



Who decides where e.g. “Bruxelles/Brussel” is located and how it is spelled?

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The increasing use of public domain geographical information, especially geographical names data raises an interesting question given the pedigree of such data - who decides where (for the general population) European places are and how they are spelled?

Considering the multilingualism and cultural richness in Europe, the people use different spellings and languages when talking about the same location and even within a country more than one spelling may be used. This is the European situation that should be considered as a prestige value and not as an obstacle! Thus, full richness, completeness and high quality of European data seem only to be guaranteed if the data providers are the European countries – creating and maintaining the source data – themselves.

According to existing popular web services using public domain data sources the answer would appear to be that by default and in lieu of an European alternative, it is not the respective National Mapping and Cadastral Agency (NMCA) – or another national institution – that decides where e.g. Bruxelles/Brussels is located and how it is spelled.

A geographical name is a key for linking information to a specific location. Currently, a European service providing the official national geographical names, maintained by the countries themselves, does not exist on the web. Of course, many popular public web services – amongst others the service ‘www.geonames.org’¹ (mainly sourced from US²) – do provide worldwide geographical names information through an easy-to-implement gazetteer service. The question is now, whether the content provided by these public web services is sufficient for all use cases (particularly referring to governmental decision-making-processes in the European Union) or whether there is rather a need for getting the original, regularly updated and more detailed data, which has been quality checked through official national cooperation on European level?

The project EuroGeoNames (EGN) is creating a European geographical names data infrastructure and associated web services to help you to find the official spelling of a name, together with its spelling in other languages, its geographical location, its pronunciation, etc. And, as an additional major important “selling point”, the EGN project will set up a technical infrastructure based on Web Feature Services (WFS), which is not restricted to provide geographical names information only. This should be of high relevance for each NMCA concerning the processes to be established in the framework of the INSPIRE initiative, too.

Therefore, all EGN project partners, the members of the EGN Consortium and of the EGN Reference Group (consisting of 15 NMCAs so far), would like to emphasize the potential of the EGN infrastructure & services for the provision of official national geographic data in general.

The NMCAs are the core of the EGN infrastructure & services as being the data providers! It should be in their own interest to promote those geographical names data they are themselves responsible for to collect, to maintain and to disseminate to users by supporting the EGN infrastructure and to join the EGN Reference Group.

If the EGN infrastructure & services should be continued and extended successfully beyond the funded period, some strategic actions have to be taken within the funded period (Sep’06 to Feb’09) by the EGN Consortium, particularly addressed to the NMCAs not yet involved.

More information about the EGN infrastructure & services is available through: www.eurogeonames.com

¹ The GeoNames geographical database is available for download free of charge under a creative commons attribution license. It contains over eight million geographical names and consists of 6.5 million unique features whereof 2.2 million populated places and 1.8 million alternate names. GeoNames is integrating geographical data from various sources. All lat/long coordinates are in WGS84 (World Geodetic System 1984). Users may manually edit, correct and add new names using a wiki interface. Use the url <http://www.geonames.org/about.html> for more information.

² The most important sources are: a) National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's (NGA) and the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (most names except US and CA); b) U.S. Geological Survey Geographic Names Information System (names in US).