

The OpenGazetteer of Open Maps for Europe and Minority Toponyms

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Keywords: gazetteer, open data toponym, minority language, minority name

Abstract:

Open Maps for Europe (OME) is a collaborative European project focused on open geographic data. It is managed by EuroGeographics, the membership association for National Mapping and Cadastre Agencies (NMCAs). Among the six datasets within the project is the OpenGazetteer, which offers authoritative geographical names as maintained in the source data of the NMCAs. It includes standardized endonyms in all the national languages of the participating countries.

However, certain types of toponyms are initially excluded from the gazetteer due to the NMCAs' limited jurisdiction to their national territories and officially recognized languages. The sub-project "Exonyms Management," funded by the German Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy (BKG), aimed to expand the OpenGazetteer by incorporating toponyms that were absent from the national names databases. These were mainly exonyms. The limited competence of the NMCAs to their national territory and to nationally recognized languages results in the exclusion of certain types of toponyms from the OpenGazetteer. These missing toponyms primarily fall into two categories:

- names of geographical features in national languages that lie beyond the NMCAs' jurisdiction (i. e. exonyms), and
- toponyms in endonymic languages not officially recognized in the respective country (endonyms and exonyms).

The three-year project "Weiterentwicklung des Europäischen OpenGazetteer" (Further development of the European OpenGazetteer), also financed by the BKG, is a follow-up to the "Exonym Management" project, which expired in 2023. This project aims to fill the gap by incorporating minority toponyms into the OpenGazetteer, ensuring that it keeps international standards and follows the recommendations of the United Nations Group on Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) and the European INSPIRE directive on Geographical Names.

The OpenGazetteer of Open Maps for Europe and Minority Toponyms is an initiative that focuses on mapping and preserving minority names in the freely accessible database. The project collaborates with experts in cultural preservation, geoinformatics, and linguistics to create a comprehensive database of minority toponyms that is publicly accessible and can be utilized by researchers, cartographers, and the general public. Names are collected from existing data bases, dictionaries, gazetteers, and other toponymical relevant publications in contact with representative organisations and institutes of the respective languages. The Process involves more than a simple transfer of the toponyms in the OpenGazetteer but a thorough check to assign the mandatory attributes to the names.

To comply with INSPIRE standards, all toponyms must be classified based on their nativeness as either an endonym or exonym. However, some names may not fit neatly into these categories and could be considered as both depending on the perspective. Following the requirements of INSPIRE it is mandatory that the status of a toponym must be indicated by assigning the name to one of the following four values: official standardised, historical, or other.

Therefore, the number of the toponyms in the OpenGazetteer largely depends on the provision of source material and the support by representing institutes and organisations of the respective minority. In addition to the commitment to being INSPIRE compliant additional individual problems arise for many languages. How to address these challenges will be demonstrated using the examples of Sami languages and Rusyn.

By incorporating these name forms into the OpenGazetteer, minority toponyms will be directly linked to their endonyms along with essential attributes such as coordinates, feature type, or other related name forms.

The promotion of the recording and use of minority names is a valuable aid to the recognition and retention of minority and regional language group heritage. The UNGEGN has recognized the importance of promoting the use of minority names and has recommended that geographical names authorities throughout the world present a summary of their activities related to minority naming initiatives. The OpenGazetteer project aligns with these recommendations and aims to enhance the visibility of minority toponyms within an open Pan-European dataset built on authoritative data sources.

By incorporating minority toponyms, the OpenGazetteer aims to promote cultural diversity, preserve historical and cultural heritage, and provide valuable free accessible resources for scientists, geographers, and the general public.

Acknowledgements:

EuroGeographics, Bruxelles

BKG - Bundesamt für Kartographie und Geodäsie (Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy), Frankfurt am Main

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