

**Twenty-eight session  
28 April – 2 May 2014**

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**Item 9 of the Provisional Agenda**

**Activities relating to the Working Group on  
Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers**

**Place-names changes in connection with administrative reforms in the  
Austrian province of Styria \***  
Submitted by Austria

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## Summary

In the course of a comprehensive administrative reform in the Austrian federal province Styria [Steiermark] new macro- and microregions [Großregionen, Kleinregionen] were established as well as eight districts [Politische Bezirke] merged into four and 542 communes [Gemeinden] into 288. The paper describes the naming problems connected with these administrative reforms and the involvement of the Styrian Place-Names Commission especially into the evaluation of naming proposals for new districts and communes. In the cases of district mergers two of the four new districts assumed new names, two preserved the names of the former districts by name combinations. Naming of the newly merged communes met partly major problems, since many an old commune found it difficult not to remain reflected in the name of the new larger commune. As a tool for argumentation, the Styrian Place-Names Commission elaborated guidelines for the naming of communes and succeeded to present a list of commune names in accordance with toponymic criteria.

## 1 Introduction

The government of the Austrian province Styria [Steiermark] (1.2 million inhabitants) initiated in 2007 profound reforms affecting the implementation of macro- and microregions [Großregionen, Kleinregionen] as well as the administrative subdivision at the level of districts [Politische Bezirke] and communes [Gemeinden]. Up to three districts became part of a newly established macroregion. In 2012/13 eight of 17 districts were merged into four resulting in a reduction of the total number of districts from 17 to 13 with the aim of better cost efficiency.

The item most intensively discussed in the public, however, was the merger of 541 into 288 communes up to the end of 2014. This significant reduction was found necessary, since Styria has the smallest communes in Austria. After a first step on a voluntary basis, the merging of communes was later forced by provincial law.

## 2 Mergers and connected place-name changes

**Macroregions** – if they were not identical with a district – received names indicating their relative location within Styria: *Liezen*, identical with a (very large) district, maintained the name of this district; the districts Bruck-Mürzzuschlag and Leoben became parts of the macroregion *Obersteiermark Ost* ('Upper Styria East'); the districts Murtal and Murau were integrated into the macroregion *Obersteiermark West* ('Upper Styria West'); *Oststeiermark* ('East Styria') was composed of the districts Weiz and Hartberg-Fürstenfeld; *Südoststeiermark* ('Southeast Styria') maintained the name of its only district; *Südweststeiermark* ('Southwest Styria') was composed of the districts Leibnitz and Deutschlandsberg; the macroregion composed of the districts Graz, Graz-Umgebung and Voitsberg was named *Steirischer Zentralraum* ('Styrian Central Region').

The names of **microregions** were derived from names of communes or valleys. Some of them coincide with names of tourism regions. When the responsible department of the Provincial Government implemented them, it respected the demands of communes.

Especially the naming of **districts** proved to be a difficult task and resulted in the heavy involvement of the Styrian Place-Names Commission founded in 1970 at the Styrian Provincial Archive. The Commission, however, could not prevent a deviation from the 250 years old Austrian principle of naming administrative and juridical districts after their administrative seat. This principle was completely ignored in two cases: The districts Judenburg and Knittelfeld merged into the new district *Murtal* ('Mur Valley'), although this name marks a geographical feature much larger than the district.

In another case (the merger of the districts Feldbach and Radkersburg) at first a tourism brand (*Vulkanland*, 'Land of the Volcanoes') was proposed to be the new name of the merged district. Only after protests and an intensive public debate the name was changed into *Südoststeiermark* ('Southeast Styria'), which is from a toponymic point of view rather acceptable than *Vulkanland*, but also problematic, since it is usually identified with a much larger area than the new district.

In two other cases the new districts received double names composed of the name of their constituents (*Bruck-Mürzzuschlag* and *Hartberg-Fürstenfeld*).

These problems with the naming of new districts resulted in an involvement of the Styrian Place-Names Commission from the very beginning, when it came to the naming of merged **communes**. The final decision, however, remained at the political level. According to Styrian provincial law (§ 2, Regulation for Communes), changes of commune and settlement names have to be approved by the Provincial Government, but can only be rejected, „if the new name duplicates the name of another commune or settlement in Austria or resembles it to such an extent that the two can easily be mixed up.“ Since this regulation opens the door to any kind of toponymic engineering, the Styrian Place-Names Commission published in 2012 guidelines based on which the responsible department of the Provincial Government could act and argue opposite institutions of communal self-government. Models for these guidelines were an office order of the Saxonian State Ministry of the Interior on commune names of 1995 as well as the “Legal orders on the formation and modification of settlement names in Germany. Evaluation of an enquete of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names in Frankfurt am Main with the German Laender” [Gesetzliche Vorschriften zur Bildung oder Änderung von Siedlungsnamen in Deutschland. Auswertung einer Umfrage des Ständigen Ausschusses für Geographische Namen in Frankfurt am Main bei den deutschen Ländern].

For the naming of new communes in Styria therefore the following items were regarded as relevant:

- the existing names of communes;
- with mergers of several communes the names of former market and town communes;
- names emerging after parts of double names or differentiating additives (e.g. *Ober-* ['Upper'], *Unter-* ['Lower'], *Groß-* ['Greater']) are deleted;
- modifications of frequently used field and landscape names referring to topographical features (e.g. *-tal* ['Valley'], *-au* ['Floodplain'], *-stein* ['Stone'], *-berg* ['Mountain']);
- names referring to historical events or settlement history;
- names not in contradiction to the locality of the commune (e.g. altitude, direction, vicinity of water bodies);
- names composed of a river, field, mountain or forest name.

Special attention was paid to potential rights of third persons, e.g. when the name proposal referred to a geographical or historical feature not located only on the territory of the commune in question, but also of other communes. It was also tried to avoid that traditional

names were replaced by newly constructed names. Double names were accepted as rare exceptions, but triple names were not accepted at all; likewise name additives not necessary for the identification of the communes – especially those with an obvious touristic or branding intention – since this would not have been in accordance with the desirable sustainability of commune names.

In two cases of commune mergers the communes in question demanded a name composed of the name of the region and the town name. They were, however, not accepted by the Place-Names Commission, because also the generics *-land* ('land'), *-grund* ('ground') and *-gemeinde* ('commune') are not acceptable.

### **3 Conclusion**

In close cooperation with the commune department of the Provincial Government the Styrian Place-Names Commission succeeded, based on its guidelines, to solve the naming problems with the new communes in a satisfying way and to present the legislator a well-elaborated list of commune names as a basis for its decision.

Just in a few cases it will be necessary to find still some improvements, e.g. with three communes that could only after extended negotiations agree on the patron of a small church as their new commune name.