13 March 2023

English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
Third session**
New York, 1-5 May 2023
Item number 15 of the provisional agenda *
Writing systems and pronunciation

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 full report of the Working Group on Romanization Systems provides an outline of the main developments in respect of the status of various romanization systems on the agenda of the Working Group.

Information is provided on the romanization systems or writing systems for Armenian, Belarusian, Kazakh and Uzbek.

Full details on romanization systems are available on the website of the Working Group (http://www.eki.ee/wgrs).

———————————

Arabic

The Working Group continues to monitor the implementation of the system for the romanization of Arabic as was adopted at the Eleventh Conference of the United Nations Conference of the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2017 (resolution XI/3); the previous UN-approved system is still found in considerable international usage.

Armenian

The Working Group convenors met with Armenian linguists and geographical names experts in June 2021 to discuss Armenian romanization. Armenia reported that the draft Armenian romanization system of 2011 was used in Armenia to romanize names. However, the experts had recently started to create two versions of a new romanization system, one with diacritics, and one without. The creation of an additional transliteration system between the scripts of Russian and Armenian was also under consideration. Armenia's national report to this UNGEGN session also records continuing application of the ISO standard, ISO 9985:1996 (E). The Working Group is keen to continue its liaison with the Armenian government to assist with the development and implementation of a system in order that it might be brought to UNGEGN for consideration as an official UN system.

Belarusian

The Working Group convenors and UNGEGN Secretariat had been invited to meet Belarusian government officials to discuss the romanization of Belarusian; a meeting had taken place in September 2022. The UN romanization system for Belarusian was approved in 2012 and is available here: https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom1_be.pdf

Kazakh

The Working Group has continued to monitor the status of the introduction of a Roman-script alphabet for the Kazakh language. As reported in 2021, the proposed alphabet discussed at the 2019 UNGEGN Session underwent some further changes, and the timeframe given for its adoption as the main alphabet for the Kazakh language in Kazakhstan has also been modified. The Working Group will continue to monitor developments and has agreed that further evidence would be required before the alphabet can be documented for the UN.

Khmer

The national report of Cambodia, GEGN.2/2023/104/CRP.104, confirms the use and implementation of the 1997 transcription system for the romanization of Khmer in Cambodia, replacing the 1972 system. The Working Group will endeavour to discuss with Cambodia the presentation of the system to the Group of Experts for its official consideration and adoption.

Lao

The Working Group had been invited to review a draft of the Lao Romanization System prepared by the National Geographic Department of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The Working Group had made certain recommendations and were keen to resume the discussion with the Lao government in order to finalise the system, and consider it for adoption as a UN system.

Sinhala

As reported at the 2021 session, Sri Lanka's Cabinet of Ministers officially accepted the proposed romanization system for Sinhala on 4 September 2018 (Cabinet Paper No.18/1965/829/005), although some modifications to the system were made subsequently. The

Working Group is keen to discuss with Sri Lanka the draft being 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 Working Group 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.

Tamazight

The Working Group has agreed, given the official status of the Tamazight language in some countries in North Africa, to include this language in its agenda. The Working Group understands that it has not yet been decided in Algeria which is to be the official script for the language, but that in Morocco the Tifinagh script is used officially. The Working Group continues to monitor developments in order that information on Tamazight romanization may be added to the Working Group's website.

Uzbek

The Working Group has learnt that, although Uzbekistan adopted the Roman script for the Uzbek language in the 1990s, the adoption and implementation of the Roman script has not been complete, and there have frequently been proposals to alter the alphabet used. In 2022 an alternative alphabet[1] was proposed, with a stated intention to introduce the altered alphabet in 2023. The Working Group will monitor the proposed adoption, and will endeavour to discuss with Uzbek names experts.

UNGEGN Strategic Plan

According to UNGEGN's Strategic Plan and Work Plan 2021-2029, there are a number of additional tasks for the Working Group. These are fully described in the 2021 session report: GEGN.2/2021/93/CRP.93. A few updates are recorded here:

Part of the Working Group's task is to promote and disseminate romanization systems once they have been approved by ECOSOC for both national and global use. This work is ongoing but many of the systems are already widely used by member countries such as US and UK and by some international groups in their mapping. The widespread adoption of these systems contributes beneficially to UNGEGN's core task of standardisation. The Working Group is planning to initiate a survey across the UNGEGN membership for information about the implementation of UNGEGN romanization systems in domestic contexts for foreign names.

The Working Group has also undertaken to consider the development and use of innovative romanization methods. Some examples of automated or systematic transliteration (via Excel) or other programmes for e.g. Ukrainian have been monitored. Also, e.g. CalConnect is developing a tool named *Interscript* that provides a basic framework to allow script conversion systems to be defined in a machine-readable way. It would be interchangeable and interoperable across systems. The *Transcriptor* project described by the Kingdom of the Netherlands at the 2021 session also contributes to this work.

It is also of note that an ISO standard, ISO 24229: 2022 *Information and documentation — Codes for written language conversion systems,* was published in 2022. This would allow the

---

[1] The currently proposed alternatives are more consistent with Turkish and other Turkic languages (e.g. /ç/ and /ş/ in place of /ch/ and /sh/).

assignment of a unique code to all systems of romanization approved by the UN. CalConnect has been appointed as the registration authority for this standard.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to express its views on the Working Group's tasks and the upcoming actions for 2023-2025.