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English

United Nations Group of Experts on

Geographical Names

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Writing systems and pronunciation

**Report of the Working Group on Romanization Systems:
Current status of UN 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 or writing systems for Arabic, Kazakh and other languages.

The report contains a short summary on the meeting that the Working Group held during the 2019 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

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

* GEGN.2/2021/1

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Arabic

As previously reported, a new system for the romanization of Arabic was adopted at the Eleventh Conference of the United Nations Conference of the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2017 (resolution XI/3) and accordingly the Working Group's report on Arabic has been updated to reflect the agreement: https://www.eki.ee/wgrs/rom1_ar.pdf

The Working Group continues to monitor the implementation of the system, and notes that the previous UN-approved system is still found in considerable international usage.

Lao

The WG was invited to review the current draft of the Lao Romanization System prepared by the National Geographic Department of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and were recommendations (these included a simplification of the table, whereby only those character combinations that were necessary for the application of the system would be included in the system). The WG understands that the principles of writing geographical names in the Lao PDR have been prepared by the Geographic Department and some legislation concerning geographical names is expected to be passed by the country's parliament.

Sinhala

The WG has learnt that 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 have been made since the 2019 UNGEGN Session. Sri Lanka has also been working on publishing a national map using the Roman alphabet. The WG awaits with anticipation the approved 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 WG 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.

Kazakh

The WG has continued to monitor the status of the introduction of a Roman-script alphabet for the Kazakh language. The proposed alphabet discussed at the 2019 UNGEGN Session has undergone 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 WG will continue to monitor developments and has agreed that further evidence would be required before the alphabet can be documented for the UN.

Tamazight

The WG has agreed, given the official status of the Tamazight language in some countries in North Africa, to include this language in its agenda. The WG 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 WG continues to monitor developments in order that information on Tamazight romanization may be added to the WG website.

UNGEGN Strategic Plan

According to UNGEGN's Strategic Plan and Work Plan 2021-2029, there are a number of additional tasks for the WG:

Under Strategy 1, *Technical Expertise*, it is acknowledged that romanization should be a key issue in considerations of geographical names data management. A key task towards this obligation is to contribute to the establishment of an authoritative international database of geographical names to be disseminated to the public through UNGEGN.

Strategy 1 also states that the WG should be engaged with evaluation and assessment of innovative methods to be used for romanization, such as machine transliteration, and that it should report on developments to UNGEGN sessions.

Clarity and assistance on the implementation and use of UN-agreed romanization systems should be promoted further – both within the relevant donor country and at the global implementation level. In UNGEGN's SWOT¹ analysis it is acknowledged that work on romanization is not well known and understood by others in related disciplines.

Under Strategy 2, *Relationships, links and connections*, it is affirmed that the WG should build on its connections and contributions to external bodies and to UN departments including the UN Documentation Division and SALB.

Finally, under Strategy 4, *Culture, heritage and language recognition*, the WG has agreed to incorporate into its agenda support to the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage in that group's investigation of principles and methodology for recording and writing geographical names from unwritten languages.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to express its views on the Working Group's tasks and the upcoming actions for 2021-2023.

¹ SWOT = Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats