



Economic and Social Council

Distr.  
LIMITED

E/CONF.74/L.55  
26 August 1982

ENGLISH ONLY

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Fourth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names  
Geneva, 24 August to 14 September 1982  
Item 13 (a)(i) of the provisional agenda\*

WRITING SYSTEMS:

CONVERSION OF NAMES FROM ONE WRITING SYSTEM INTO ANOTHER:

ROMANIZATION

Romanization in the context of the United Nations

Paper presented by the United Kingdom<sup>1/</sup>

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\* E/CONF.74/1.

<sup>1/</sup> This document was received in limited quantities and is distributed to participants only.

The United Kingdom paper on the status of the English language illustrates the great variety of Roman alphabets which are in existence. Most of these alphabets contain a greater or lesser number of accents, diacritical signs and modified letters. The highly individual nature of some of these alphabets, such as that for Polish, can render them almost incomprehensible to most people familiar with another Roman alphabet, such as that for English.

We therefore constantly face great difficulties when we consider the adoption of a single romanization system for non-Roman alphabets and scripts. In most cases, it is not possible to adopt or devise a standardized system of romanization which is ideally suited to all Roman alphabets.

Recognition of this problem has been widespread, but the attempts to resolve it have frequently concentrated on suggestions to apply systems based on the Serbocroatian or a similar alphabet. Many experts appear to believe that only in such a way can standardized romanization systems be achieved.

The United Kingdom has always considered that this may not be the most appropriate response to this problem. Such alphabets as the Serbocroatian are not readily comprehensible to the vast majority of people familiar with a different Roman alphabet, and there is consequently a danger of adopting systems which are of small practical value to the user.

Our discussions on the standardization of geographical names take place within the context of the United Nations. This applies to our deliberations on romanization just as much as to our discussions on the many other items of the agenda. There must therefore be considerable merit in discussing the question of romanization systems in terms of what is United Nations practice throughout its organization.

The United Nations operates, necessarily and smoothly, with three working Roman-alphabet languages: English, French and Spanish. Are we being entirely realistic in suggesting that geographical names, and geographical names alone, can always be reduced to one single romanization, based neither on English, nor French, nor Spanish? We must face the fact that it may not always be possible to achieve a single system acceptable for international use.

The Conference is therefore asked to consider the proposition that, in the event of a single system of romanization not proving acceptable for international use, separate systems based on the Roman-alphabet working languages of the United Nations will be devised.