

Giustina Selvelli

## **The Alphabet of Discord**

The Ideologization of Writing Systems on the Balkans since the  
Breakup of Multiethnic Empires

# BALKAN POLITICS AND SOCIETY

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Giustina Selvelli

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# PREFACE

This book examines a series of issues related to the use of alphabets in the construction of national identity in the Balkan region, with a special focus on Bulgaria and Croatia. It does so by following the spread of different ideologies related to writing systems over a period of about a hundred years (1918-2017). Through the comparative and diachronic study of the symbolism of the alphabet in its modern variants, this work aims to help shed light on relevant questions related to processes of nation building in the Balkans and the linguistic (“alphabetic”) rights of ethno-linguistic minorities, focusing on the important relationships linking writing systems, culture and society. The analysis opts for a large time span in order to register the recurrence of significant elements in different socio-political contexts in both countries, mainly after moments of political crisis or powerful socio-cultural change.<sup>1</sup> The aim is not to endorse or discredit the truthfulness or legitimacy of particular cultural traditions or identity discourses, but to problematize the value of the alphabet as a cultural element on a symbolic level and, within the “national historical imagination,” for the collective consciousness of a country (cf. Marinov 2011: 9-10)

The book starts with an introductory section (chapter 1) that explains the peculiarities of the post-imperial and post-socialist context in the Balkan Peninsula in terms of nation-building processes and the position of ethno-linguistic minorities. I then illustrate the importance of writing systems’ symbolic dimension and describe the methodology for considering different “textualities.” Finally, I comment on the disciplinary approaches I have applied to the investigation of this topic, referring to the anthropology of writing, cultural memory studies and semiotic approaches.

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1 Although some of the controversies covered had precedents in nineteenth-century debates in which writing systems played an important role, this book will focus almost exclusively on the period 1918-2017. Moreover, it is important to note that this book is concerned with the topic of writing systems and thus approaches the question of language in a very restricted way.

Chapter 2 analyzes the debates that arose in Greece in the second half of the 1920s over the adoption of a Latin-based alphabet in place of Cyrillic for the language of the Slavophone communities in Aegean Macedonia. The issue is contextualized within the complicated Balkan and European scenario after the end of the First World War, when the issue of protecting the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities first appeared in international law. I then illustrate the specificity of the school primer *Abecedar*, which was produced for these communities in Aegean Macedonia in the local Slavic language but using a Latin alphabet, something contrary to the Slavic Orthodox beliefs of the population, and I analyze the reactions of various Bulgarian intellectuals such as Ivan Shishmanov and Lyubomir Miletich.

Chapter 3 examines the debates about the advisability of replacing the Cyrillic alphabet for the Bulgarian language with a new, Latin script that took place in Bulgaria in the early 1930s. I emphasize the importance of the Soviet context of Latinization, linked to the theories formulated by the Russian linguist Yakovlev about the substitution of all non-Latin scripts by the so-called *alphabet of the revolution*. The debate is reconstructed through the analysis of some texts from this period, in particular the report “Cyrillic or Latin: The Bulgarian Character,” published in the journal *Bulgarian Book* in March 1930, which presents the opinions of representatives of the intellectual, graphic and political spheres on this issue.

Chapter 4 explores the issue of the problematic introduction of the Latin alphabet for the Turkish minority in Bulgaria following its adoption in neighboring Turkey in 1928. I explain why this event triggered anxieties in both the Bulgarian state and the more conservative strata of the local Turkish community, which affected the community’s “writing” and linguistic rights. In this context, I analyze the attitudes towards the Arabic and Latin alphabets that led to the prohibition of the Latin alphabet for this minority in the Balkan country in the interwar period, in an unprecedented constellation of interests between the Bulgarian authorities and Islamic religious powers.

Chapter 5 describes the “alphabet context” in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, in the

1920s and 1930s. In particular, I consider the issue of “biscriptality” as the official language policy and connect it to debates about the possibility of making the Latin alphabet the sole writing system in the country. I then consider the texts of three authors who see a possible solution to the situation of parallel use of Latin and Cyrillic in the creation of a new *Yugoslav alphabet*, an artificial and mixed writing system containing the characters of both alphabets in equal proportion. Although these proposals were not taken into account by official policy, they resonated in the debates of intellectuals of the time, a fact I demonstrate by looking at the reactions of intellectuals, such as those of the eminent philologist Aleksandar Belić.

Chapter 6 addresses the issue of the so-called “cyrillophobia” towards the alphabet used by the Serbian population, by considering the pre-war context and illustrative cases of the laws prohibiting its use enacted during the years of the independent Croatian state, the Nazi puppet state during Second World War. This issue is inscribed in the context of the growing rejection by a part of the Croatian cultural and intellectual world of any idea of linguistic and orthographic union with its Serbian counterpart. I refer to several texts that downplay the value of the Serbian script tradition and, in contrast, glorify the uninterrupted history of Croatian writing. Finally, I briefly analyze the parallel rediscovery of Glagolitic, including the 1944 case of the Glagolitic inscription in Zagreb Cathedral.

Chapter 7 focuses on the role of the Glagolitic alphabet in Croatia from the 1970s onwards, when the monumental project of the *Glagolitic Alley* was built in the Istrian hinterland. The motif of Glagolitic as a “democratic” writing system is analyzed in depth through the texts of the writer Zvane Črnja, who worked to promote local Istrian heritage and territory. I then address the examples of the institutionalization of Glagolitic as an autochthonous symbol at the state level in the post-socialist period, when this script became a fully national one in the official discourse of the independent country.

Chapter 8 addresses the question of the changes in the status of the Cyrillic alphabet in Croatia and Serbia in the post-socialist moment. I show that, if on the Croatian side this script was

subjected to various forms of “marginalization” in the public sphere, in Serbia it became the core of some official and nationalist discourses. To this end, besides the first signs of discontent towards the Serbian Cyrillic heritage in the country, I consider the episode of “anti-Cyrillic” protests in the city of Vukovar in 2013/2014 and contextualize it in the process of Croatian nation-building. I also focus on the legacy of biscriptality in Serbia and briefly mention the debates on the status of the Cyrillic alphabet led by some nationalist actors.

Chapter 9 analyzes the debates that took place in Bulgaria at the turn of the century, triggered by the so-called *Kronsteiner case*, and trace the latter’s stages from the initial proposal of the Austrian Bulgarianist to introduce a Latin alphabet parallel to the Cyrillic one in the country. I interpret the polemic by looking at important issues of modernization and European integration that go hand in hand with conservative narratives about national identity in a sometimes contradictory way. In addition to the texts written by Professor Otto Kronsteiner, I present the reactions of representatives of the Bulgarian scholarly and intellectual world to the issue, as well as texts drawn from the wider public debate.

Chapter 10 illustrates a number of initiatives for safeguarding the Cyrillic alphabet in Bulgaria since the country’s accession to the European Union (EU), initiated and supported by politicians, intellectuals and even ordinary citizens. I refer to important technical and practical matters related to the use of this script in the context of the Internet, and I examine the theme of the May 24 National Day celebrations and the contemporary ideological value of the Cyrillo-Methodian work (the creation of the alphabet) in the national discourse. In addition, I briefly mention the recent rediscovery of the Glagolitic alphabet in Bulgaria and its use for the purpose of “ethnogenic” affirmation by the right-wing political party *Ataka*.

All of these case studies share similar structural features, a fact that supports my hypothesis regarding the relevance of the alphabet in legitimating certain kinds of identity rhetoric in the context of socio-political turning points. At the same time, they substantiate the idea that alphabets represent an element of particular importance in the

Balkan world, intertwined with some “ethnosymbolist” (Smith 2009) identity dynamics active in the post-imperial and then post-socialist period of the affirmation of new political entities.

By looking at the rhetoric and ideologies of different countries in a longer-term perspective, this work does not aim to reduce the topic to a “unitary” or “monovalent” point, such as through simple oppositions and equations. Instead, by virtue of a broad comparative approach, I attempt to reconstruct the ideological background of individual historical-cultural contexts in which specific discourses and practices related to alphabets find their legitimacy. Based on a “relational” logic, such considerations uncover crucial contextual principles that need to be taken into account in order to obtain a more complete vision of the intricate Balkan space at two critical moments in the history of the last century.