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**United Nations Group of Experts On**

**Geographical Names**

**2019 session**

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**Item 16 of the provisional agenda \***

**Writing systems and pronunciation (Working Group on Romanization Systems)**

**Report of the Working Group on Romanization Systems:  
current status of United Nations Romanization systems for  
geographical names**

Submitted by the Working Group on Romanization Systems\*\*

**Summary**

The Working Group on Romanization Systems was established under the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. The full report of the Working Group provides an outline of the main developments in respect of the status of various romanization and writing systems, including for Arabic, Georgian, Kazakh, Kurdish, Lao, Montenegrin, Sinhala and Tamazight.

A new system for the romanization of Arabic was adopted in 2017, at the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names ([E/CONF.105/165](#), resolution XI/3) and, accordingly, the Working Group's report on Arabic has been updated to reflect the agreement (see [www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom1\\_ar.pdf](#)).

Since the Eleventh Conference, the Working Group has met once, at the Institut géographique national in Paris on 20 March 2018. Full details on romanization systems are available on the website of the Working Group ([www.eki.ee/wgrs](#)).

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\* GEGN.2/2019/1

\*\*Prepared by Catherine Cheetham and Peeter Päll, Convenors of the Working Group on Romanization Systems.

## **Report of the Working Group on Romanization Systems: Current status of UN romanization systems for geographical names**

The UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems (WGRS) monitors the status of romanization systems on its agenda; this includes both those that have been approved by the United Nations, and those that are still being discussed. The following is a list of major developments since the report presented to the Eleventh UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2017.

Full details of romanization systems are available on the WGRS website at <http://www.eki.ee/wgrs>

The UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization Systems (WG) met at the Institut Géographique National in Paris on 20th March 2018 and discussed items currently on the WGRS agenda and also considered other languages and scripts that might need inclusion in the Group's work. Additionally, the Working Group agreed that, given that the structure and organization of UNGEGN had changed, the previous practice of reissuing all the romanization systems after an UNGEGN Conference would be revised, and that only substantive changes to a system would result in a new version of the system being posted. Substantive changes would be recorded as a new version, e.g. V4 becoming V5, where minor editorial changes would be captured simply as e.g. V4.1.

Information on the WG has been updated on the UNGEGN website <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEgn/wg5.html>, and the WG has contributed to a new matrix outlining each working group's objectives, activities and workplan.

The WG would also like to express its condolences for the passing in February 2018 of long time WG member Mr Sandro Toniolo, Italy.

### **A. Languages/scripts covered by systems recommended by the United Nations**

#### *Arabic*

A new system for the romanization of Arabic was adopted at the Eleventh Conference of the United Nations Conference of the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2017 (resolution XI/3) and accordingly the Working Group's report on Arabic has been updated to reflect the agreement: [https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom1\\_ar.pdf](https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom1_ar.pdf)

In UN resolution XI/3 it is specifically stated that the system was recommended for the "romanization of the geographical names within those Arabic-speaking countries where this system is officially adopted". There is evidence of its partial implementation in Jordan, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The Working Group will continue to monitor the implementation of the system, and notes that the previous UN-approved system is still found in considerable international usage.

### **B. Other languages/scripts – Romanization of national languages**

#### *Georgian*

No romanization systems for Georgian have been put forward to the Working Group on Romanization Systems. However, there is a romanization system in widespread use in Georgia, which the Working Group has recently learnt was the subject of a decree of the President of Georgia (Decree of the President of Georgia, No. 109, February 24, 2011: On the Approval of Rules of Latin Transliteration of the Names of Geographical Features. <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1216954?publication=0> (accessed 2018-12-08). This

additional information has been added to the Working Group's report on Georgian: [https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom2\\_ka.pdf](https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom2_ka.pdf)

### ***Lao***

The WG was invited to review the current draft of the Lao Romanization System prepared by the National Geographic Department of the Lao People's Democratic Republic; and recommendations were supplied (these included a simplification of the table, whereby only those character combinations that were necessary for the application of the system would be included in the system. The WG plans to prepare a draft for the WG's website reflecting this simplified form. Other recommendations that had been supplied included the use of 'y' to mark a lengthened 'i' and addressed a possible typographic error. A question regarding the presentation of the syllable-final /k/ had also been posed: it was noted that syllable-final consonants for a number of syllables containing long vowels had been captured as a voiced counterpart of the consonant (e.g. where a syllable followed a short vowel the consonant final was /p/ or /t/ but after a long vowel these were replaced with /b/ and /d/ respectively). It was notable, however, that syllable-final /k/ did not transform to /g/ as might be expected. The Lao PDR is currently discussing the suggestions within the Geographic Department and the WG awaits further information.

### ***Montenegrin***

The WG has noted that the International Organization for Standardization has approved a language code for Montenegrin (cnr) and has agreed that a summary of the script as used in Montenegro should be prepared for the WG's website. Montenegro uses the Roman script alongside Montenegrin Cyrillic and therefore it is hoped that, if further evidence were collected, a simple 'table of correspondences' (i.e. a table for the conversions used between the two writing systems) could be prepared.

### ***Sinhala***

The WG has considered a draft of the proposed Sinhala romanization system and supplied several suggestions to the system's authors proposing alternative romanizations; some of these were reflected in the resulting draft and others not, and it was acknowledged, as with some other agreed romanization systems, that there was an element of compromise in the agreed system. The WG had subsequently sent an official endorsement of the system to Sri Lankan officials. The WG has learnt that Sri Lanka's Cabinet of Ministers has officially accepted the proposed romanization system for Sinhala and now awaits with anticipation the approved draft to be put forward to the UNGEGN plenary. With the approval of a system for Sinhala, the UN and international community would have a recognized and agreed method of representing Sinhala geographical names. Until now, the unapproved 1972 'Sharma' system has been applied in such instances, in the absence of anything more official. Once the draft is submitted to UNGEGN the WG will be able to consider the adoption of the system, noting that, as well as being scientifically sound, UNGEGN needs to see evidence of its implementation.

## **C. Other languages/scripts – Writing systems of national languages**

### ***Kazakh***

The WG has been monitoring the current status of the introduction of a Roman-script alphabet for the Kazakh language. The currently proposed alphabet has seen some significant change since that discussed at the 11th UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in August 2017. Since that time, an alternative alphabet was decreed in October 2017. However, this alternative alphabet was itself overturned with a different alternative being published in February 2018. The WG Convenors have circulated information on the latest proposed alphabet and the WG has agreed that that further evidence would be required before they would recommend documenting the alphabet for the UN.

## **D. Other languages/scripts – Romanization of other languages**

***Kurdish***

The WG has agreed that, since Kurdish is an official language of Iraq, Kurdish in its Perso-Arabic script form should be subject to the WG's review. There are a number of systems and a Roman-script alphabet for Kurdish already in existence, which will be considered in this review.

***Tamazight***

The WG has agreed that, given the official status of the Tamazight language in some countries in North Africa, the WG will include this language in its agenda. The WG understands that it has not yet been decided in Algeria which would be the official script for the language, but that in Morocco the Tifinagh script is used officially. The WG has agreed to collect further information in the hope of including information on Tamazight romanization on the website.