

THE SPELLING OF THE COUNTRY NAME “ROMANIA” IN BRITISH OFFICIAL USAGE: FROM UNCERTAINTY TO STANDARDIZATION¹

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Abstract. *The spelling of the country name “Romania” in British official usage: from uncertainty to standardization.* This paper examines the interesting history of the spelling of the country name “Romania” within British official usage, charting the course of that spelling in the face of the competition it has frequently faced from its rival English-language forms “Rumania” and “Roumania”. The United Kingdom’s Permanent Committee on Geographical Names has for most of its history advised use of the form “Romania”, and that spelling has for several decades now been accepted as the standard for United Kingdom government usage.

Rezumat. *Scrierea corectă a numelui de țară „România” în limbajul oficial britanic: de la incertitudine la standardizare.* Această lucrare examinează interesanta istorie a scrierii corecte a numelui de țară „România” în limbajul oficial britanic, schițând cursul acelei ortografii în competiția în care se confruntă frecvent cu formele din limba engleză “Rumania” și “Roumania”. Comitetul Permanent pe Nume Geografice din Marea Britanie a recomandat, pentru cea mai mare parte a istoriei sale, utilizarea formei „Romania” și, de câțiva zeci de ani, ortografia a fost acceptată ca formă standard de utilizare de către guvernul Marii Britanii.

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Cuvinte cheie: *numele de țară „România” ; standardizare.*

1. BACKGROUND

In the Romanian language, the adjectival form to indicate “Romanian” had come into use by the 19th Century to denote the inhabitants of the original Romanian province of Wallachia; the *Țara Românească* or “Romanian lands”. The word “Romania” as a noun came into use during the period 1858-62 which saw the union of Wallachia and Moldavia, this union being a prelude to the new Romanian kingdom which emerged in 1881. In its Romanian-language form – *România* – this noun was used in official documents from 1862². The Romanian language had been written in Cyrillic script until about 1830³, and in this script the adjectival form “Romanian” appeared as follows:

РѸМѪНЕСКЪ *masculine*
РѸМѪНЕАСКЪ *feminine*
РѸМѪНЕЩІ *plural*

The second letter (Ѹ) of this adjectival form is a late Byzantine ligature for the letters (o) plus (v), though in fact the pronunciation (*ou*) suggested by this ligature is probably of Ottoman rather than Greek or Romance origin, reflecting the Ottoman name [روم] “*Roum*”. Hence a possible inference is that the English-language spellings “Rumania” and “Roumania”⁴ reflect a later Ottoman variation of the name, and that the spelling “Romania” might be a better reflection of its Roman origin⁵. The fourth letter (Ѫ) represents the close central vowel, a particular characteristic of the Romanian language. After the adoption of Roman script in the early 1860s, this vowel appears to have been written customarily as (â), apart from a brief period between 1900 and 1904, and again in the period from 1953 to 1993. During each of these periods this vowel was written as (î), for reasons which are beyond the scope of this present paper to address.

2. BRITISH OFFICIAL USAGE BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (the PCGN), a body established in 1919 within the Royal Geographical Society with the task of advising the British government on the spelling of foreign geographical names, took a decision in 1923 to advise its government, plus British cartographic publishers and the Newspaper Association, that the correct spelling of this country name in the English language should

² Klepper, N: *Romania: An Illustrated History*, Hippocrene Books, New York, 2002, ISBN 0781809355; p122.

³ Klepper, N: *op. cit*; p99.

⁴ The “Roumania” spelling was probably introduced into the English language via French.

⁵ The word РѸМѪН, despite its possible Ottoman origins, was nonetheless a label borne proudly by the inhabitants of the *Țara Românească*, even if it was sometimes used pejoratively by neighbouring Slavs to represent its bearers as a class of landless serfs rather than a people.

be “România”. This advice was based on the PCGN “roman-alphabet rule”, which stated (and continues to state) that foreign spellings written in a Roman alphabet should be respected in their original form. This fundamental rule is designed to protect the orthographical integrity of a foreign geographical name, and in the very early days of the PCGN it was felt that it could be applied to all names occurring within a given single sovereignty. However, it was quickly recognised that this rule could not be expected to apply to the category of names (including country names) that would later come to be known as exonyms⁶. For this category, one would more naturally expect to follow the normal conventions of the English receiver alphabet. With this recognition, in 1926 the PCGN advisory spelling was altered to “Romania”, without the circumflex.

The British Foreign Office did not accept this PCGN advice, thereby creating a rare point of disagreement between the two bodies. While accepting the linguistic rationale behind the PCGN decision, the Foreign Office pointed out that the official communications they received from the country’s own legation in London were invariably signed by the “*Roumanian chargé d’affaires*”. The Foreign Office was therefore reluctant to appear to be at variance with Romania’s own apparent preference for the spelling “Roumania” in English-language usage in Britain. Meanwhile, the prestigious London newspaper *The Times* and the 1922 *Times Survey Atlas of the World* had adopted the spelling “Rumania”, a form which had also gained the greatest acceptance in the United States.

In 1932, the Romanian government instructed its legations in Britain and the United States to abide by the PCGN advice of 1926. These instructions from Bucharest were duly carried out in Washington, but the Romanian legation in London requested permission to continue its use of the spelling “Roumania” on the grounds that this was the spelling used by the British Foreign Office. It seems therefore that the Romanian legation in London and the Foreign Office had become involved in a circular misunderstanding, each believing that the other preferred the spelling “Roumania”.

By the late 1930s, though, the Romanian legation in London had begun to follow the 1932 instruction from Bucharest. It changed its letterheads to read “*Romanian Legation*”⁷, and had sponsored in Britain a brochure entitled “*New Romania*”. Then on August 8th 1940 the Romanian government’s wartime English-language periodical “*Romanian Bulletin*” carried the following announcement: In 1926 the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (British Royal Geographical Society) decided that Romania was the correct spelling in English instead of the other two forms used, Rumania and Roumania. On the advice of the Romanian Royal Academy of Letters and the Royal Romanian Geographical Society, this new spelling has been adopted by the Royal Romanian Legations in London and Washington.

Yet there did nevertheless remain some inconsistency of usage. The London legation’s correspondence with the Foreign Office was still on occasion signed by “*The*

⁶ At this juncture, in the 1920s, the terms *endonym* and *exonym* had not yet been coined.

⁷ The legation’s letterheads had hitherto been in the Romanian language.

Roumanian Minister, London”, presumably because the legation continued to believe that the Foreign Office preferred this form. In turn, the Foreign Office maintained the spelling “Roumania”, believing this to be Romania’s own continuing preference. And in 1939-40 the legation, while officially “Romanian” on its letterheads, was nonetheless “Rumanian” according to the brass plate on its front door, and “Roumanian” in the London telephone directory. Throughout this period of confusion, however, the PCGN advice in favour of “Romania” remained constant.

3. BRITISH OFFICIAL USAGE AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Notwithstanding the PCGN advice, however, the spelling “Romania” did not particularly take root in Britain. Instead the form “Rumania”, as had been used by *The Times* since the 1920s, came to achieve by far the greatest popularity after the Second World War as the conventional country name. “Rumania” had also become standard usage in the United States, where the US Board on Geographic Names had approved it as far back as the 1930s. In the face of this general usage of “Rumania” in the United Kingdom, doubts gradually began to trouble the PCGN as to whether “Romania” could justifiably continue as its preferred English-language conventional name. Even the “Roman-alphabet rule” argument, originally deployed by the PCGN in 1923 to favour “România” with a circumflex as the English-language name, no longer applied because in 1953 the authorities in Bucharest had changed the Romanian-language spelling of the country from *România* to *Romînia*. By the early 1960s it seemed apparent that British English usage had settled on a spelling (“Rumania”) different from that advised by the PCGN (“Romania”). So in November 1963 the PCGN advised that “Rumania” be recognised as the British English conventional spelling, and in the following month the Foreign Office finally abandoned its long-standing usage of “Roumania” in favour of “Rumania”. It did so, however, principally on the basis of requests from the Romanian government itself which, surprisingly perhaps, favoured the spelling “Rumania” for the English language at this time.

Shortly afterwards, though, in August 1965, the Romanian authorities decided to revert to the letter (â) rather than the letter (î) to represent the close central vowel in the word *România* and its derivatives. At the same time, the official state title of the country changed from *Republica Populară Romînă* (“Rumanian People’s Republic”) to *Republica Socialistă Romînia* (“Socialist Republic of Romania”). Bucharest back-tracked on its recent English-language preference for “Rumania”, and renewed its pre-war campaign to persuade English-speaking countries to accept the spelling “Romania”, without the circumflex but with the letter “o”. Having revisited this issue only two years previously, in 1963, and at that time made a change to “Rumania”, the PCGN and the Foreign Office were unwilling to countenance so soon a reversal, particularly as constant spelling shifts attributable to pressure from Bucharest would give the impression that exonym spelling could be at the discretion of the donor rather than the receiver language.

But over the following few years the diplomatic pressure from Bucharest intensified, with the spelling of the country name being raised by Bucharest as an issue at the signing of UK-Romanian trade agreements and communiqués. For this reason, and

perhaps in order to support Romania’s growing nationalist portrayal of itself as an isolated Latin enclave set apart from Moscow’s Slavic sphere of influence, the Foreign Office made representations to the PCGN in 1970 that the spelling “Romania” be adopted. By this time, an increasing number of British commercial publications, including the family of atlases published by *The Times*, had already begun to use the “Romania” spelling, and the US Board on Geographic Names had adopted it in 1969. Accordingly, in July 1970, the PCGN advised use of the spelling “Romania”, and that same spelling was officially adopted by the Foreign Office in September 1970. Since that time, all United Kingdom government departments have followed the PCGN 1970 advice to use the spelling “Romania”.

4. CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF THE PCGN ADVISORY SPELLING

1923-26 România
1926-63 Romania
1963-70 Rumania
1970 → Romania

