

'Why has Comecon resumed contact with the European Community?' from La Libre Belgique (18 February 1976)

Caption: On 18 February 1976, daily newspaper La Libre Belgique considers the reasons which have inspired Comecon to seek rapprochement with the Member States of the European Economic Community (EEC).

Source: La Libre Belgique. 18.02.1976, n° 49; 93e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Pourquoi le Comecon a-t-il repris contact avec la Communauté européenne?", p. 4.

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Why has Comecon resumed contact with the European Community?

At a time when, in Western Europe, questions are increasingly being asked about the real nature of détente, Comecon (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, established with a view to coordinating economic policy in Eastern Europe), through its President, Mr Gerhard Weiss, has resumed contact with the European Community.

On Monday, Mr Weiss sent a message to Mr Thorn, Luxembourg Prime Minister and President-in-Office of the Council of Ministers of the EEC, in which he suggests that negotiations be opened in the near future, either in Moscow or in Brussels, with a view to the conclusion of an agreement between Comecon and its Member States, on the one hand, and the EEC and its Member States, on the other.

According to that message, which Mr Thorn has already forwarded to the various Member States, Comecon suggests the conclusion of a framework agreement, to include scope for multilateral and bilateral agreements between the Member States of both Communities, as well as between the Member States of Comecon and the bodies set up by the EEC Council.

It appears that, from now on, the Soviet Union will be prepared to allow each of the Member States of Comecon to conclude separate bilateral agreements with the European Community, agreements which, to date, had always been banned. Moreover, this ban led Mr Wellenstein, Director-General of external relations at the European Commission, to sever links with Moscow in February 1976.

This is a significant U-turn by the Soviet Union, which had always refused to recognise the Community as such, all the more so because Mr Weiss's proposals are considered by Comecon to be merely a basis for discussion.

It appears that two primary factors led Moscow to make this U-turn.

Firstly, the People's Republic of China which, since 1975, has had a permanent ambassador to the EEC, is keen to conclude a non-preferential trade agreement with the Community as soon as possible. In February, a Chinese delegation is due to arrive in Brussels for exploratory talks.

Secondly, trade between the EEC and the Comecon countries underwent a marked deterioration in 1975, and the trade deficit between the countries of Eastern Europe and the Common Market increased significantly. That is particularly true as regards the Soviet Union, for which the deficit with the countries of the Community had already exceeded BEF 40 million in the first nine months of 1975. The situation for Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria is not much better. Furthermore, in 1976, the Community made very little effort to liberalise its imports from the countries of Eastern Europe since the latter had, to date, ignored the offer made by the Common Market in early 1975 to conclude new bilateral agreements between the European Community and the various countries with state-controlled economies. Since 1 January 1975, the EEC has had overall responsibility for the trade policies of its Member States.