

## Translating personal names in the USSR successor states: cross-cultural and sociolinguistic perspectives

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### Abstract

In Soviet times, Russian performed de facto the role of the official language which influenced not only the ways personal names were written in Cyrillic alphabet languages, but also the ways of their Romanization. The translation problem was complicated by the existence of numerous traditional correspondences and variant forms of first names and to a certain extent, of the last names (e.g. Mykola / Nikolai / Mikalai; Tetiana / Tatiana / Tatsiana etc.) in the closely related East Slavonic languages: Ukrainian, Russian and Belorussian. Against this background the mixed or marginal perception of the name-bearer's ethnic identity complicates the practice of translation and produces all kinds of orthographic duplicates.

Name choice is to a great extent an identity choice. Translation of a first name belonging to a linguistic minority into the official language can substantially change the initial intent of the name-giver and / or embarrass the name-bearer's ethnic feelings and modify her or his self-perception. There are numerous incidents in Ukraine and elsewhere showing that men and women are often dissatisfied with the way their names are treated publicly and officially. The case of Dmitri Bulgakov vs. Ukraine in the European Human Rights Court and other similar cases show that there is a variety of unresolved issues in the official practice awaiting both linguistic and legislative resolution.

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When the USSR broke up in 1991, fifteen sovereign states appeared on the world map: three East-Slavic countries, three Baltic States, three states in the Caucasus area, Moldova, and five Central Asian states. Except the Baltic States, all the national languages used or were obliged to use the Cyrillic alphabet in the Soviet period of their history. However, linguistically and culturally these countries were very heterogeneous. Under the influence of the dominant Russian language in the bilingual situation, their onomastic systems developed a number of features which lasted on for years after the fall of the USSR and in some countries still survive.

Each of the abovementioned states had its own standard language. However, passports, birth and marriage certificates, educational and employment history certificates etc. in the USSR were either bilingual or in Russian. All names had their parallel spellings in a person's national language and in Russian. When a person went to travel abroad, he or she was issued the so-called foreign travel passport, where the names were not written in the person's national language, but in Russian and in Roman characters. According to the government's requirements the non-Russian names had to be first turned into Russian Cyrillic before their Romanization, and only after that changed into Roman script. Thus, a Ukrainian surname *Береговий* was changed into *Береговой* and then transliterated as *Beregovoy*. When a person with this name became the Prime Minister of France in 1992, few people in Ukraine were aware of the origin of the name since its Ukrainian orthography reflected its French pronunciation – *Беперовья*.

In the translation of family names adapted to Russian in the Soviet era we mostly find the suffixes *-ivskyi*, *-yi*, which were converted into *-ovskyi*, *-oi* (*Kosakivskyi* turned into *Kosakovsky*, *Shvydkyi* into *Shvydkoi* etc.), and the prefixes *-pid*, *-bez*, converted into *-pod*, *-bes* (*Pidruda* turned into *Podruda*, *Bezpalko* turned into *Bespalko* etc.). Translations of many family name roots reflected the etymological background rather than their contemporary sound

form. So-called conceptual translation was applied to last names deriving from appellatives whose phonetic resemblance in Ukrainian and Russian was based on the regular alternations of the vowels [i] - [e], [i] - [o], [e] - [e] etc. Thus Kysil turned into Kisel, Bilodid into Beloded, Pyrih into Pirog.

After the proclamation of independence in 1991, the reverse process of derussification of Ukrainian given and last names began and albeit slowly, still goes on. Thus, family names that were once russified are returning to their original Ukrainian form (Korunets, 2000, 92). Occasionally, names of Russian and Belorussian origin are erroneously involved into that transformation and are artificially Ukrainianized.

The influence of the Russian language is still a factor determining the current differences in Roman spelling of the names coming from post-Soviet countries. A striking example is the name of Turkmenistan's first President Saparmurat Niyazov, which is rendered differently into a variety of languages. The Internet translation service ([http://en.translatethings.com/s/a/p/saparmurat\\_niyazov.html](http://en.translatethings.com/s/a/p/saparmurat_niyazov.html)) gives several translations mostly reflecting the way this name appears in Wikipedia. The two major versions are Saparmyrat Nyýazow (reflecting the Turkmen spelling and pronunciation) in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Slovak, on the one hand, and Saparmurat Nijazov in English, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, Catalan, Galician, Romanian, Greek, Finnish, Czech, which follows the traces of Russian influence. Languages like Belarusian, Macedonian, Serbian, Ukrainian, which use Cyrillic script, follow the Russian model. Two translations, Bulgarian Сапармурад Ниязов and Lithuanian Saparmuradas Nijazovas have a specific rendering of the final consonant influenced by an earlier Russian orthographic variant reflecting the regressive assimilation of final [t] into [d].

There is no evidence of any linguistic dependence of the above variant spellings upon the language family or group. Apparently, the translation standard is either set by the norm established by the country's authorities or depends upon an individual translator's choice if there is no such national standard.

There are two major strategies in the translation of proper names in literary translation: either the name can be taken over unchanged from the source text into the target, or it can be adopted to conform to the phonic or graphic conventions of the target language (Hervey and Higgins (1986, 29).

The Russification of the onomastic systems in Central Asia's new independent states has been both structural (personal names were made of three components: family name, given name, and patronymic) and morphological (family names acquired Russian suffixes -ov, -yev). For some time, this was tolerated in the post-Soviet era, but since the end of the years 2000, a tendency to return to the ethnic name forms is becoming more and more apparent. In Azerbaijan the government is planning to rid the local family names of the Russian suffixes -ov, -jev, suggesting instead the Azerbaijanian suffixes -ly, -zade, -ogly, -gizy or no suffix at all. In Kazakhstan there was an NGO campaign, unofficially encouraged by the government, for a return to traditional ethnical family names ending in -uly and -kizy instead of the current Russian endings -ov, -jev.

Recent developments demonstrate that name translation can also be a valuable resource that helps to achieve certain social goals. In 2007 the president of Tajikistan Emomalii Rahmon gave up the Russian ending of his surname (formerly Rahmonov) and encouraged his countrymen to follow his example to "return to the cultural roots". The registrars were given orders to register the newborn ethnic Tajiks without the Russian suffixes in their last names. Thus, the last names of whole generations (parents and their children) are spelled and pronounced differently. An intralingual transcoding procedure from "Soviet Tajik" to "modern Tajik" is necessary to identify the last names of the children and their parents' names.

However, names of any origin had a chance of undergoing considerable phonetic changes (occasionally even beyond recognition), but additionally, non-Russian names stood chances of being Russified either in the intermediate or in the final stage of this process. In the case of Ukrainian and Byelorussian, belonging like Russian to the East Slavic group, onomastic adaptation touched upon not only the affixes, but also the root morphemes of family names. Names (especially compound ones) with a transparent inner form were in many cases calqued into Russian and then transliterated into Roman script. Thus, the Ukrainian family name Bilokin literally meaning “white horse” was turned into Belokon with the same meaning but having two different vowel phonemes as compared with the original.

Since the 1920-ies, in Latvian and Lithuanian, most foreign names take on specific endings. Ukrainian or Russian Ivan turns into Latvian Ivans or Lithuanian Ivanas, for instance, Ukrainian Oleh into Olehs (Olehas), and Russian Oleg into Olegs (Olegas). Lithuanian legislation proceeds from the premise that a name should be treated as an element of the national language and a valuable part of the nation’s cultural heritage. Accordingly, translation should follow the laws of the national language not only in terms of alphabet but also in grammar, namely the declension system and differentiation in masculine / feminine gender forms.

Although connotations and implied meanings are not generally considered relevant in the name’s official records, certain sociocultural and sociolinguistic contexts give more prominence to this aspect. As P. Newmark rightly observes, there are some names that bear connotations and require a specific translation procedure to correctly represent them (Newmark, 1988b, 214). Russian speakers, who are numerous in the Baltic States, demonstrate reluctance to obey the linguistic transformation of their names, considering it an intrusion of their ethnic and personal identity. Occasionally, this reluctance goes as far as legal proceedings in the European Human Rights Court or other international bodies.

An NGO “Return Our Names” was set up in Latvia (2006), which is an indication of the seriousness of the name translation issue in the context of interethnic relations. The leader of this NGO Ruslan Pankratov (in Latvian spelling Ruslans Pankratovs) submitted an application to the European Court of Human Rights objecting to Latvianization of his first and last name in the passport and other official records. The Court did not support his claim, but in 2010 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights recognized the right of a different Latvian citizen Leonid Raikhman not to add Latvian endings to his given name and family name.

The case of Shishkin vs. Latvia shows the relevance of the possible misrepresentation of the name’s inner form and associated background caused by translation. The Cyrillic letter Ш is normally rendered by the Latvian symbol Š. However, in the machine-reading zone, at the bottom of the biographical data page, the diacritics are lost and Šiškin (a derivative of the Russian word шишка meaning “a cone”) turned into Siskin (a derivative of the Russian word сиськи meaning “female breasts”). Thus, for a purely technical reason the name’s inner form was changed, which irritated its bearers and made them take legal action.

The surname of Mrs. Mentzen, a Latvian citizen who acquired it through marriage to a German national, was indicated in her Latvian IDs in the Latvian feminine form as “Mencena”. Mrs. Mentzen asked the Constitutional Court to declare the legislation regulating the orthography of personal names unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court, however, confirmed the legitimacy of article 19 of the state language law which states that “Names of persons shall be presented in accordance with the traditions of the Latvian language and written in accordance with the existing norms of the literary language.”

There is much evidence that the demarcation line between translation and change of names is vague in both family names and given names. Cognitive science suggests that we tend to assimilate new and unfamiliar information to patterns that have already been

recognized and have become familiar, and there is evidence from studies of the brain that there is a biological basis for this theory (Tymoczko, 1999, 48). S. Hervey and I. Higgins regard cultural transplantation as a translation procedure in which the names of the source language are replaced by names of the indigenous target language. These are not their literal equivalents but have similar cultural connotations (Hervey, Higgins, 1986, 48). In some languages (Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian, for instance) given names, in contrast with surnames, admit variants, which makes them a much more flexible subcategory from the translation perspective. Before some four decades, the Ukrainian name Oksana was translated into Russian exclusively as Ksenia. Since the 1980-s this Ukrainian name became very popular in Russia and consequently it gained recognition of the authorities as a legitimate official form of the Russian name. This opened up a possibility of a variant translation of Ukrainian Оксана into Russian, either as Ксения, or as Оксана.

In the closely related East Slavic languages there exists a centuries long tradition of translating a number of etymologically related names by their national equivalents Pyotr – Petro, Рыгор – Григорій, Olena – Elena etc. Until recently both Ukrainian and Russian speaking people did not consider such translations a form of ethnic assimilation. The break-up of the USSR brought a reduction of the influence of the Russian language and narrowed its use in the official documents outside Russia.

The attempts made by the new independent states to expand the use of their own languages are often interpreted as a linguistic aggression against Russian. There are many examples of men and women appealing to the official bodies for changes in their official records. A 35 year old resident of the Ukrainian city of Simferopol, Dmitri Bulgakov, decided to contest the alleged Ukrainianization of his name in the European Human Rights Court (2007) insisting on a Russified spelling of his name in both Ukrainian and English records in the Ukrainian passport. The Court refused to recognize the violation of his right to a name and identity for a variety of both legal and linguistic reasons.

A year later (2008) the resident of the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, Oleksandr Smirnov, submitted a claim at the local Ukrainian court to have his official Ukrainian name record changed to Aleksandr and won the case. Mr. Smirnov is a researcher and he motivated the change by the need to identify his scientific papers published in English under the name of Alexander with his current passport record. The intrusion of juridical decisions into linguistic translation procedures highlights the sociolinguistic nature of the phenomenon. The information about the case was given to the media by the “Russian Bloc” and was commented as a successful attempt to counter the alleged “onomastic assimilation of Russians”.

A very specific situation exists in Belarus, which has two official languages: Belarusian and Russian. In the national (internal) passport the name is given in two languages: Belarusian and Russian. The given names are correlated according to a traditional, not a transliteration principle: Дзяніс - Денис, Вольга – Ольга, Віктор – Віктар. Unless the passport bearer gives his own version of Romanization, the name is automatically transliterated from the Belarusian form. Thus the Russian surname Грибов (Belarusian Грыбаў) can produce 2 quite different variants: HRYBAU and GRIBOV.

There are contradictory statements in the national legislation and in other official documents regulating translation. Moldovan legislation sets different rules for the names of ethnic Moldovans, on the one hand, and ethnic minorities, on the other. Accordingly, Moldavian names are not gender sensitive (identical forms for men and women), patronymics take no suffixes. The law also regulates translation of Moldavian names into other languages, saying that “specific features of their spelling are preserved without adaptation” (Moldovan language act, article 26). On the other hand, Latvian legislation says: “Every name in Latvian spelling must have an ending according to the grammatical system of masculine and feminine gender” (Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia, regulations № 295, article 3.3).

From the practical perspective an international coordination body could be helpful. One should encourage a special information site on the internet managed by competent linguists and qualified translation students. A network of national identification and translation bureaus should be set up, and reference-books and gazetteers be created both nationally and internationally.

The demarcation line between translation and change of names is vague. Proper name translation resists unification because of the mixed linguistic nature of the names, tradition, different approaches applied to translation, non-linguistic interference into translation. Different approaches co-exist: direct transposition, morphological modification (suffixes or inflection), conceptual translation. All morphological elements (roots, prefixes, suffixes and endings) are ethnically sensitive elements. Translation presupposes the change of both the linguistic (technical) and the socio-cultural code. Proper name translation is used to achieve social or ethno-cultural goals.

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