How to reconcile UN resolutions on exonyms and on place names as cultural heritage

Peter Jordan, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Urban and Regional Research, Vienna, Austria; University of the Free State, Faculty of Humanities, Bloemfontein, South Africa; peter.jordan@oeaw.ac.at

1 Introduction

The recent session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) in 2021 revealed once again and perhaps even more drastically than ever how contested the concept of the endonym/exonym divide is and how emphatically pros and cons related to exonyms are formulated.

It revealed, however, also that at least official, 'politically correct' attitudes and attitudes towards exonyms conforming to state policies as they use to be expressed in these sessions have shifted from the strive of reducing exonyms to a felt parity between exonym sceptics and exonym defenders.

While the United Nations (UN) had in the 1970s and 1980s passed several resolutions recommending the reduction and cautious use of exonyms[1], no such resolutions came up later.

---

[1] See especially Res. II/29-1972, Res. II/35-1972, Res. III/18-1977, Res. IV/20-1982, Res. V/13-1987 (UNGEGN 2022)

Res. II/29-1972: "I The Conference, Recognizing the desirability of limiting the use of exonyms, Recommends that, within the international standardization of geographical names, the use of those exonyms designating geographical entities falling wholly within one State should be reduced as far and as quickly as possible. II The Conference, Recognizing that exonyms are losing ground, even in national use, 1. Recommends that in publications intended only for national use the reduction of exonyms should be considered; 2. Further recommends that in those cases where exonyms are retained, the local official forms should be shown in addition as far as possible."

Res. II/35-1972: "The Conference, Recognizing that the final publication of full national gazetteers may not be immediately possible in some countries, Further recognizing the necessity for having a basic stock of standardized names available for international use, Considering the keen interest expressed by various countries in abolishing exonyms and using nationally standardized names, and in order to accelerate this process, 1. Recommends that, in the interim, countries be encouraged to publish concise lists of their names of geographical entities, including administrative divisions, within a reasonable time; 2. Recommends further that, as far as possible, where these names are officially written in a non-Roman script for which a romanization system has been agreed at the first or Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, romanized names in accordance with those systems should be included in the lists."

Res. III/18-1977: "The Conference, Noting that, in accordance with resolution 28 of the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, progress has been made in the matter of exonyms in so far as a number of countries have identified and prepared, or are preparing, lists of their own exonyms, Recognizing, nevertheless, that progress has not been uniform in all countries, Further recognizing that the reduction of both different types of languages and different linguistic categories of exonyms require different approaches, Recommends that (a) The countries concerned continue to work on the preparation of provisional lists of exonyms, singling out those suitable for early deletion; (b) The Group of Experts contribute to the exchange of information among the countries concerned on the results of the studies of different categories of exonyms made by those countries."

Res. IV/20-1982: "The Conference, Noting that, in accordance with resolutions 18 and 19 of the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, further progress has been made in the reduction of the number of exonyms used and a number of States have prepared lists of their own exonyms, Realizing that the reduction of exonyms used has not been carried out with the same intensity by all States, Realizing further that the methods and principles aimed at a reduction of the number of exonyms used should constantly be reviewed for expeditious implementation of the resolution and understanding that not all countries can govern the content of maps and atlases published within their territories, Recommends that exonyms giving

To the contrary: Resolutions of the 2000s and early 2010s appreciating traditional, inherited place names as parts of the cultural heritage[2] did not explicitly exclude exonyms, thus implicitly including them.

The explanation for this remarkable shift can be found in a fundamental change of the political environment (see JORDAN 2022). Up to the late 1980s, the global political situation was marked by a Communist bloc with an internationalist ideology, demonizing exonyms as expressions of nationalism. It cooperated at that time in UNGEGN – remarkably enough – with the anglophone countries, who regarded English exonyms not as exonyms in the narrower sense, but as international names that were anyway unavoidable and not in danger to be reduced. A third pillar of exonym sceptics were the German-speaking countries with their language (including exonyms) stigmatized by the events of World War II and the atrocities of the Nazi regime.

The first reason, the Communist bloc, has imploded in the meantime. The third reason, the hesitation of German-speakers to use their own exonyms, is not as strong as before due to temporal distance from World War II and a new standing mainly of Germany and the German

rise to international problems should be used very sparingly and published in parenthesis with the nationally accepted standard name."

Res. V/13-1987: "The Conference, Recalling resolution 28 of the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and resolution 20 of the Fourth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Noting that progress has been made in reducing the use of exonyms in cartography and related fields, Observing that the reduction in the use of exonyms is being carried out at different rates in different countries, Considering that many public and private organizations other than names authorities play a significant and effective role in the dissemination of foreign place names, 1. Recommends a further reduction in the use of exonyms; 2. Recommends, more specifically, that countries intensify their efforts to persuade private and public organizations, such as educational institutions, transport companies and the media, to reduce the use of exonyms in their publications or, at least, to increase the use of geographical names in their local standardized form (that is, endonyms); 3. Also recommends that, where exonyms are used in publications, maps and other documents, precedence be given to national official names."

[2] See Res. VIII/9-2002, IX/4-2007 and X/3-2012 (UNGEGN 2022)

Res VIII/9-2002: "The Conference, Recognizing the emphasis placed by delegates to the Eighth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names on the importance of geographical names as part of a nation's historical and cultural heritage, Noting that the collection of geographical names in many countries of the world is made increasingly difficult as a result of the rapid pace of socio-economic change impacting on society and landscape, Recalling the recommendation made by the Second United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in its resolution 27, as well as the recommendations made by the Seventh Conference in its resolution VII/5, that measures be taken nationally to ensure that names that are yet to be collected are recorded through fieldwork according to local usage of name forms, Urges countries that have not already done so, to undertake both the systematic collection of geographical names and the promotion of a greater understanding among the wider public of the significance of inherited geographical names with respect to local, regional and national heritage and identity."

Res IX/4-2007: "The Conference, Recalling its resolutions II/27, II/36, V122, VII/5, VIII/1 and VIII/9, Considering the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on 17 October 2003, Recognizing that toponyms are indeed part of the intangible cultural heritage, Noting that the use of certain toponyms which provide a sense of identity and of continuity is under a variety of threats, 1. Encourages the official bodies responsible for toponymy to: (a) Identify toponyms that meet the criteria for application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; (b) Submit them to the Committee set up by the Convention, for approval; (c) Prepare a programme to safeguard and develop that heritage in accordance with article 2, paragraph 3, and article 18 of the Convention; (d) Start implementing it. 2. Calls upon the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to give sympathetic consideration to requests for support that the High Contracting Parties submit to it for such activities."

Res X/3-2012: "The Conference, Noting the existence of a number of resolutions that address toponymy as part of a nation's cultural heritage and the necessity to preserve toponymic heritage, Recalling recommendation C of its resolution I/4 on the principles of office treatment of geographical names, Considering that, to develop these principles, it is recommended that unnecessary changes to geographical names should be avoided and that the treatment of names should not result in the suppression of significant toponymic elements."

language in Europe. It is also a fact that exonym use has – despite UN resolutions demanding its reduction – underwent a strong revival after the fall of Communism in former Communist countries and has not at all been reduced elsewhere, probably because exonyms are simply needed and functional.

Remaining exonym sceptics in the ranks of UNGEGN experts recruit themselves mainly from western Europe and North America arguing that modifying earlier UN resolutions or even declaring them obsolete would mean questioning the authority of UN resolutions and UN in general.

Let us first highlight exonyms as part of the cultural heritage and then present a proposal how the apparent gap between former UN resolutions on exonyms on the one hand and actual practice as well UN resolutions on place names as cultural heritage on the other could be closed or reconciled.

2 Exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage

Exonyms in the sense of place names not used by the local community and differing from the respective endonym (in the sense the place name used and accepted by the local community) are certainly parts of the cultural heritage (see also JORDAN et al 2009, CANTILE & KERFOOT 2016) insofar **as they are elements of a language.** When we understand culture in the most comprehensive sense as a system of values and norms, by which human communities differ from each other, language is a most essential part of it (see JORDAN 2020a). Every language reflects a system of concepts that characterizes a specific culture and makes a group of people, a community, looking at least slightly different from others at our world, i.e., at complex reality. People speaking the same language have roughly the same system of concepts, which makes living in a community much easier. And this same system of concepts could develop, because they were able to communicate about it in the same language. Language has thus very veritable capacities for community building and therefore also as identity marker of group identities. Language includes individuals into a community and excludes others at the same time.

Another factor that makes language including individuals into a community and has a less including effect on others is closeness. Closeness can be generated by special words for a concept or by the specific pronunciation or intonation of given words. Families, partners or parents and children, for example, like to create special words not understandable to others for some concepts and develop in a way a 'secret language'. There are also subgroups in a wider community or society using specific words and developing a specific language variant ('sociolect') such as the younger generation, workers, fans of sport clubs, hunters, fishermen, prostitutes and criminals (see GIRTLER 1996). These variations separate an in-group knowing and using these keywords from outsiders. "He speaks like we speak" has the same meaning as "He is one of us."

Exonyms are elements of a language owing all the characteristics mentioned before. Who uses an exonym, is part of the group acquainted with the set of exonyms specifically used by this (sub-)group. Who addresses a small village beyond the language boundary by the exonym in local use on his/her side of the boundary, identifies himself/herself as an insider and generates a feeling of closeness with his/her conversation partner – like it is, when they speak the same local dialect.

But calling exonyms parts of the cultural heritage has also some more justification. They have been created **due to intensive relations of the receiver community with the feature designed by the exonym** by translation of the endonym, by its morphological or orthographic adaption to the receiver language, sometimes also by creating a new word. A feature frequently

addressed in a given community due to its importance for the community is named by an exonym, because the exonym in orthography corresponding to the receiver language is easier to be pronounced and memorized.

The pattern of exonyms used by a certain community thus reflects the network of its historical and current external political, cultural and economic relations. This is supported by several case studies (see Figures 1-2 and JORDAN 2009, 2020b). Close relations to external features result in a frequent use of their names that need for this very reason to be easily and safely pronounced, to be easily memorized.

It has, however, also to be admitted that there exist additional factors affecting the use of exonyms and thus distorting to some extent the spatial pattern mentioned before. These are first and foremost the use of prestigious trade languages that reduce the necessity of exonyms as well as linguistic relation between languages that work into both directions.

Fig. 1: German exonyms for populated places used in Austria (Source: AKO 2012)
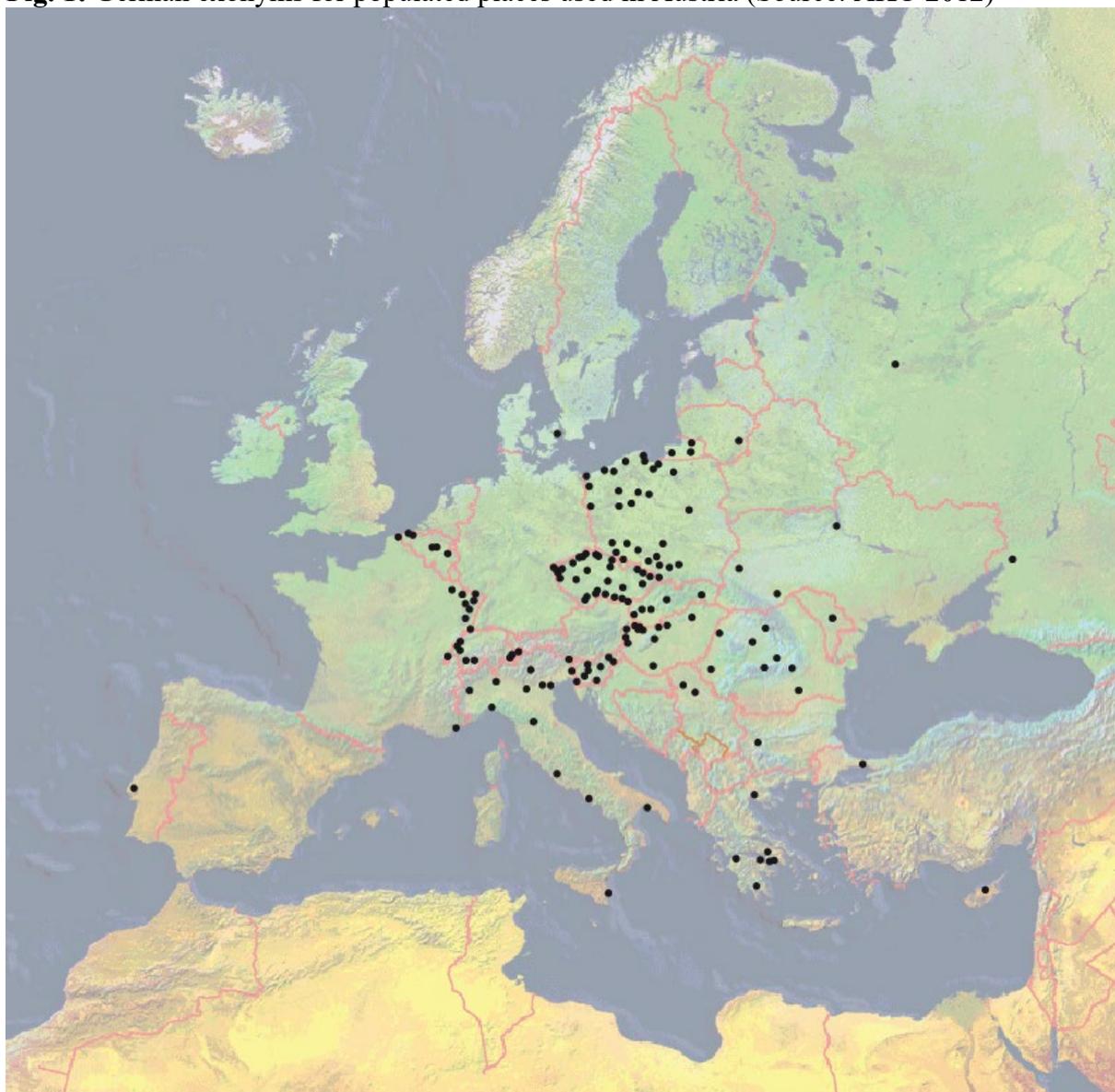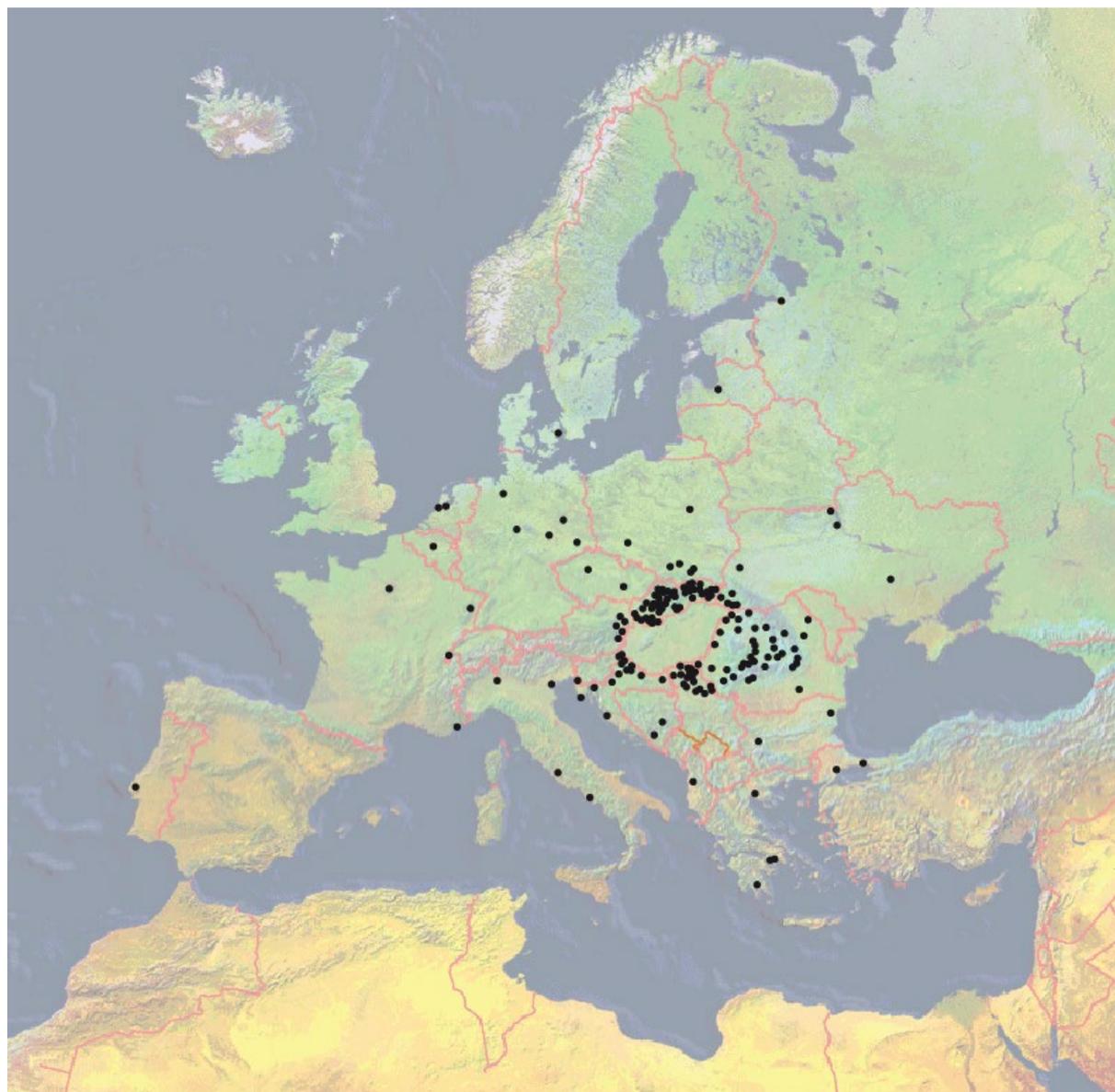
Fig. 2: Hungarian exonyms for populated places (Source: DUTKO 2007)

Another justification of attributing exonyms the quality of being part of the cultural heritage is that **they relate a community with its history**. There is no question that in the literature of a certain linguistic community historical events, places and people are referred to by those name forms that were valid at the time of the event, at the time referred to or that have long been used for this purpose by the receiver community (are part of its literature). In many cases they are today exonyms due to a change of the endonym.

French historiography will certainly continue to speak of the Battle of Austerlitz, German historiography of the Battle of Thannenberg and Austrian historiography of the battles of Lepanto or Lissa, although all of these places have different endonyms today.

Using these exonyms also in current contexts is frequently impossible or not advisable. It is certainly not possible in the cases of *Vindobona* for Roman Vienna [Wien], *Nova Roma* or *Constantinopolis* for the Roman and East Roman, *Byzantium* or *Byzantion* for the Byzantine Istanbul [İstanbul], where these exonyms refer to exclusively historical concepts and not to the modern concept of these cities – in fact not to the same feature (see WOODMAN 2016). It is also not advisable in cases like Auschwitz [Oświęcim], where according to our modern understanding *Auschwitz* refers to the concentration camp and has thus a specific connotation,

while *Oświęcim* refers to the city – both names actually designing different concepts. In cases like *Canton* [Guangzhou] or with most country names and names of historical-cultural landscapes, however, the use of a traditional exonym also in present-day contexts may help to underline the continuity of the place and to emphasize the identity between the historical feature and the current place.

The same applies when in modern speech or texts explicit reference is made to a linguistic community's historical or current diaspora.

A fourth justification may be seen in the fact that exonyms play **an important role not only in urban names** like as the specific component of street names, where they assume the status of endonyms in the toponymic sense, but also **as specific components of ergonyms** like names of dishes, pieces of music or theatre plays also there assuming the status of endonyms, but in the wider onomastic sense.

It is a frequent practice to name streets and other traffic areas after external places to which a given community has close relations – be it that the street leads into their direction (e.g., *Triester Straße* in Vienna after Triest [Trieste] in Italy) or for commemorative reasons, e.g., because this external place played an important role for the city naming a street or square after it, e.g., *Avenue de Wagram* in Paris after Deutsch-Wagram, the place of a Napoleonic victory in Austria or is very important in general, e.g., the former name *Moszkva tér*, a square in Budapest, after Moscow [Moskva].

Not only streets, but also other features can be named after external places for commemorative reasons: buildings like railway stations (e.g., *Gare d'Austerlitz* in Paris after the German exonym for Slavkov u Brna in Czechia), shelter huts in the Austrian Alps (e.g., *Karlsbader Hütte* after the German exonym *Karlsbad* for Karlovy Vary in Czechia), dishes (e.g., *Krakauer*, the name of a sausage after the German exonym for Krakau [Kraków] in Poland), drinks (e.g., *Erlauer Stierblut*, a wine named after *Erlau*, the German exonym for Eger in Hungary) or music groups (e.g., *Egerländer Musikanten* after *Egerland*, a German exonym for a region in Czechia), due to their foundation from there, for marketing purposes or because this is their place of origin.

They are, as the examples demonstrate, usually named by the exonyms in common use for these places that assume in this other function the status of endonyms and constitute the germ of a name system in the receiver community. They provide a strong argument for preserving the use of exonyms for these external places not to lose the connection between this external place and the domestic name system. Would the corresponding exonyms get out of use, the meaning of these endonyms would become intransparent.

As an intermediate conclusion it can be said that highlighting exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage means appreciating their value not only as means of domestic (intra-cultural) communication, as favoring the consistent use of one's own language, their importance for the acquisition of cultural techniques (e.g., geographical knowledge, topographical orientation), community and identity building, but also their roles in relating various aspects of culture, most specifically in the diachronic perspective.

This approach, however, is not to neglect that geographical names in general are politically and culturally sensitive because they constitute identity. Exonyms are particularly sensitive because they designate 'foreign' places and are therefore often associated with claims. This is especially true for historical endonyms, i.e., names that were once the names of a local community that no longer exists there today. Thus, it is always necessary to weigh the pros and cons of using exonyms and to consider their political and cultural sensibility. But it is also obvious that in domestic (intra-cultural, intra-community) communication advantages clearly prevail and disadvantages are practically absent (see JORDAN 2000, 2022).

3 Reconciling UN resolutions

In our opinion it is therefore high time to reconcile the earlier UN resolutions demanding the reduction of exonyms with the UN resolutions of the 2000s and 2010s recognizing them as parts of the cultural heritage. This is also the distinct opinion of our new UNGEGN Chair Pierre JAILLARD and of my successor as the Chair of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms, Kohei WATANABE. We are essentially supported also by Paul WOODMAN, long-term British UNGEGN expert and mastermind of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms. But, as already mentioned, there are also still exonym sceptics.

Our strongest arguments for a motion in favor of exonyms and for a reconciling resolution/recommendation are in our opinion that

- already the resolutions on minority names have overruled the one-name-per-feature principle – which is anyway rather a legend than a fact, since already Resolution I/4D-1967, a resolution of the first United Nations Conference of the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1967, had admitted the standardization of more than one name for the same feature.[3]
- the resolutions on place names as parts of the cultural heritage have implicitly recognized at least traditional exonyms as parts of the cultural heritage and thus ask for a clarification of UNGEGN's position on exonyms.
- the authority of and respect for UN resolutions is not in danger, when new recommendations correct them or declare them partly as obsolete, but when they are carried on as fossils irrespective of new political circumstances and societal developments. We think that UN resolutions are not made for eternity and that the UN will remain conceived as a living and relevant body only if they are ready to revise and improve themselves.

With all that in mind we have so far arrived at the following draft version of a resolution/recommendation. It needs still to be consulted in a next meeting of the WG on Exonyms, which is to take place 1-3 September 2022 in Ljubljana.

Draft recommendation: Exonyms as a part of the intangible cultural heritage

The Economic and Social Council,

Recalling resolutions I/4, I/10, II/29, II/35, III/17, III/18, V/13 and VIII/4 of the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN), in favour of reducing the use of exonyms;

Recalling on the other hand that UNCSGN resolutions II/31, III/14, III/19 and IV/20 have limited the scope of this policy, that UNCSGN resolutions II/28, VIII/9, IX/4 and X/3 have recognized geographical names as part of the intangible cultural heritage, and that UNCSGN resolutions II/36, V/22, VIII/1 and IX/5 have underlined the legitimacy of using indigenous and minority geographical names in addition to the name in the majority language;

---

[3] Res. I/4D-1967 (UNGEGN 2022) "It is recommended that, in countries in which there exist more than one language, the national authority as appropriate: (a) Determine the geographical names in each of the official languages, and other languages as appropriate; (b) Give a clear indication of equality or precedence of officially acknowledged names; (c) Publish these officially acknowledged names in maps and gazetteers."

Considering the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 17 October 2003;

Considering the Sustainable Development Goals of UNESCO, and notably target 11.4: "Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage";

Recognizing that exonyms are a function of language, and that those that form living and vital parts of individual languages are part of the intangible cultural heritage;

Noting that technical advances in data management have dramatically lessened the practical need for reducing the use of exonyms since the early Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names;

Considers that the aim to standardize one geographical name per geographical feature, which would exclude both exonyms in any languages and endonyms in minority languages, would be too strict,

Recommends that the standardization of geographical names should be understood to allow for one name per feature *per language,* and that employing an exonym in international use should be done with cultural sensitivity, wherever possible in combination with the corresponding endonym.

References

ARBEITSGEMEINSCHAFT FÜR KARTOGRAPHISCHE ORTSNAMENKUNDE (AKO) (ed.) (2012), *Empfehlungen zur Schreibung geographischer Namen in österreichischen Bildungsmedien.* Wien, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

CANTILE A. & KERFOOT H. (eds.) (2016), *Place names as intangible cultural heritage. International Scientific Symposium Firenze [Florence] – Italy, 26th – 27th March 2015.* Firenze, Istituto Geografico Militare Italiano.

CRLJENKO I. (ed.) (2016), *Hrvatski egzonimi I. Imena država, glavnih gradova i njihovih stanovnika.* Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža.

CRLJENKO I. (ed.) (2018), *Hrvatski egzonimi II.: popis suvremenih i povijesnih egzonima.* Zagreb, Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža.

DUTKÓ A. (2007), List of Hungarian exonyms. Paper presented at the 5th Meeting of the UNGEGN Working Group on Exonyms, Prague.

GIRTLER R. (1996), *Randkulturen: Theorie der Unanständigkeit.* Wien, Böhlau Verlag.

JORDAN P. (2000), The importance of using exonyms – Pleading for a moderate and politically sensitive use. In: SIEVERS J. (ed.), Second International Symposium on Geographical Names "GeoNames 2000". Frankfurt am Main, Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie = Mitteilungen des Bundesamtes für Kartographie und Geodäsie, vol. 19: 87-92.

JORDAN P. (2009), Exonyms as indicators of trans-national spatial relations. *Review of Historical Geography and Toponomastics*, IV, 7-8, 2009: 7-16

JORDAN P. (2020a), Languages and Space-Related Identity: The Rise and Fall of Serbo-Croatian. In: BRUNN St.D. & KEHREIN R. (eds.), *Handbook of the Changing World Language Map.* Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland AG: 541-561.

Jᴏʀᴅᴀɴ P. (2020b), Croatian external relations as reflected by the use of exonyms. *Studia lexicographica*, 14: 63-83.

Jᴏʀᴅᴀɴ P. (2022), *Breslau oder Wrocław? Das Begriffspaar Endonym/Exonym als Kernthema der Kritischen Toponomastik. Wie politische Haltungen den Gebrauch geographischer Namen bestimmen.* Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag.

Jᴏʀᴅᴀɴ P., Bᴇʀɢᴍᴀɴɴ H., Cʜᴇᴇᴛʜᴀᴍ C. & Hᴀᴜsɴᴇʀ I. (eds.) (2009), *Geographical Names as a Part of the Cultural Heritage* (= Wiener Schriften zur Geographie und Kartographie, 18). Wien, Institut für Geographie und Regionalforschung der Universität Wien, Kartographie und Geoinformation.

Uɴɪᴛᴇᴅ Nᴀᴛɪᴏɴs Gʀᴏᴜᴘ ᴏғ Exᴘᴇʀᴛs ᴏɴ Gᴇᴏɢʀᴀᴘʜɪᴄᴀʟ Nᴀᴍᴇs (UNGEGN) (ed.) (2022), *Resolutions adopted at the eleven United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.* [Retrieved 7 May 2022] https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/

Wᴏᴏᴅᴍᴀɴ P. (2016), What is a name change? In: Jᴏʀᴅᴀɴ P. & Wᴏᴏᴅᴍᴀɴ P. (eds.), Place-name Changes. Proceedings of the Symposion in Rome, 17-18 November 2014 (= Name & Place, 5). Hamburg, Verlag Dr. Kovač: 13-18.