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Work on Standardization of Geographical Names
in the Soviet Union

WORK ON STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL
NAMES IN THE SOVIET UNION

During the four years passed since the Geneva meeting the work on national standardization has continued in the Soviet Union. Within this period the Joint Commission - a national body on geographical names - was widened, reorganized and strengthened. Now besides members from the state cartographical services and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR it includes representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The State Press Committee, TASS and other departments, i.e. now this body became more representative and authoritative. The decisions of the Commission on geographical names are recommended for all the national departments and organizations.

We stated more than once that multinational nature of our state as well as equality on paper and in practice of all the Soviet nationalities to a great extent predetermines the specific character of national standardization and the difficulties we suffer. The character of national standardization in the USSR is roughly comparable with that of international one. Hence it is not difficult to imagine the problems most urgent for us: to standardize names in each republic and to work out guidelines of names transfer into Russian and other languages of this country, since we consider direct borrowing unacceptable for us for theoretical and applied considerations. We stated this in

the working papers submitted to the Geneva meeting.

Though activities on transliteration have been lasting in this country for nearly 20 years all the problems have not been solved and coordinated with scientific and administrative bodies of Soviet republics. Take the Estonian republic, for example: up to fairly recent time we could not find such an adequate representation of the Estonian prolonged vowels in Russian which would be acceptable for the Estonians and would not break the tradition of the Russian language. There still exist a quite number of unsolved problems on transliteration of Kirghiz and some other languages.

At present we give much consideration to revision of all the guides on Russian transliteration of names on territories of the Soviet republics for the purposes of:

- 1) coordinating on guides with scientific and administrative bodies of the republics concerned;
- 2) unification of guides;
- 3) accepting them as compulsory for all the Soviet publications.

A reviewed guide is appended with a considerably-enlarged list of geographical terms and words forming the toponymy of a given area, thus helping much to those who do spadework or check names with informants on the spot and those who prepare a mass of names for cartographic needs or for special reference-books of geographical names.

The transliteration guides on representating Estonian, Ukrainian, Kazakh, Georgian and some other languages in Russian have already been completed or are under preparation now.

At the same time some Soviet republics are working out transliteration rules for representating Russian and other Soviet languages as well as foreign ones in their mother tongues. This was a result of enlarging map edition in Soviet languages and starting that of national encyclopaedias. To the last New York meeting we submitted transliteration guides on the languages of the Baltic republics. At present a similar work is carried on in Moldavia, Azerbaidjan and some other republics, the Joint Commission and its executive and working subdivision - Department of Geographical Names - rendering them systematic considerable support.

Transliteration of foreign geographical names remains no less important for us than problem mentioned before. According to its new status the Joint Commission is also responsible for revision and re-edition of 'transliteration guide to foreign languages. At the same time we seek to improve transliteration rules and make them more precise, on the one hand by approaching a Russian written form to the sounding of a foreign name and on the other hand by safekeeping reversibility of names what is not always compatible. Moreover we do our best not to break badly an existing conventional system of transliteration.

Take the guide on transliteration of English geographical names, for example. Their spelling and sounding vary in many cases so that it is sometimes difficult to retain the same written element in different names and rightly transmit its sounding (for example "gate" - "гейт" and "гит"). And, for example, treatment of the letter "o", sounding [ʌ], as in "London". Till now it has been treated in Russian as "o" what misrepresents the sounding of a name, but retains its spelling. If we would represent the vowel [ʌ] by the sounding of a name we would diminish reversibility. This would also require a great amount of alterations needed in already existing publications. Transliteration of English names provokes so many conflicting opinions that it proves to be extremely complicated, or sometimes even impossible to agree upon the English guide with all the organizations concerned.

We took the guide on English only for example. At present we want to improve, republish and approve as compulsory a series of guides on: Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Norwegian, Icelandic etc. Our experience permits to make many guides more defined and detailed as well as to enlarge lists of geographical terms encountered in names what aids to understand and treat each name correctly. Edition of gazetteers and dictionaries of names is another aspect of our work. In 1970 we started work on gazetteers and prepared the experimental patterns which will be submitted to all the departments and organizations concerned

in the near future. While preparing material and technological basis for gazetteers we are doing much in preparing various dictionaries of geographical names for Soviet republics, foreign countries and regions.

As far as possible we are working out romanization of Russian names and those of Soviet republics using the Cyrillic alphabet. We plan to complete this work during the 1971 year (the Russian language) and during the 1972-1973 years (other languages) and to approve worked-up guides as state standards.