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Difficult historical problems of transliteration and transcription in South-Eastern European toponomastic practice

A few words about historical geography

From the 15th century, and until the beginning of the 20th century, almost all of what we call South-Eastern Europe was, longer or shorter, under the domination of the Ottoman Empire. That epoch will constitute a starting time criterion for my considerations. And that, of course, without leaving out or belittling the pre-Ottoman cultural contexts.

The widest reaching borders of the Ottoman Empire at any time included the total territories of the following countries of today:

Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus,¹ Greece, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldavia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and that little what remains of the Ottoman Empire in Europe at present, that is Eastern Thracia, with the imperial capital city of İstanbul (earlier: Greek Byzantium and Konstantinopolis, Latin Byzantium and Constantinopolis).

In addition, the Empire hold temporary control of smaller or larger swaths of lands in Southern Slovakia, Southern Slovenia and Southern and South-Eastern Ukraine.

That region is often associated with another geographical-historical-cultural concept, namely the Balkans, or the Balkan Peninsula. That concept replaced only as late as the 19th century a descriptive name "Turkey of Europe". The Balkans is an ill-defined notion and it is highly debatable and subjective as regards its constituent parts. Nobody would object calling Albania, Bulgaria or Serbia a Balkan country, but Slovenia, Hungary and Romania are sometimes included in the same list, on other occasions they are excluded – mainly on emotional and ambitious basis. It obviously results from stereotyped image of the Balkans as such – that geographical idea appeared comparatively recently in European geopolitical and cultural thinking, with a general image of a highly exotic Orient and occasionally putting forward doubts if it belonged to Europe at all. Detailed reports of diverging understandings of historical geography of this part of Europe may be found in works by Pitcher 1972, Birken 1976, Carter 1977, Karpat and Zens 2003, Jezernik 2004 and many others, to which I allow myself to resend for further reference. The debate on what is or is not the Balkans will

¹ The island of Cyprus lies in fact in Western Asia, not at all in Europe, but by agreement and convention, and through its historical-cultural association with the Hellenic world, is usually counted among South-Eastern European countries.

probably continue for many years (or decennies) to come because, as philosophers say, *there is no objective truth, because the truth is dependent on the observing subject*. The same with subsequent sovereign powers reigning over various territories – debates and disputes by historians and ideologists in this vulnerable area on factual or imagined details and *status quos* will certainly not expire before long, if ever. I am not trying to dwell on all diverging points of view on changing political and legal status of any given territory at any time.

In any case, my remarks will concern all ex-Ottoman territories in Europe. The purpose of this short introduction was to give just a short outline of the historical geography of the area and interconnected problems of its definition.

Linguistic-toponymic layers

Now we shall pass to toponomastic aspects of the cultural setting of the area.

The Turkish toponymy of the Ottoman lands was underlain by most diversified linguistic substratum elements. Here, I will make an attempt at giving a systemic picture of toponymic layers and resulting linguistic interrelations in transcription and transliteration procedures in each individual country. A very rough and schematic stratification outline follows below.

Albania – Albanian and Greek (Latin and Greek scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Albanian (Arabic script) → Albanian (Latin script).

Bosnia-Herzegovina – Serbo-Croatian² (Cyrillic scripts) → Ottoman Turkish and Bosnian (Arabic script) – Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian (Latin and Cyrillic scripts).

Bulgaria – Bulgarian and Greek (Cyrillic and Greek scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Bulgarian (Cyrillic script).

Croatia – Serbo-Croatian, Italian and Hungarian (Cyrillic and Latin scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Croatian, Italian and Hungarian (Latin scripts) → Croatian (Latin script).

Cyprus – Greek and Italian (Greek and Latin scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Greek and English (Greek and Latin scripts) → Greek and modern Turkish (Greek and Latin scripts).

Greece – Greek and Italian (Greek and Latin script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Greek (Greek script).

Hungary – Hungarian (Latin script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Hungarian and German (Latin script) → Hungarian (Latin script).

² I am using this outdated term meaning the whole of dialectal continuum, today politically divided into the areas under the domination of official Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian languages. Practically, Croatian and Bosnian are written in Latin, while Serbian in either Cyrillic or Latin.

Kosovo – Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Serbian and Albanian (Cyrillic and Latin scripts) → Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Albanian and Serbian (Latin and Cyrillic scripts).

Macedonia – Bulgarian and Greek (Cyrillic and Greek scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Bulgarian (Cyrillic script) → Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Macedonian (Cyrillic script).

Moldavia – Romanian and Slavic (Cyrillic script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Russian (Cyrillic scripts) → Romanian (Latin script) → Moldavian and Russian (Cyrillic script) → Romanian, Moldavian and Russian (Latin and Cyrillic scripts).

Montenegro – Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Serbian (Cyrillic and Latin scripts).

Romania (Wallachia and Moldavia) – Romanian, Slavic (Cyrillic script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Romanian (Cyrillic script) → Romanian (Latin script).

Romania (Transilvania) – Hungarian and German (Latin script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Hungarian, Romanian and German (Latin and Cyrillic scripts) → Romanian (Latin script) → Romanian and Hungarian (Latin script) → Romanian (Latin script).

Serbia – Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Serbian (Cyrillic script) → Serbian (Cyrillic and Latin scripts).

Slovakia (Southern) – Hungarian (Latin script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Hungarian and German (Latin script) → Hungarian (Latin script) → Czech (Latin script) → Hungarian (Latin script) → Slovak (Latin script).

Slovakia (heartland) – Hungarian (Latin script) → Hungarian and German (Latin script) → Hungarian (Latin script) → Czech (Latin script) → Slovak (Latin script).

Slovenia (Southern) – German (Latin script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → German (Latin script) → Slovenian (Latin script) → German (Latin script) → Slovenian (Latin script).

Slovenia (heartland) – German and Italian (Latin script) → Slovenian (Latin script) → German and Italian (Latin script) → Slovenian (Latin script).

Turkey (Eastern Thrace) – Greek (Greek script) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → modern Turkish (Latin script)

Ukraine (Southern, Crimea) – Greek and Italian (Greek and Latin scripts) → Tatar (Arabic scripts) → Tatar and Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Russian (Cyrillic script) → Ukrainian and Russian (Cyrillic script) → Russian (Cyrillic script).

Ukraine (South-Eastern) – Ruthenian (Cyrillic script) → Polish and Ruthenian (Latin and Cyrillic scripts) → Ottoman Turkish (Arabic script) → Polish and Ruthenian (Latin and Cyrillic scripts) → Russian (Cyrillic script) → Ukrainian and Russian (Cyrillic script) → Ukrainian (Cyrillic script).

Validity of the stratification

The scheme presented above gives the first, very general idea of how many toponomastic changes occurred in the area of our interest. It should be reminded, however, that in each of the above encyclopedic entries we should add much more details. First of all, the domination of a given official or most popular language of the area does not mean that other languages were not present and practiced in many fields at the same time: in common everyday use (ethnic and interethnic), in religious circles, in official administration on diversified levels.

The best example might be the Greek language which exerted strong influence on cultures of nations belonging to the Christian Orthodox Church(es) and made a solid imprint in the official documents of various kinds, as well as in historical writings. Historical documentation testifies of the existence of Greek toponymic forms in all areas where Greek language was actually taking, or trying to take dominance over the languages of non-Greek local inhabitants. Those Greek toponymic formations retain a high historical value for the study of local cultural contexts and linguistic changes over the ages. Interrelationship between them and their local counterparts should reveal many important aspects of transcription and transliteration procedures used in the past and their evolution. Analogically, the same aspects should be taken into account as regards the cultural position of the Old Slavic language used – in competition with Greek – by all Slavic and Romanian/Moldavian Orthodox nations (for several hundred years Romanian language was written in Cyrillic letters and had admitted through resulting linguistic contacts a huge number of Slavic words).

Furthermore, the nations defined in space by present borders were never like this in the past. They were changing shape and extended borders during the whole period of their existence, usually to the detriment of immediate neighbours. Lands, regions and provinces were changing their masters and their population. In result, toponymic layers were either assimilated by new owners of a land, or removed and replaced with completely new names. Sometimes these procedures succeeded one after another. For example, the Ottoman toponymic layer in Bulgaria was first accepted as such, with a natural change of the writing system from Ottoman Arabic into Cyrillic, and only later on, gradually, Turkish names were replaced by Bulgarian ones – either recovered from the historical past or simply invented and coined anew, using genuine Bulgarian linguistic elements, just to change the cultural image of the landscape (Andreev 2002).³

Bi-alphabetical languages

To name a few current situations, we should start with a very peculiar situation of the Serbo-Croato-Bosnian language which has two actually used writing systems: the Latin script and the Cyrillic script. The Arabic script, adapted from the Ottoman for writing down the Bosnian texts, has at present only a historical value, unless a contrary evidence comes to our knowledge. Code switching between Latin and Cyrillic scripts seems easy and automatic.

³ Similar procedure was followed by Poland on the Recovered Territories (*Ziemie Odzyskane*) after World War 2. A commission of experts in history, geography and linguistics reconstructed all geographical names of Slavic origin that could be derived from historical documents and gave them appropriate Polish forms, and when a Slavic substratum was unavailable, the existing German names were either translated into Polish or simply replaced with new creations.

Romanian/Moldavian language scripts bear consequences of the complicated political situation in which the Romanian-speaking ethnic group(s) remained. Romanian language, as was mentioned above, was written in Cyrillic alphabet during many centuries, but switched to Latin after independence in the 19th century. A part of the Romanian linguistic territory, incorporated by the Soviet Union (on the left, Eastern shore of the Dnester River), was donated with the so-called Moldavian language, i.e. Romanian written in Cyrillic. A question arises if the new orthography followed the earlier Cyrillic Romanian or not. When the Soviet Union occupied the Eastern part of the Romanian Moldavia (between the rivers Dnester and Prut), that newly created Moldavian language was imposed on the country. After the collapse and dismemberment of the Soviet Union, Moldavia regained independence, changed back to Latin alphabet and renamed its official language Romanian. But the Eastern part of the ex-Soviet republic, now a separatist Transnistria, retained the Moldavian language written in Cyrillic, alongside the Russian.

Quasi bi-alphabetical languages

All languages normally written with a non-Latin script, that is Greek (for the Greek language) and Cyrillic (several orthographic variants used by Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, Moldavian, Ukrainian and Russian), have their officially acknowledged forms of transliteration into Latin. Bi-lingual languages use their own Latin version when necessary. Other languages developed transliteration systems specially invented for the purpose.

In all such cases we can say that a language has in fact two scripts: the original dominating one and the other, of a much more limited use, but still retaining an official value.

Here we can observe an interesting phenomenon. The Slavic languages – Bulgarian, Ukrainian and Russian – had their Cyrillic-to-Latin transliteration systems elaborated on the example of the Latin scripts as used by some other Slavic languages, like Czech or Serbian, with such special signs like ш → š or ч → č. That usage brought about certain uniformity in orthography among many, if not all Slavic countries. Recently, the Bulgarian, Russian and Ukrainian naming authorities renounced their previous systems and decided to go for, instead, the Anglo-American combinations of letters for one Cyrillic sign, like х → *kh*, ш → *sh* or ч → *ch*. The reason for such change could be a wish to comply with English as a dominating language in world economy and political relations.

Only Romanization?

When we are speaking about transcription and transliteration it is mainly about the Romanization, that is bringing names from non-Roman (Latin) alphabets⁴ to alphabets originating from the Latin script. However, we should not neglect the problems of standardized transcription and transliteration procedures in opposite direction: from Latin scripts to Greek and Cyrillic scripts. For the time being, those questions have not been tackled adequately on international level and, as far as this author is informed, there are no attempts at coordinating such procedures between various countries.

⁴ In this part of the world we do not have to deal with non-alphabetical writing systems which are so characteristic for East Asia.

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