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# Choosing between Cyrillic and Latin for linguistic citizenship in contemporary Serbia

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**Abstract:** Both the Cyrillic and Latin scripts are routinely used for writing in Serbian. In existing ideological discourses, using Cyrillic is associated by some with Serbian ethnic authenticity and loyalty to nationhood, but by others with conservatism, Russian-leaning politics and dangerous ethnonationalism. For some, using Latin is associated with cosmopolitanism and a western-leaning internationalisation, but for others with an assault on Serbian heritage, values and tradition. In this context, with which script do Serbians today most closely affiliate and does established ideological discourse actually inform script choices? By seeing this affiliation as linguistic citizenship, the paper analyses survey data and metalinguistic explanations about which script Serbians choose to represent their own names as the most personal of identities. The data show that while some simply write their name in either script depending on habit, younger Serbians, and Serbians outside metropolitan areas, seemingly bias Cyrillic for ethnonationalist reasons as discourse predicts. However, especially revealing is that linguistic citizenship among older Serbians is sooner mediated by lingering notions of Yugoslavia and Serbo-Croatian as country and language that no longer exist but once indexed ideals of equality and harmony in the region.

**Keywords:** digraphia; Serbian; Cyrillic; Latin; linguistic citizenship; nationalism

## 1 Introduction

Serbian is a rare example of a language community with a linguistic culture of digraphia – in this case of synchronic biscriptality – whereby the Latin and Cyrillic scripts are currently used interchangeably for writing the standard language (Bunčić 2016). At a crossroads between the Cyrillic world and the Latin world, the state recognises Cyrillic as the official script for official purposes and the government seeks to protect and promote this status, albeit other scripts, including Latin, may be

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used. The linguistic culture is such that Serbians are largely free to use either Cyrillic or Latin, subject to any specific contextual demands or the working of official policy. Serbia's public spaces – such as street signs, advertisements and other elements of the linguistic landscape – encapsulate this digraphia with an often unpredictable use of Latin, Cyrillic, or indeed both in tandem. Figure 1, for example, shows that two unaffiliated *pekara*/пекара ('bakeries'), both in inner Belgrade offering similar products, have chosen different scripts in their commercial representation.

The fact that Serbians can choose between two scripts is at least in part attributable to former Yugoslavia. There, both Cyrillic and Latin were co-official. Since the fall of Yugoslavia, however, Latin and Cyrillic have acquired pertinent semiotic properties in popular Serbian discourses. Latin has become discursively associated by some with modernisation, cosmopolitanism, an affiliation with the West and an openness to integration with Europe (Ivić 2001; Radovanović 2000), but by others with an assault on Serbian heritage, often intertwined within discourses of Serbia being victim to a western-led international conspiracy (Hodges 2016). Cyrillic, on the other hand, has for some been iconised, as Jovanović (2018) discusses, with the preservation of a Serbian, quintessentially non-Croatian identity to aid the post-war nation-building process, and for others with over-zealous religious ethnonationalism, conservatism and Russian political sympathies. What is more, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has, for Serbian discourses, only amplified attention to the pull of Russia from the East into its orbit, and the pull from the West towards democratisation and integration. Serbian government-backed media, known for its Russian sympathies, is criticised for seeing the West “a provocateur, hegemon, instigator of the crisis, promoter of a fake pandemic and vaccines bearing chips to track humans”



**Figure 1:** Two bakeries in Belgrade. © author.

(Intellinews 2022) amidst a background of Serbia refusing to join the international community in laying sanctions on Russia (Sekularac 2022).

With this complex ideological terrain in mind, what script do Serbian individuals then choose to write their own names in, and are these choices motivated by ideology as popular discourse would suggest? Personal names are after all an ultimate expression of one's own identity (Finch 2008). For this paper, 317 self-identifying Serbs were asked – by way of a survey canvassing more matters about digraphia in Serbia – which script they write their names in, and why, when not prompted to bias one script or the other. This produced a quantitative data set on script choice plus a qualitative data set on linguistic motivation. By positioning their responses as expressions of linguistic citizenship, the paper discusses how Serbs see their own selves as being most authentically represented in terms of script where a script choice is possible.

## 2 Digraphia, ideology and language policy in former Yugoslavia

Serbia's digraphia is a result of the ethnic and religious diversity – and sociolinguistic circumstances in dialectic relationship to that diversity – of the region and former Yugoslavia. Now split into Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia and Kosovo, Yugoslavia was known, as Bugarski (2001) explains, as “the Balkan linguistic pot” (p. 71) whereby the state hosted over twenty languages. This linguistic pot was headed, however, by the Serbo-Croatian language as it was then known, encompassing languages we now know as Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. Other major languages included Slovenian and Macedonian. Being ethnic Serbian was – and remains – pragmatically associated with the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the script of that affiliation is Cyrillic. Meanwhile, for Roman-Catholic Croats, Latin emerged as the local standard for writing in Serbo-Croatian (Husic 2009). In pluralist Bosnia literacy emerged in Cyrillic, Latin, and even in Arabic up to the 20th century among Muslims (Bugarski 2001; Ford 2002).

In the interests of stability, the position of President Tito<sup>1</sup> – seen as the architect of modern Yugoslavia – was to prevent ethnic identities, that intertwined religion and language, from manifesting into ethnonationalism. His presidency was largely successful in this, albeit this resulted from silencing ethnonationalism rather than resolving it. From a policy perspective, the arrangements were Leninist. Serbo-

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<sup>1</sup> Tito was president of Yugoslavia from 1953 to 1980, but held other key positions before then, including secretary-general of the Communist Party (1939–80), supreme commander of the Yugoslav Partisans (1941–45) and the Yugoslav People's Army (1945–80), and marshal (1943–80) and premier (1945–53) (Barnett 2022).

Croatian – as the language of Belgrade and the capital of Yugoslavia – was not imposed federally, but the various states established their own language policies in respect to their own linguistic environments. Federal policy therefore included the recognition of Latin and of Cyrillic as official scripts in Yugoslavia, to be both learnt in the education system (Bugarski 2001; Greenberg 2000). The foundations of this were set out in the Novi Sad agreement of 1954 whereby Serbians and Croats reaffirmed the unity of Serbo-Croatian as a single language to be written in Cyrillic or Latin (Bugarski 1992). Nonetheless, the system afforded the individual republics a legal framework to pursue their own language management programmes. This allowed Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Montenegro to plan their own languages, albeit from a typological linguistic perspective these four republics were considered to use varieties on a broader Serbo-Croatian continuum (Tollefson 1993). This was an intentional policy to cater for linguistic variation across the country in the spirit of fostering unity amidst Yugoslavian diversity (Filipović et al. 2007). Indeed, Serbo-Croatian contrasted from other dominant Slavic languages in Yugoslavia, such as Slovenian, Macedonian, and from minority language such as Hungarian, Slovak and Vlach.

In Serbia, the Latin and Cyrillic scripts were used largely interchangeably until 1991 (Greenberg 2000). On the one hand, it retained its Cyrillic tradition. The work of Serbian linguist Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864) was occupied with expressing unity across the Serbo-Croatian language continuum and this included promulgating a Serbian Cyrillic alphabet parallel to Latin (Bugarski 2004a). This was seen as complementing, rather than overriding, an ideology of cohesion amidst diversity. This was evident in ideological discourses of *naš jezik* (our language) in the early 20th century that even spoke – albeit largely only in legal terms – of Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian as a single language (Bugarski 2004a). However, Latin was instrumental in fostering cohesion and communication with other Yugoslavs and afforded access to foreign popular culture, literature, and technology (Ivić 2001). It was the generally preferred script of those in Vojvodina in northern Serbia that hosts a sizeable Hungarian minority, and it gained popularity in urban Belgrade (Greenberg 2004).

However, ethnic tensions and ethnonationalism would lead to the fall of Yugoslavia (see Schöpflin 1993 for overviews of the causes of the fall of Yugoslavia). Bugarski (1992, 1993, 2004b) explains that matters of language were specifically exploited in articulations and assertions of ethnonationalism that would ultimately lead to war. So pertinent was language, Bugarski (2004a) claims, that it was “readily drawn upon in bolstering up Our cause and satanising Their sides” (p. 29) whereby ethnonationalism engendered linguistic debates in the Balkans as much as linguistic debates engendered ethnonationalism (Bugarski 2001). As Yugoslavia fractured in 1991, the notion of Serbo-Croatian as a unified language lost currency. This once powerful ideology split into seeing Croatian and Serbian as distinct languages for

distinct peoples with distinct cultures, for the purposes of aiding separate identity and nation development. Croatia adopted only Latin as its official script in its post-war language policy and young Croatians are now largely illiterate in Cyrillic. Serbia, however, upheld its tradition of digraphia (Ivković 2013; Jovanović 2018).

### 3 Digraphia, ideology and language policy in contemporary Serbia

Despite discursive associations between script and ethnicity, the Serbian language has not become universally synonymous with using Cyrillic. Empirical linguistic data is limited, but recent insights suggest that Cyrillic remains the predominant script across personal and public domains, albeit Latin appears to remain a concrete rival (see Bugarski 2021 for an overview of the current situation). However, a diversity of ideals arose in respect to how the Serbian language should be planned since Yugoslavia broke apart, and the situation of digraphia remains hotly debated. Greenberg (2000) explains that Serbian language enthusiasts and linguists have typically fallen into three broad groups: status-quo linguists, neo-Vukovites, and an Orthodox group. Status quo linguists advocated seeing modern Serbian as the advancement of Serbo-Croatian and to uphold Serbia's system of digraphia. Their concern was with authenticity rather than with a hierarchy of scripts per se. Neo-Vukovites, as they are known, wish to see both Cyrillic and Latin be used, but in the norms promulgated by Vuk Karadžić. This group therefore sees Vuk Karadžić's work as the essential reference point for contemporary Serbian.

The Orthodox group, on the other hand, "is that of the extreme Serbian nationalists" (Greenberg 2008, 628) that has not only advocated for the sole use of Cyrillic but also seeks to delegitimise Croatian and Bosnian as true languages. The latter is also the group that has constructed Cyrillic as the essence of being Serbian (Bugarski 2021). Jovanović's (2018) analysis of Serbian ethnonationalist discourses from Matica Srpska – the association tasked with protecting Serbian heritage – and from print media shows, from the perspective of this group, that "to be a Serb ... one should additionally and ineluctably be of the Orthodox faith, speak Serbian, and consequently use the Cyrillic script" (p. 612). Some two decades on from Serbia's war with Croatia, this group tends to see Cyrillic as the perfect script and even uniquely Serbian albeit the script is shared much more broadly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Jovanović 2018). The Orthodox group claims that Cyrillic is under threat through the encroachment of Latin, and reportedly holds disdain for Latin as an index of things Croatian (Bugarski 2021; Greenberg 2004; Jovanović 2018). This

contrasts with notably anti-nationalist voices in Serbian linguistics (Bugarski 2021; Jovanović 2018).

Contemporary Serbian government sympathises with pro-Cyrillic enthusiasts. Under the Serbian constitution (2006), both scripts can be used, but official communications of the state are to be in Cyrillic (Article 10). The government, however, seemingly sides with the Orthodox group. For nationalists, and indeed the government, Latin is seen as a threat to the Serbian sense of self. In turn, the government passed legislation in 2021 that extends the obligation on public institutions to use Cyrillic in public life to now include non-government actors (Republic of Serbia 2021). By default, Cyrillic is now mandated as the script for private media, entertainment, the arts, commerce and all other public use of language (see Bugarski 2021 for discussion). The legislation also comprises tax incentives for businesses who use Cyrillic in public life and penalties for using Latin, essentially fabricating a neoliberal motive in the community to use Cyrillic. In primary schools, literacy education begins in Cyrillic, and Latin is introduced in the second semester of the second grade (Rulebook on Curriculum for First and Second Grade of Elementary Education 2013).

The discussion above summarised the politicisation of scripts in Serbia. The analytical focus now is on whether, and why, Serbian nationals see Latin, Cyrillic, or both scripts as best representing their personal identities and indeed whether these ideological narratives are at play in that identification.

## 4 Theory and method

Drawing on Stroud (2003), this paper positions identity, and the use of one script or another when expressing that identity in its written form, as linguistic citizenship. Within the framework of performative pragmatics, linguistic citizenship sees people enact and reclaim power and legitimacy through discourse and through their linguistic performances. This is not in the least because complex sociolinguistic milieu require individuals to find a linguistic “good fit for themselves in what is happening around them” (Williams and Stroud 2015, 407) and dynamic and diverse settings and sociolinguistic phenomena give rise to representations of one’s positionality through language practices, and to perceptions of pragmatic associations between the practices of others and their sociopolitical positioning (Salamh et al. 2018). For Serbia, this includes what script people choose for their written interactions and whether, to what extent, and why individuals see Cyrillic, Latin, or some digraphic combination as amounting to a good fit in (expressing) being Serbian. To this end, the task of a Serbian individual choosing one script over another is seen as a matter of *enacting* linguistic citizenship. This is because the individual is faced with the question of representing his/her linguistic citizenship within a broader societal context where

two scripts are available and in an ideological context where script choice is not (necessarily) seen by others as benign.

Naturally, linguistic interactions and performances are ubiquitous and subject to societal norms, domain and ideological pressures or expectations. For example, government forms tend to encourage the use of Cyrillic, and the online world tends to be Latin. It was my hope to identify script choice where specific norms and pressures are minimised. I therefore opted for the performance of writing one's own name – not on any official documents or where context dictates one script or another – but by hand where one has relatively free choice between the scripts, such as when giving a phone number or writing a name tag. The hypothesis is that asking Serbian people which script they choose simply to write their own name – when otherwise unprompted by context or ideological forces – can reveal linguistic citizenship. For this I rely on theoretical understandings about identity and its salience in personal names. Personal names are one of the most personal identities (Dion 1983) and are how people self-identify to others. Where more than one script is available, giving one's name to others is performative by alluding to how one constructs one's linguistic self. This is especially relevant in the case of Serbia where individuals can choose to enact a linguistic citizenship affiliated with Cyrillic or with Latin in a context backgrounded by language politics. I therefore posited that choosing between script alternatives can amount to the expression of perceived personal linguistic authenticity and, therefore, linguistic citizenship.

An important starting point for any social research in Serbia in the wake of Yugoslav-era conflict is that national identities are in transformation. This means that individual linguistic citizenships in Serbia may also be under transformation. Nonetheless, the research is interested in whether linguistic citizenship is or is not informed by nationalist sentiments. Popular discourse suggests this is the case. Indeed, we know “for many people in the larger Balkans post-war region, nationalism is not only acceptable” but often “the default position” (Deasy 2011, 74). Kahlina (2015) and Mikuš (2015) also explain that in response to the broader idea of European integration, and the liberalisation of minority rights this entails, Serbian nationalism has arisen within the so-called patriotic-bloc movement. This opposes what it sees as the imposition of European values, is concerned with narratives of Serbian suffering, and draws on the teachings of the Orthodox Church to conceptualise morality. However, we also know that a strong nationalist movement exists in Serbia that is enthusiastic about European integration and about moving beyond Serbia's tumultuous past and is even criticised for romanticising the west (Simić 2016). Russell-Omaljev (2016) similarly notes that another visible cohort of Serbians is one that is still attached to pre-war Yugoslavia and holds disdain for things Serbian by seeing them as uncivilised. Nationalism may still be a pervasive reference point in linguistic citizenship, but so may be resistance to that nationalism. As such, this paper's



approach to linguistic citizenship is also inspired by Milani's (2006) discussions about ideological interpellation. This sees that ideologies – including ideological or political associations – come into being through linguistic performances. For us, this includes writing one's own name which interpellates one's own linguistic citizenship and discloses it to other Serbians. This becomes relevant when analysing whether and how choices to use a specific script are related to ideological discourses about the affiliations the scripts presuppose.

Asking Serbian people in which script they write their name is a direct method using self-reports but asking for their meta-explanations is a matter of folk linguistics. Folk linguistics is societally-relevant research about language that specifically investigates how people in the community engage with and talk about the sociolinguistic world vis-à-vis broader social, political and economic processes. While attitudes towards language and language policy may be one aspect of folk linguistics, the focus is on what people claim to know as facts and commonsense about the nature of language and that they assert epistemic authority within talk about language in respect to – and no doubt reflecting – broader societal contexts (Niedzielski and Preston 2009). Most critically, the point of folk linguistics is that claimed knowledge and beliefs that inform societal discourses need not be empirically sound to have impact. Rather, the vast majority of people who use language, and reflect on their own practices, the practices of others and the language policies of a state, are not trained linguists, but they do nonetheless claim facts about their linguistic environments. The point is that claims about the nature of the sociolinguistic world are discursively produced and reproduced in Foucauldian terms through ideology, politics, religion and other mechanisms. These ultimately inform perceived truths and commonsense about the (sociolinguistic) world and add to local discourses and debates about language affairs (Albury 2017; Preston 2011). This premised Jovanović (2018) analysis of how Cyrillic is epistemically constructed by conservatives as under attack and central to Serbian identity and, relatedly, the desirability of preserving Cyrillic as the “perfect” script. Now, in asking people to explain why they would write their name in one particular script, I positioned them as folk linguists tasked to rationalise, through folk linguistic discourse, a linguistic phenomenon by way of their own knowledge, motivations, and the sociopolitical context of Cyrillic and Latin more generally.

I promulgated an online survey across Serbia and the Serbian diaspora and invited participation by anyone who identifies as Serbian, speaks Serbian as a first language, is 18 years of age or older, and has never studied linguistics. The survey investigated various phenomena, but this paper deals with responses to one specific question: “if a person of Serbian nationality asks you to write your name (for example, on a mailbox or to give them your telephone number), which script would you use, and why?” Figure 2 is a screen shot of the specific question at hand in the





## Svakodnevna upotreba ćirilčnog i latiničnog pisma u Srpskom jeziku

[Daily use of the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets in Serbian]

Главна питања у мом истраживању су:

- Како се људи у Србији осећају по питању ћириличног и латиничног писма који су у употреби у Српском језику?
- Коју идеолошку релевантност имају ћирилична и латинична писма у Србији?

[The main questions in my research are:

- How do people in Serbia feel about the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets that are in use in the Serbian language?
- What ideological relevance do Cyrillic and Latin have in Serbia?

Ukoliko vam osoba Srpske nacionalnosti zatraži da napišete svoje ime (na primer, u poštanskom sandučetu ili da date svoj telefonski broj), koje pismo koristite i zašto? [If a person of Serbian nationality asks you to write your name (for example, on a mailbox or to give your phone number), which script do you use and why?]

Tekst lang antwoord

У којим ситуацијама користите ћирилицу приликом писања на Српском језику, и зашто? [In what situations do you use the Cyrillic alphabet when writing in Serbian, and why?]

Tekst lang antwoord

U kojim situacijama koristite latinicu prilikom pisanja na Srpskom jeziku, i zašto? [In what situations do you use the Latin alphabet when writing in Serbian, and why?]

Tekst lang antwoord

Размишљајући о српском језику, шта бисте више волели да видите у Србији? [Thinking about the Serbian language, what would you prefer to see in Serbia? - Latin only; - Cyrillic only; - both Cyrillic and Latin - it doesn't matter]

- ☐ Само латинично писање
- ☐ Само ћирилицу
- ☐ и латиницу и ћирилицу
- ☐ Није важно

Figure 2: Research question in context and alternating between scripts.

survey, plus parts of the relevant introductory text to the survey and other items adjacent to the one in question in this paper (but not, showing how the survey itself alternated between using Latin and Cyrillic).

The survey was in Serbian to ensure only Serbian speakers would respond, however the qualitative data was translated to English by an accredited translation firm in Belgrade. Writing one's name in digital spaces was purposefully excluded from the question, given the documented predominance of Latin script online (Bugarski 2021) which may prime participants to choose Latin. Non-digital contexts are therefore more conducive to the performance of linguistic citizenship. Also, to avoid biasing either Cyrillic or Latin, and inadvertently prompting participants to use one script or the other, the survey explicitly told participants they are free to choose to complete the survey in either script. As shown above, the question relevant to this paper ("if a person of Serbian nationality asks you to write your name (for example, on a mailbox or to give them your telephone number), which script would you use, and why?"), was written in Latin.

The survey was disseminated using various approaches. To begin, a snowball approach was pursued whereby Serbian friends forwarded the survey to their friends and family or posted it on their Facebook pages. I also posted it to my Facebook page, Twitter and to Instagram with the hashtags #srpski and #srpskijezik. I also followed a variety of publicly-open groups on Facebook and invited participation from Serbians with diverse backgrounds and political leanings. These included pro-Cyrillic language enthusiast groups, Serbian cultural groups, Orthodox church groups, pro-European Union groups, as well as less politically motivated groups including an animal shelter, a hunting group, a rugby group, a go-carting group, and the Facebook pages of radio stations and newspapers. These were in large part determined by where access was obtainable. For the latter, I also posted a link to the survey in comments to specific news items. Universities in Belgrade and Niš also agreed to send the survey across their student mailing lists.

The survey resulted in 317 participants. Based on their own reports of where they reside, 134 people in Belgrade participated, 56 in Niš, 23 in Novi Sad, 75 elsewhere in Serbia, and 29 abroad. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the age and gender profile of the participants. In total, 35 people responded to the specific question at hand in Cyrillic. This may seem low, especially in the context of the upcoming analysis, but is explained by Latin dominating online communication, especially given participants often reported their keyboards to be Latin-only.

The analytical starting point for this paper is the quantified data on script choices to write one's name. Qualitative data about why the participants use the script they do was then used to help nuance the quantitative data. I do not claim that the data set is representative, nor do I make generalisations about the prevalence in Serbia more broadly of the arguments that arose in the qualitative data. This is

**Table 1:** Participation by age and gender.

	18–30 years	31–40 years	41–50 years	51 + years	Totals
Female	87	71	27	14	199
Male	48	42	17	10	117
Rather not say	1	0	0	0	1
Total	136	113	44	24	317

primarily because of the size of the participant group, the fact those motivated by matters of language were more likely to participate, and because the detail to which participants explained their script choices varied. Whereas some indeed gave explanations of, for example, up to 25 words, others only stated the script they use and moved on to the next question. Also, I do not claim to have identified ideologies of language per se, as these may be best discovered through interaction or in lengthier discourses (Verschueren 2011) rather than through survey responses, but the qualitative data helps to elucidate the types of thematic arguments and explanations the participants relied upon, including whether these seemed ideologically motivated, to construct a linguistic citizenship.

In conducting analysis, all responses for script choice were first tallied in frequency tables based on variables including age, location, level of education, and gender. Then, the qualitative data was analysed through folk linguistic content analysis (Preston 1994, 2011) through a discourse-historical lens (Wodak and Meyer 2009). This meant firstly positioning the data as explanatory stances (Jaffe 2009), and coding and categorising (Saldaña 2012) the explanations by theme. The explanations were analysed as critical discourse (van Dijk 2003) whereby the texts were examined for explicit claims about why a script is chosen as well as implicit intersubjectivities – i.e. presupposed knowledge or commonsense that explanations seemingly relied on to make sense in the Serbian context – and reflecting on how these were motivated. True to critical discourse analysis in a historical context (Wodak and Meyer 2009), this demanded interpretation vis-à-vis existing knowledge and scholarship.

## 5 Findings and discussion

When asked which script they use to write their names in situations where they have not been prompted otherwise, 50.5 % claimed to use Cyrillic, 42.9 % claimed to use Latin, and the remainder claimed to use both. It is also important to emphasise that this is a case study. The unequal cohort sizes – by gender, location and age – mean the

study has not captured universal perspectives, nor does it form a basis for demographic comparisons. It is entirely feasible that those who responded to the survey were motivated by the topic – eager to share their preconceived ideas and convictions – and represent the pointed ends of attitudes to the scripts.

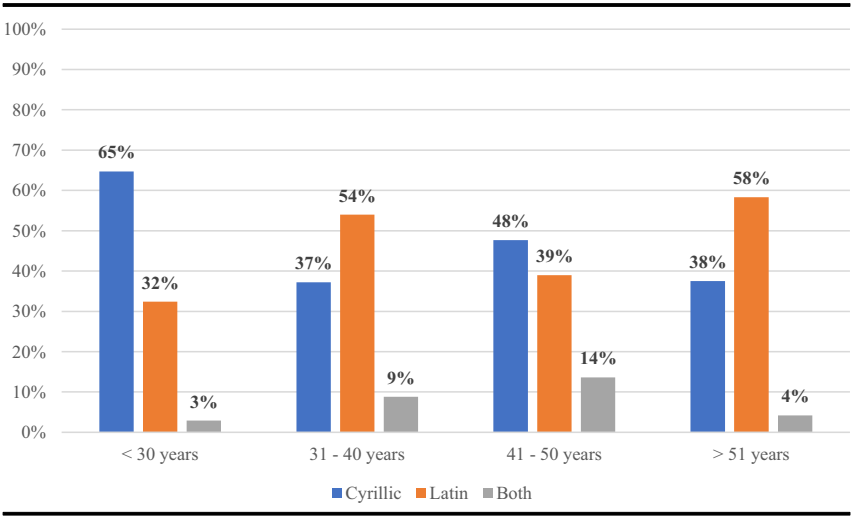
Also, even with this relatively neutral survey question, it is possible that some people felt prompted to use one script over another. This is especially true for Serbian people who come from multiethnic families, as was commonplace in Yugoslavia. For example, one parent may be Serbian, another Croatian, and the family may have Bosnian or Montenegrin relatives, albeit in the past they considered themselves to be Yugoslavian. Specific surnames may therefore be derived from specific languages or regions that used one specific script. Indeed, one participant explained “my surname is originally written in the Latin script, its translation can be written in Cyrillic but I use it very rarely”, suggesting that although she is Serbian, her name may for example be Croatian, Slovenian, or Bosnian. Justifications such as this may have backgrounded choices, even where the participant did not offer explanations for script choice beyond simply naming one script and moving to the next survey question. However, it is also reasonable to assume that because the survey invited participation by people who self-identify as Serbian, and with Serbian as their first language, then fewer people from mixed Balkan backgrounds may have completed the survey if they did not self-identify strictly as Serbian. It is also entirely possible – given the observer’s paradox – that participants offered responses that they themselves saw as ideologically desirable even if these did not reflect their actual practices. This is an inherent risk in direct research methods and renders the study a snapshot of perceived linguistic citizenship, rather than a comprehensive analysis of actual script choices.

Nonetheless, and most importantly, the study does reveal whether and how ideological motivations were pragmatically embedded in reported script choices. Added to this, demographic differences did emerge in script preference, specifically as it concerns the age of the participants and their location. Level of education did not play a role in that responses filtered by education level – from high school through to postgraduate education – mirrored the same general trend.

## 5.1 Generational differences

The results show that younger Serbians aged 18–30 years strongly favoured Cyrillic while Latin was seen as more authentic to personal names – or at least held a more prominent place – amongst the majority of those in the older age groups. An overview of this data is at Table 2. Only a minority of young respondents exhibited a preference for Latin, and only three revealed sympathies for internationalisation to

**Table 2:** Script choice for writing name by age group.



motivate choosing Latin, explaining for example “I use Latin because it resembles English letters more ... and the majority of content on the Internet is written in Latin” (24-year-old, non-disclosed gender). The younger respondents explained their preference for Cyrillic through two main reasons.

Reponses from the majority of participants under 30 showed that they use Cyrillic not for nationalist purposes, but because they are simply more familiar with it, use it out of habit, or that this is the script they were mostly educated in. This makes sense given this cohort received formative education during or after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the codification of Cyrillic as the first script in education. For example, a 21-year-old female explained “I use Cyrillic cursive letters, I write faster that way, and besides I have written cursive letters all my life”, and a 22-year-old male wrote that “Cyrillic. In school we first learned Cyrillic, so now I automatically write in Cyrillic”. That is to say, most youths justified their script choices on the basis of habit – whereby this habit results from language policy that structured their education – rather than on the basis of political motivation.

Some, but fewer youths, were motivated by matters of national identity, explicitly claiming that Cyrillic is the true script. They use Cyrillic to write their names because they are Serbian. For example, a 19-year-old male explained he writes his name “with the intention of preserving cultural identity of Serbs and the Cyrillic script is their distinguishing feature”, and a 22-year-old female wrote “I use the

Cyrillic script, primarily because that is the alphabet of my country and I don't want it to be forgotten over time and merged with the scripts of other countries". On first glance, these sentiments may seem nationalistic. It would be unwise, however, to conflate national sentiments with nationalism per se. These youths have, after all, mostly only known Serbia as an independent state and not as part of Yugoslavia, and have been socialised into notions of *Serbia* and *Serbian*. To this end, it ought to be recalled that Serbian has been politically constructed as distinct from Croatian and Bosnian, but is in practical terms the same language as those varieties. For these youths, Cyrillic may therefore serve as fodder in carving out a language – and a linguistic citizenship – that is identifiable from their Balkan neighbours.

On the other hand, nationalism may indeed be at play: Serbian youths are, in general terms, prone to nationalism because their formative socialisation took place in a context rife with nationalist discourses. Hudson (2003) noted already in 2003 – when these youths were children – that a chauvinistic return to nationalistic sentiments was arising, largely because Serbia had been banished from the European mainstream. This has led to suspicions of the West conducting surveillance of Serbia, disdain for the imposition of western values, and collective memories of foreign attacks against Serbia during the formation of the new state. Mandić (2017), for example, also speaks of Serbian youth retaining a reverence for official, nationalist narratives of Serbian history. Greenberg (2014) notes that nationalist fanaticism has, for example, come to flavour domains populated by youth such as sport, especially where Serbia plays against a Balkan neighbour. Hudson (2003) also argues that since the 1990s, nationalist messaging has often been embedded in popular Serbian music – notionally catering to today's youth – amounting to "a process of ethnification – a cult of the folkloric – in which popular music contributed to the estrangement, alienation and distancing of the Other" (p. 157).

Indeed, a preoccupation with demarcating Serbia from the *other* was evident in some justifications for biasing Cyrillic. A 24-year-old female explained that she uses "Cyrillic. I was born in Serbia, Serbian script" and another female, also 24 years, argued that she uses "Serbian ... that's the alphabet of my mother tongue". The former comment reasserts Cyrillic as the single authentic Serbian script while the latter goes so far as to synonymise Serbian with Cyrillic. Views such as these implicitly, but nonetheless clearly, correlated Latin with the non-Serbian *other*. A small minority of participants took this further by alluding to a conspiracy to eradicate Cyrillic. A 22-year-old female admitted that she uses Latin but explained this is because "most people around me use the Latin alphabet. My opinion is that the Latin script is being imposed on us" and a 23-year-old male claimed he writes his name in "Cyrillic, primarily for aesthetic reasons and partly out of spite". Claims such as these, with words such as "imposed" and "spite", harbour a resentment towards the use of Latin to the detriment of Cyrillic. Such data suggests that the nationalist

rise among young Serbians extends for many to matters of linguistic citizenship. That is not to say, of course, that all Serbian youths felt this way. Some youths expressed identifiably pro-western and global views with a preference for Latin, explaining they use Latin “because it looks nicer and the whole world uses it” (23-year-old female). It is, however, to say that Cyrillic was the preferred script in representing individual Serbian linguistic citizenship among youths and that this may be explained by these youth being socialised into the Serbian state at a time of ethnonationalist nation-building and its associated discourses.

Results from the older cohorts were, however, notably void of ethnonationalism. Instead, Yugoslavian ideals of equality and diversity seemed to mediate linguistic citizenship. Especially striking is that the majority of people in the groups 31–40 years, and those over 50, reported to write their names in Latin. For the group aged 41–50 years, no one script was preferred by the majority, but a large minority claimed to use both scripts interchangeably. A question, of course, is why this contrasts with the youngest group.

A pertinent clue can be found in the claim, made by 15 people in these older groups, that they speak Serbo-Croatian and not Serbian. In some cases, this was done without reflecting on script choice, with assertions such as “In Serbia we speak Serbo-Croatian!” (53-year old female). The youngest claimant of this view was 35. In doing so, these people positioned the language they use to write their name not as the language of contemporary Serbia as it has been officialised through nation-building. Rather, they reproduced Yugoslavian language policy and ideology, despite the survey question, and in essence continued to claim to use a language that is no longer recognised by the state from a country that no longer exists.

This Yugoslavian mindset was evident in justifications to use Latin. Participants explained that this is the script they became familiar with as children growing up in Yugoslavia. For example, a 46-year-old male explained that he uses “Latin. It was demanded more by the school system”, and a 40-year-old female wrote “There is no rule, but probably Latin, as I am simply used to it”. More frequently, however, participants simply stated that they write in Latin, without further extrapolation, or claimed that it is a habit. Others explained their script preference in dialectic relationship to Latin being the predominant script across the Balkan region whereby their linguistic citizenship appears not to be mediated by the politics of Cyrillic today, but by the legacy of their Yugoslavian socialisation under a Leninist view on equality. For example, a 37-year-old male explained that he uses “Latin, because more people will be able to read it (Bosnia, Croatia, Western Europe...)”, and a 57-year-old male said he uses “Latin, it’s generally accepted and I think more widespread in our region”. This means that linguistic citizenship as Serbian – as opposed to Serbo-Croatian – may be felt as unwelcomingly ethnonationalist in the Yugoslavian socialisation they had. Their linguistic citizenship therefore seems not to have



evolved in line with Serbian nation-building, nor nationalism, but remains connected to the other Balkan states and to the Yugoslavia in which they grew up. For them, that connection manifests in Latin.

Only a few participants claimed to use Cyrillic for nationalist reasons or on the basis “it is the official script” (37-year-old male). Instead, they explained that this was a personal choice, and divorced this choice from Serbian politics and from the script debate. For example, a 35-year-old male explained “Cyrillic, because I learned it first and I use it by “default””, a 42-year-old female explained that “stylistically it’s more to my taste”, and a 34-year-old female explained that

after mastering the Cyrillic alphabet in the first grade of elementary school, we started learning the Latin alphabet too. In my case, using the Cyrillic script formed into a habit, but I also think it looks nice (visually), so I continued using it in everyday life.

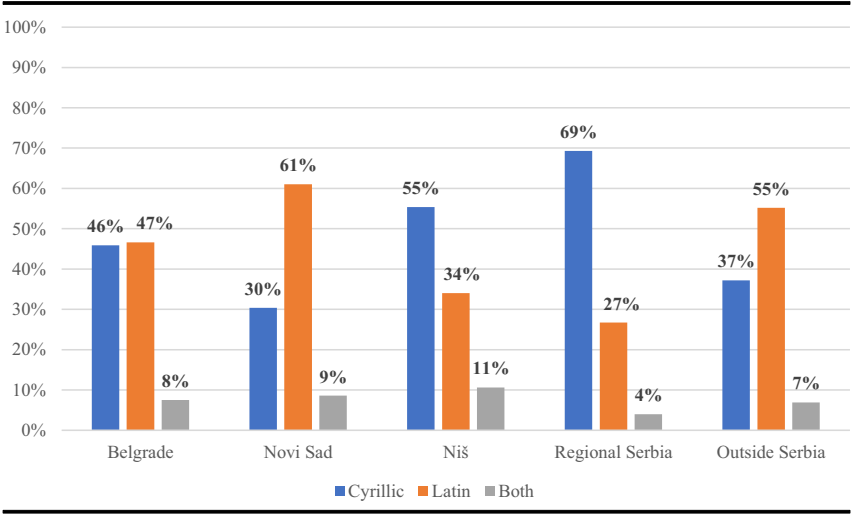
This suggests that people who biased Cyrillic mostly did so out of circumstance and were not opposed to Latin, nor its position in Serbia and the linguistic citizenship of other Serbians. This, as discussed earlier, mirrors the policy of Yugoslavia which promoted equality between the scripts. This is further substantiated by comments made by those who claimed to write their name in both scripts. In particular, they highlighted the normativity of biculturality, and emphasised equality between the scripts. This rendered their practices flexible and informed by context and not by politics. For example, a 48-year-old male explained “I don’t think about it, I use both equally. The advantage of the Latin script is that it’s written faster whereas the Cyrillic script looks nicer”, a 41-year-old female wrote “I don’t know, I use both scripts equally”, and a 37-year-old female explained “Mostly Latin but I use Cyrillic if the document I’m filling out is in Cyrillic”.

Others, seemed to take a more pragmatic, international orientation to position their languages – and their names – within the broader international community. They argued, for example, that they write in “Latin, because the whole world uses the Latin script” (39-year-old female) and “Latin, it’s international” (40-year-old female). The preference for Latin may be seen as instrumental in the international arena. However, the fact that Latin was seen as international – and not Cyrillic albeit it is used in neighbouring countries, and widely in Eastern Europe and Central Asia – a critical view may see this as political support for Serbia’s integration into the western European community, potentially resulting from a desire to distance oneself from Serbia’s modern history.

## 5.2 Geographic differences

Location also played a pertinent role in the data, as showed at Table 3, whereby people in different locations favoured different scripts. From a political science

Table 3: Script choice for writing name by location.



perspective, this may not be surprising. In the wake of the fall of Yugoslavia, and in the context of seeking a new identity as an independent state, Serbia is not understood to exhibit ideological coherence as a nation at the geopolitical macro level (Todosijević 2008). The data suggest this also extends to orthographic choices.

The data shows that a preference for Cyrillic or Latin was generally balanced in the capital Belgrade, reflecting Serbia’s digraphic linguistic culture more generally, but that Latin was clearly favoured in the northern town of Novi Sad. Although the size of the Novi Sad cohort was small, the result is also not surprising. Novi Sad is the capital of Vojvodina which enjoys the status of being an autonomous province. Vojvodina is home to some 20 ethnic groups and is the heartland of Serbia’s ethnic Hungarian minority. Within Yugoslavia, it was granted ethnic territorial autonomy along with Kosovo, in large part rooted in Tito’s ideology to neutralise nationalist uprisings and retain Yugoslavian unity (Borisova and Sulimov 2018). Slobodan Milosevic, however, was hostile towards this arrangement and to any separatist ideologies among the ethnic Hungarian minority, but special rights and affordances were ensured after the formation of Serbia. Today, local Vojvodina leaders – and especially those within the large ethnic Hungarian community – reportedly feel “imperiled by a resurgence of Serbian nationalism, and that the government’s rhetorical commitments to human and minority rights are false advertising” (Hagan 2009, 617). A bias for Latin could therefore index non-Serbian affiliation and

linguistic tradition for some in Vojvodina on the one hand, but serve as a sociolinguistic protest against Serbian nationalism and the Serbian administration on the other. However, Vojvodina was also a target destination for planned resettlement for ethnic Serbs who, elsewhere in former Yugoslavia outside the current borders of Serbia, were displaced during the conflict of the 1990s, given Vojvodina was less involved in violent conflict with NATO (Nikitović and Lukić 2010), meaning the Novi Sad cohort will have also included ethnic Serbs. In any case, Novi Sad participants tended to explain that they use Latin because “my generation grew up using the Latin script more”, “it is a better-known alphabet” and “if I was, for example, Slovak, Hungarian or Romanian, I would write in Serbian using the Latin script”. These claims are in dialectic relationship to Vojvodina’s unique demographic composition whereby its ethnic and cultural purview extends to peoples and languages to the north of Serbia which use Latin.

However, Cyrillic was clearly favoured in the southern town of Niš and in non-urban centres. The results from Niš should be treated with caution as the vast majority of these participants were aged between 18 and 30, meaning the Niš results can also be read as age-related results. However, in as far as Cyrillic indexes political and social conservatism, then the bias for Cyrillic outside the cities probably reflects a broader and internationally common trend of conservatism – and the nationalism this can encompass – in regional areas. This compares with the generally more progressive politics of urban areas that arise from metropolitanism, migration, youthful populations, and more tangible participation in globalised economies (Savitch and Vogel 2009). For Serbia, this potentially includes less Balkan or European diversity within rural areas – and less transnationalism that this diversity brings – than in Belgrade where pro-Cyrillic stances were common but less prevalent. Indeed, a 33-year-old male in Belgrade explained that he uses Latin “so that all my friends from the region would find it easier to read” and a 53-year-old female in Belgrade argued – with a claim that could also be attributed to the above discussion about older participants reproducing equality reminiscent of Yugoslavian ideology – that “we have two scripts which we use and I prefer Latin. Only the nationalists think that Latin is Croatian and Cyrillic is Serbian. That is wrong. They are both ours and you simply have the right to choose”.

Responses from outside metropolitan areas affirmed the view already documented in the 1990s that rural Serbia can exhibit a more politically conservative, populist, Orthodox, and domestic orientation (Ramet 1996). Cyrillic is indeed, according to current scholarship (Jovanović 2018), iconic of a conservative domestic gaze in Serbia. In the data, this national conservatism manifested in traditionalist claims about Cyrillic, ethnic authenticity and, in turn, about one’s own linguistic citizenship. For example, a 39-year-old male in Bor explained that he uses “Cyrillic, because it’s the script of the Serbian language. Every language has its script and the

script of the Serbian language is Cyrillic”, and a 22-year-old male in Niš explained “I use Cyrillic, because it’s Serbian script that was formulated by Cyril and Methodius, who spread Christianity and literacy. All in all, I love the Cyrillic alphabet”. Others argued that the script ought to be safeguarded and writing their names in Cyrillic adds to this enterprise. In doing so, they explicitly or implicitly constructed their argument on an epistemic belief that not only is the survival of Cyrillic under threat, but that threatening Cyrillic jeopardies Serbian heritage. For example, a 44-year-old female in Vršac explained that “I want the Cyrillic script to be preserved”, and a 43-year-old female in Požarevac explained “I want to nurture the Cyrillic alphabet, i.e. I want people in Serbia to continue to use it”. That is not to say all people outside urban areas made such claims – as a substantial majority simply claimed they use Cyrillic, and some added that they do so out of habit or because they like it – but that some especially argued that Cyrillic is the authentic script of Serbia to the exclusion of Latin.

The small cohort from the Serbian diaspora abroad also biased Latin. This can be explained by these people living in societies where Cyrillic is not the local script. Indeed, these respondents were in various countries including Australia, United States, Norway, Germany, and Oman, and they explained that they write their name in Latin because “I have to use it for my work” and “it’s a habit. But also because I live in Norway”. It is noteworthy however, that the diasporic experience did not foster more traditionalist identity constructions by way of Cyrillic to delineate the Serbian diaspora from other Balkan language groups in a way that identity theory might suggest, or to vocalise membership in it as nationals of a relatively new (or, reborn) state. Only in a few cases did Serbians overseas reassert that they are committed to Cyrillic, such as when a 32-year-old female in Norway explained “I use Latin only when I have to. It’s the habit from my childhood, my handwriting looks worse when I use the Latin script. I sign every document in the Cyrillic script, both in Serbia and abroad”. The general absence of a diasporic linguistic citizenship through Cyrillic may, however, be explained – if off-the-record comments from Serbian informants are at all indicative – that many in the diaspora left Serbia with dissatisfaction with nationalist politics in which discourses of Cyrillic are embroiled.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper is an attempt to unpack personal affiliations among Serbian nationals vis-à-vis Cyrillic and Latin as Serbia’s two alternate alphabets. It also sought to analyse whether script choices harbour ideological motivations as mainstream Serbian discourse implies, particularly whether bias for Latin is motivated by ideas of progress, pro-Western politics and internationalisation while a bias for Cyrillic is

motivated by ethnic identity and tradition. To do this, the practice of using one script or another was seen as a performance of linguistic citizenship within the Serbian language community, whereby reports about which scripts Serbians claim to use to write their own names would reveal the authentic performativity of this linguistic citizenship. The small survey sample, the unequal cohort sizes, and the fact not all participants explained their script choices, means it is unwise to quantify any qualitative themes or to treat this research as more than a case study.

Nonetheless, I do conclude that justifications for choices of script were largely stripped of overtly ideological orientations. Participants instead reported to favour one script simply out of habit, or because they like its aesthetics, or indeed offered no explanation at all. This therefore challenges the supposed influence on script choice of the now well-established popular ideological discourse in Serbia that affiliates Cyrillic and Latin with polarised political affiliations. Dominant mainstream discourses – about Cyrillic as indexing tradition and at worst Serbian nationalism, and about Latin as indexing cosmopolitanism, and at worst a conspiracy by the West against Serbia – appeared only in a minority of responses. This especially included, across the cohorts, arguments that Latin is instrumental in the current globalised world and, as such, that it is convenient and easy. This mirrors discourses that reject nationalism and welcome Serbia's integration with the west.

However, it was especially striking that Serbians living outside the major metropolitan areas, seemed much more likely to see Cyrillic as the script of their linguistic citizenship. They tended to offer either factual arguments that Cyrillic is the true script of Serbian, or arguments that were more identifiably embedded in nationalist discourses that constructed Latin as foreign, unwelcome and non-Serbian. This is, of course, contrary to official language policy but in line with the government's ideological rhetoric and promotion of Cyrillic and this speaks to a tradition of conservatism and to a more domestic gaze in contrast to the diversity and progressiveness that is more common in Belgrade. However, nationalist discourses do not seem to have attracted widespread purchase in Novi Sad. In as far as Novi Sad hosts sizeable non-Serbian ethnic minorities, then resistance to Cyrillic may on the one hand be a resistance to Serbian nationalism, or on the other hand simply reflect non-Cyrillic linguistic traditions.

However, it is especially striking that the prevalence and currency of script earlier in the lives of the participants played an important role in the responses, whereby this has socialised them into script preferences today. Indeed, the linguistic citizenship of younger Serbians – who grew up in the new Serbia – tended to favour Cyrillic. In their case, nationalist discourses about the state – and about Serbian as an independent language – that have been reproduced since these participants were children seem to have been successful in recruiting ideological adherents. On the other hand, the linguistic citizenship of older generations was sooner mediated by a

collective memory of Yugoslavia. Their notions of linguistic citizenship were traceable to their socialisation in the days of Yugoslavia – including its culture and policy of biliteracy and avoidance of ethnonationalist proclamations about language – and not to matters of power and ideology today. These cohorts were much less emphatic about Cyrillic as the authentic Serbian script and were instead more likely to justify their individual choices based on circumstance, such as education and family practices in Yugoslavia, whereby these choices are indeed only personal. They were also much more open to using Latin to accommodate their Balkan neighbours who only became separate states in the living memory of these participants and were also generally more likely to report writing their personal names in either script. That is to say, Yugoslavia as an ideological affordance carried more weight than the language politics of nation-building that preoccupied many youths and led to their emphatic claims about Cyrillic.

Now some analysis of linguistic citizenship in the context of writing names has been undertaken, the next possible step is to investigate which sociolinguistic domains now tend to be associated with which script and why, again with a focus on demographic differences and similarities. Collectively, this will help to reveal contemporary day-to-day script choices in Serbia, the extent to which these are ideologically motivated, and ultimately help to consider whether and to what extent Serbian language policy is working.

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