

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

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Transmitted by email: wchupin@yahoo.com

Mr. Vladimir Chupin
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Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has asked us to thank you for your emailed letters of 15 January and 24, 28 and 31 July 2000 and their attachments, in which you raise questions about the transliteration of Arabic and Persian words into the Cyrillic alphabet and present your scheme for achieving this. We are instructed to send you the following reply.

The House of Justice agrees that it is highly desirable for the Bahá'ís to make use of such a transliteration system for the Cyrillic alphabet. The selection of a system, however, would best be made by a committee of individuals who are familiar with the problems from a scholarly point of view and are appointed for this purpose. It should also be approved by the National Spiritual Assemblies of those countries which use the Cyrillic alphabet. As you may know, the system adopted by the Guardian for use in the Roman alphabet was adopted by an international congress of orientologists representing French and German speakers, as well as English. If it proves difficult to obtain agreement among the affected National Assemblies, the matter could be referred to the Universal House of Justice with a full description of the reasons for disagreement.

It is understood that the Cyrillic alphabet has had additional letters added to it as it came into use with different Slavonic languages, and that this process was extended to non-Slavonic languages of the Caucasus and Central Asia. It would seem, moreover, that the method adopted in such additions was to create new letters, or modified forms of existing letters, rather than to add accents, as has been the predominant process in modifying the Roman alphabet for use with the many languages which have adopted it. Such factors need to be borne in mind when designing an acceptable transliteration system for the Cyrillic alphabet.

It should also be noted that the Roman system is based upon Arabic but is also useable for Persian, since Persian uses the Arabic alphabet although pronouncing it differently and having certain additional letters. This is important for a transliteration system for Bahá'í use. Many of the Tablets are partly in Persian and partly in Arabic, and one would not wish to employ two different systems for the two languages, as is often the case in academic writing.

Since the language which makes the greatest use of the Cyrillic alphabet is Russian, and since this question has been the subject of consideration and study by Russian Bahá'ís such as Dr. Ionessian and yourself, it would seem appropriate for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Russian Federation to take the initiative in the matter of a transliteration system.

At the present time the use of computers is rapidly spreading everywhere, and the one computer character set which encodes all the characters in use in the world is Unicode. It would seem to be important, therefore, for anyone who designs a transliteration system using the Cyrillic alphabet, to examine the Cyrillic characters already represented in Unicode so that any computer using Unicode would easily reproduce the chosen characters for the transliteration.

In your email of 15 January 2000 you ask about the limits of use of a transliteration system, once it is adopted. It has been found in other parts of the world that, as people's knowledge of other countries has increased, and the consciousness of the unity of mankind has spread, the insistence on using one's own version of foreign words has lessened and familiarity with foreign names from a multitude of backgrounds has increased. For example, in English, the spelling "Mahomet" for the Prophet of Islam has long since given way to "Muhammad" as a preferred form, while there has been no widespread resistance to spelling the capital of China "Beijing" instead of "Peking". No doubt a similar process will gradually take place in Russian-speaking countries. There remain, nevertheless, many names of people and places which are so "naturalized" that there is no inclination to change them. For example, the English and French names "Moscow" and "Moscou". Or the name of the Latin author Titus Livius, which appears as "Livy" in English and "Tite-Live" in French. Shoghi Effendi recognized this difference and, in "God Passes By", he uses the form "Mecca" rather than the transliterated "Makká". As you point out, he retained the spelling "Shoghi" for his own name, rather than the transliteration "Shawqí". As and when a transliteration system for the Cyrillic alphabet is adopted, decisions on such points will also need to be made.

A different, but related, question is that of the inflexion of names according to the declensions of nouns in the various languages using the Cyrillic alphabet. This problem has also been faced by the many different languages using the Roman alphabet, and the solutions found by the National Spiritual Assemblies of such countries may be of help in finding an acceptable practice in Russian.

You should not be unduly concerned that until now the method of presenting Arabic and Persian terms in Russian has been somewhat haphazard. It was a long time before a uniform system was introduced for users of the Roman alphabet, and it is important that whatever system is adopted for the Cyrillic alphabet should be well thought out, so that it does not need to be subjected to change thereafter—at least not for many decades.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

cc: International Teaching Centre

Board of Counsellors in Asia (by email)

Board of Counsellors in Europe (by email)

National Assembly of the Russian Federation (by email)

