

Committee on Automated Bibliographic Control  
Slavic and East European Section  
Association for College and Research Libraries  
American Library Association

## Proposal to revise the Belarusian ALA-LC romanization table

This proposal aims to bring the Belarusian ALA-LC romanization table in accordance with the modern standard Belarusian language, and also to support an expansion of the table by the inclusion of letters that are considered obsolete but which nonetheless occur in older Belarusian publications.

For modern Belarusian language in Cyrillic script, there are two orthographic standards - the more commonly used post-1933 codification that has official status in Belarus and is used by the Belarusian minority in Poland, and the pre-1933 ("Tarashkevitsa") orthography used by émigrés and some independent newspapers and publishers in modern Belarus. In order to provide consistent and accurate romanization of Belarusian that appear in either post- or pre-1933 orthographic reform Belarusian publications, this proposal includes letters that are common in both alphabets. However, the basis for the table is the post-1933, official alphabet. Obsolete letters and letters that occur in modern publications in Tarashkevitsa orthography are accompanied with notes that explain the letters' usage.

- 1) Add the phrase "(See Note 1)" in parentheses after the letter *Г г* (romanized as "G g"). Add Note no. 1: "Letter found in Old Belarusian and in modern publications in Tarashkevitsa orthography."

### Explanation:

The letter *Г г* and its graphic variant *Г' г'* was excluded from the official Belarusian alphabet after the 1933 orthographic reform; however it successfully survived and it is used in modern publications in Tarashkevitsa orthography. In the official orthography in use in Belarus today, there is no separate symbol for the sound /g/. In certain words the letter *г* is supposed to be pronounced as /g/ rather than /h/. Accordingly, although the letter *г* represents the sound /h/ in most words, e.g. *голас, горад, год* – *holas, horad, hod*, in some words that are borrowed from Polish and other languages, it represents the sound /g/, for example, *гузік [guz'ik]* 'button', *ганак [ganak]* 'porch', (spelled as *гузік, ганак* in the pre-1933 orthography).

- 2) Include the letter *И* in the romanization table with the phrase "(See Note 2)" in parentheses. Add Note no. 2: "Letter is considered obsolete for the modern Belarusian Cyrillic alphabet; found primarily in Old Belarusian and occasionally in late 19th and early 20th century texts."

Suggestion for romanization character: *ī* ("I" with macron)

Explanation:

The letter и had been in use throughout the East Slavic lands since the 11th century, and in Belarusian language was used predominantly as a positional variant of the letter *i*: *i* was written before vowels and й, and и was written elsewhere. The tendency in general was to follow the phonetic principle wherever possible (in contrast to the etymological/morphological orthography of standard Russian). Thus, in Belarusian, etymological /i/ after hard consonants ш, ж, ч and р was generally rendered as ы, even when the letter и was still in use. For example: Пачынаючы выдаваць беларускую газэту „Наша Нива”, хочэм трохі пагаварыць з усімі, каму у той чы іншы спосаб залежыць на нашай працы, хочэм адкрыць свае думкі, каб усе маглі нас пазнаць. (Наша Нива (no. 1, Nov. 23, 1906).

In modern standard Russian, the sequences ши, жи (both consonants were originally soft in Common East Slavic/Old Russian, pre-13th century) are pronounced шы, жы, but the original spelling is preserved. In the collections of Belarusian folklore that were published in the latter part of the 19th century by Russian and local scholars using Cyrillic rather than Latin, these Russian orthographic conventions were sometimes observed. When the Belarusian language was standardized in the beginning of the 20th century, the letter и was fully replaced by *i* and excluded from the alphabet.

- 3) Include the letter *ĩ* in the romanization table with the phrase “(See Note 2)” in parentheses.

Suggestion for romanization character: *ĩ* (“i” with umlaut)

Explanation:

The letter *ĩ* was common in Old Belarusian, primarily in religious texts, reflecting the continued influence of Church Slavonic orthography in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Letters *ĩ* and *i* are used more or less interchangeably in Old Belarusian, but in general, letter *ĩ* was even more common than the letter *i*. As in Old Russian texts, *ĩ* was mostly used in foreign borrowings and names, primarily in initial position.

- 4) Add the phrase “(See Note 3)” in parentheses to the letter x. Add Note no. 3: “Do not confuse with the digraph кр (also romanized as “kh”). Manual review may be needed when transcribing data in vernacular characters in order to distinguish x from кр.”

Explanation:

In Old Belarusian, the velar stop [g] in borrowings was represented by the letter Г [transliterated as “g”]) and the digraph кр, for example: Жикгимундъ - Zhigimund = Sigismund, епикграмма = epigramma, крещкий = gretskii (Greek), etc. The graphic component r in the digraph кр should not be confused with a separate Belarusian letter р: кр represents the velar stop [g], while р represents the voiced velar fricative [h]. Some Modern Belarusian words also have this composition on the morpheme border, for example, якра [iakha] ‘at once’. A potential

“mistake-in-transliteration” may occur in Romazniation of modern Belarusian following the existing transliteration system for cases when *kr* represents two distinct sounds: would have to be rendered as “iakha” which, if transliterated back into Cyrillic, would potentially also give the non-existent form “яха”.

- 5) Add the phrase “(See Note 4)” in parentheses to the letter *ц*. Add Note no. 4: “Letter is considered obsolete for the modern Belarusian Cyrillic alphabet; found primarily in Old Belarusian and occasionally in late 19th and early 20th century texts. Do not confuse with the digraph *шч* (also romanized as “shch”). Manual review may be needed when transcribing data in vernacular characters in order to distinguish *ц* from *шч*.”

Explanation:

The letter *ц* does not exist in the modern standard Belarusian language; sounds corresponding to the Russian *ц* are usually rendered as “шч” in Belarusian: яшчэ = Russian ещё, шчодры = Russian щедрый, etc. Historically, the letter *ц* was well established in the written forms of Common East Slavic (Old Russian) since the 11th century. Later, with the development of the Belarusian language, the Old Church Slavonic letter *ц* was adopted into Old Belarusian as the symbol for the Belarusian *шч*. *ц* does occur in Old Belarusian texts from the 14th -17th centuries, for example, in the 1588 edition of the Statute of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Section III, Article 35: О ме~~ц~~анех места нашого Виленьскаго...), in the *Metryka vialikaha kniastva Litouskaha* (15th-16th cent.).

For the period from the 18th century to the 1860s, most Belarusian-language texts (for example, Jesuit school dramas, folkloric texts, the first Belarusian-language newspaper *Muzyckaja prauda*, etc.) were written in Latin script, using Polish orthographic conventions, thus *ц* > *szcz*. The letter *ц* reappeared again in the latter part of the 19th century, when the use of Cyrillic for Belarusian was revived (although the Latin-based orthography, with some modifications, continued to be used among Belarusian Roman Catholics until the 1930s). The beginning of the 20th century was marked by attempts at the standardization of the Belarusian language based on the Cyrillic alphabet. The first Belarusian newspaper *Наша Ніва* (first issues published in 1906) used *шч* instead of *ц*. A codified standard Belarusian orthography appeared only in the 1920s, followed by an orthographic reform in 1933, which was not accepted by some Belarusians, mostly in Polish-controlled Western Belarus (1933-1939) and in emigration. The pre-reform (“Tarashkevitsa”) Belarusian orthography was briefly revived in the school system and local administration under Nazi occupation, 1941 to 1944. While the pre- reform orthography (“Tarashkevitsa”) and post-1933 standard orthography differ in a number of respects, both orthographies use *шч* rather than *ц*.

- 6) Add the phrase “(See Note 4)” in parentheses after the letter *ь* (soft sign). Add Note no. 4: “The letter *ь*(soft sign) is romanized as ‘ (prime). It is not to be confused with the apostrophe (’), e.g., з’ехаць *z’ ekhats’* ; з’ехаць *z’ekhats’* .“

Explanation:

A clear distinction should be made between Belarusian Ь (soft sign, romanized as prime [']) and non-letter graphic sign ' (apostrophe, romanized as is). The soft sign ['] should not be transliterated using the non-letter apostrophe sign [']; the apostrophe should not be substituted with the soft sign. Some instances of apostrophe that should not be transliterated as soft sign include the position before jotated vowels я, е, ё, ю, і, for example: siam'ia > сям'я (not \*сямья), ab'ekhats' > аб'ехаць (not \*абьехаць). It is important to maintain this distinction especially as there is one context where apostrophe and the soft sign have been used differently by the pre-1933 "Tarashkevitsa"/"classical" orthography and the post-1933 orthography, namely, with the prefixes з, раз and без. For example, the pre-1933 "Tarashkevitsa"/"classical" orthography uses the soft sign after the prefix in з'ехаць z'ekhats', з'ядуць z'iaduts', etc.; while the post-1933 orthography uses the apostrophe after the prefix: з'ехаць z'ekhats', з'ядуць z'iaduts', etc.

- 7) Include the letter Ъ in the romanization table with the phrase "(See Note 2)" in parentheses.

Suggestion for romanization character: ě ("e" with hacek)

Explanation:

The letter Ъ was used mostly at the end of 19th century by authors who published their own texts or folklore records in Russian periodicals, namely Maryia Kosich, Ianka Luchyna, Alaksandar Elski, Alaksandar Pshcholka, etc. The usage of this letter was presupposed by the publication in Russian editions. A little earlier, in 1870, it was used by Ivan Nosovich in his fundamental dictionary of the Belarusian language. In the beginning of the 20th century the letter was eliminated from the texts in Modern Belarusian in Cyrillic and was used only accidentally.

- 8) Include the letter Ъ in the romanization table with the phrase "(See Note 2)" in parentheses.

Suggestion for romanization character: " (hard sign)

Explanation:

The letter Ъ was used mostly at the end of 19th century by authors who published their own texts or folklore records in Russian periodicals, namely Maryia Kosich, Ianka Luchyna, Alaksandar Elski, Alaksandar Pshcholka, etc. The usage of this letter was presupposed by the publication in Russian editions. A little earlier, in 1870, it was used by Ivan Nosovich in his fundamental dictionary of the Belarusian language. The letter Ъ at the end of the word disappeared earlier; the same letter within the word (it showed "iotated" nature of the next vowel letter) was used in Modern Belarusian approximately until 1909 when it was replaced by the apostrophe.

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### Belarusian Language Romanization Table ABC SEES Working Group website

<http://connect.ala.org/node/134973> (includes the Working Group's charge, discussions, drafts of proposal and images of texts)