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Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries and on the progress made in the standardization of geographical names

Report of Norway

Submitted by Norway**

Summary:

The full report provides an outline of progress and developments in Norway on geographical names since the Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. One of the main issues addressed in the report concerns the proposed amendments to the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990. The Ministry of Culture proposed several amendments to the Act in October 2018, three years after the previous amendment. The ongoing revision of the Act is aimed at finding a way to “democratize” the standardization of geographical names at the municipal level. The Ministry of Culture proposes giving the municipalities more authority with regard to geographical names matters by making it easier to standardize names according to local spoken and written usage independent of linguistic recommendations. A reorganization of the name consultancy service, administrated by the Norwegian Language Council, has also been proposed. The amendments are expected to be passed and enter into force by mid-2019.

The Norwegian Mapping Authority is responsible for running and developing the Central Place Name Register. There are 987,000 named places, some of which have several forms, amounting to 1,009,200 names in the register. In addition, some of the names have variant spellings, totalling 1,196,000 name forms. In total, there are 112,000 authorized spellings in the register.

The Government proposed a new municipal structure to the Parliament for both municipalities and counties. Since 2017, the number of municipalities has diminished from 428 to 422, and the number of counties from 19 to 18. In 2020, there will be 354 municipalities and 11 counties. Because of the ongoing local government reform, a revised version of the toponymic guidelines for Norway is being revised for the 2019 session.

A renewed regulation for the Place Name Act entered into force in May 2017, allowed the use of Skolt Sámi names in South Varanger municipality next to or instead of

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names in North Sámi. Skolt Sámi is not an official language in Norway and is no longer spoken within Norway. However, geographical names in Skolt Sámi are still in use, and the May 2017 amendment has given the Skolt Sámi language higher status in Norway.

Amendments in the Norwegian Place Name Act (NPA)

Introduction

The long-standing standardization program for geographical names in Norway was codified by law in 1990. Put into force in 1991, the Norwegian Place Name Act (NPA) legitimizes standardization as a governmental tool for safeguarding geographical names as cultural heritage. The Act affirms the Norwegian Mapping Authority as Norway's national name authority, making this institution responsible for running and developing the Central Place Name Register. This register currently contains about 1,009,200 names of 987,000 named places. The number of spellings in the register is 1,196,000, illustrating the fact that a large number of geographical names in Norway are registered with two or more written forms. In total, there are 112,000 authorized spellings standardized according to the principles and rules of procedure in NPA.

The Mapping Authority standardizes the vast majority of *inherited* geographical names in Norway in their written form. Contrary to widespread belief, the Mapping Authority does not decide a name's reference to a place, feature or area. The municipalities, on the other hand, determine both the name and the spelling of the majority of *new* geographical names within their administrative borders, such as street names.

According to the rules of procedure in NPA, the spellings are determined after local hearings and expert advices provided by decentralized Name Consultancy Services. The Language Council administrates the four Name Consultancy Services for Norwegian names and one for names in the Kven language, while the Sámi Parliament of Norway administrates the Name Consultancy Service for Sámi names. An Appeal Committee is set up to handle complaints regarding the standardized forms.

Originally, NPA only regulated geographical names in their written form, in addition to the use of geographical names in multilingual areas. However, with amendments put into force in 2006, the Act specifically places restrictions on the renaming of geographical features that carry a traditional inherited name.

Recent developments and amendments in NPA

In 2008, members of the Norwegian Parliament initiated a process aiming to give landowners the right to determine the spelling of the name of their property. As explained in earlier reports from previous UNGEGN sessions and conferences, the background for this proposal can best be understood in light of the fact that about 70% of the Norwegian population has a traditional geographical name as their family name. In most cases, these family names are originally derived from settlement names, usually names of farms and smallholdings. The corresponding family name, however, usually carries a more conservative spelling, following an older (Danish) norm. During the years, many landowners have objected to the standardization of farm names, claiming that the spellings determined in most cases by the Mapping Authorities compromise their identities. In 2015, an amendment was put into force, allowing the owner to decide the spelling of their property as long as documentation of such spelling in official use is obtained.

In April 2017, the Ministry of Culture announced that the Government was discussing the power of decision in matters concerning geographical names. The aim was to find a solution that would

give the municipalities more power over and influence on the standardization of geographical names. The regulation in question was section 3 in NPA. According to this paragraph, one cannot change a traditional name on a geographical feature unless there are “exceptional” circumstances.

The concrete background for the public attention around section 3 were two cases of renaming in Overhalla municipality in Trøndelag county. The Overhalla Municipal Council decided to change the name of the municipal center from *Ranemsletta* to *Overhalla*, and the name of a densely populated area from *Hunn* to *Skage*. All four names are inherited names in the area, but *Ranemsletta* and *Hunn* have longer traditions in the respective geographical locations. The local decision to rename the locations arose out of a gradual development in name use. The Municipal Council also expressed concerns about a possible erasure of the name *Overhalla* in case Overhalla municipality in the future would merge with other municipalities. In 2014, the Appeal Committee for Place Name Matters concluded that the renaming of the municipal centre *Ranemsletta* to *Overhalla* would be contrary to section 3, and be incompatible with NPA’s overall purpose of safeguarding geographical names as cultural heritage. Local politicians in Overhalla reacted with rage when the Appeal Committee, supported by the Name Consultancy Service, overruled the local decision. The Minister of Local Government and Modernisation at the time, Jan Tore Sanner, later defended the local authorities in public newspapers and encouraged them to delay the implementation of the name *Ranemsletta*, for instance on road signs.

In December 2017, the Ministry of Culture proposed an amendment to section 3 of the Act. In order to give the municipalities more self-determination in deciding a name’s reference to a place, the Ministry proposed to make an exception for the naming of geographical name objects where the municipalities already were empowered to determine the names in their written forms. Examples of such geographical features are official road addresses, densely populated areas, residential areas, and public spaces such as parks and marketplaces. The proposal still encouraged the municipalities to follow the main rule. However, according to the proposal, it would no longer be possible to make a complaint about standardized names decided by a municipal body. Because of the Norwegian state’s obligations to protect minority languages through international agreements and resolutions, this exception would not apply for names in Kven or Sámi. The Ministry later withdrew the proposal, partly because of great resistance among the consultative bodies during the process of hearing. Instead, the Government announced that they were working on a more extensive revision of NPA.

In October 2018, the Ministry of Culture presented another proposal, this time with comprehensive changes, including changes in the standardization principles and changes in the organization of the decentralized Name Consultancy Services. In the following sections, this report will discuss the main topics in this policy proposal. The hearings are now closed, and the proposed amendments are expected to be passed and put into force during the summer of 2019.

“Democratizing” the standardization of geographical names

Based on the political wish to give the local communities more freedom to decide names of geographical locations within the municipal borders, the Ministry proposes a liberalization of the conditions for name changes in section 3. As mentioned above, according to the current regulations, one cannot change an inherited traditional name of a geographical feature unless

“exceptional” circumstances allow for a name change. The Ministry proposes to make this term more pliable, thereby making it easier for the municipalities to rename places without risking formal reactions. A gradual change in name use is in the proposal suggested to count as an “exceptional” circumstance.

Another proposed change with the purpose of “democratizing” the standardization of geographical names is to allow more traditional spellings to be authorized if these spellings are well known and established in the local communities. In the process of determining the name in its written form, various and often conflicting principles are to be taken into consideration. NPA aims to balance dialectal diversity, modern orthography, etymology, traditional spellings and local usage and wishes. However, according to section 4 the point of departure when determining and selecting the official spelling is the *inherited local spoken form* of the name. As a basic rule, a geographical name has to be spelled based on local pronunciation in accordance with modern orthographic principles for Norwegian, Sámi and Kven. Traditional spellings, however, typically carry a more conservative orthography, following an older (Dano-Norwegian) norm. Examples of traditional spellings are *Volden*, *Røed* and *Rygh*, where the spellings according to modern orthography are *Vollen*, *Rød* and *Rygg*. If this proposed change is realized, a potentially high number of already authorized spellings can be reconsidered leading to extra work for the standardization bodies and resulting in more diverse spellings of geographical names.

Additionally, the Ministry recently recognized a set of detailed guidelines for the spelling of geographical names in Norwegian. These guidelines, prepared by the Language Council on assignment for the Ministry, allow more dialectal variety in the written forms of the names than earlier regulations. Altogether, we now witness a tendency towards more diversity in the spelling of geographical names, particularly of names in the majority language.

Reorganization of the Name Consultancy Services

In the proposal, the Ministry suggests a reorganization of the Name Consultancy Services, which is administrated by the Language Council. As the State’s consultative body on language issues, the Language Council provides advice and guidance in the standardization of Norwegian and Kven geographical names through decentralized Name Consultancy Services. Until July 2018, there were four services for Norwegian names and one for Kven names. The Sámi Parliament of Norway still administrates the Name Consultancy Service for geographical names in Sámi languages.

The organisational structure of the Language Council consists of a secretariat, a board appointed by the Ministry of Culture, as well as specialist advisory boards that employ people from several fields of society with a passion for language (including linguistic expertise). While employees in the Secretariat have prepared geographical name matters, the final recommendations have formally been issued by Name Consultants who are scientifically autonomous and not employed by the Language Council. However, the rapid decrease in place name scholars over the past ten years has made the recruitment of Name Consultants challenging. Due to the difficult recruitment situation and also in light of retrenchment measures, a reorganization of the Name Consultancy Service has been the subject of discussion from time to time.

In July 2018, the Language Council, on assignment from the Ministry of Culture, set up a specialist advisory board for the standardization of geographical names. This board is intended to replace the role of the Name Consultants. The board consists of four specialists in Norwegian

geographical names and one specialist in Kven geographical names. A secretary is appointed from the Secretariat of the Language Council. The leader of this board is former Name Consultant and retired Associate Professor in Onomastics at the University of Oslo, Mr. Botolv Helleland. An evaluation of this organization is expected by the end of 2019.

The members of the board are still scientifically autonomous, meaning that the recommendations of standardization provided by the board or its members are not included in the responsibilities of the Director General of the Language Council. However, in the proposal the Ministry suggests making the Language Council fully responsible for linguistic recommendations provided by the Name Consultancy Services for Norwegian and Kven names. The idea is that this change in the organizational model will be easier to communicate to the public bodies consulting the Name Consultancy Service, and at the same time incorporate the standardization of geographical names fully in the organizational structure of the Language Council.

Concurrently, the Ministry wants to expand the responsibilities for the Name Consultancy Service by instructing public institutions with standardizing power to consult the Name Consultancy Service before naming or renaming a geographical location. Today, standardization bodies are only obliged to consult the Name Consultancy Service regarding the spelling of geographical names.

Geographical name archives and digitization of geographical names

Academically based standardization of geographical names in Norway is hampered by the structure of its geographical name archives. Onomastic research has traditionally been carried out at the universities of Bergen, Oslo, Stavanger, Tromsø and Trondheim. Thus, each university has its own geographical name archive. In addition, a substantial number of geographical names are included in archives at regional (fylke) and municipal (kommune) administration level. Much of the archival material is still not digital, albeit substantial portions are. For this reason, the degree of integration of digital archive material on geographical names is still rather limited.

With an ever decreasing number of university staff employed in onomastic research, the problem of access and utilization of the archives becomes more and more problematic. When the University of Oslo decided to close down its geographical name archives, together with its lexicography and dialectology units, the archives were transferred to the University of Bergen, thereby centralizing a major part of the geographical name archives and starting the process of creating a common point of entry for digital academic utilization of geographical names.

Work is under way to create a national consortium consisting of major universities, regional administrations and local government institutions. One goal will be to achieve the digitization of the remaining university archives in Stavanger and Trondheim. Consortium finalization and document scanning is planned for 2019, as well as online publication of several sources containing geographical names. In addition, an application for full digitization of the Stavanger and Trondheim archives in 2020 and 2021 has been submitted to the Ministry of Culture.

The standardization of geographical names in multilingual areas

An increased number of multilingual road signs seem to reflect a slightly better implementation of the Norwegian Place Name Act concerning name use in multilingual areas. Still, there is quite a lot of work to be done before reaching equal status for Norwegian, Sámi and Kven geographical names. Apart from a lack of formal decisions in the standardization of multilingual

names, there are other explanations for the unbalanced distribution of official standardized names in multilingual areas. One likely factor is the fact that neither the Norwegian population nor the Sámi and Kven themselves are used to think of Sámi and Kven as languages of equal footing or as living languages with geographical names in actual use.

A renewed regulation for the Place Name Act put into force in May 2017 allowed the use of Skolt Sámi names in South Varanger municipality next to or instead of names in North Sámi. Skolt Sámi is not an official language in Norway and is no longer spoken within Norway's borders. However, geographical names in Skolt Sámi are still in use, and this amendment has given the Skolt Sámi language higher status in Norway.

Meetings and conferences

The Mapping Authority, the Sámi Parliament and the Name Consultancy Services as well as representatives from the Secretariat in the Language Council assemble yearly to discuss legal, professional and organizational matters regarding the standardization of geographical names. There are approximately 30 participants at these meetings. The meeting is over two days, and is usually arranged in October each year. In 2018, the meeting was arranged at the University of Bergen Library, giving the participants an insight in the status of the Language Collection and the Name Collections in particular.