

PROBLEMS OF CORRELATING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Paper presented by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*

The international standardization of geographical names is of great importance. Through such standardization, the names of geographic points located within the territory of a State and formally accepted by that State become binding and are adopted in other States. The international standardization of names of parts of the world, countries, inhabited localities, rivers, seas, mountain ranges, isolated summits and other geographical points is necessary for many national and international organizations and individuals. It will eliminate the possibility of using accidental, erroneous and deliberately false names. Therefore the initiative of the Economic and Social Council which led to the present Conference should be welcomed.

There is no doubt that the basis for the international standardization of geographical names lies in national standardization alone. Although national standardization must be carried out in the light of principles recommended for all countries, the implementation of those principles is the internal affair of each State and requires proper attention to its toponymic system, the national structure of the population and its traditions.

At the same time, certain problems arise in the process of national standardization which extend outside the frontiers of the individual country and require a co-ordinated international solution. They include, in particular, problems of names of a traditional nature, names of large features extending through the territories of several States, as well as the handling of nomenclature.

Each State uses a certain number of traditional names. Traditional names of features which are foreign to each particular country may be divided into two main categories: those used only in a certain country, and those used in all countries in a traditional form. With regard to the first category, it is expedient to accept recommendations about the preservation in each country of certain traditional names of large and widely known features. Thus, if traditions are observed, МОСКВА will be "Moscou" in French-speaking countries, "Moscow" in English-speaking countries, "Moskau" in German-speaking countries. However, the list of such names must be minimal and include only those whose elimination would cause serious inconvenience among the population (names daily used in the Press, names with many derivatives and which give rise to standard expressions etc.).

A number of names have already acquired an international tradition and are used throughout the world in translated form for instance, the "Mediterranean Sea", the "Black Sea", "Tierra del Fuego", the "Cape of Good Hope". A list of such names should be prepared, to be accepted as a guide for all countries after thorough consideration.

A similar problem is that of names of extensive features located on the territory of several States. Here, a name may be chosen by the countries on whose territory the feature is situated, or by other countries which have no relation to it.

A country may preserve for internal use, the form and spelling already accepted, for example the Danube: Дунай (USSR), "Dunaj" (Czechoslovakia), Дунав (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia), "Duna" (Hungary), "Dunărea" (Romania), "Donau" (Austria, Germany).

The second case is much more complicated. Indeed, which form of the Danube name is most preferable for languages of non-Danube countries? This problem cannot be settled by vote or administrative ruling. The proper, well founded decision which will be acceptable to all can be made only on the basis of serious preliminary research. First, existing international practice must be clarified; to that end a list of similar names is compiled for all countries of the world, but limited at first to features on the map of the world at 1:2,500,000 scale. For each name, the forms of spelling accepted in the countries in which the point is not located should be defined. Decisions may differ, but they must take account of modern practice. Where there is no unitary approach in the different countries, it may be recommended to accept for international use such names as are used by the country where the greater part of the feature is situated. The principles worked out for naming large features will be regularly used by each country in the translation of names of small features.

The problem of transposing foreign geographical terms is not so much technical as scientific. It is closely connected with the theory of toponymics and the understanding of the essence of the proper name. If the main function of a name is to designate an object thereby distinguishing it from every other object, it is natural that a generic term should be accepted as an integral part of a name. In some cases local use may be determinant. A decision is also complicated by the fact that in each language, both the literary language and especially dialects, there exist a great many terms to designate objects of a certain category. Some of them are synonyms but most have a definite significance and indicate precise characteristics (size, origin etc.). Disregard of such terms will often lead to the loss of valuable geographical information.

The practice in the Soviet Union is to preserve the generic term where the specific part of the name is expressed by an adjective or the genitive case of a noun. As a rule, local geographical terms are preserved in the process of transcription. These principles, which are also applied to some extent in other countries, may serve as a basis for international standardization.

These are only some of many problems of standardization of geographical names. A great many States are interested in working out these problems and taking a co-ordinated decision on them.

In this connexion, we support the proposal of the Group of Experts for the establishment of a permanent committee of experts on geographical names. Such a committee, formed of representatives of the countries most concerned in the problem, should serve as an international co-ordinating, consultative and methodological centre. The possible functions of such a committee might be as follows:

Collection of information on progress of work on national standardization of geographical names and

* The original text of this paper, prepared by A. M. Komkov, Chairman, Terminological Commission of the National Council of Soviet Cartographers, and E. M. Pospelov, Chairman, Toponymical Commission of the USSR Geographical Society, appeared as document E/CONF.53/L.38.

presentation of such information to the countries concerned; compilation and publication of annual bulletins containing accounts of national geographical names services as well as compilation and publication of bibliographical notes on dictionaries and reference books of geographical names, regulations and rules of names transfer published throughout the world;

Study and dissemination of national standardization experience, elaboration of basic principles and methods of international standardization;

Rendering of scientific, methodological and technical assistance to the developing nations in the organization and operation of national geographical names services.

The composition of the committee should not be too large. Members should be elected at United Nations conferences on geographical names for a certain period (two or three years), observing the principle of geographic and linguistic representation. Under the leadership of the committee members, working groups could be formed to deal with specific problems; experts could be invited if necessary.

Upon completion of the work on each problem, the committee should discuss it and adopt recommendations.

The formation of such a United Nations committee

should not preclude the use of effective forms of international co-operation such as participation in sessions of international geographical and onomastic unions. The problem of geographical names standardization can and must be dealt with in committees of those unions and discussed at the international geographical and onomastic conferences.

Of course, there is no doubt of the usefulness of regional co-operation. Both regional cartographic conferences organized by the United Nations and regional conferences on problems of geographical names could be effectively used to this end. The principles of selection of groups of States possessing common interests in the standardization of geographical names still require thorough study. However, it is clear that such regional conferences on geographical names could be of maximum help to developing countries which have not yet organized their national geographical names services. The selection of regions for sessions of the combined conferences should be based on linguistic considerations. The participation of countries with common problems as well as those possessing well developed services of geographical names, whose experience is of high value to the developing countries in such regional conferences, would be very useful.

SCANDINAVIAN REGIONAL STANDARDIZATION

Paper presented by Denmark, Norway and Sweden¹

Under the "suggested programme for the international standardization of geographical names"² and in consequence of a resolution adopted by the sixth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences held in Munich from 24 to 28 August 1958, the Norwegian delegate to that congress suggested that representatives of Denmark, Norway and Sweden should meet to discuss the standardization of the spelling of geographical names in the Scandinavian region. A meeting was held in Uppsala on 1 October 1958 and there was full agreement on the following points:

The creation of national authorities responsible for the standardization of the writing of geographical names is essential (official bodies responsible for the regulation of the spelling of national names have long existed in the Scandinavian countries);

¹ The original text of this paper appeared as document E/CONF. 53/L.67.

² *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, Annexes, Twenty-seventh session, agenda item 6, document E/3209, para. 11.*

The internationally adopted writing of place names should be based on forms recommended by national names authorities;

It will be easier to achieve international uniformity by transcribing written forms than pronunciation;

Special Scandinavian letters and diacritical marks should be accepted in international usage.

In accordance with this programme, the language councils of the Scandinavian countries have since 1958 published lists of foreign geographical names in which common Scandinavian spellings, based on genuine national forms, are recommended for use in maps and educational material. A special committee of experts from Denmark, Norway and Sweden have agreed on a common Scandinavian transcription of geographical names written in the Cyrillic alphabet. Work is now in progress on similar rules for transcription from other writing systems (e.g. Arabic, Chinese).

Annex

FIRST REPORT OF THE GROUP OF EXPERTS ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES*

FOREWORD

The Group of Experts on Geographical Names was set up by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in pursuance of resolution 715 A (XXVII) of the Economic and Social Council. Under this resolution, it had the following terms of reference:

"(i) To consider the technical problems of domestic standardization of geographical names, including the preparation of a statement of the general and regional problems involved, and to prepare draft recommendations for the procedures, principally linguistic, that might be followed in the standardization of their own names by individual countries;

"(ii) To report to the Council at an appropriate session, in the light of its discussion on the above points, on the desirability of holding an international conference on this subject and of the sponsoring of working groups based on common linguistic systems."

This report was prepared during the meeting held by the Group at the Headquarters of the United Nations, New York, from 20 June to 1 July 1960 with Dr. M. F. Burrill as chairman and Mr. A. Pégorier as rapporteur.

The Group discussed the various questions before it on the basis of experience gained by the experts in their participation in their respective national work in standardization of geographical names and in international co-operation in onomastic science. The Group studied the draft programme for achieving international uniformity

* Extract from *World Cartography*, vol. VII (United Nations publication, Sales No.: 62.I.25).