

Group of Experts on Geographical names

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Agenda Item 6(a)

ON CONVERSION OF NAMES INTO ROMAN ALPHABET FROM OTHER WRITING SYSTEMS

Paper submitted by Sweden*

In the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names and at the four UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names that have been held till now, transcription of place-names from different writing-systems into Roman alphabet has often been discussed.

The first UN Conference in 1967 already recommends "that efforts should be made to arrive at an agreement on a single romanization system, based on scientific principles, from each non-Roman alphabet or script, for international application". (Resolution No.9)

Resolution No. 18 of the same Conference proposes that either English or French orthography should be used in the rendering of African names depending on the language area. In other words, the orthography should reflect the previous colonial situation.

to be deleted (Ref. by H. G. Lewis)

At the second Conference in 1972 there was recommended in resolution No. 8 the adoption of the so-called amended Beirut system for the romanization of Arabic names. This system was elaborated by Arabic experts at a conference held in Beirut in 1971. The resolution is an example of the principle that a romanization system should be elaborated by the donor language.

UK finds inaccurate - there were discussions between donor + receiver

At the third Conference in 1977 China presented a phonetic alphabet that is to be regarded as China's official Roman alphabet, called Pinyin. In spite of strong opposition from the United Kingdom and the United States of America the conference recommended in resolution No. 8 that Pinyin be adopted as the international system for the romanization of Chinese geographical names. With that the principle of the right of the donor language to decide on romanization system could be regarded as accepted.

At the fourth Conference in 1982 the UK and the USA proposed that new romanization systems should be based either on the English alphabet, (or on a combination of the English, French and Spanish alphabets (WP L. 54, L 55, L 112).

R. R. R. (revise or delete)

The arguments were as follows:

Each language using the Latin alphabet has its own special variants of this alphabet. The work on transcription systems for other scripts should be based on the three UN languages using a Roman alphabet, namely English, French and Spanish.

English is the most widely understood language in the world today, and in China alone, the number of people learning English exceeds the English-speaking population of the United States. We should not attempt to impose on ordinary people names that they can neither pronounce nor memorise. To expect a large number of people to learn even a few unfamiliar letters is too much to ask, geographical names are difficult enough even when written in the alphabet of a single Roman-alphabet language. Many alphabets contain a greater or lesser number of accents, diacritical signs, and modified letters making them incomprehensible to people familiar with, say, the English alphabet. That people in addition should learn to pronounce these letters and consonant clusters is not to be thought of.

All this together was said to speak for the principle that receiver countries with Roman script should transcribe other scripts according to their own rules. Thus one should accept that a non-Roman script could be transcribed, besides according to the system of the donor country, in one or more (three - English, French, and Spanish) ways.

But this way of thinking will lead to absurdities in practice. For example, Bulgarian travel booklets and information pamphlets in English use one spelling of Bulgarian place-names, and the same publications in German use a different spelling of the names. But on road-signs there can hardly be more than one Latin form in addition to the original Cyrillic form. Thus the English-speaking road user, or the German speaking one, or both of them, will meet name forms on the road signs not corresponding to his guidebooks and road maps.

The only and natural way of handling this problem must be to let the Bulgarians themselves decide how to transcribe the text on road signs, and this transcription should be used by everyone using a Roman alphabet who has to deal with Bulgarian place-names.

Questions about pronunciation and the difficulty to find out the right pronunciation from the written form of a foreign language should be kept out of the discussion on transcription to Roman alphabets. As a rule, English-speaking people accept the fact that they cannot pronounce a Swedish or a Polish or a French name merely by means of the script and without any knowledge of the said languages. The difference between Swedish, Polish, and French on the one hand and Bulgarian, Russian, and Greek on the other hand is merely that the first-mentioned ones have no other writing system beside the Roman alphabet. If an English-speaking person would like to look at the use of Roman alphabet for Greek and Russian from the view of pronunciation, why should he not look at the Roman alphabets for Polish and French from the same viewpoint? Then you can think of an argumentation like this:

"Of course we shall work for reducing the number of exonyms in English. Thus, we should replace the English form Geneva by the French name Genève. But we English-speaking people have no idea of how to pronounce g and the funny è in French. Therefore we decide to write Zhenaiv instead of Genève".

This way of arguing is of course not to be taken seriously, but in fact it is in consistence with the views presented in the above-mentioned working papers from the Fourth Conference.

The conclusion must be that it is important that UNGEFN strongly upholds the principle that the donor language has the right to decide on romanization system.

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