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Alternate Web Address: Central and East European Online Library ([www.cceol.com](http://www.cceol.com)), under Periodicals—United States—*Sarmatian Review*.

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### Our Take

## **A Modest Proposal concerning Eastern European orthography**

This idea was put forth by a friend of ours, an academic on the other side of the fence (i.e., a scientist), who has no roots or interest in non-Germanic Central and Eastern Europe. The said scientist has attended numerous conferences in Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, Bucharest, Zagreb, Vilnius and other cities of the region. He does not speak any of the languages spoken there, but he often deals with things Eastern European. What irritates him is the high number of diacritical marks that each language possesses. There is simply no possibility that a foreigner can spell these words correctly, he says. It is hard to locate streets whose names have many

dots and dashes above and below the letters. Words with diacritical marks are more difficult to remember than words without them. These marks make Eastern European languages even more alien to an English-speaking person.

There are some diacritical marks in French and especially in German, but Eastern Europe beats these two by many lengths. "For a visitor," our friend said, "this is both inconvenient and annoying. Couldn't these peoples stop using these marks? The native speakers know how to pronounce these words even when the marks are not there—look at their email correspondence." Sounds reasonable to us. Granted, from time to time there may occur some confusion as to what is meant, but such cases would be rare: sentence structure and pronunciation are enough to keep words firmly within the meaning they are supposed to represent. Pronunciation would remain the same, but spelling would do away with the marks. In English there are words whose meaning depends on pronunciation and place in the sentence (e.g., research), and no one seems to complain. Perhaps a consensus of a group of academics would be a good beginning: this may be the right time to start building such a consensus. Δ

