

Statement by Mr. Prodromos Vasileiou to the 20th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names

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1. Introduction:

1.1 The island of Cyprus was created many millions of years ago, in the depths of a great ocean, the remnants of which constitute the Mediterranean, the Caspian and the Black Sea. The creation of Cyprus which has lasted three million years was due to underwater volcanic activity and other more complicated processes. Even today, many low - and even high - lying areas are strewn with fossilised sea shells that bear witness to the fact that these regions were once at the bottom of the sea.

1.2 To a significant extent, Geography determined the historical destiny of Cyprus because of its geostrategic location, at the meeting point of three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa as well as its natural wealth. The history of its civilization begins from the 6th Tillennium BC. For certain periods, Cyprus lived under foreign domination and it became an independent Republic and a member of the United Nations in 1960. In 1961 it became a member of the Council of Europe, the British Commonwealth and the Non-Aligned movement. In 1990 it applied to join the European Union and negotiations for accession begun in April of 1998.

1.3 We, in Cyprus, are privileged to have most of our geographical names bequeathed to us in ancient texts from Homer to Herodotus, the tragic poets and Strabon up to ancient cartographers, like Claudius Ptolemaeus and from medieval cartographers, like Abraham Ortelius, up to lord Horatio H. Kitchener who mapped Cyprus in the 19th Century at the beginning of the British rule of the island. The name of the island "Kypros" was mentioned by Homer 3000 years ago.

1.4 The last two conquerors of Cyprus were Ottoman Turks, from the 16th to the 19th century and subsequently the British until 1960. Geographical names which survived through the centuries in writing or in the oral tradition until 1960, year of the independence of Cyprus, are fully acknowledged and preserved by the Government of Cyprus. A lot of them, I repeat, have been collected from texts, historical documents, left by the British and the Ottoman Turks and the other previous conquerors. All the conquerors of Cyprus were imposing their own system but they were not proceeding to any change of the traditional geographical names. Now, however, Turkey since its invasion and occupation of 37% of the territory of the Republic in 1974, the occupying power is systematically proceeding to change and rename in an arbitrary way the internationally accepted official toponyms that have survived through centuries, violating in this way the relevant resolutions of the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical names.

2. Geographical Names Historical Background

2.1 Cyprus belongs to the Mediterranean world, which has entered written history with written monuments at least three thousand years ago. Naturally the historical sources about Cyprus refer also to toponyms. If one takes as a basis the Greek presence in Cyprus, on account of its being the most long-lived, from 1100 BC to this day, we have, in Cyprus, pre-hellenic toponyms, toponyms of the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, which are Greek, toponyms of the Frankish periods among them some Frankish too, and toponyms of the Turkish period, among which also in Turkish. In the kaleidoscope of Cypriot toponyms, the history of Cyprus is reflected.

2.2 Research has ascertained that the toponyms are mostly stable, but also variable. Some toponyms remain unchanged through the millennia and the centuries, following only the changes which take place in the historical evolution of the language, but some are altered, as life itself moves along. The change of toponyms is mainly the introduction of new ones and more accurately, from natural entities, man made works and new ownership.

2.3 It is possible to compile a voluminous archive of Cypriot toponyms in an electronic form by sorting out the sources from ancient times till today - texts, inscriptions, codes, maps, catalogues, collection and local manuscripts. This task constitutes one of the future projects of the Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names.

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3. Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names.

3.1 The Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names was set up in April 1977 by decision of the Council of Ministers No 15769 and constitutes the only competent national geographical names authority, consisting originally of 5 members from different related Governmental Departments responsible for collection, standardization and romanization of the geographical Names of Cyprus.

3.2 In 1997, by decision of the Council of Ministers a new Committee was formed consisting of 10 members, a Geographer- cartographer, five Philologists, a Lawyer representing the Ministry of Interior and three Glossologists, two of them representatives of the University of Cyprus

3.3 In 1998 a new law, No 66(1) of 1998, about the Proceedings for the Standardization of Geographical Names came into force and /as published in the Official Gazette of Cyprus No 3257 of 17 July 1998

With this law, in addition to the Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of the Geographical Names, a Geographical Names Advisory Committee was established. This committee must be consisted of five members experts (Glossologists), a presiding member and four other persons appointed by the Minister of education. Two of them must be professionals from the University of Cyprus. This Committee:

- (a) examines all the matters which are referred to it by the Cyprus Permanent Committee and
- (b) investigates the objections submitted to it by any interested body or person and
- (c) submits the results to the Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names for decision.

3.4 The Minister of Education & Culture is obliged to make regulations, which are contemplated by the above law or are necessary or expedient for the purpose of the law. These regulations however are now before the Attorney's General office, for legal advice. These regulations must be then submitted to the Parliament of Representatives for approval and embodied to the above law (No 66(1) of 1998) about the proceedings for the Standardization of Geographical Names.

4. Achievements and Progress made regarding the Geographical Names

4.1 In the program of the Standardization of Geographical Names and according to the resolutions of the UN Conferences the major tasks, undertaken by the Competent Authority since its establishment, are the following:

i) The standardization of names has been applied mainly to geographical names, geographical terms, in cartography, in archaeological names and in odonyms. The system of transcription of the Greek names into the approved Roman alphabet (ELOT 743) has been fully implemented in official geographical names, in cartography, in odonyms and in the road signs. It is also implemented to a large degree in the passports awaiting its full implementation.

The standardization of names and their transcription into the approved roman system has began to be implemented also in the private sector, in the press, in books and in studies.

ii) From the archive of Cypriot toponyms, which has been compiled by the Department of Lands & Surveys from the maps and the cadastral plans, two gazetteers have been prepared:

- a) in 1982 the CONCISE GAZETTEER OF CYPRUS which contains about 2000 main geographical names and
- b) in 1987, the A COMPLETE GAZETTEER OF CYPRUS which contains about 67000 names

iii) The Cyprus Permanent Committee for the Standardization of Geographical Names has undertaken the following tasks:

- a) Has offered advice for standardization of names to the Government Municipal and Village Authorities and private individuals.
- b) Has discussed the historical spelling of some Greek names and has reached to conclusions.
- c) Has standardized and transcribed the new toponyms of towns and villages.

4.2. In Cyprus, the toponyms are subject to the Municipal and Communal Authorities. The toponyms, which are given by the Communal authorities, are under the approval of the respective District Officers, Ministry of Interior. All the names given are referred to the Cyprus Permanent Committee for Standardization of Geographical Names, for grammatical correction, if necessary and for uniformity all over the island.

4.3. The Greek toponyms, as these are expressed with the terms ODOS (street), LEOFOROS (avenue), PLATEIA (square) are all in genitive case. For the Greek toponyms of Cyprus, the following principles are applied:

- a) All the given names are complete, to identify the persons, in favour of whom these are given
- b) The names of the ancient language are recorded to the ancient type of the genitive type, as it happens and to the surnames of the citizens. The names of the modern language are recorded in the modern type of the genitive case.
- c) The transcription to the approved Roman system, where it is applicable, is obligatory.
- d) In the road signs, the Greek names are written on the upper level and the Roman type at the lower level. The Roman constitutes the transcription of letter to letter of the Greek names. The same principle covers foreign names as well. The foreign writing of the foreign names is not used on the road signs.

5. Work in progress

5.1 The tasks which are in the progress of being realized, are the following:

a) The compilation of a Booklet/guide containing guides and principles applied for the standardization, transliteration and transcription to the roman system of the geographical names of Cyprus. It consists of about 90 pages and is already completed in draft form.

b) The compilation of Toponymic Guidelines for Map and Other Editors. This has about 40 pages and is also compiled in draft form.

c) The compilation of the list of countries and capitals in the Greek language.

5.2 It is hoped that by the time of the next conference, Cyprus will be in a position to publish and then present the above-mentioned works, firstly in session of the Romano-Hellenic Division and in the upcoming Conference of the United Nations.

6. Future Program

6.1 The following have also been scheduled:

- * The preparation of a new and improved edition of the Concise Gazetteer consisting of about 2000 names.
- * The compilation of volume II of the A Complete Gazetteer of Cyprus. This however cannot be realized yet because further research and field work is needed to complement the whole project by adding the geographical names which do not constitute official names but exist and are part of the culture of the Cypriots and the scientific work regarding the local enquiry and field checking for verification is not possible in the northern part of the island, due to the Turkish military occupation which renders it inaccessible to the competent authority.
 - * The preparation of a glossary of sea and undersea features.
 - * The preparation of A Complete Odonyms Gazetteer for the free area only and not for the whole of the island because of the same reason referred to above.
 - * The compilation of a glossary under the title Generic terms in Cyprus Geographical Names.
 - * The preparation of a map of the Administrative Division of Cyprus and Regions, Districts and Municipalities.
 - * The Standardization of Cartographical Symbols.

7. United Nations Conferences and Sessions on the Standardization of Geographical Names

7.1 Cyprus participates in all the conferences and meetings of the UN on the standardization of Geographical Names and is a member of four Linguistics Divisions.

- * The Roman-Hellenic Division.
- * The East-Central and South-East Europe Division.

Unfortunately we did not participate to the 15th Session of the East-Central and South-East Division held between 19-21 April 1999, because of technical reasons and I appologise for it.

- * The Asia South-West Division (other than the Arabic Division).
- * The "East Mediterranean" (Other that Arabic).