

# ON THE ROMANIZATION OF BULGARIAN AND ENGLISH

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## Abstract

The present work deals with the recent evolution of the non-academic practice of English transliteration of Bulgarian, starting with the introduction of the Streamlined System in 1995, its subsequent progress and official endorsement, as well as its present use for electronic communication in Romanized Bulgarian, and its possible relevance to the phonetic spelling of English.

## I. The Streamlined System

This system of English transliteration of Bulgarian was introduced in the 1995 Toponymic Guidelines for Antarctica [7]. Here follows the relevant excerpt from the Guidelines:

### "7. Language and Spelling"

"Names are approved in their Bulgarian language forms using Cyrillic script, together with Roman spelling versions obtained as outlined herein. Generic elements of names will normally be translated into one of the official Antarctic Treaty languages which use Roman script (English, French, Spanish), with specific elements correspondingly Romanized. Definite articles of place names which contain no generic elements may be dropped in the process with generics added instead. In the case of English language, conversion of Bulgarian names to Roman spelling is based on the following graphemic correspondences scheme:"

"а-а, б-б, в-в, г-г, д-д, е-е, ж-zh, з-z, и-и, й-у,  
к-k, л-l, м-m, н-n, о-о, п-p, р-r, с-s, т-t, у-u, ф-f,

х-h, ц-ts, ч-ch, ш-sh, щ-sht, ъ-a, ь-y, ю-yu, я-ya.”

“However, authentic Roman spellings of names of non-Bulgarian origin, and traditional Roman spellings which exist for few Bulgarian names will have priority.”

## II. 1997 Comments on the English Transliteration of Bulgarian Names

### Conventions:

‘Transliteration system’ stands below for ‘system for English transliteration of Bulgarian names’; ‘Bulgarian practice’ refers to the non-academic practice of English transliteration of Bulgarian names in this country; ‘English/American practice’ refers to the non-academic practice of transliteration of Bulgarian names in the UK and the USA.

### Remark 1:

These comments are of informative nature and not intended to promote any particular transliteration system.

### Remark 2:

The present comments deal with the practical rather than the theoretical aspects of the issue. Although Bulgarian is my mother tongue and I do most of my writing in English, I am not an expert in any of those languages. Needless to say, I have consulted the leading Bulgarian experts on English transliteration of Bulgarian names. These include Dr. H. Stamenov and the late Prof. A. Danchev, both of Sofia University.

### 1. The problem

The Bulgarian version of the Cyrillic alphabet comprises 30 letters:

а, б, в, г, д, е, ж, з, и, й, к, л, м, н, о,  
п, р, с, т, у, ф, х, ц, ч, ш, щ, ъ, ь, ю, я.

The transliteration system regarded as most appropriate for academic Romanization of Bulgarian names is the so called ‘universal’ or ‘Czech-style’

system:

а-а, б-b, в-v, г-g, д-d, е-e, ж-ž, з-z, и-i, й-j,  
к-k, л-l, м-m, н-n, о-o, п-p, р-r, с-s, т-t, у-u, ф-f,  
х-h, ц-c, ч-č, ш-š, щ-št, ъ-ǎ, ь-j, ю-ju, я-ja.

The 'universal' system complies with the one-to-one principle, i.e. establishes a one-to-one graphemic correspondence providing for reverse transliteration and retrieval of the original Bulgarian names from their Romanized versions. The area of non-academic application of the system in this country is restricted to postal services and road signs. The 'universal' system is unsuitable for non-academic English transliteration because of the way it renders letters such as 'й' and 'ц'; it is not suitable for non-academic French or German transliteration of Bulgarian names either.

As far as non-academic English transliteration of Bulgarian names is concerned, it appears that most Bulgarian letters are treated uniformly throughout both Bulgarian and English/American practices, namely:

а-а, б-b, в-v, г-g, д-d, е-e, ж-zh, з-z, и-i, й-y,  
к-k, л-l, м-m, н-n, о-o, п-p, р-r, с-s, т-t, ф-f,  
ц-ts, ч-ch, ш-sh, щ-sht, ь-y, ю-yu, я-ya.

(The finer details of certain transliteration systems are disregarded here.) However, divergent treatments do occur in the case of the Bulgarian letters 'y', 'x', 'ъ', due to intrinsic reasons or to influence by other practices.

### The case of 'y'

This Bulgarian letter denotes a short vowel practically identical with the English one in 'book'. It is transliterated by 'u', 'ou', with 'u' prevailing in both Bulgarian and English/American practices. The usage of 'ou', more popular in the past, is probably related to certain patterns of French origin encountered in the English spelling.

### The case of 'x'

This Bulgarian letter denotes a consonant corresponding to the Scottish one in 'loch' or the German one in 'Bach'. It is transliterated by 'h', 'kh'. Transliteration by 'h' strongly prevails in Bulgarian practice with a diminishing usage of 'kh', while the latter is more frequent in English/American practice, presumably due to influence by the English

transliteration of Russian. Bulgarian experts fail to find any convincing reasons justifying the use of 'kh'.

### The case of 'Ѣ'

This Bulgarian letter denotes a short vowel, to be transcribed by the shwa sign 'ə', which is practically identical with the English one in 'wisdom' /'wɪzdəm/ and occurs in both unstressed and stressed positions, e.g. in Bulgarian 'мѢдѢр', /'mɛdɛr/ (English 'wise'). While this vowel is probably as common in English as it is in Bulgarian, it lacks a specific grapheme in the English spelling. The Bulgarian letter 'Ѣ' is rendered by various transliteration systems as 'a', 'ă', 'â', 'ü', 'ǔ'. The Bulgarian and English/American practices differ on this point, the latter being more liberal toward the use of diacritics. Diacritical marks are avoided by Bulgarian users and not recommended by the experts on two grounds. First, the non-academic publishers almost inevitably tend to omit diacritics for technical reasons, thus replacing the originally intended transliteration system by a different one. Second, diacritics are not common in both English and Bulgarian spellings, hence their meaning is not clear without special explanation.

## 2. The Bulgarian practice

While the Bulgarian practice has a long tradition, it has become of particular importance only in the recent years, with English becoming the number one foreign language in all areas of public usage at the expense of other languages traditionally popular in this country such as French, German and Russian.

The usage of the English language, and correspondingly the practice of English transliteration of Bulgarian names, is expanding tremendously in three main areas: first, by governmental agencies; second, by English language editions such as books, magazines and weekly newspapers, published both by Bulgarians and by the community of English speaking foreigners resident in this country; and third, by business enterprises in their correspondence and advertising materials. Part of the Bulgarian practice is formed by numerous international and foreign institutions located here, starting with the US and British embassies and ending with the American University in Blagoevgrad. (Bulgarian practice seems to embrace the street graffiti even, written nowadays more often in English than in Bulgarian!)

It should be stressed that the practice of English transliteration in all these areas has always been (and still is) somewhat chaotic and has never been subjected to any formal regulation. Therefore, that practice is evolving in a fairly natural way with some notable tendencies to be discussed below.

One may distinguish between two major patterns of usage in Bulgarian practice, to be informally referred to as the 'Streamlined System' and the 'Danchev System' respectively. Both of them transliterate 'х' by 'h'. The Streamlined System transliterates 'у', 'ъ' respectively by 'u', 'a', while the Danchev System renders 'у', 'ъ' as 'ou', 'u' respectively. While there is no available statistical data at present, observations suggest that the Streamlined System is becoming established in an irreversible way.

The choice of users seems to be determined mainly by personal perception formed by their Bulgarian language environment and by their different degrees of knowledge of English, varying from excellent and very good in the case of experts, teachers and interpreters, to fairly modest (albeit steadily improving) in the case of the average user. Recent developments in Bulgarian practice suggest that users identify the following main purposes and criteria of English transliteration, which obviously are partly overlapping and partly conflicting:

- (1) The primary purpose of a non-academic transliteration system is to ensure a plausible phonetic approximation of Bulgarian names by English speaking persons, including those having no knowledge whatsoever of the Bulgarian language and no available additional explanation of the particular transliteration system;
- (2) It is desirable for a transliteration system to allow for reverse transliteration, i.e. to comply with the one-to-one principle, as much as feasible. Reverse transliteration appears to be of considerably lesser relevance in the non-academic practice;
- (3) Transliterated Bulgarian names should fit their English language context; spellings perceived as too 'un-English' are disfavoured by users;
- (4) Transliterated name forms should be streamlined and simple.

An obvious advantage of the Danchev System is that it complies better with the one-to-one principle. As already noted however, that principle is not a top priority in the non-academic practice. Anyway, no non-academic transliteration system adheres strictly to the one-to-one principle, already violated by the rendering of 'ц' as 'ts' since there are a number of

Bulgarian names with '-тски' in final position, e.g. 'Палешутски', 'Гранитски'.

The fact that transliteration of 'ъ' by 'a' rather than 'u' is apparently favoured by Bulgarian users might be attributed to the fact that in many Bulgarian words 'a' is properly pronounced /ə/, e.g. in Bulgarian 'града' /gra'də/ (English 'a town'), or Bulgarian 'те са' /te sə/ (English 'they are'). Likewise, possible pronunciation of 'a' as /a/ rather than /ə/ in transliterated names would in many positions either go unnoticed or sound familiar since such pronunciation is typical for the influential western Bulgarian dialects (spoken in regions encompassing Sofia), where e.g. Bulgarian 'ръка' /rə'ka/ (English 'hand') is pronounced /'raka/.

Taking into account the present situation and tendencies in the Bulgarian practice, the Antarctic Place-names Commission opted to employ the Streamlined System for the practical purposes of English transliteration of Bulgarian place names in Antarctica.

*Sofia, 25 July 1997*

### III. Subsequent Developments

While no apology is owed for the publication of the above Comments (quoted in [3] as [4]) five years after they were written, an explanation of their origins and purpose seems to be in order – more so in view of the relevant subsequent developments.

To begin with, due to existing international obligations to Romanize the Bulgarian names of geographical features in Antarctica, on 2 March 1995 the Antarctic Place-names Commission (affiliated at that time with the Bulgarian Antarctic Institute) accepted the author's proposal to endorse what is called above the Streamlined System for English transliteration of Bulgarian names [7]. In the process, the author met the late Prof. A. Danchev to discuss the subject, including particular merits of that system and the alternative one suggested in [1], as well as possible tendencies in the non-academic practice of transliteration.

At the same time, the Antarctic place-naming authorities of the United States and Britain used to transliterate Bulgarian names according to yet another scheme adopted for official use in those countries. (Their version differed from

the Streamlined System in using 'kh' for 'x' and 'ŭ' for 'ѡ'.) By 1997 they had become aware of this discrepancy and wanted to know more about our system. So the above Comments came as a response to their request. On that occasion, the manuscript was discussed with H. Stamenov and made available to the Department of English and American Studies at Sofia University too.

Subsequently, M. Gaidarska [3] carried out a comparative study producing some general picture of the popular practice of English transliteration of Bulgarian names as of 1998, based on the analysis of about 1,300 samples taken from press articles, city guides, brochures, business cards and other sources. While registering a marked predominance of the Danchev System, she nevertheless conceded certain indications of a potential tendency favouring the Streamlined System instead. And that was precisely what happened; very soon it became clear that the Streamlined System was taking the upper hand.

In a major development prompted by the introduction of new identity documents, the Government of Bulgaria decreed in 1999 that personal names would be Romanized by the Streamlined System in the new Bulgarian identity cards and passports. This was enacted by Ordinance 61 of 2 April 1999 [5], later amended by Ordinance 8 of 10 February 2000 [6] (so that 'и' be rendered as 'ts' not 'c') to the effect of the eventual scheme now in use being precisely the 1995 Streamlined System.

Yet another area in which the Streamlined System is presently gaining ground is the Romanization of street names in various Bulgarian cities; a natural next step would be to officialize its usage in the road signs as well.

This dynamic process of the last few years could be further elucidated by having an update of the survey [3], hopefully covering the Internet practice as well.

It would seem that the reasons for such remarkable – and unforeseen by the experts – evolution in the Bulgarian practice of transliteration, are yet to be understood and explained. A small remark on the link between 'a' and 'ѡ' in the mind of the native Bulgarian speakers. It is arguably due to more than just certain peculiarities of Bulgarian in its spoken form as suggested in [3], for some patterns of Bulgarian in its written form may also be contributing to that link. Indeed, the Bulgarian Cyrillic spelling itself uses 'a' for the vowel /ѡ/ in highly frequent grammatical forms other than the case of vowel reduction in unstressed position. Namely, according to the modern Bulgarian spelling the letter 'ѡ' is never used in end position, and the vowel /ѡ/ in that position is written as 'a.' Likewise, yodized /ѡ/ in

end position is written as 'я.' Such are e.g. the words /градъ - gra'də/ and /те съ - te sə/ mentioned in the Comments above, or /четъ - tʃe'tə/ (English 'read') and /светъ - sve'tə/ (English 'the world'), written as 'града', 'те са', 'чета', and 'света', respectively the words /вървйъ - vər'vjə/ (English 'walk'), /градйъ - gra'djə/ (English 'build'), /стойъ - sto'jə/ (English 'stay') written as 'вървя', 'градя' and 'стоя'. As for the spoken Bulgarian, one may add also that the unstressed /ъ/ is pronounced close to /а/ e.g. in 'ръка' /rə'ka/.

#### IV. Communicating in Romanized Bulgarian

Presently, the Streamlined System is increasingly being used in a wider area of practical application too, namely the Romanization of entire Bulgarian texts rather than just particular Bulgarian names imbedded in English language context.

Indeed, the practice of Internet and mobile phone communication conducted in the Bulgarian language yet employing Roman script has been expanding enormously during the recent years, both in terms of volume and especially the number of people involved. That practice is fairly chaotic however, with a great variety of graphemic correspondences being applied arbitrarily and inconsistently. Even graphemes other than letters are being employed, such as '4', '6' respectively for 'ч', 'ш', apparently deriving from Bulgarian 'четири' /'tʃetiri/ (English 'four') and 'шест' /ʃest/ (English 'six'). It would be interesting to compare the Bulgarian case with the evolution of the Romanization practices of other languages that normally employ non-Roman scripts, such as Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Thai, Korean, Russian, Ukrainian etc.

While the technical, psychological and other possible motivation behind such unprecedented usage of Romanized Bulgarian – and the perspectives of that usage alike – deserve a separate study, there is little doubt that the chaos in question itself could be attributed but to one reason, namely educational deficiency. The fact is that no particular transliteration scheme is taught in Bulgarian schools, even though one single lesson might suffice. If this 'transliteration illiteracy' is remedied, then the usage of Roman script for electronic communication in Bulgarian language could be expected to gradually become more and more uniform.

To this end, in 2002 the Public Council at the Parliamentary Committee on Civil Society (acting on this author's proposal) recommended to the Parliament, respectively to the Ministry of Education and Science, that some basic acquaintance with the transliteration scheme decreed by the abovementioned Government Ordinances, i.e. the Streamlined System, be incorporated within the national school curriculum.

## V. Re-Romanization of English

In yet another possible application of the Streamlined System approach, English could be Cyrillized along the lines set by Danchev in [2], and then Romanized back by means of the Streamlined System. This suggests the following twenty-two-letter system of Basic Roman Spelling which provides for an easy and natural, if somewhat rough, phonetic spelling of the English language.

a	-	as in <b>ask</b> ; but also <b>hat</b> ; <b>hut</b> ; <b>ago</b> , open
aa	-	<b>farm</b> ; <b>firm</b>
au	-	<b>out</b>
ay	-	<b>white</b>
b	-	<b>best</b>
ch	-	<b>cheer</b>
d	-	<b>do</b> ; <b>this</b>
dzh	-	<b>joy</b> (optional variant grapheme: j)
e	-	<b>red</b>
ea	-	<b>air</b>
ey	-	<b>way</b>
f	-	<b>fix</b>
g	-	<b>green</b>
h	-	<b>home</b> ; <b>why</b> ; <b>loch</b> (Scottish)
i	-	<b>in</b>
iy	-	<b>feel</b>
ia	-	<b>dear</b>
k	-	<b>kiss</b> ; <b>loch</b> (English)
l	-	<b>like</b>
m	-	<b>me</b>
n	-	<b>name</b>
ng	-	<b>sing</b>
o	-	<b>on</b> ; <b>bother</b>
oo	-	<b>port</b>
ou	-	<b>know</b> ; <b>no</b>
oy	-	<b>toy</b>
p	-	<b>peak</b>

r	-	<b>r</b> iver; <b>w</b> rite; also <b>f</b> arm, <b>r</b> iver in rhotic dialects
s	-	<b>s</b> ea
sh	-	<b>s</b> hip
t	-	<b>t</b> op; <b>t</b> hink
ts	-	<b>t</b> sar
u	-	<b>l</b> ook, <b>y</b> ou; <b>w</b> ill, <b>w</b> hy
uu	-	<b>m</b> ood; <b>w</b> ood
ua	-	<b>t</b> our
v	-	<b>v</b> iew
y	-	<b>y</b> ou; <b>m</b> illion
z	-	<b>z</b> oo
zh	-	<b>v</b> ision.

Possible variant graphemes: 'th' as in **t**hink, 'dh' as in **t**his.

## An illustration of the Basic Roman Spelling of English:

Hamlet's Salilakuiy  
(Akt III, Siyn I)  
William Shakespeare

Tu bi, oo not tu bi, dat iz da kueschan:  
Hueda 'tiz noubla in da maynd tu safa  
Da slingz and arouz av autreydzhas foochan  
Oo tu teyk aamz ageynst a siy av trabalz,  
And bay apouzing, end dam. Tu day, tu sliyp –  
Nou moo, and bay a sliyp tu sey ui end  
Da haat-eyk and da tauzand nacharal shoks  
Dat flesh is ea tu; 'tiz a kansyumeyshans  
Divautli tu bi uish'd. Tu day, tu sliyp –  
Tu sliyp, paachans tu driym – ey, dea'z da rab,  
Foo in dat sliyp av det huot driymz mey kam,  
Huen ui hav shafld of dis mootal koyl,  
Mast giv as pooz; dea'z da rispekt  
Dat meyks kalamity av sou long layf:  
Foo hu uud bea da huips and skoons av taym,  
D' apresaa'z rong, da praud man'z kontyumli,  
Da pangz av dispayz'd lav, da loo'z diley,  
Da insalans av ofis, and da spaanz  
Dat peyshant merit av d'anwaadi teyks,  
Huen hi himself mayt hiz kuayatas meykh  
Uid a bea bodkin; hu uud faadalz bea,  
Tu grant and suet andar a uiari layf,  
Bat dat da dred av samting afta det,  
Di andiskava'd kantri, fram huz buan  
Nou travala ritaanz, pazlz da uil,  
And meyks as rada bea douz ils ui hav,  
Dan flay to adaaz dat ui nou not av?  
Das konshans daz meykh kauadz av as ol,

Hamlet's Soliloquy  
(Act III, Scene I)  
William Shakespeare

To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep –  
No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep –  
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause; there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life:  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin; who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,

And das da neytiv hyu av rezalyuushan  
Iz siklid o'a uid da peyl kast av toot;  
And entaaprayziz av greyt pich and moumant  
Uid dis rigaad dea karants taan aray,  
And luuz da neym av akshan. – Soft yu nau,  
Da fear Ophelia. Nimf, in ti orizans  
Bi ol may sins rimemb'ad.

And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action. – Soft you now,  
The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in thy orisons  
Be all my sins rememb'red.

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\* Since 2005 moved to <http://apc.mfa.government.bg/topo.htm>