

## GELFAND

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## Some alphabets easily beat Russian over letter count

SIR — In his Essay about the Phaistos Disc ('A century of puzzling' *Nature* **453**, 990–991; 2008), Andrew Robinson notes that the largest known alphabet is Russian, with 36 letters. But since 1918, the Russian alphabet has had 33 letters; before that, it officially had 35 (and 37 in reality).

Still, even this number falls short by comparison with the alphabets of the many consonant-rich languages of the northern Caucasus. These commonly have more than 40 letters (for example, there are 45 in Lezghin, 49 in Chechen, 51 in Avar and 62 in one of the dialects of Abkhaz).

The outright winner is the Archi alphabet, developed in 2006. Another language from the Caucasus, this has 97 letters — although many of these are groups of two, three or even four or five characters, rather than independent signs. The highest number of independent signs, at 41, is probably to be found in Abkhaz.

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