

The Economic Commission for Europe

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The Economic Commission for Europe

On 11 December 1946, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution of principle in support of the creation of an Economic Commission designed to help the war-torn countries of Europe. On 28 March 1947, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE).

Swedish economist Karl Gunnar Myrdal was the first Executive Secretary of the ECE, a subsidiary body and regional economic commission of the United Nations (UN). It is the only post-war European organisation to have included all the countries on the European continent, in addition to the United States as financial backer and Canada. However, in practice, almost all the countries of Eastern Europe rapidly abandoned their involvement with the various technical committees established by the ECE. As a result, only the permanent secretariat and the annual plenary sessions of the Commission, to which all the member countries sent representatives, if nothing more, ensured that minimal contact was maintained between the Western and Eastern parts of continental Europe. The Economic Commission could not take any decision concerning a member country without the consent of the national authorities. It originally consisted of representatives from the 17 European UN members: Belgium, Belarus, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, the USSR and Yugoslavia, as well as the United States. The ECE held its first session from 2 to 14 May 1947 at the UN headquarters in Geneva. It was the de facto successor of the European Economic Assistance Committee, the European Coal Commission and the European Central Inland Transport Organisation, which were created as a matter of urgency as soon as the war was over.

The Economic Commission for Europe, which set up a number of specialised committees, carried out studies, drew up statistics, offered expertise and issued recommendations to its members. It facilitated solutions to economic problems arising from the reconstruction of countries destroyed or weakened by the war, in particular the supply of coal, mining timber, electricity and oil. It also promoted trade and improvements in intra-European transport. In addition, the ECE supported the adoption of conventions or agreements on traffic management and road signs and signals, customs formalities, commercial arbitration and town planning. Initially set up on an experimental basis, the ECE became a permanent UN agency in 1951.