Which is correct: ‘krai’, ‘region’ or ‘territory’?

Как правильно: ‘krai’, ‘region’ или ‘territory’?

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ABSTRACT. The article reviews versions of translation of names of the higher administrative divisions of the Russian Federation into English, including those by Russian governmental bodies, as well as American and English sources. It is noted that the lack of a uniform approach to translation of these names has led to the appearance of a whole array of terms for the same administrative divisions. It is suggested that a unified approach is worked out, based on the loanword practice, most common for such purposes worldwide, and the already existing set of such terms used in the English language proper.

How are these divisions different? Do they differ in sovereignty and regulations, or in something else? The result is rather confusing for non-Russians, who are, by the way, the target audience of such sites. So, how does the term краи and other names of Russian administrative divisions actually translate into English?

Introduction

If we click on an English version of a Russian scientific journal or any official governmental site, we will be bewildered by an abundance of such word combinations as ‘Krasnoyarsk Krai’, ‘Krasnoyarsk Region’, ‘Красноярский край’, ‘Красноярский край’ — often all on one site. How are these divisions different? Do they differ in sovereignty and regulations, or in something else? The fact is they do not differ at all; all of these names refer to the same administrative unit, rendered into English differently, at the discretion of a translator or editor. The result is rather confusing for non-Russians, who are, by the way, the target audience of such sites. So, how does the term краи and other names of Russian administrative divisions actually translate into English?
and French ‘région’), or transcription (from Mongolian аймаг). The name of the British administrative division is translated into Russian by a calque from ‘county’: literally translating the root (‘count’ is граф in Russian) and adding the relevant suffix (-ство). On the other hand, the largest administrative divisions of the Chinese People’s Republic are translated into Russian as провинций [GSE; GRE], whereas in Chinese they are called ‘sheng’ [Cowie, Evison, 1986]. In this case it is possibly a case of indirect borrowing, occurring though an intermediary language (English or French). So, the Russian language obviously prefers loanwords and, occasionally, calques.

Let us look at how names of administrative divisions of foreign countries are translated into the English language. The name of the Polish division in English is ‘wojewodztwo’, of the French one — ‘region’ and of the Mongolian one — ‘aimak/аймаг/аимаг’ [Encyclopedia Britannica; Merriam-Webster Dictionary; World Factbook]. The name of the Chinese administrative division in English is the mentioned above ‘province’, while in Chinese it is still ‘sheng’. As in Russian, ‘wojewodztwo’, ‘region’ and ‘aimak/аймаг/аимаг’ are loanwords, while the name of the Chinese division (‘sheng’) is an analogue, translated from the source language by a similar, but having a different spectrum of meanings term of the recipient language (‘province’).

As we can see, borrowing, or the use of loanwords (‘wojewodztwo’ and ‘region’), with, in case of different alphabets, transliteration/transcription (‘aimak/аймаг/аимаг’), to translate foreign administrative divisions is the most common and widespread practice. Calques may also be used occasionally (графство for ‘county’), as well as analogues (‘province’ for ‘sheng’). The descriptive method is not used whatsoever, as totally unacceptable. The descriptive method would also imply describing how administrative divisions actually differ from one another — but who can tell the difference between область и край? (Some would maintain that ‘kрай’ is larger, in terms of territory and/or population, but Архангельская область is about 9 times larger than Ставропольский край, and Свердловская область is 3 times larger than the same Ставропольский край and 1.5 times more populous; some would argue that ‘kрай’ is less developed, but this is not the case any more either — think of Краснодарский край, for example).

So, the Russian Federation, too, has its own administrative divisions, its first tier ones being область, республика, край and (автономный) округ. While there is no problem with translation of the term республика into English (it is always the reverse calque ‘republic’), situation with область, край and округ appears to be more complicated.

Let us look at the official sites of Russian Federal Agencies, i.e., their English-language versions. The official site of the Ministry of Economic Development of Russia uses two versions for область (‘oblast’ and ‘region’), two versions for край (‘krai’ and ‘territory’) and two versions for округ (‘округ’ and ‘district’) [MER RF]. The site of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia suggests the same two versions for область and округ each, but three versions for край (‘krai’, ‘region’ and ‘territory’) [MID RF]. The site of the Government of Russia in its English version is more consistent and uses only one version for each term, and they are, ‘region’ for область, ‘territory’ for край and ‘district’ for округ [GOV RF], whereas the Presidential Administration of Russia, using two versions for область (‘область’ and ‘region’) and край (‘krai’ and ‘territory’), opts for just one version for округ (‘district’) [President RF] (in the above examples the actual ratio of usage is hard to define, as ‘region’, ‘territory’ and ‘district’ are used for economic, geographical and other non-administrative divisions just as well).

Russian-English dictionaries published in the USSR/Russia mostly reflect the actual situation in the Russian practice of translation of these terms into English, suggesting two versions for область, край and округ as administrative divisions: ‘oblast’, ‘krai’ and ‘округ’ (as the first option) and ‘region’ ‘territory’ and ‘district’ (as the second option) [Taube et al., 1982; Taube, Daglish, 2005].

How accurate and comprehensible would the suggested equivalents of область, край and округ be for native speakers in theory? The lexeme ‘region’ in English has a rather broad spectrum of meanings, none of which are associated with an administrative division [Cambridge Dictionary; Encyclopedia Britannica; Merriam-Webster Dictionary]; it may be regarded as a broadly defined hypernym and, being neither a borrowing nor a calque or an analogue, seems to have little chances to serve as an adequate version of translation of the term область or край as administrative divisions. ‘Territory’ and ‘district’, in their turn, although they have other meanings as well, are used as administrative divisions, and not only in the USA and Britain, but also in English-speaking Canada and Australia [Encyclopedia Britannica; Merriam-Webster Dictionary; World Factbook], and, theoretically, as analogues, have greater chances to be accepted by native speakers. On the other hand, the terms ‘oblast’, ‘krai’ and ‘округ’ are loanwords, most commonly used for such purposes in the English language.

And how do the terms for Russian administrative divisions actually sound in the English language? Let us turn to English dictionaries and official sites of American and British governmental bodies. The World Factbook of the US Government lists the following administrative divisions in the Russian Federation: ‘46 oblasts, 21 republics, 4 autonomous okrugs, 9 krays, 2 federal cities, and 1 autonomous oblast’ [World Factbook]. American Merriam-Webster Dictionary is like-minded about ‘oblasts’ and ‘krays’, although it does not have an entry about an ‘округ’; and while explaining the term ‘district’, quite unsurprisingly, it makes no reference to Russian administrative divisions [Merriam-Webster Dictionary].

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the USSR was divided into ‘autonomous republics (автономные республики), autonomous provinces (автономные оblas-
Taking into account the modern global processes, with the Internet unprecedentedly speeding up communication and putting it to a new level, it appears to be just about time to come to a consensus regarding the English names for the administrative divisions in our country. From the point of view of theoretical linguistics and practical English language usage, the appropriate English equivalents of Russian most common administrative divisions область, край and (автономный) округ would be ‘oblast’, ‘krai/kray’ and ‘(autonomous) okrug’.

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References


Discussion

The term область seems to have just one appropriate equivalent, and it is the loanword ‘oblast’; a possible version could be the analogue ‘province’, but it has not been in use in the English language with reference to Russian subdivisions since the USSR times; besides, as the term ‘province’ used to be referred to another type of administrative division in Russia, using it again now as an equivalent of область may prove misleading. The term ‘region’ for область appears to be the least appropriate of all mentioned, being a too broadly defined hypernym.

The term край also turns out to have just one adequate equivalent, and it is the loanword ‘krai’, or ‘kray’, as the native English speakers prefer to spell it. A possible version could be the analogue ‘territory’, but English language sources apparently seem to be inclined towards ‘kрай’.

As for the term округ, there seems to be actually one option as well: it is ‘(autonomous) okrug’. The English and American sources that do use the term, use it like this, leaving ‘district’ for the city, military and federal districts.