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On 11 December 1946, the General Assembly of the United Nations, at its fifty-fifth plenary meeting, unanimously recommended "in order to give effective aid to the countries devastated by the war, the Economic and Social Council, at its next session, give prompt and favourable consideration to the establishment of an Economic Commission for Europe".

The Council, at its fourth session, complied with the General Assembly's wishes by adopting, on 28 March 1947, resolution 36 (IV) setting up ECE and giving it its terms of reference. The Economic Commission for Europe was thus, together with the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), which was established on the same date, one of the first two regional economic commissions to be established by the Council. Subsequently the Council established the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) in March 1948, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in April 1958 and the Economic Commission for Western Asia (ECWA) in August 1973.

During the first four years after its founding, ECE functioned on a provisional basis: the Council expressly provided for a special review of the Commission's work, to be undertaken not later than 1951, "with a view to determining whether the Commission should be terminated or continued, and if continued, what modifications, if any, should be made in its terms of reference".

According to article 1(a) of its terms of reference, the Commission's prime objective is to "initiate and participate in measures for facilitating concerted action for the economic reconstruction of Europe, for raising the level of European economic activity, and for maintaining and strengthening the economic relations of the European countries, both among themselves and with other countries of the world".

To this major aim was added that of making or sponsoring investigations and studies of economic and technological problems and developments as well as the collection, evaluation and dissemination of economic, technological and statistical information (article 1(b) and (c)). In view of the special concern of the General Assembly and the Council for the problem of repairing war damage, and in the light of the winding up of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA) in the spring of 1947, ECE was also called upon to "give prior consideration, during its initial stages, to measures facilitating the economic reconstruction of devastated countries of Europe which are Members of the United Nations" (article 2).

The Commission is empowered to make recommendations on any matter within its competence directly to the participating Governments of the region, subject to two qualifications: (a) the activity of the Commission, which functions within the framework of the policies of the United Nations and under the general supervision of the Council, is subject to the provision that the Commission "takes

no action in respect to any country without the agreement of the government of that country" (article 1); and (b) the Commission is required to "submit for the Council's prior consideration any of its proposals for activities that would have important effects on the economy of the world as a whole" (article 4).

Acting upon the instruction contained in article 19 of the ECE terms of reference, the Secretary-General of the United Nations convened the first session of the Commission in Geneva in May 1947 at the seat of the European Office of the United Nations which, under article 18 of the ECE terms of reference, is also the location of the Commission's headquarters. Subsequent sessions of the Commission have taken place in the Palais des Nations in Geneva, except for the twenty-ninth session, which was held in Bucharest in 1974, at the invitation of the Government of Romania.

At its sixth session (May/June 1951) the Commission unanimously adopted resolution 1 (VI) on its future, in which it considered that constructive economic co-operation was essential to the maintenance of peace, reaffirmed its faith in the possibility of such co-operation within the framework of the Commission, and recommended that it should continue its work in this direction.

Earlier (December 1950), the General Assembly, in resolution 409 A (V) taking note "with satisfaction of the Economic and Social Council's decision to undertake in the near future a complete review ... of its commissions", had expressed the opinion "that the regional economic commissions should be maintained". This review was carried out by the Council's ad hoc Committee on the Organization and Operation of the Council and its Commissions in April and May 1951.

When it was established in 1947, ECE was given the mandate of helping to rebuild post-war Europe, develop economic activity and strengthen economic relations between European countries and between them and the other countries of the world. However, the Iron Curtain which separated East and West shortly after ECE's establishment forced it to deal only with questions that were of common interest to East and West, despite their different economic systems and their political and ideological confrontation.

For more than 40 years, ECE was the only instrument of economic dialogue and cooperation between these two radically different systems, and it may legitimately be proud of the results achieved in such a difficult context including the network of "E" roads linking all European countries, the harmonization of road signs and signals, safety and anti-pollution standards for motor vehicles, standards for the transport of dangerous goods by road, the agreement for the development of combined transport, standards for perishable agricultural produce, agreements on customs procedures and various trade regulations, standards for the electronic exchange of trade and transport data and conventions on transboundary air pollution, the protection of watercourses and the transboundary effects of industrial accidents. At the same time, its analyses and statistics on regional economic development are considered authoritative.

With the end of the Cold War, the transition from a centrally planned economy system to market economy and the integration of the so-called countries in transition into the global economy became the major concern. ECE was able to adapt by focusing its analytical capacities on the transition process and by using its experience of harmonization to facilitate the integration of the central and east European countries. In order to meet the needs of the economies in transition and, in particular, those of the Newly Independent Countries resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation, as well as from the separation of the Czech and Slovak Republics, the number of ECE members increased from 34 to 55 within four years. ECE developed an entirely new form of assistance activity, consisting of seminars and workshops on aspects of the operation of the market economy and of advice provided by a team of specialists set up to help countries implement ECE recommendations, standards and conventions.

At the end of the Cold War ECE, along with others, extended its activities to central and east European countries and to the central Asian republics which desired to be members of both ECE and ESACAP. Since then, ECE has continued to adapt to the changing geopolitical landscape in

Europe and has undergone two major reforms, one in 1997 and one in 2005 to better tailor its activities to the current needs of its now 56 member States – good proof that it is possible to effect meaningful reforms within the United Nations.

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