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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**Proposal for a resolution on exonyms and cultural heritage**

Submitted by the Working Group on Exonyms**

Summary

Reports entitled “Quatre types d’exonymes” (GEGN.2/2021/56/CRP.56/Rev.3) and “Exonyms as part of the cultural heritage” (GEGN.2/2021/73/CRP.73) were presented at the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, which was held online from 3 to 7 May 2021. In response to those reports, in which the value of exonyms was acknowledged, the Group of Experts adopted decision 2/2021/12. In paragraph (c) of that decision, it decided to conduct further discussions on finding guidelines that reconciled the current resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on exonyms and its acknowledgement of exonyms as part of the cultural heritage. In addition, the Group, in paragraph (b) of its decision 3/2023/16, decided that there was a need to issue a recommendation, for consideration at its 2025 session, that reconciled the resolutions of the Conference on exonyms and its acknowledgement of exonyms as part of cultural heritage.

There were intensive discussions regarding the topic at the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group on Exonyms, which was held in Ljubljana in 2022, at the 2023 session of the Group of Experts, in New York, and at the twenty-sixth meeting of the Working Group, which was held in Prague in 2024. The draft resolution has been reviewed and edited many times. The Working Group, in a virtual meeting held on 27 January 2025, came to an agreement on the draft resolution on exonyms and cultural heritage:

Exonyms and cultural heritage***The Group of Experts,***

Recalling that United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names resolutions 1972/II/28, 1972/II/29, 1977/III/18, 1982/IV/20, 1987/V/13 and 2002/VIII/4 all recommend a reduction in the use of exonyms,

Recalling also that Conference resolutions 1987/V/6, 2002/VIII/9 and 2012/X/3 consider geographical names to form part of a nation’s cultural heritage and that resolution 2007/IX/4 affirms that they fall within the concept of intangible cultural heritage as understood in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003, which calls for the safeguarding of “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”,

* GEGN.2/2025/1

** The full report was prepared by Kohei Watanabe, Convenor of the Working Group on Exonyms

Recognizing that exonyms are a function of language and include many geographical names that form living and vital parts of individual languages,

Recommends, while recognizing the principle of avoiding the use of exonyms that could be considered contentious, including those with the potential to give rise to international problems, as well as the precedence of official national forms, that a judicious and contextual use of exonyms should be respected where these form living and vital parts of individual languages.

The report provides information on how the draft resolution was prepared, discussed and revised and includes a recommendation that the Group of Experts adopt the draft resolution as set out in the report.

Proposal for a resolution on exonyms and cultural heritage

1. Background

The resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) on exonyms advocate the reduction of exonyms in “international use” (e.g. 1972/II/31), while recognising that “certain exonyms (conventional names, traditional names) form living and vital parts of languages” (1972/II/28).

On the other hand, the prevalent recent recognition is that “toponyms are indeed part of the intangible cultural heritage” as in the context of the Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage adopted on 17 October 2003 by UNESCO (2007/IX/4) under a certain criteria (2012/X/3).

At the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN), held online on 3-7 May 2021, the reports “Quatre types d’exonymes”¹ and “Exonyms as part of the cultural heritage”² were presented. In considering the value of exonyms, a decision to reconsider past UNGEGN resolutions on exonyms that requested a reduction of exonyms was discussed.

As an outcome, UNGEGN decision 2/2021/12 (c)³ states that; “The group of experts decided to conduct further discussions on finding guidelines that reconcile the current resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on exonyms and its acknowledgement of exonyms as part of the cultural heritage”.

Following this, there were intensive discussions regarding the topic at the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group on Exonyms, which was held in Ljubljana in 2022, and at the 2023 session of UNGEGN, in New York. At the Ljubljana meeting, the Working Group came to an agreement with the text of the draft resolution. However, at the Working Group meeting in New York, concerns and disagreements on the text of the draft resolution were raised by some participants. In the end, it was decided that the draft resolution be reported under agenda item 13 (exonyms) at the 2023 session only as the current status of work on the topic and not be put forward for adoption as a resolution. As an outcome of the 2023 session, UNGEGN, in its decision 3/2023/16 (b)⁴, decided that there was a need to issue a recommendation, for

¹ GEGN.2/2021/56/CRP.56/Rev.3 See:

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/GEGN.2_2021_56_CR56_13_exonymes_rev3.pdf

² GEGN.2/2021/73/CRP.73. See

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/GEGN.2_2021_73_CRP73_13_Exonyms_cultural_heritage.pdf

³ E/2021/69. See: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2nd_session_2021/documents/E_2021_69_report_e.pdf

⁴ E/2023/84. See:

https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/3rd_session_2023/documents/E_2023_84_2023_UNGEGN_Report_e.pdf

consideration at the 2025 session of the Group of Experts, that reconciles the resolutions of the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on exonyms and its acknowledgement of exonyms as part of cultural heritage, and that the Working Group on Exonyms should continue further discussions towards achieving this.

At the twenty-sixth meeting of the Working Group, which was held in Prague on 14 - 15 May 2024, a revised draft resolution was presented. Subsequent discussion led to a general agreement on the new draft text. The first virtual meeting to confirm the draft agreed at the Prague meeting took place on 17 October 2024. About 30 experts joined the meeting. There was an understanding of the basic concept of the draft, but it was felt that the draft text was too lengthy and contained superfluous parts.

The second virtual meeting took place on 27 January 2025. Here the text for a revised draft resolution significantly shorter than the previous draft resolution was presented. After incorporating a few points raised by the participants, a final agreed draft resolution was achieved.

2. Proposal

In the above process, many concerns have been addressed, such as those shown below:

- *Exonyms indicate an idea of domination*: this applies only to some exonyms that had been created artificially. The majority of exonyms coined by common usage reflect and indicate the historical relationship and familiarity of the language community with the denominated feature.
- *Exonyms cause ambiguities*: it is less likely that standardising two or more names for one geographical feature would cause a critical ambiguity. Within the language community, established exonyms are commonly used and are well understood as to which geographical feature they correspond to. Current development of geographical names databases allows unambiguous correspondence between a feature and multiple names by means of a data identifier.
- *Exonyms hinder the respect for Indigenous or minority names*: the approach for multiple names for a feature, as mentioned above, is indeed the suggested approach also for indigenous or minority names. It could also be pointed out that reduction in the use of exonyms will most likely only result in promoting the use of established mainstream endonyms, but not indigenous or minority names.
- The Working Group agreed on a draft resolution shown below that calls for a reconsideration of past UNGEGN resolutions that requested a blanket reduction of exonym use.

We propose that this resolution be adopted at the 2025 UNGEGN session:

Exonyms and cultural heritage

The Group of Experts,

Recalling that United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names resolutions 1972/II/28, 1972/II/29, 1977/III/18, 1982/IV/20, 1987/V/13 and 2002/VIII/4 all recommend a reduction in the use of exonyms,

Recalling also that Conference resolutions 1987/V/6, 2002/VIII/9 and 2012/X/3 consider geographical names to form part of a nation's cultural heritage and that resolution 2007/IX/4 affirms that they fall within the concept of intangible cultural heritage as understood in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003, which calls for the safeguarding of “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”,

Recognizing that exonyms are a function of language and include many geographical names that form living and vital parts of individual languages,

Recommends, while recognizing the principle of avoiding the use of exonyms that could be considered contentious, including those with the potential to give rise to international problems, as well as the precedence of official national forms, that a judicious and contextual use of exonyms should be respected where these form living and vital parts of individual languages.