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National standardization: office treatment of names

**Problems encountered in the standardization of names
of waters**

Submitted by Poland**

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** Prepared by Ewa Wolnicz-Pawlowska, Vice-Chairman, Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland, affiliated with the Surveyor-General of Poland, Warsaw.

In small, local communities geographic names create no greater problems to user in general. But as social relations become more complex new needs and demands are born. An increasing number of areas of human life undergo standardisation and normative evaluation, This is also true today of geographic names, starting with names of continents, states, countries and ending with the names of small physiographic features.

Standardization according to the *Glossary of Terminology used in the Standardization of Geographical Names* (Warsaw 1998, p.70) is:

- a) establishing by an appropriate authority a collection of standards or norms concerning, e.g. a uniform presentation of toponyms,
- b) creating new toponyms consistent with those norms.

Standardization of geographical names is defined in that work as: "Recommendation by a names authority to use a specific name or names of a specific geographical feature together with the form of its recording and also the conditions for using such names."

Standardization of geographical names is only an expression, but not the most important, of general world trends to introduce uniform principles of describing and identifying various objects and the relations between them.

Digital designations are being increasingly widely used in the contemporary world for identification: individual tax payers hold numbers, also institutions and goods. People have bank account numbers, numbers of credit cards, library identification, club, passport numbers etc. Work is also being pursued on the digital coding of geographical names. The Polish Standardising Committee is, for instance, establishing code names of countries and their administration units. Polish hydrologists have elaborated codes programme of names of waters in Poland.

Digital designation has many merits allowing a feature to be unambiguously identified. But it would be wrong to suppose that numbers could entirely substitute language methods of distinguishing separate objects, i.e. to substitute proper names. Proper names are not only used daily in common language. Geographical names still seem to be imperative on administration, sightseeing and tourism maps, on school atlases and other handbooks, in many administration documents, not to mention literature.

If that is the case, standardization can not be avoided. The matter is not whether to standardize but rather - **to what extent**.

The United Nations has for long been disseminating the standardisation idea as well as general recommendations as to the organisation of standardization work. Here the earlier mentioned glossary defines a names authority as:

- a) a person, office or committee officially appointed to an advisory and/or deciding function in matters of toponomastics
- b) an authority entrusted with publishing standardized toponyms.

Two such authorities exist in Poland at present:

- 1) the Commission for Establishing Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects – at the Ministry of the Interior and Administration
- 2) the Commission for Standardization of Geographical Names Outside Poland – at the Surveyor General of Poland.

Another question remains – how should such a large collection of geographical names be officially established. For obvious reasons the names of towns, villages and other points of settlement are subject to standardization. There can also, surely, be no doubt that names of states, their capitals etc. should be standardized. An unresolved issue is whether the names of small physiographic features, void of economic and cultural significance, should be subject to standardization. The scope of standardization of such features is bound to vary from country to country, depending on economic requirements, capacity of names authorities etc.

Certain unification trends as regards geographic names appeared as early as the 16th century in Poland, e.g. in documents of the royal chancery (description of royal estate borders). Cartographers imposed a kind of names standard in the 17th century when maps and sketches were drawn. The number of such documents increased in the ensuing centuries.

It was the authors of the 15-volume “Geographic Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavonic Countries” who are the most highly merited for the standardization of Polish geographical names. That grand work appeared at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century and collected the names of localities, mountains, rivers, lakes, forest units etc.

A multitude of linguistic elaborations of geographical names appeared in Poland during the whole 20th century, which accumulated historical and contemporary as well as dialectical material and established the correct pronunciation and lettering of names.

The achievements of many generations today simplify the undertaking of the standardization of geographical names in my country.

The first standardization efforts, in today’s understanding, on geographical names in Poland commenced after the II World War. The above mentioned Commission for Establishing Names of Localities and Physiographic Objects started work then. Initially, the names of localities and also of physiographic objects, such as rivers, marshes, meadows, hills, forests etc. were standardized. The enormity of work related to establishing official lists of localities names and their parts led, in time, to shifting the standardisation of physiographic objects to a future time.

It must be admitted the standardization of physiographic features gives rise to many problems, since apart from matters appearing when official locality names are established, specific problems also arise.

I wish to spend some time on issues connected with standardization of the names of waters, mainly rivers and streams, but also lakes and ponds.

The first group of issues which are encountered in the standardization of names of water features relate to their nature and character. Unlike to towns and villages whose administrative status is easy to define and their geographic location also arouses no problems, many waters belong to various administration bodies (since they flow through several provinces, for instance) while the definition of their sources and mouths is far from simple and has not been unambiguously decided. It also happens that a lake, for example, is treated in some documents, on certain maps, as a separate feature, and on others – as part of another feature.

Another matter is that of periodical streams, which appear after rainfalls, and rivers which flow underground on a certain section, which means one cannot be sure whether it is the same object or a completely different one. On a par with other Slavonic nations, the Polish language contains similar names for such rivers (Ponik, Ponikwa, Ponikła).

Difficulties appear relatively frequently when deciding whether an object is the upper section of a river or whether it is its tributary in the upper section. This requires a decision whether one feature has two names or whether they are separate objects.

Let me remind that a basic principle of standardization is to give one feature only one name. According to that principle, Poland's longest river bears the name Vistula (Wisła) along its whole length, though separate names are in popular use for two source sections: Czarna Wiselka and Biała Wiselka (Black, White Wiselka). Separate names also exist at the mouths of two river branches: Nogat and Leniwka. Hence should these names be included in the collection of standardized names?

The issue mentioned herein which appeared in the course of standardisation work concerning water features stems from their natural features. But it is also Man himself, through economic activities, who complicates water relations by constructing canals, ditches and cuttings. Numerous problems arise when setting official names, for instance when defining which water stream is recognised as the major one for the named feature. For instance, following land improvement operations, part of the water flows in a canal and a part – in the old river bed. Is the standardised name to be given to both features or to only one?

For instance the name of a river on the maps is Obra but it is called the Obra Canal along one section.

Similar problems are encountered when establishing the names of water streams between lakes: whether to treat them as separate objects or rather as one stream with one name. In the case of the second decision, a given object is – in consequence – treated as discontinuous since it is interrupted by other objects (lakes).

Obviously, the decisions taken by hydrologists are of great help when standardising water names. However, a scientific description of water relations is one thing and the social function of hydronyms – is quite another. Sometimes it happens that the existence of an official name for an element and not for the whole of the given feature is more important from the social viewpoint.

I feel that, when tackling that group of problems during standardization of water names, a principle may be used similar to that in the case of names of residential objects, that is – use one name for the whole object and, if necessary, give official names to parts of the object (for instance – the name of a town – the names of urban districts).

Problems of a linguistic, terminological nature also arise, apart from issues related to the physiographic character of water features.

Primo, type terms are differently treated in various sources, such as stream, river, lake, pond, canal, ditch etc. They sometimes are included in a proper name, and sometimes are not. From the viewpoint of the Polish language, the most consistent principle is to use such words as part of a proper name in adjective designations, for instance Biały Potok, but to avoid them in noun names e.g. Białka and not Potok Białka (Stream). A certain problem appears with these names which are genetically type names but refer to objects of a different character, for instance there is a river called Jezioro (Lake) while we have a natural lake in the mountains called Czarny Staw (Pond) etc. Hence decisions must be taken in such case whether to use type terms as parts of a proper name (e.g. Rzeka Jezioro (River Lake)).

Secundo, in social practice many cases exist of the joint appearance of differing variants of the name of one object e.g. Mała Wrzeźnica, Wrzeźnianka, Wreścianka or Bawół, Czarna Struga, Struga. It is clear that these are word formative or lexical variants, each of which is correct from the viewpoint of literary language. In such cases the Commission must deliver an arbitrary decision which variant is to be recognised as official. The justifications here are often divided between social customs (local population and administration) and historical tradition.

When discussing that issue mention must be made of variant names in various languages. Many names existed in the past, in today's Poland, of Prussian, Sudovian, German, Ukrainian and other origins. Such names were used depending on the language spoken in a given community (several of which, including Prussian and Sudovian have become extinct). Many such names are no longer used or have adapted to the Polish language system. Today, in a situation in which national minorities account for 3 percent of the total population at the most, the issue of names of physiographic features in minority languages does not seem to be of immediate urgency but may not be omitted in standardization work.

Another issue of a linguistic nature is that of dialect pronunciation. Several names of minor streams and ponds are expressed exclusively in dialect pronunciation which means the commission has to decide whether to change such a name to a shape consistent with norms for Polish correct literary language or to leave it unchanged e.g. Potok Białczański (dialect form) or Białczański (literary form).

I also wish to point to yet another group of problems when regulating names of water features. There are many features which have no names at all and are not marked on maps with names. Difficulties also exist when extracting a name for such feature on the spot since the local population just does not use a proper name for a given stream, pond or marsh. In such cases the question is whether to create an official name or to leave the object without a name. However the principle here must be quite clear according to which names are given to such objects. I would add that names can be found in historical sources which were once used by the local people but have been forgotten today. Standardization work should take that into account.

The problems of standardization of water names presented here in abbreviated form appeared when the programme to unify water names in Poland was being implemented. The project was created in the Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography, with a group of experts from various fields being engaged on it: hydrologists, cartographers, linguists, historians and other specialists. To the moment a large collection of names has been gathered (some 50,000 entries – contemporary and historical names, word formative, phonetic and graphic variants, in Polish and other languages). Basing on the collection, comprehensive work can be commenced on standardising and regulating Polish hydrographic names. It is a task which will take several years to complete but I hope it will prove successful.
