

---

# GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES – FROM CAPTURE TO STANDARDIZATION

*Ema Pogorelčnik*

*Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of  
Slovenia, Ljubljana*

*Received for publication: 9 June, 1999*

*Prepared for publication: 9 June, 1999*

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to present work in the field of geographical names. Main characteristics are described and the basic description of the standardization of geographical names at the international and national level is presented. A short report follows from the 15th Regional International Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names for Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe.*

**Keywords:** *geographical names, standardization of geographical names*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The basic purpose of geographical names is to assist users in spatial orientation. In addition to everyday use, this is especially expressed in the use of geographical names on maps, in various publications and atlases and in the use of digital data in numerous geographic information systems, etc. Slovenia has approximately 200 000 geographical names, which appear in various sources. The present situation (nonstandardized geographical names, scattered throughout various sources) causes many difficulties, communication problems and errors in various maps and databases. The purpose of setting up a Register of Geographical Names is to ensure the standardization of geographical names.

Geographical names captured from various sources have not yet been standardized. The standardization of geographical names is a task performed in Slovenia by the Governmental Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names. The entire process of standardization is very time-consuming, but continual gradual work is enabling us to achieve concrete goals – standardized geographical names.

## **2 DATABASE OF THE REGISTER OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

The setting up and keeping of the Register of Geographical Names has its origins in the UN – the Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names, which has proposed in its resolutions the keeping of databases of geographical names. At its last conference, which took place in 1998 in New York, access via the Internet to data on geographical names was recommended. The Register of

Geographical Names contains all names of objects that are permanent and have a certain temporally, historically, ethnologically or socially established identity. To a large extent this is also a definition of geographical names. The Register of Geographical Names is kept in a central database. In 1997, all geographical names captured up to that time were copied into a revised version of the unified database in Oracle. The capture of geographical names from national nomenclature plans and maps at various scales (1 : 5000, 1 : 10 000, 1 : 25 000, 1 : 250 000) will be completed in 2000.

Software was produced for the keeping, updating and issuing of data and an Intranet application for viewing data. In the first phase, the basic function of the Intranet application of the Register of Geographical Names was to enable the review of geographical names by competent regional geodetic administrations and branch offices. In addition to the review, the Intranet application proved to be a useful aid or source for the standardization of geographical names. The possibility of accessing the Intranet application for geographical names was therefore also granted to the contractor which performs professional and operative work activities for the Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names. If this proves to be necessary, the possibility of granting access to the database is also envisaged for other users. In accordance with UN recommendations and the database's content it would be reasonable to allow access to the database to all users via the Internet. It is expected that expansion of the range of the database's users would further improve the quality of the database, i.e. the correctness of records of geographical names.

### 3 STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Geographical names are basic information for spatial orientation. If used in standardized form, they contribute effectively both to national and international communication. Geographical names are important for the widest range of users, because they identify the regions, express the identity of a nation, are part of the cultural heritage, provide a framework for orientation, promote the perception of the world around us. The writing and use of the names of cities, towns, villages or regions, names of bodies of water and other geographical names must be clear, accurate, fluent and unambiguous. Effective communication depends on the correct use of such names on maps, in the media, in legal documents and in everyday life. The consequences of inaccurate and incorrect interpretation of geographical names can be multi-layered and complex, and frequently affect the public. Geographical names are written in various ways and they change; a single geographical name may refer to several objects in nature and vice versa. These are only a few factors affecting the success of communications. Geographical names are written using numerous orthographic systems (Arabic, Chinese, Cyrillic, Hebrew, Japanese, etc.). Various ways are known for converting records from other systems into the Latin system. The producers of maps and atlases, journalists and other users frequently find themselves in difficulties when they have to decide on how to write something and which system of orthography to use.

This is why the United Nations undertook the systematic solving of this problem as early as 1959, with the intention of standardizing geographical names and achieving more effective communication. A system was established which was

supposed to help solve such problems. The standardization of geographical names means activities and efforts aimed at establishing and prescribing the written forms of geographical names. All these activities converge towards the final goal of standardization: the legal adoption of geographical names which correspond with the linguistic usage of the local population, such that these geographical names could be used in national and international communication. The basic benefit expected from the standardization of geographical names is primarily a contribution to more effective communication. The correct use of geographical names is expressed at various levels in the functioning of society: in trade, statistics, real-estate records, urban and regional planning, environmental protection activities, natural disasters and civil defence preparations, safety strategies, search and rescue operations, maps and plans, geographic information systems, automatic navigation, tourism, etc.

Under the patronage of the UN, the standardization of geographical names therefore functions at both the national and international levels. Figure 1 shows the organizational schematic of institutions and organizations involved in the standardization of geographical names.

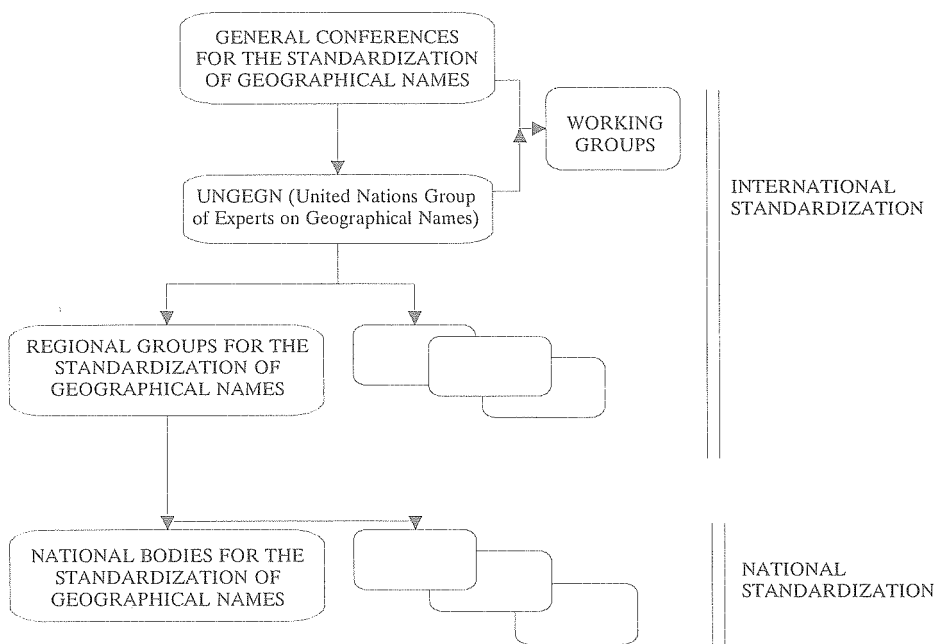


Figure 1

The UN's general conferences for the standardization of geographical names are held every five years. Resolutions (recommendations) are issued within the framework of these conferences. A collection of all resolutions has been translated into Slovene in the form of working materials. The second level within the framework of international standardization consists of the United Nations group of experts on geographical names (UNGEGN), which functions primarily as a consulting and an expert body. UNGEGN conferences are held as a rule every two years. In addition to

national representatives, the sessions are attended by representatives of the heads of regional groups, who report on work, proposals and problems discussed at regular regional meetings. The third level of international standardization of geographical names are regional groups for the standardization of geographical names. Slovenia is active in the regional group for Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe. Regional group conferences generally take place every two years.

In addition, the UN also establishes other working groups if necessary for individual fields in the standardization of geographical names (definitions, submarine and maritime objects, extraterrestrial objects, unified Latin systems for each non-Latin orthographic system, educational courses, directories of geographical names, automatic data processing, list of country names). National standardization bodies are responsible for activities in the field of national standardization of geographical names; in Slovenia, this function is performed by RS Government Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names.

#### 4 COMMITTEE FOR THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

Pursuant to Resolution No. 4, 1st UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (Geneva, 1967), each country should establish a national body responsible for geographical names. In Slovenia, the Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names was first appointed in 1986, and then again in 1990. In the latter composition, the committee held its last meeting in 1991. There were several reasons for the cessation of their operations, including major personnel changes and the reorganization of various bodies which participated in this committee. Since 1994, the Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia has been gradually setting up the Register of Geographical Names. Due to unsolved problems in the standardization of geographical names, a campaign was begun in 1994 for the reappointment of members to the Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names, which was established in September 1995. This committee is now a standing working body of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia responsible for the standardization of geographical names and functioning within the framework of the Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia. Operative work for the committee was taken over by the Anton Melik Geographic Institute of the Scientific-Research Centre of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences. The committee consists of representatives of geographers, linguists, geodesists-cartographers, representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

The basic tasks of the committee include preparation of professional standardization documents, checking of correctness and proposing of corrected records of geographical names in compliance with standardization documents, informing the public about the standardization procedure and the use of standardized geographical names. The committee operates pursuant to the adopted resolutions and recommendations of the expert group for the standardization of geographical names (UNEGN), and participates in the work of this UN expert group and the work of the regional group for Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe. The tasks of this committee also include the provision of data on

standardized and other geographical names to the Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia which keeps a database of geographical names with all essential contents (geographical name, location, etc.). The documents the committee prepares or adopts are either in analogue or digital form and primarily include the following: Toponymic guidelines, Dictionary of Toponymic Terminology, List of Country Names, List of Exonyms, Directories of Geographical Names (gazettes), various opinions, expert reports, analyses, etc.

## 5 REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES FOR EASTERN, CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

Slovenia has assumed the leadership of the regional group for the standardization of geographical names for Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe (on the basis of its election in Budapest in 1997) and was confirmed at the 7th General UN Conference for the Standardization of Geographical Names in January 1998 in New York. In accordance with this, the Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia organized the 15th Regional International Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names for Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe, which took place from 19 to 21 April 1999 in Ljubljana. The objective of regular conferences (organized every two years) is to exchange experience, knowledge and ideas and implement the procedures for the standardization of geographical names both at national and international level. The conference was attended by experts in the field of standardization of geographical names from ten countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, and Austria and Italy as representatives of the neighbouring regional groups. Representatives from Cyprus and Macedonia apologized for not being able to attend and wished us a productive meeting. Representatives from Albania and Ukraine sent reports on work performed in the field of standardization of geographical names. The conference which was held in cooperation with the Anton Melik Geographic Institute of the Scientific-Research Centre of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, brought good results, which was reflected in the responses from participating countries. We believe that by exchanging our experiences, knowledge and ideas and enforcing the procedures for the standardization of geographical names both at national and international level we have contributed to better and more successful work in this field (standardization of geographical names), especially for the territories of countries which participated at this conference.

Find more about the standardization of geographical names and the conference on our web site: <http://www.sigov.si/kszi/>.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In the future, activities in the field of geographical names will be focused primarily on the improvement of the quality of data in the Register of Geographical Names and the process of standardization of geographical names. Based on the experience of other countries, in which the standardization of geographical names has been going on for 30 years or more and still receives much attention, it can be expected

that this process will take a long time in Slovenia as well. Geographical names confirm the identity of each nation and represent a part of it's history and culture. Care for the correctness (i.e. standardization) of geographical names is not only the duty of competent authorities; it is a task of us all to use correct and, if possible, standardized geographical names.

**Sources and references:**

Ažman, I., Pogorelčnik, E., *Uporaba tehnologije Intranet pri vodenju in vzdrževanju Registra prostorskih enot in Registra zemljepisnih imen. Zbornik s posvetovanja Dnevi slovenske informatike, Portorož, 1999, str. 312-318*

Geodetska uprava Republike Slovenije, Inštitut za geodezijo in fotogrametrijo FGG, *Evidenca zemljepisnih imen – Konceptualni, logični in fizični model z navodilom za vzpostavitev. Ljubljana, 1996*

Geodetska uprava Republike Slovenije, Aster d.o.o., *Register zemljepisnih imen – Tehnična dokumentacija. Ljubljana, 1997*

Radovan, D., Orožen Adamič, M., *Geodetska uprava Republike Slovenije, Resolucije Združenih narodov o zemljepisnih imenih. Ljubljana, 1999*

United Nations, Group of Experts on Geographical Names, *The United Nations and Geographical Names. Geneva, 1996, Eighteenth Session*

Review: Božena Lipej, Ph.D.  
Marjan Podobnikar