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WRITING SYSTEMS
CONVERSION OF NAMES FROM ONE WRITING SYSTEM INTO ANOTHER

Paper submitted by the Government of Austria

COMMENT

on the Правила международной транслитерации русских имен собственных латинскими буквами, worked out by the Институт языкознания АН СССР, 1951 - 1956.

- 1 If a conversion system is to serve the purposes of cartography - and of documentation in general - in an optimal way, it has to fulfil two conditions:
 - 1.1 The system should allow of the conversion of original sequences (i.e., words/names spelled in the source language and source script) into corresponding target sequences (i.e., words/names spelled in the target script) without the requirement of any additional information as to unpredictable features of pronunciation. A worker in the field of cartography or documentation cannot be expected to know the pronunciation of every Russian place-name but is only supposed to be able to identify Russian characters and to follow unambiguous instructions of a conversion key.
 - 1.2 The system should provide for the reconversion of romanized (target) sequences into the corresponding original (source script) sequences on the basis of general orthographic rules of the source language. It should not be a necessary condition for workers in cartography and documentation to be familiar with any special rules (concerning unpredictable, "exceptional" cases) that may govern the spelling of a given place-name.

2 Whereas the Soviet romanization system according to ГОСТ 16876-71 (issued 1971/1973) and the international system ISO/R-9 (1968), recognized also by Soviet authorities for use in international bibliography (see ГОСТ 16876-71, § 2) do fully comply with the above described conditions of biuniqueness (i.e., one-to-one convertibility in both directions), the romanization system worked out by the USSR Academy of Sciences (1951/1956) and used in the "World Atlas" (Атлас мира, Moscow 1967) fails to meet those requirements. The following features and items of the USSR Academy of Sciences' conversion table seem unsatisfactory in some respects:

2.1 (An instance of ambiguity of the conversion table itself; and, possibly, an instance of ambiguity of conversion from Russian towards Roman script:)

The romanization table of the USSR Academy of Sciences states that -

- the Russian letter e yields Roman e (je);
- the Russian letter ë yields Roman 'o (o, jo).

2.1.1 This provision, when understood in its literal sense, means that a given Russian name containing the letter e for /'o/, such as, e.g., Орел, Пугачево, Елкино, is to be spelled in transcription

- with Roman e (je) when the name is found to be spelled with Russian (undotted) e in the source text or map; examples: Орел, Пугачево, Елкино → Orel, Pugačevo, Jelkino;

but

- with Roman 'o (o, jo) when the same name happens to be spelled with Russian dotted ë in the source text or map; examples: Орëл, Пугачëво, Ëлкино → Or'oel, Pugačovo, Jolkino.

As is well known, the use of the Roman letter ë (instead of e) for /'o/ is optional and a given word or name containing /'o/ may be found spelled with e or ë indiffe-

rently. Hence it follows that the above rule, when applied literally, would lead to a situation where one and the same Russian place-name may yield two different romanized spellings (with different alphabetical ordering) - depending on such fortuitous factors as the choice of letter-types in the printed source text. Such a situation would be inconsistent with basic principles of documentation work.

2.1.2 It is, however, not impossible that the above quoted (2.1) provision of the USSR Academy's conversion table is to be understood in a different way; namely, that -

- the Russian letter e, -
- when standing for /'e/ is to be romanized e (je);

example: Енисей → Jenisej;

but

- when standing for /'o/ - and therefore alternating freely with the Russian letter ë - is to be rendered in Roman script by 'o (o, jo); examples: Орел, Пугачево, Елкино → Or'ol, Pugačovo, Jolkino.

Although such an interpretation of the conversion rule in question cannot be based on the literal wording of the conversion-table, there are yet some reasons to suppose that it might have been intended by the author(s) of the system. Under such an assumption it would be extremely difficult for a user to apply the system in practical work correctly whenever a Russian place-name containing the letter e is to be romanized. There is no reliable way to tell whether Russian e in certain positions is pronounced /'e/ or /'o/ - sometimes not even for the native speakers of Russian unless they happen to be familiar with the place-name in question. E.g., Борщев → Borščev or Borščov ? Золочев → Zoločev or Zoločov ? (See also: Bondaruk G.P./Komkov A.M. in: Нерешенные вопросы русского правописания, Moskva /Nauka/

1974, p. 50.) A worker in cartography - and documentation in general - would not be safe in giving the correct romanization for Russian e unless he was supplied with an additional list of all Russian place-names where the letter e corresponds to /'o/ - which is obviously unpracticable.

2.2 (Instances of ambiguity in reconversion from Roman towards Russian script:)

2.2.1 Roman e can be the result of a conversion as well of Russian e as of Russian э, both after consonant letter. (Although the latter case occurs rather seldom in names belonging to the Russian language area, it will be frequent in names from other languages such as, e.g., Moldavian.) - Example: Beringovo more → БЕРИНГОВО МОРЕ, Berovskie bugry → Бэровские бугры.

2.2.2 Since ь and Ь are likewise omitted before vowel letters, a Roman script cluster "consonant letter + j + vowel letter (a, e, o, u)" can yield in reconversion either "consonant letter + ь + vowel letter (я, е, ё, ю)" or "consonant letter + Ь + vowel letter (Я, Е, Ё, Ю)". (It is to be admitted, however, that the first case - ь - will not occur frequently in place-names.)

2.2.3 In the case (at least) of Йошкар Ола, romanized Joškar Ola, the cluster jo proves ambiguous in reconversion since it stands elsewhere for Russian e pronounced /'o/.

3 It is difficult to see why and how a distinction should be made between the romanized spellings of Russian place-names according whether they occur within or outside the sphere of cartography and geography. In fact, a distinction in the treatment of cartographic/geographical publications and other documentation material is impracticable

since cartography may be regarded as a typical and central field of documentation.

- 4.1 There would be undoubtedly much to say in favour of the conversion system of the USSR Academy of Sciences: it provides in some respects a highly appropriate picture of the phonological structure of Russian. However, its failure to secure biuniqueness in relation to Russian orthography suggests to discard it as a candidate for a transliteration system in the fields of documentation including cartography.
- 4.2 Instead, it is recommended to adopt for the romanization of Russian geographical names a system which -
- (1) ensures unambiguity of conversion in both directions, and
 - (2) is in common use in other fields of documentation.
- Such systems are:
- 4.2.1 The romanization system according to GOCT 16876-71; it has the advantage of being presented by an official standard of the country of the donor-language, i.e., the Soviet Union.
- 4.2.2 The romanization system according to ISO/R-9 (1968); it has in its favour the status of a Recommendation of the International Organization for Standardization and, furthermore, is used in contributions from the Soviet Union to international bibliographic works of reference (see the above mentioned standard GOCT 16876-71, § 2).

Summary

The linguistic evaluation of the Romanization System for the Russian alphabet worked out by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, 1951 - 1956, shows the following results:

The system provides a highly appropriate picture of the phonological structure of Russian. But inasmuch as it allows of no reconversibility, it is not very suitable for carto-

graphical use. As there are in the Soviet Union already two excellent transliterations in use, State Standard No.16876-71 for general purposes, and Recommendation 9 (1968) of the International Organization for Standardization for contributions from the USSR to international bibliographical works of reference, it does not seem to be advantageous to recommend for international cartographical use a third system of minor quality as a means of transliteration.