

10 March 2025

English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 8 (c) of the provisional agenda *

Culture, heritage and language recognition: Exonyms

Foreign Names in Estonian

Submitted by Estonia **

* GEGN.2/2025/1

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Background

Foreign names started to appear in more numbers in Estonian texts from the mid-19th century, initially in an adapted spelling. After transitioning from the old, German-based spelling to a new, Finnish-based one since the 1870s, it was decided to use the original spelling for non-Estonian personal names, i.e., not to adapt the names. As for foreign geographical names, the recommendations remained indecisive, but in 1911, it was finally agreed that, as a rule, these names were to be written in the original spelling, except for names that had become rooted in traditional form. These guidelines were followed through to the end of the 1930s, supported by dictionaries of Standard Estonian (the ‘small dictionary’ or VÕS that was first printed in 1933 contained a list of the names that was regularly updated) and also by the Estonian Encyclopaedia (1932–1940). The balance between endonyms and exonyms became more or less fixed.

The situation changed when Estonia was occupied in 1940. In an attempt designed to isolate Estonia from the rest of the world, a campaign was launched with the aim of adapting all foreign names to Estonian spelling rules. The campaign was not successful in the end, but it shifted the line between endonyms and exonyms heavily in favour of exonyms. A typical new exonym was an orthographic adaptation of the original spelling, e.g. *Madriid* ‘Madrid’, *Liihtenštein* ‘Liechtenstein’. The first attempt to curb the number of exonyms was made in 1960 when, after a pause of 20 years, a new list of geographical names was produced in the dictionary of Standard Estonian. Further reductions of exonyms took place in 1976, and the peak was achieved in 1983 when the Language Committee (then *vabariiklik õigekeelsuskomisjon*, later *keeleteoimkond*) approved the list of names of countries and their capitals (covering Roman-script languages only). Changes made in this list proved to be too radical to many, so later, some of the recommendations were reverted in favour of exonyms, e.g., *București* → *Bukarest*, *København* → *Kopenhagen*.

Current situation

The main principles of treating foreign names are still valid. As a rule, names retain their original spelling when used in Estonian texts. If the name is originally written in a non-Roman script, a romanization system is applied, preferably an international one, in most cases approved by the United Nations. Estonian own transcription systems are applied if there is no international system in place, e.g. for Kazakh, Kirghiz, and Tajik, or in some cases because of a long tradition, e.g. for Russian.

Whereas for geographical names within Estonia, there is the Place Names Act regulating all major aspects of names standardization, there is no such provision for foreign geographical names. Handling these names is considered as part of general language regulation, and the Language Committee is entitled to give any recommendations if necessary. These recommendations, as a rule, do not apply to single names but to more general questions, such as the spelling of names in a certain language or the approval of romanization systems for Estonian use. For example, in 2024, the Language Committee approved for Estonian use the UN system of romanization for Belarusian (2012) and also the *de facto* national system of romanization for Macedonian Cyrillic.

Legally speaking, these decisions are recommendatory, not mandatory for the wider society. Therefore, it would be impossible to tell if a certain foreign name is officially approved for Estonian or not. This became obvious in 2023 when there was an intention to ‘rename’ Kaliningrad as Königsberg. The Foreign Affairs Committee of Riigikogu, the Estonian Parliament, appealed to the Language Committee, but the committee lacked the authority to do it.

This brings us to a new aspect of standardizing foreign names for Estonian use. The Language Committee consists mainly of linguists, there is also an advisory working group on foreign names that includes major stakeholders such as the ministries and departments, the media, academia (geographers, historians), etc. Recent trends in geographical naming reveal a growing pattern of politicization of names and an increase in naming disputes. The Language Committee is ill-equipped to handle requests involving political aspects.

Typology of naming disputes

The following is a brief attempt to generalize naming disputes into broader categories. The omission of any concrete examples is intentional.

1. Disputes on **country names**. The reasons for such disputes may be manifold: non-recognition of such an entity or its government by other countries, a conviction that a given name is misleading, having pretensions to a much larger area, sometimes the linguistic novelty of the name itself, etc.
2. Disputes over names of **international sea areas**. Countries, especially those bordering the sea areas, may have differing views on the international names of certain sea areas. There is no proper mechanism to solve such disputes unless all bordering countries come to a mutually agreed name.
3. Disputes on names reflecting **sovereignty** over certain areas. Countries may have different understandings of their sovereign areas, which might be reflected in toponyms, i.e., the use or non-use may include a recognition of a country's sovereignty claim.
4. Disputes over names of **non-recognized entities**. Not only the names of the entities themselves but also geographical names within these entities may be the subject of disagreements, especially when the entity has changed the names afterward. As a general rule, internationally, only these names are used that were given by the recognized government (see also Resolution III/16 of UN CSGN).
5. **Deprecated geographical names**. Certain names might be too sensitive for use in a country, either for political, historical, or other reasons. The use of such names may be interpreted as provocative.
6. **National** naming disputes. This is a broad category involving disputes on the national level only: renaming of cities, use of minority names, etc.
7. **Local** naming disputes. This is also a broad category of disputes on a local government level: names of streets and squares, e.g.

This list of categories is not exhaustive, but it proves well the difficulties of other nations in using names that, for one or another reason, are considered sensitive or provocative. Essentially, deciding on which name to use in such cases is not a linguistic activity anymore but a political statement. Understandably, the Language Committee is reluctant to do it, and if there is a proposal to change a certain well-known name, the Committee usually accepts both the old and the new name, leaving it up to the users to decide on which one to prefer. This has been the case for 'renaming' *Gruusia* 'Georgia' into *Georgia* and *Kiiev* 'Kyiv' into *Kõjiv* (an Estonian transcription of the name of the capital of Ukraine). As a result, both *Gruusia* and *Georgia*, *Kiiev* and *Kõjiv* are considered as acceptable, but traditional exonyms still prevail in everyday usage. In any case, it is the users who make the decision to accept or reject the names, not linguists.

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the difficulties in standardizing foreign geographical names in case of naming disputes.
- (2) Share experience and offer solutions to this issue.