

Working group on foreign names in Estonian

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Principles of writing foreign names

- In the 19th century foreign names were often adapted to Estonian spelling but since ca. 1860s personal names and then (expressedly since 1911) place names were written in their original spelling
- There was a short period (around 1949–1955) when this principle was questioned by some linguists but no decision was taken; however this provoked a bigger number of adapted spellings than in the 1930s. Gradually their number was decreased (esp. in 1977, 1983)
- Main principle: foreign names are written exactly as in the original language, including diacritical marks (e.g. *Västerås*, *Helsingør*); if the original is in non-Roman script, the name is romanized

Who decides on writing foreign names?

- There has never been any commission in Estonia to decide the spelling of foreign names (cf. Poland, UK, USA)
- Recommendations on writing foreign names have been given as part of other linguistic recommendations
- The dictionary of Standard Estonian (last edition 2018) has an appendix (list of toponyms) that can be viewed as the authoritative source for name spellings but it is fairly short (together with Estonian place names a little more than 4000 entries)
- The Language Committee at the Mother Tongue Society is the main authority on questions of language norms but it usually does consider only principles, not isolated words or names

Language Committee and foreign names

- Although the committee makes decisions on the matters of principle only, from time to time they deviate from this, e.g. in 1983 the committee (then orthological commission) approved a list of country and capital names (Roman-script part) that was worked out in collaboration with geographers
- Ever since that there has been a practice to involve a wider group of interested people in the decision-making when issues with foreign names have been discussed (including transcription of names, principles of writing names in certain countries, etc.)
- This circle of people, however, seemed to be casual and not fixed

Working group on foreign names

- In September 2018 this wider group of people was organized into a working group, with a joint mailing list
- The working group is expected to discuss matters of principle, as well as specific names:
 - how to write names of certain countries, e.g. Tunisia
 - how to romanize names from non-Roman-script languages (Ukrainian, Belarusian, Persian, Arabic)
 - spelling of specific names, translation of official country names, etc.
- Decisions, if needed, will still be made by the Language Committee

Members of the working group

- All Language Committee members (11) are included
- Others represent:
 - geographers (University of Tartu)
 - newspapers (linguistic editors)
 - news agency (BNS)
 - Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR)
 - Language Inspectorate
 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 - some interested individuals

Questions discussed since Sept. 2018 (1)

- Swaziland (Est. **Svaasimaa**) > Eswatini (**eSwatini**)
 - As the Estonian name was considered traditional, it was decided to maintain this as the main name but for official texts adopt the Swazi spelling (*eSwatini Kuningriik* 'Kingdom of Eswatini'; similar approach is with Elevandiluurannik – Côte d'Ivoire, Ida-Timor – Timor-Leste)
- Co-operative Republic of Guyana – **Guyana Kooperatiivne Vabariik**
- Proposal to replace *Kiiev* by regular transcription from Ukrainian, *Kõjiv* (cf. Kyiv) – rejected, Kiiev was considered as traditional exonym
- Macedonia (Est. **Makedoonia**) > North Macedonia (**Põhja-Makedoonia**)

Questions discussed since Sept. 2018 (2)

- Capital of Kazakhstan **Astana** > **Nur-Sultan** (not Nursultan)
- New capital of Burundi: **Gitega** (previously Bujumbura)
- Most of correspondence has been informative only (no discussion)
- Usually consensus is aimed at, voting has not been applied
 - in one case (Zealandia) consensus was not achieved