turkic republics -- those with ethnic and linguistic links to Turkey -- adopted the Roman script in the 1920s. In 1940 Moscow decided that the Soviet Turkic republics should adopt the Cyrillic-based alphabet to reduce Turkish influence in the region. However, Kazakhs living in China and Iran continue to use the Arabic script when writing in Kazakh, while those in Turkey and Europe use the Roman script.

Anar Fazylzhanova, deputy director of the Almaty-based Baytursynuly Institute of Linguistics of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences, said the use of the Cyrillic script was a negative influence on the Kazakh language because foreign words are often incorporated in a form based on the spelling and pronunciation norms of Russian.

Fazylzhanova said that young Kazakh speakers associate the Arabic script with Islam and religion, the Roman alphabet with "quality," "innovation" and "new technologies," and Cyrillic with the "Soviet totalitarian past."

However, some say that a change to Roman script would dilute Kazakh culture. "The idea is a complete nonsense because our history has been written in Cyrillic for many decades. This is a betrayal of history," said Yevgeniya Savelyeva, 32, an ethnic Russian maker of company stamps. "This is stupid toadying to the West," she said. "There is no sense in looking toward the West

because we need to do things in our own ways."

Aidos Sarym, an Almaty-based independent political analyst, said the proposed shift to the Roman script had been prompted by significant changes in Kazakhstan's demographic and linguistic landscape as the proportion of ethnic Russians declines. Ethnic Kazakhs accounted for 66.5% of the population in 2016, up from 39.7% in 1989, while the proportion of ethnic Russians fell from 37.8% to 20.6% over the same period.

Unprecedented protests against land reforms in 2016 have also put the state authorities under pressure to pay more attention to young Kazakhs, Sarym said. "Authorities find it difficult to suggest anything positive to society at the moment, so they think they are suggesting some national agenda that is relatively painless for them and is acceptable to the public," he said. "This is a symbolic gesture to show some steps being taken in modernizing society."

Sarym added: "The current generation is already different and is rejecting many things related to the Soviet past and values of the 'Russian world,' while a future generation would simply stop understanding it." He said the Kremlin faced a choice between a stable, secular, modernized Kazakhstan and "antiquity with accompanying chaos, drug trafficking, export of terror and other negativity along its border."

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