
**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
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Item 4(a) of the provisional agenda ***Reports: Governments on the situation in their
countries and on the progress made in the
standardization of geographical names**Relevant resolutions: **I/4, II/27, II/32,
III/3, IV/2, IV/5, VI/7, VI/9, VII/5,
VII/9, VIII/1, VIII/9, VIII/10, VIII/12,
IX/4, IX/5****Report of Norway**

Submitted by Norway**

Summary:

The full report provides an outline of the progress and developments of Norway on geographical names since the 2019 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

Item one of the report includes a review of the recent revision of the Norwegian Place-Name Act and its effects on the standardization of geographical names at the local government (municipal) level and within other areas. The Act gives local governments more authority in making it easier to standardize names according to local spoken and written usage, independently of linguistic recommendations. Item one also gives details on the effects of the reorganization of the geographical names consultancy service, which also resulted from the 2019 amendment. The consultancy service is now administered by the Norwegian Language Council.

Item two of the report concerns the effects of the administrative reform of 2020, which reduced the number of regions (counties) from 18 to 11 and the number of local governments (municipalities) from 422 to 356.

Item three of the report contains a review of the geographical names service under the responsibility of the Norwegian Mapping Authority. The Authority is in charge of hosting, maintaining and developing the central geographical names register. There are 1,050,000 named places in the register, some of which have several written forms, making a total of 1,075,000 geographical names. In addition, some of the names have variant spellings, bringing the total number of name forms to 1,264,000. In total, 119,000 of the register's geographical names have been given authorized spellings, and the remainder will be spelled according to the written norm until they are given special attention.

Item four of the report is on other activities in Norway, including the preparations by the Norwegian Language Council for the launch of an e-learning course on the standardization of geographical names at the local government (municipal) level. In addition, the place-name archive under the Norwegian Language Collections is developing new services to help with the standardization of geographical names in

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accordance with recommendations B and C in resolution 4 of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (see [E/CONF.53/3](#)). Those items will be outlined in the report of Norway and elaborated on in detail in separate reports.

Item five of the report touches on the effects of the European Union General Data Protection Regulations on collecting, recording and managing geographical names for use in standardization, as viewed from a Norwegian perspective. It has been found that those regulations pose severe problems in delivering geographical names information to regulators and the general public.

Item six of the report pertains to the indigenous and minority languages of Norway, Sámi and Kven, including with respect to hearings on the official Sámi and Kven names for Norway and on guidelines for spelling rules.

Item seven of the report concerns the updated toponymic guidelines that Norway presented in 2020 in response to the administrative reform detailed under item two above. A further revision is envisaged for 2021

Report of Norway

1. Revision of The Norwegian Place Name Act

The Norwegian Place Name Act is both a language law and a cultural heritage law. It ensures that traditional Sami, Norwegian and Kven geographical names are in active use by the public sector. The main instrument for safeguarding geographical names is through official standardization. However, standardization of geographical names does also have a practical side. To make geospatial data more accurate and useful, for instance on maps, certain standards in the use of names is required.

The standardization of geographical names in Norway is a delicate balance between the local and the national scale. The Act aims to balance dialectal diversity, official spelling norms, etymology, traditional spellings, local usage, local preferences, market forces and the State's need for unambiguous names and spellings for navigation purposes. However, the various principles of standardization are often non-congruent, leading to disagreements, public debate and frequent revisions of the Act. Meanwhile, the linguistic expertise needed to work in the onomastic field and to implement the Act is rapidly decreasing.

The Act itself was revised in 2015 and 2019. The regulations for the Act were revised in 2017. After the revision of the Act in 2019, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs has worked together with the Language Council and the Mapping Authority on a revised version of the regulations. The deadline for the hearing was 7.04.2019.

The main aim for the latest revision of the Act in 2019 was to transfer more power to the local and municipal level in cases pertaining both to the spelling of geographical names and actual geographical name selection. This amendment is meant to make it easier for local governments to standardize names according to spoken and written usage – and independently of linguistic recommendations. In the following sections, the report will concentrate on two of the most important changes (in section 4 and 13) and their effect on practice so far.

Section 4

The main rule in the Act is section 4. According to this section the spelling of a geographical name shall be based on the inherited local pronunciation, but at the same time follow the current spelling rules of Norwegian, Sami and Kven languages. The rationale behind this is that the local pronunciation often indicates the etymology and can therefore give

information about what the name means. The phrase "if the spelling has been in use for a long time, and is well known and incorporated, one can deviate from the current spelling and spelling principles". This sentence previously appeared in the regulations of the Act but is now lifted to the level of the legal text itself. The Ministry of Culture emphasized in its consultation letter to the amendment that the purpose of lifting this exception rule from regulations to legal text is a signal that it should be practiced more often than before. However, the exception is only applied if all of these three conditions are filled: The spelling has "been in use for a long time" and is "well known" and "incorporated". More guidance on how to evaluate these conditions is currently found in the consultation letter for the Act and will be integrated in the new regulations to the Act (see below).

The actual effect of this amendment was questioned by a member of Parliament in December 2020. In a written question, the Minister of Culture and Gender Equality, Abid Raja, was asked whether or not the intention of the amendment is followed up. In the question it is referred to a specific case, Kjernfjellet vs. Tjernfjellet, in Saltdal municipality in Nordland county, where the local wish was rejected.

This name dispute relates to the spelling of the first part of the name, *Kjern(e)*- (English *churn*) "tool for making butter" and *Tjern*- "small forest lake(s)", are both common words in Norwegian language. The second part of the name, *-fjellet*, "the mountain", was undisputed. The name was unauthorized and came up in relation to the opening of a tunnel in the area. The planning for this tunnel had been going on for three decades under the spelling Tjernfjelltunnelen. In April 2019, the Mapping Authority decided to spell the name Kjernfjellet, based on linguistic recommendations. The name contains the word *kjerne*, not *tjern*, and the same etymology is present in the parallel name in Lule sami language, Girno. Despite the fact that the spelling Tjernfjellet conceals the original meaning of the name, the local community wanted this spelling. The Mapping Authority's decision was appealed by Saltdal municipality and treated by the Appeal Board for Place Name Cases. The Appeal Board, however, agreed with the Mapping Authority and confirmed its decision. The Norwegian Public Roads Administration relates to the Mapping Authority's decision, and the signs therefore show Kjernfjelltunnelen, as well as the Lule Sámi name Girnotunælla.

The Minister of Culture and Gender Equality confirms that moving the sentence in question from regulations to law in 2019 was to ensure that the exception rule would be practiced more often. In his written answer to the member of Parliament, he then refers to the Mapping Authority and the Norwegian Language Council, both institutions reporting they have systematically assessed the exception rule in all cases where it is relevant. This also applies in the current case of Kjernfjellet vs. Tjernfjellet. In such assessments, the Mapping Authority and the Norwegian Language Council must weigh different considerations against each other in accordance with the Act with regulations and guidelines for the spelling. Even though the change in the law has only been in effect for a year and a half, there is good reason to believe that the intention of the Act is followed up, the Minister concludes.

Examples where the exception rule in the Place Names Act section 4 has been applied are the spellings:

- Ousdal / Ausdal,
- Lanner / Lander,
- Skaret / Skardet,
- Stoksund / Stokksund,
- Græsli / Gresslia
- Norevikane / Nordrevik / Norevik / Nordvikane.

In all cases the first spelling became the standard form, in spite of linguistic recommendations.

Section 13

Also resulting from the 2019 amendment is a reorganisation of the Name Consultancy Service for Norwegian and Kven geographical names. Earlier, the Norwegian Language Council gave advice and guidance in the standardization of Norwegian and Kven geographical names through decentralized Name Consultancy Services that they administered. The Name Consultancy Service for Sami geographical names has been and still is integrated in the Sami Parliament of Norway.

As a consequence of an amendment in section 13 in the Place Name Act, stating that the Name Consultancy Service is equivalent to the Language Council, a new organizational structure was outlined. On assignment from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the Language Council was asked to set up a centralized Advisory Board for the standardization for Norwegian and Kven names as a replacement for the decentralized services. The rationale behind this reorganization was that it would be easier for the public to relate to one instead of five Consultancy Services, and at the same time finding a way to incorporate the standardization of geographical names fully in the organizational structure of the Language Council. In addition, the rapid decrease in place name scholars over the past 10 to 15 years has made the recruitment of Name Consultants challenging.

This new organizational structure came into force in July 2018 as a temporary arrangement, continued throughout 2019 and became permanent in 2020. The Advisory Board is now fully integrated in the organizational structure of the Language Council, meaning that the recommendations of standardization provided by the board or its members are included in the responsibilities of the Director General of the Language Council.

The leader of this board between July 2018 until March 2021 was former Name Consultant and retired Associate Professor in Onomastics at the University of Oslo, Mr. Botolv Helleland, who was also an active member of UNGEGN for many years. Mr. Helleland is succeeded by Professor in Nordic Languages at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Mr. Ivar Berg. Concurrently, the board was extended from five to six members. There are now five consultants for Norwegian language names and one member for names in the Kven language. Ms. Ellen Hellebostad Toft, working as a senior advisor in the Language Council, has been the board's secretary since the establishment. The Advisory Board has 4-5 meetings during the year. Between meetings the consultants in the board work consecutively with name cases prepared by advisors in the Language Council who are specially trained in handling name cases.

At the meetings, the Advisory Board discuss general questions pertaining to ongoing geographical name cases as well as political and other issues of current interest. The board has for example written consultative responses and given statements on several occasions. The most substantial was a response to the hearing arranged in connection with the amendments to the Place Name Act. The board also wrote a statement to a hearing about the status and future of some vulnerable fields in the humanities – one of which, unfortunately, is onomastics (name studies). Furthermore, the board has responded to the proposed amendments to the regulations for the Place Name Act. The board has also given statements in geographical name cases. Typically, the board discusses cases in which various, and often conflicting, principles figure in the Place Name Act or in the regulations. In many cases, there may be more than one possible spelling of a geographical name. In these cases, the board discusses the different varieties and gives its advice.

2. The administrative reform of 2020

On 1. January 2020, Norway implemented its biggest local government reform since 1964, resulting in an overnight reduction from 428 municipalities (kommuner) to 356, and from 19 counties (fylker) to 11. The reform was initiated by the Norwegian government in 2014,

when a broad majority in the Parliament supported the government's call for the need for a reform at the local and regional government level. The main arguments for a local government reform was to ensure:

- Good, equal services for inhabitants, today and in the future
- A comprehensive and coordinated community development
- Sustainable and financially solid municipalities
- Strengthen local democracy
- Allocate more power to municipalities and counties

Part of the reform was also to transfer additional administrative tasks to the local government/municipal level. In 2017, the new municipal and regional structure was decided upon, see *Proposition to the Storting no. 96 S* (https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/46a1576a806f4e1682f00b0d9a1f4456/proposition_to_the_storting_no_96_s.pdf), and the result was that 119 of the existing 428 municipalities merged into 47 new municipalities. According to Norwegian law and custom, the new municipalities and counties take over the same responsibilities and rights from the old units.

3. SSR – Central Geographical Names Register

The Norwegian Mapping Agency (Statens kartverk) is in charge of hosting, maintaining and developing the Central Geographical Names Register (Sentralt stedsnavnregister – SSR). Currently, the Norwegian geographical names service contains 1,050,000 named places. Some of these places have two or more written forms. Thus, the register contains no less than 1,075,000 geographical names. However, if we include registered variant spellings, the register contains no less than 1,264,000 name forms. It goes without saying that standardization constitutes a major effort. Hitherto, 119,000 geographical names in the register have been officially standardized. The remainder of the register's geographical names are maintained and stored according to written norm until becoming subject to authorization.

4. Other activities in Norway

An e-Learning course in the Norwegian Place Name Act and executive work on the standardization of geographical names will be released in April/May 2021. The overall goal with this course is to improve the implementation of standardized forms in accordance with the principles in the Norwegian Place Name Act. The target group of the course is mainly employees in the public sector working with geographical names at local government (municipal) level (see also item 3). With the use of visual and interactive content, the intension is to engage the users and motivate them to learn about geographical names and their importance for society and culture. Hopefully, this course will lead to a better understanding for the rationale behind the Act and make the procedures for standardization better known. This course is presented in a separate report (GEGN.2/2021/20/CRP.20).

The Norwegian Language Council and the Norwegian Mapping Authorities have started regular cooperation meetings where they discuss the standardization of geographical names. The two institutions both have strengthened the work with geographical names and made reorganizations. These meetings started in 2020 and will be arranged 3–4 times a year.

5. Effect of EU General Data Protection Regulations

The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>) is a regulation in EU law on data protection and privacy in the European Union and the European Economic Area. Under this law, controllers and processors of personal data must put in place appropriate technical and organizational measures

to implement data protection principles designed and built to safeguard and protect with privacy in mind. This means that datasets may not be used to identify a subject. No personal data may be processed unless this processing is done under one of the six lawful bases specified by the regulation (consent, contract, public task, vital interest, legitimate interest or legal requirement).

Under the GDPR, the processing of personal data is legitimate only if: “the data subject has given consent to the processing of his or her personal data”, or e.g. if it “is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest”. The GDPR leaves it to EU law or national law to determine which kind of activities are considered as being “in the public interest” and does allow for some exemptions for research and archive purposes.

Concerning archives, the obligation to provide information to data subjects where personal data were not obtained from the data subject does not apply when it would be “impossible or would involve a disproportionate effort, in particular for processing for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes”. However, it is entirely unclear what constitutes an ‘impossible’ and ‘disproportionate effort’.

For this reason, a growing number of European archive institutions choose not to make any digital archives containing personal data available after a set date, e.g. 70 or 150 years prior to the current year. If this becomes a general rule, it will make digital transformation of geographical names archives impossible. In addition, researchers and civil servants will not be able to carry out their work satisfactorily – unless they visit the physical archives, where such restrictions do not apply, squarely underlining the inappropriateness of the GDPR regulations. No national guidelines for has yet been implemented, although international ones do exist, such as the *Guidance for Data Protection for Archive Services* (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/eag_draft_guidelines_1_11_0.pdf) by the European Archives Group.

In Norway, as well as other Nordic countries, the publication of source-material is potentially made impossible where the object, be it text or images contains the name of the collector, and/or the informant. Since personal name information is a guarantee of authenticity of the information given and used to identify when a collection campaign took place, this constitutes a potentially devastating blow to geographical names management.

6. Indigenous and minority names news

North Sami, Lule Sami and South Sami are all official indigenous languages in Norway. There have been yet other Sami languages spoken in Norway, but the latter are considered extinct (although there are on-going revitalization efforts) and have no official status. Nevertheless, many geographical names have been preserved in these languages, which allowed for them to retain a certain degree of official status in the field of name preservation.

Kven is the language of the Kven/Norwegian-Finnish ethnic minority in Norway. Its traditional core area is the county of Troms and Finnmark. It is a sister language to Finnish, and the two languages are to a large degree mutually intelligible.

In an amendment to the regulation of the Place Name Act in 2017 the use of Skolt Sami names was allowed next to, or instead of North Sami names in the South Varanger municipality, the core area of Skolt Sami presence in Norway. In recent years two other Sami languages, Ume Sami and Pite Sami, have had official orthographies developed for them. In a proposal for new regulations for the Place Name Act, it has been suggested that these two languages are given status similar to that of Skolt Sami geographical names, i.e. that Pite Sami may be used next to, or instead of Lule Sami in certain municipalities in the county of Nordland, and that Ume Sami geographical names will fall under similar regulations in certain municipalities where South Sami names are otherwise used (further South in Nordland county).

In 2019 the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernization (KMD) started a process of confirming official names for the Kingdom of Norway (that is, for both the full name «The Kingdom of Norway», and the shortened commonly used version «Norway») in the minority languages North Sami, Lule Sami, South Sami and Kven. This process is not yet at an end, but a public inquiry on these names has been conducted, and the currently proposed names are as follows (for «Norway» and «The Kingdom of Norway» respectively):

<i>Language</i>	<i>Short name</i>	<i>Full name</i>
• North Sami:	Norga	Norgga gonagasriika
• Lule Sami:	Vuodna	Vuona gånågisriikka
• South Sami:	Nöörje	Nöörjen gånkarijhke
• Kven:	Norja	Norjan kuninkhaanvaltakunta

7. Updated Toponymic Guidelines for Norway

Owing to its substantial administrative reform, Norway published an updated [Toponymic Guidelines in 2020](#) in response to the administrative reform detailed under item 2, above. A minor revision might be published during 2021, should the need occur. The revised Guidelines are available on the homepage of the Norwegian Mapping Agency:

- <https://www.kartverket.no/globalassets/til-lands/stadnamn/toponymic-guidelines-for-map-and-other-editors-norway.pdf>