

UNITED NATIONS

Third Session of the Ad Hoc Group of Experts
on Geographical Names
2 to 12 February 1971

Information Paper No. 8

Committee on Romanization
Circular from P.J.M. Geelan (U.K.)

Dr. Burnell

UN Group of Experts on the Standardization of Geographical Names

Committee on Romanization

Circular from the United Kingdom Member (P.J.M. Geelan) No.1 (7 Jan 71)

1. It has been difficult to know how to deal with my share of the languages allotted by the Chairman in his Circular No.3. As regards:-

Bulgarian. Members will already be familiar with the EGN/PCGN System set out in the 1967 "Romanization Guide" and there is no need to circulate it again. Most other systems in current use are based on Croat orthography (using č, š and ž) and differ essentially on the treatment of one letter only: Љ, the variants being â, ä and " . The first of these is used by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Russian World Atlas; the second and third are optional alternatives recommended by ISO, " being the preferred one. The dual nature of the ISO system is designed to meet the requirements of different users: those who find it best to treat all Cyrillic alphabets identically by means of strict transliteration, and those who need to distinguish the phonetic characteristics of individual languages by use of transliteration in its normal sense of "stylized transcription".

Burmese. In this case the EGN/PCGN System in the "Romanization Guide" is not of its own devising but is simply a statement of the system used on available romanized mapping of Burma. The discrepancy between written Burmese and its pronunciation is such that strict transliteration would be impossible in any meaningful sense.

Chinese. The arguments in favour of Wade-Giles and those for Pinyin are already widely known. There are many comparative tables available setting out the two sets of transcribed syllables, but these in themselves would mean little for the real problems concern interpretation and application. No formal comparison of the two systems is possible in this respect, for the rules concerning the application of Pinyin (word-division and use of tone marks) have not yet been adequately formulated and approved Pinyin "readings" are not yet available for more than half the total number of characters that will be encountered in geographical names.

Byelorussian. Byelorussia and Georgia are constituent Republics of the Georgian. the Soviet Union and, therefore, from an international point of view, names can only be standardized on the basis of their approved Russian spelling. Important as these and the other sixty languages of the Soviet Union are, it would be unworkable in practice for international standardization to rest on the application of sixty different transliteration systems. Even if it were possible it would be futile, since standardization within the Soviet Union itself is based on Russian and external standardization cannot work unless it accepts the results of internal standardization within states. (Similar considerations apply, incidentally, to the languages of India).

2. Coming now to the matters raised in Circular No.4 from the Chairman, I agree in general terms with the points 1 - 5 of the Austrian Member's circular No.1. On his reference to additional languages in point 6, see my comments on the last paragraph above. I accept the principle stated in his point 8 provided that romanized mapping exists at an adequate scale for international standardization purposes. On points 9, 10 and 11, I do not think decisions can be made on the basis of abstract principle; they must take into account which systems will be most useful in the circumstances. Standardization never works unless it is based on practical rather than theoretical considerations.

3. The Chairman asks our views on the possibility of finding a final solution on Arabic, Cyrillic, Greek and Hebrew at the New York meeting next month. I believe that Greek and Hebrew will be generally soluble on the basis of the principle made in point 3 of the Austrian Member's Circular No.1 referred to above. Arabic is much more complicated, involving as it does more than a dozen states, but the same principle must play an important part. We have already discussed Cyrillic at great length in previous meetings without success; it may be useful now to consider the problem from the point of view of the usefulness in practice of the various systems.

4. The preparation of a UN Transliteration Guide to the systems in current use in different circumstances would be of considerable reference value and might go some way towards an interim solution of the problem.

5. On the question of reversibility, it would hardly be possible to have it in all cases even if it were agreed to be essential. For many eastern scripts (Thai, Lao and Cambodian, for example) complete reversibility would require more diacritics than would ever be acceptable in practice. Even Hebrew, a simple alphabet by comparison, requires a quite impractical use of diacritics to ensure reversibility (see ISO R259 already distributed). Though reversibility may be essential for linguistic and bibliographical purposes it does not follow that it is necessary for the standardization of geographical names which, because of its universal nature, will be correspondingly less scientific and more practical. The reasonable attitude to take, I think, is that reversibility is always desirable if it can be achieved without sacrifice of practicality.