

Romanization and the United Nations

According to the UNGEGN Glossary of Toponymic Terminology **romanization** is a conversion from non-Roman into Roman-script. Conversion is the process of transferring the phonological and/or morphological elements of a particular language to another, or from one script to another.

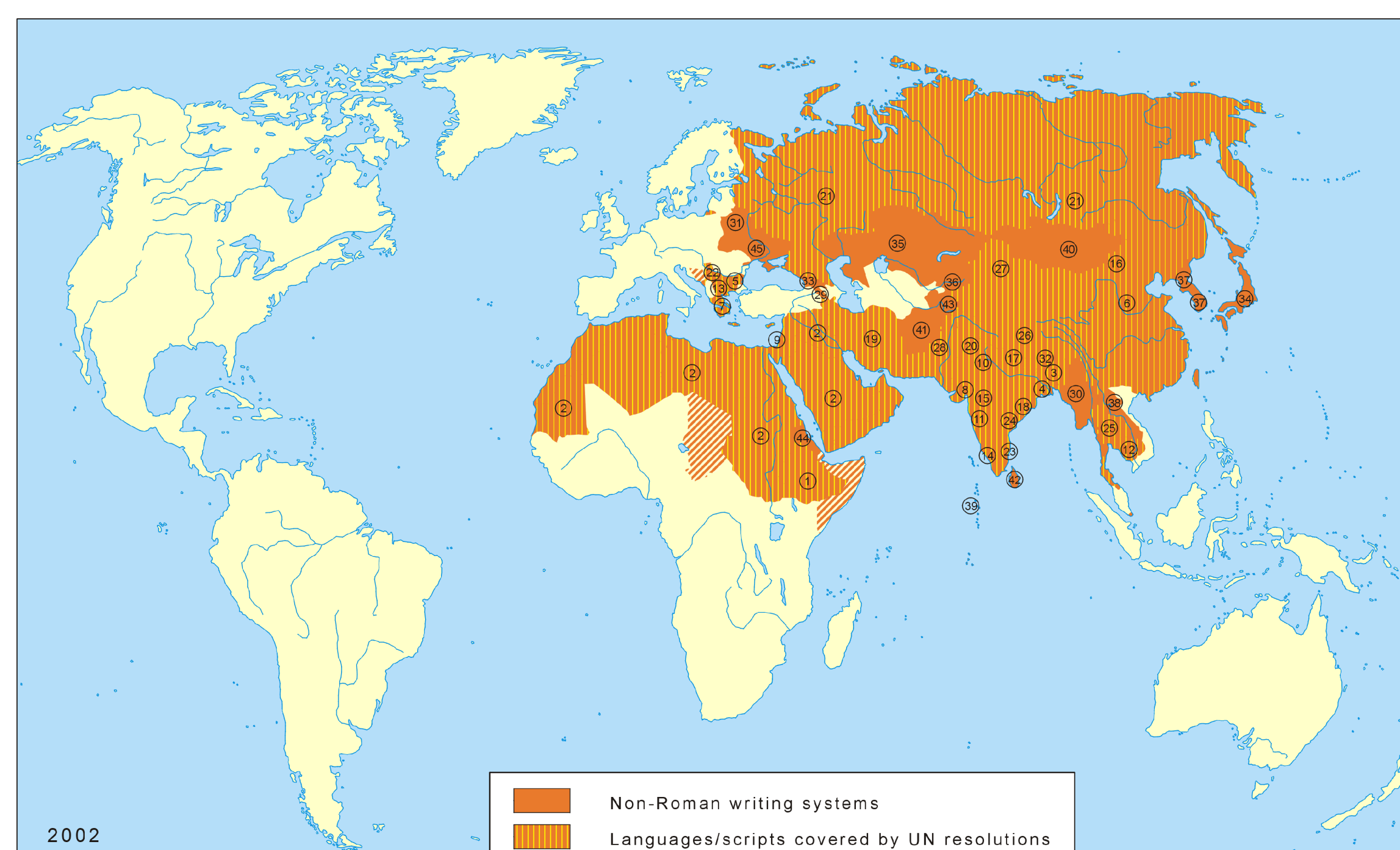
It has been agreed that one of the general aims of the international standardization is **"to arrive at an agreement on a single romanization system, based on scientific principles, from each non-Roman alphabet or script, for international application"** (Res. 9 of the first UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, 1967).

This recommendation is aimed at resolving the difficulties arising from the use of multiple romanization systems. One and the same name might be romanized very differently depending on the target language and the tradition, e.g. a Russian name Шахты could be romanized as follows: *Šahṭy* [UN-approved system], *Shakhty* [English], *Šahṭõ* [Estonian], *Šahṭy* [Finnish], *Chakhty* [French], *Schachṭy* [German], *Sahti* [Hungarian], *Szachṭy* [Polish], *Sjachṭy* [Swedish], *Şahṭı* [Turkish] etc. This is in sharp contrast with the use of names from Roman-script languages where there are practically no variations in spelling for most of the names, exonyms exempted.

Therefore since 1967, the United Nations conferences on the standardization of geographical names have adopted resolutions recommending romanization systems that cover 28 languages. However, not all of them have been implemented on equal level, both nationally and internationally. E.g. for the 13 languages of the Indian Group there is practically no evidence of implementation. In addition there are 17 other official languages on the agenda of the UNGEGN Working Group on Toponymic Terminology that do not have any UN-approved system of romanization.

The following map shows the distribution of official languages with non-Roman scripts and the extent to which they are covered by UN-approved systems. The map does not take into account the actual degree of implementation, e.g. the romanization system for Arabic was recommended "for the romanization of the geographical names within those Arabic-speaking countries where this system is officially acknowledged"

(Res. II/8, 1972). This means that in many Arabic-speaking countries, notably in Algeria, Djibouti, Lebanon, Mauritania and Morocco, the UN-approved system is not actually used.



Languages/scripts covered by UN resolutions

| | | |
|-------------|---------------|------------|
| 1 Amharic | 12 Khmer | 21 Russian |
| 2 Arabic | 13 Macedonian | 22 Serbian |
| 3 Assamese | Cyrillic | Cyrillic |
| 4 Bengali | 14 Malayalam | 23 Tamil |
| 5 Bulgarian | 15 Marathi | 24 Telugu |
| 6 Chinese | 16 Mongolian | 25 Thai |
| 7 Greek | (in China) | 26 Tibetan |
| 8 Gujarati | 17 Nepali | 27 Uighur |
| 9 Hebrew | 18 Oriya | 28 Urdu |
| 10 Hindi | 19 Persian | |
| 11 Kannada | 20 Punjabi | |

Other languages/scripts

| | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|--------------|
| 29 Armenian | 35 Kazakh | 41 Pashto |
| 30 Burmese | 36 Kirghiz | 42 Sinhalese |
| 31 Byelorussian | 37 Korean | 43 Tajik |
| 32 Dzongkha | 38 Laotian | 44 Tigrinya |
| 33 Georgian | 39 Maldivian | 45 Ukrainian |
| 34 Japanese | 40 Mongolian (Cyr.) | |

Resolution IV/15 of the UNCISG stated that

- the new romanization systems for international use should be considered only on condition that the sponsoring nations implement such systems on their cartographical products;
- States should refrain from revising systems previously adopted for international use.

Sufficient time is required for appropriate consultations and an expression of all views on technical matters before a resolution recommending the use of a particular romanization system can be adopted.