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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names  
2019 session**

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Item 7 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**National and international standardization of geographical  
names: names collection, office treatment, national  
authorities, features beyond a single sovereignty and  
international cooperation****Project on the national standardization of geographical  
names in Norway****Summary\*\***

Since September 2016, research on the standardization of geographical names has been conducted in the context of a doctoral project funded by the Research Council of Norway through its public sector doctoral scheme. The working title of the thesis is “Politicizing toponymic standardization: towards a new theoretical approach to the scalar politics in the standardization of geographical names”. The project, which is expected to be finalized by 2021 or 2022, is being undertaken in collaboration with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning of the Norwegian University of Life Science.

As the State’s consultative body on language issues, the Language Council has been assigned by the Ministry of Culture to follow up on the official language policy. In Norway, the national standardization of geographical names is an integrated part of language policy and is even regulated by law. The overall purpose of the Norwegian Place Name Act of 1990 is to safeguard toponyms as part of the nation’s cultural heritage. The Act aims to balance dialectal diversity, official spelling norms, etymology, traditional spellings, local usage, local preferences and market forces. However, the various principles of standardization are often non-congruent, leading to disagreements, public debate and frequent revisions of the Act. Meanwhile, the expertise needed to work in the onomastic field and to implement the Act is rapidly decreasing.

Framing a policy issue along geographical, jurisdictional, temporal or linguistic lines influences governing ability, inclusion/exclusion, interests, power and the responsibilities of actors. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs is currently in the process

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\* [GEGN.2/2019/1](#).

\*\* The full report was prepared by Ingvil Nordland, Senior Adviser, Language Council of Norway. The report will be available at [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/1st\\_session\\_UNGEGN.html](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/geoinfo/UNGEGN/1st_session_UNGEGN.html), in the language of submission only, as document GEGN.2/2019/78/CRP.78.



of democratizing toponymic standardization policy within the concept of municipal self-government, suggesting that geographical names should be standardized according to local spoken and written usage and local preferences. However, the local use of names frequently conflicts with linguistic recommendations, which indicates that there is no undisputed truth on how the problem of toponymic policy can be solved.

Through a qualitative case study of the Act and its history, the doctoral research project explores how policy actors manoeuvre along geographical, jurisdictional, temporal or linguistic lines in order to legitimize one standard over another (and, consequently, to implicate one mode of regulation at the expense of others). The empirical data in the research project consist of policy texts, supplemented with semi-structured interviews with central policy actors and participant observation from policy work. The analytic tool used to analyse the data is a post-structural policy analysis drawing on concepts such as power, knowledge, discourse, genealogy and governmentality. The overall purpose of the project is for all parties to gain a better understanding of the discursive struggles and political rationalities associated with toponymic standardization in Norway so that the Language Council can be better equipped to address future policymaking in that area.

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