

10 April 2023

English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**

2023 session

New York, 1 – 5 May 2023

Item 13 of the provisional agenda *

Exonyms

**Proposal on a decision "on the use and safeguarding of
exonyms"**

Submitted by the Working Group on Exonyms**

Summary:

At the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, held on-line 3–7 May 2021, CRP53 "Quatre types d'exonymes" and CRP 73 "Exonyms as part of the cultural heritage" were presented. Following these papers that recognised the value of exonyms, there was a discussion on a decision on reconsidering past UNGEGN resolutions on exonyms that requested a reduction of exonyms.

At the 24th meeting of the exonyms working group, held in Ljubljana, Slovenia from 31 August to 3 September 2022, as a result of an intensive deliberation, the working group agreed on a draft recommendation. This paper invites the group of experts to discuss and adopt the draft recommendation.

* GEGN.2/2023/1

** Prepared by Kohei Watanabe and Pierre Jaillard

Proposal on a decision "on the use and safeguarding of exonyms"

1. Background

UNCSGN resolutions on exonyms advocate the reduction of exonyms in "international use" (e.g. 1972/II/31), while recognising that "certain exonyms (conventional names, traditional names) form living and vital parts of languages" (1972/II/28).

On the other hand, the prevalent recent recognition is that "toponyms are indeed part of the intangible cultural heritage" as in the context of the Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage adopted in 17 October 2003 by UNESCO (2007/IX/4) under a certain criteria (2012/X/3).

At the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, held on-line 3–7 May 2021, CRP53 "Quatre types d'exonymes" and CRP 73 "Exonyms as part of the cultural heritage" were presented. Following these papers that recognised the value of exonyms, there was a discussion on a decision on reconsidering past UNGEGN resolutions on exonyms that requested a reduction of exonyms.

As an outcome, Decision 2/2021/12 (c) states that; "The group of experts decided to conduct further discussions on finding guidelines that reconcile the current resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on exonyms and its acknowledgement of exonyms as part of the cultural heritage"

2. Proposal

The 24th meeting of the exonyms working group was held in Ljubljana, Slovenia, from 31 August to 3 September 2022. In this meeting, a draft decision document "on the use and safeguarding of exonyms" was discussed. Intensive deliberation took place among a core group of voluntary participants, as well as among the plenary. Many concerns has been addressed, such as:

* *exonyms indicate an idea of domination*: this applies only to some exonyms that had been created artificially. The majority of exonyms coined by common usage indicate only a familiarity of the language community to the denominated feature.

* *exonyms cause ambiguities*: it is less likely that standardising two or more names for one geographical feature would cause a critical ambiguity. Within the language community, established exonyms are commonly used and are well understood as to which geographical feature they correspond to. Current development of geographical names databases allows unambiguous correspondence between a feature and multiple names by means of a data identifier. Indeed this is the suggested approach for indigenous or minority names.

As a result, the working group agreed on a draft decision text that calls for a reconsideration of past UNGEGN resolutions that requested a blanket reduction of exonym use, that is to be proposed at the 2023 UNGEGN session.

Its main basis are:

- no change in UNGEGN's stance that exonyms are to be used discreetly in international communication with utmost sensibility
- legitimisation of the use of exonyms in non-international use
- use of both endonyms and exonyms in context-free uses (lists, databases, maps) wherever possible

Draft decision on the use and safeguarding of exonyms (Exonyms WG, Ljubljana Sep 2022)

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

Considering the United Nations Charter adopted on 26 June 1945, and notably its Article 1 referring to the principle of self-determination of peoples, which implies at the same time the right of peoples who inhabit a place to name it and the right of other peoples to refer to that place in their own language without foreign interference;

Considering the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 17 October 2003, which implies the safeguarding of languages and the safeguarding of geographical names which are “vehicles of the intangible cultural heritage”;

Recalling that decision 1967/I/4 (C, 1) has set up the objective that “unnecessary changing of names be avoided”;

Recalling that decisions 1972/II/28, 2002/VIII/9, 2007/IX/4 and 2012/X/3 have recognized some geographical names, either endonyms or exonyms, as part of the intangible cultural heritage, and that decisions 1972/II/36, 1987/V/22, 2002/VIII/1 and 2007/IX/5 have underlined the legitimacy of using indigenous and minority geographical names in addition to the name in the majority language;

Recognizing that most exonyms, coined by common usage, generally indicate a familiarity of the language community or its sub-group(s) to the denominated features without any idea of domination on them, unlike some of those created artificially;

Recognizing that the relationship between geographical names, either endonyms or exonyms, and geographical features cannot be absolutely unambiguous like for a data processing identifier, but only be relatively unambiguous to a language community or its sub-groups, which has to define an acceptable scope of ambiguity;

Recognizing that technical advances in data management have dramatically lessened the practical need for reducing the use of exonyms since the early Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names;

Recalls that exonyms should be reduced in international and especially diplomatic use and that the possible use of an exonym in such a context should be done with consideration of political and cultural sensitivity, taking also into account the relevant provisions of last paragraph of decision 1982/IV/20, as well as the precedence of national official forms;

Recalls that exonyms should be used in combination with the corresponding endonym, wherever possible, in uses without context like databases, gazetteers or maps (printed or digital);

Recommends that national standardization should register, standardize and safeguard as living and vital parts of languages those exonyms coined by a long enough and still current usage which meet the criteria listed by decision 2012/X/3;

Recommends that national standardization should not initiate the formation of exonyms, except by conversion from one writing system to another, by the omission, addition or alteration of diacritics or the article, by declension or derivation, or by the translation of a generic term;

Considers outdated the provisions of previous UNGEGN decisions which would be inconsistent with this decision, such as those calling for a blanket reduction of exonyms.