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Romania's activity within COMECON

The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) was created in 1949, as an organisation of economic collaboration between countries of the Soviet bloc. Although it was presented as a replica of the Marshall Plan, the main motivation to form COMECON was Stalin's wish to tighten economic control over countries of the socialist camp by including them in a supranational body led from Moscow.

From 5 to 8 January 1949, a secret conference was organised in the Soviet capital, with the participation of the USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Hungary, who became the founding countries of COMECON. During the last day of the conference, a document including the principles of the economic cooperation within the future organisation was adopted. The main purpose of the organisation was to strengthen economic coordination among member states. COMECON effectively started to function on 25 January 1949, following the establishment in Moscow of a Permanent Bureau of the organisation, in which all founding states had representatives. Afterwards, COMECON was joined by Albania (1949–62), the German Democratic Republic (1950), the Mongolian People's Republic (1962), Cuba (1972) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1978). Some countries received the status of observer (such as the People's Republic of China and the Korean Popular Democratic Republic), while others signed collaboration conventions (Yugoslavia and some capitalist countries).



Stalin regarded COMECON from the perspective of politico-ideological interests and the confrontation between the two camps. During his rule, collaboration at the organisation's level remained quite limited and after 1950 no COMECON session was convened. The Kremlin leader was more interested in the benefits he could get from the Soviet Union's direct economic relations with satellite countries.

Only after 1954 did the new leader of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, began to give more attention to the functioning of COMECON and the way in which the organisation could serve the interests of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the most developed countries from the organisation – mainly East Germany and Czechoslovakia – in their turn showed an increased interest in collaborating with COMECON to attempt to solve some of the economic structural issues that emerged after the establishment of the communist regime. Together with the USSR, these countries became the main promoters of changes in COMECON activity including the move towards a centralisation of decisions at supranational level, strengthening economic integration among member states and a specialisation of

production according to development levels and the natural resources of each country. At the beginning of the 1960s a situation of stalemate was reached due to the divergent interests between the more developed countries, supported by the USSR, and the less developed countries, mainly represented by Romania.

Concerning Romania, a controversial issue was the debate over whether a Romanian initiative led to COMECON's establishment. Corroborating information from Romanian archives with those from works by some Russian researchers (e.g., Nina Bystrova, *USSR and the genesis of military blocs' confrontation in Europe, 1945-1955*, Moscow, 2007; Leonid I. Gibianski, in *The Cold War, 1945-1963. Historical review*, Moscow, 2003), historian Florin Constantiniu proposes the following sequence of events: 1) in the autumn of 1948, the Romanians, through Vasile Luca, conveyed a proposal to Moscow to create an economic bloc made up of the USSR and popular democratic countries; 2) on 23 December 1948, the Soviet Political Bureau decided to convene a conference on 5 January 1949 in secret with the participation of the USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania and Hungary, as the result of a Soviet and Romanian initiative; 3) the conference took place in Moscow from 5 to 8 January 1949; 4) during the session of the PMR Central Committee Political Bureau, of 10 January 1949, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej informed the audience about the Moscow conference, stating: 'The initiative of discussing this issue belongs to the leadership of our party and, during discussions that followed, this thing was mentioned. The idea was considered very important and it was even emphasized that we were late.'

It is highly probable that the proposal from the Romanian side may have been the result of a Soviet suggestion, especially since it did not exceed the form of a general idea. As is commonly known, Moscow had the habit of demanding its alliance partners to formulate proposals and viewpoints as if the initiative would have been theirs. The Kremlin did not want its overwhelmingly powerful position within the bloc to appear so obvious and, as a consequence, it either 'suggested' initiatives or it associated its satellites with its initiatives. It is, therefore, quite possible that the mention of Romania together with the USSR as supporter of the COMECON idea was simply a diplomatic manoeuvre. In any case, during further discussions concerning COMECON, no reference was made to it as a Romanian initiative.

Romania's attitude towards COMECON had three main phases. Until the end of the 1950s, there was an attitude of conformity, explainable both by the massive presence of the Soviets (first of all, Soviet troops) in the country and by the organisation's reduced role at that stage. During the 1960s, especially after 1962, Romania adopted a rebellious attitude, opposing all Soviet proposals to accelerate economic integration and the specialisation of COMECON countries. At the same time, it opposed tendencies aimed at moving decisions about the economic policy of a country from the national to the supranational level. The Romanian leadership refused the position which was reserved for its country as a provider of agricultural and industrial raw materials and instead wanted to use these resources for its own development and for closing gaps between it and more developed COMECON countries. At the same time, in order to be better prepared to face eventual pressures from its organisation partners, but also in order to acquire more advanced technology, during this period Romania developed significant collaborations with western countries.

The third phase, starting after 1969, marked its gradual transition to a more flexible attitude concerning cooperation on the grounds proposed by COMECON, but within the limits of respecting national sovereignty. Especially during the 1980s, in the context of increasing international oil prices and also of a decreasing trade with the West, the leadership in Bucharest began to emphasise the advantages of

cooperating within COMECON. As a result of the major political changes that took place between 1989 and 1990, COMECON was dissolved in 1991.

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