
Eleventh United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names
New York, 8-17 August 2017
Item 11 of the provisional agenda
Exonyms

Exonym use: Globally common characteristics and criteria

Submitted by the Working Group on Exonyms*

* Prepared by Peter Jordan (Austria), Convenor, Working Group on Exonyms

Exonym use: Globally common characteristics and criteria

Introduction

Resolution VIII/4 (UN Conference in Berlin, 2002) created the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms and defined the formulation of guidelines ensuring a politically sensitive use of exonyms as one of its major tasks. The WG undertook many efforts to comply with this task:

- at the WG Meeting in Prague (2003);
- at the 9th UN Conference in New York (2007), where a detailed list of criteria for the use of exonyms was presented and discussed;
- at the WG Meeting in Timișoara (2008), where this list of criteria was again discussed and modified;
- at the 25th UNGEGN Session in Nairobi (2009), where the attempt to propose an essentially reduced version of this list as a model for a UN resolution failed;
- at the 10th WG Meeting in Tainach 2010, where the aim was no longer a UN resolution, but instead an advisory handout or brochure.

The WG Meeting in Zagreb (2015) – after an exhaustive discussion – confirmed the Tainach preference of avoiding any normative approach. To this end it was found necessary to depart from empirical studies on the use of exonyms in various parts of the world. The WG Meeting in Prague (April 2017) was devoted to this very task and saw 16 paper presentations on this topic. Based on their findings, the WG developed in a general debate the list of globally common characteristics and criteria for exonym use as presented below.

These criteria are primarily conceived as noting the circumstances in which exonyms are currently used, but they may also serve as a guideline for exonym use in future.

Globally common characteristics and criteria of exonym use

(1) Language-related criteria

Exonyms tend to be used,

- in receiver language environments;
- if the endonym is composed of a specific and a semantically transparent generic word.

(2) Feature-related criteria

Exonyms tend to be used, if the geographical feature marked by the name

- has close and traditional relations to the community of the receiver language;
- is historically or currently important (for the receiver community);
- extends across language boundaries.