

# **Creative Tension: The Role of Conflict in Shaping Transnational Identity at Comecon**

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## **ABSTRACTS**

Das Zusammentreffen nationaler und internationaler Interessen im Rahmen einer internationalen Organisation wie dem Rat für gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe (RGW) führt unvermeidlich zu Konflikten. Durch eine Mikroanalyse spezifischer Auseinandersetzungen innerhalb des RGW versucht dieser Artikel, die Gestaltungskraft dieser Konflikte zu bestimmen. Es werden Auseinandersetzungen zwischen internationalen Beamten, die für den RGW arbeiteten, und Vertretern ihrer Herkunftsländer erforscht, um die Logik der Konflikte und ihrer Auflösung zu verstehen. In den Konflikten entsteht bei den Akteuren die Frage nach dem Rationalitätsprinzip ihres Handelns. Im Artikel wird eine Typologie von Konflikten entwickelt. So können RGW-Mitarbeiter erstens ihren Kollegen, die aus den Mitgliedsländern zu einem Treffen im RGW kommen, deren internationale Inkompetenz vorwerfen – und damit gleichzeitig die eigenen besonderen transnationalen Fähigkeiten betonen. Zweitens entscheiden sich manche dafür, an internationalen Verhandlungen nicht teilzunehmen, wenn sie sich dem Versuch ihrer Instrumentalisierung für nationale Ziele auf internationaler Ebene ausgesetzt sehen, um so dem unvermeidbaren Konflikt mit Vertretern ihrer Herkunftsländer aus dem Weg zu gehen. In seltenen Fällen kann die Auseinandersetzung drittens auch zu einem offenen Konflikt führen, was die internationalen Beamten allerdings zu vermeiden versuchen. Die Erforschung dieser drei Modalitäten von Konflikten erlaubt es, das transnationale Selbstbewusstsein der RGW-Mitarbeiter als Entstehung einer doppelten Loyalität zu beschreiben. Die Berücksichtigung der Benutzung des Begriffs „gemeinsames Interesse der Mitgliedsländer“, das die RGW-Mitarbeiter in ihren öffentlichen Äußerungen entwickeln, ermöglicht dem Historiker, deren doppelte Einbettung sowohl in nationalen als auch in internationalen Machtnetzwerken zu verstehen, aus der heraus sie gleichzeitig einen transnationalen und einen RGW-spezifischen Standpunkt durchzusetzen versuchen.

The meeting of national and international interests within the framework of an international organization, such as the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), inevitably leads to conflict. Through a micro-analysis of specific disputes within the CMEA, this article endeavours to determine the creative power of these conflicts. Disputes between CMEA officials and representatives from those officials' country of origin are examined to understand the logic of the conflicts and their resolution. In the conflicts, the question of the rationality principle is raised among actors with reference to their actions. This article develops a typology of conflicts. First, at international meetings, CMEA officials might reproach their national counterparts for having insufficient international competence, while concomitantly stressing their transnational expertise. Second, some CMEA staff avoided conflict, by not attending negotiations where officials from their country of origin might try to use them to advance nationalist goals at the international level. Third, in a few cases, conflicts of interest did lead to open conflict, an outcome CMEA officials tried to avoid. Exploring these three modalities of conflict allows us to characterize the transnational self-awareness of CMEA workers as arising from a dual loyalty. Factoring in CMEA officials' use of the phrase "the common interest of the member states" in their public statements allows the historian to understand their double embedding in national and international networks of power from which they tried to enforce a transnational and CMEA-specific point of view.

## 1. Introduction

Albina D. and Peter Hübler, two former agents of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), described the atmosphere in the organization as being far from one of "peace, joy and harmony".<sup>1</sup> The adversarial atmosphere, which existed in the socialist world between the Comecon member states themselves, is quite well known.<sup>2</sup> The originality of this chapter lies in its focus on the articulation of national and international interests at the Comecon, examining the way the experts who worked in Moscow, as international civil servants of the Council's secretariat or in the member states' permanent representation offices, dealt with conflicts arising in their day-to-day activities. Indeed, the experts did so in different ways revealing how the Comecon community was not a homogeneous social group. Microanalysis of conflicts with an international scope allows for re-evaluating the Council's apparent failure in cooperation as a creative tension. The development of a transnational identity among the civil servants cannot be taken for granted or considered a linear process progressively undermining their loyalty toward their countries and fostering conflict.<sup>3</sup> Shaping the socialist bloc as a symbolic framework (appropriated by its experts) was a challenge for the Comecon secretariat, not the

1 Interview Albina D. and Peter Hübler, in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc par l'économie. Configuration des territoires et des identités socialistes au CAEM*, PhD Thesis, Geneva, 2014, appendices, p. 139, p. 298.

2 R. Stone, *Satellites and Commissars. Strategy and Conflict in the Politics of Soviet-Bloc Trade*, Princeton 1996; See also the article by Suvi Kansikas in this issue.

3 Y. Buchet de Neuilly, *Devenir diplomate multilatéral. Le sens pratique des calculs appropriés*, in: *Culture & Conflicts* 75 (2009), p. 76.

natural outcome of cooperation. As a way to operationalize the largely qualitative measure of the acculturation that took place at the Council, the following analysis offers an interpretation of the sense of the organization given by the Comecon agents' reactions to specific conflicts (opposing them with representatives of their country).<sup>4</sup> The way the Comecon agents resolved conflicts highlights a complex socialization process in which they preserved the possibility to combine national and international loyalty within the organization.<sup>5</sup>

This contribution first describes the conditions of the emergence of conflicts at the Comecon, while questioning the shaping of the concept of "common interest" within the organization. The use of this concept in situations of conflict is then analysed in order to understand how the Comecon experts mastered two loyalties and illustrated their specific transnational acculturation.

## 2. A Disputed Recombination of Identities

### 2.1. The Comecon Agents: National Ambassadors or Autonomous Go-Betweens?

Although the Comecon experts working for the international secretariat as well as at the permanent representation offices of their countries were fairly autonomous from their national embassies in Moscow, they belonged to powerful oversight bodies. The so-called "basis organizations" structured and monitored the social life and the professional activities of the Council's agents on a national basis.<sup>6</sup> Each national group had one specifically dedicated to the secretariat's staff members and their colleagues at the permanent representation offices. The different Comecon basis organizations also coordinated with each other, organizing the social life of the international collective. However, their first task was to defend the interests of their party, and consequently of their country, in international negotiations.

Yet, already in 1964, the basis organization of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany dealt with the question of a possible gap between defending the interests of the GDR and the specific duties of international civil servants. It argued that the defence of East German interests would benefit the whole socialist community and therefore set a clear hierarchy between the authorities, which Comecon agents had to comply with:

4 C. Shore, *La socialisation de l'administration de l'Union européenne. Une approche anthropologique des phénomènes d'eupéanisation et de supranationalisme*, in: H. Michel and C. Robert (eds.), *La fabrique des "Européens". Processus de socialisation et construction européenne*, Strasbourg 2010, pp. 169-196.

5 Ibid., pp. 5-28; J. T. Checkel, *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework*, in: *International Organization* 59 (2005) 4, pp. 801-826.

6 S. Kott, *Communism day-to-day. State Enterprises in East German Society*, Ann Arbor 2014.

*We must fully understand, that the points of view of the member states are the only one existing at the Comecon. [...] The elaboration of the secretariat's point of view always has to be based on the points of view of the member states.*<sup>7</sup>

In the eyes of their countries, Comecon experts remained first and foremost technical ambassadors who had to maintain national opinions while working at the international level. Although its existence was acknowledged, the point of view of the secretariat of the Council possessed no autonomous legitimacy. This ambiguous position was well perceived by the agents delegated to the Comecon, especially in the permanent representation offices. According to Peter Hübler, who worked at the East German permanent representation office as an advisor between 1962 and 1967 and again between 1980 and 1986,

*the attitude of almost all countries and almost all members of staff was: I have to pay attention that my country suffers no prejudice [...] the approach at the Comecon was not determined by a positive, but by a negative interest, that is to say, paying attention.*<sup>8</sup>

International civil servants were fully aware of the multiple constraints in which they were embedded. Contesting the goals set by their governments to the Comecon was impossible. Nevertheless, only through active participation in international negotiations, based on economic and technical, and not on political rationality, did their foreign colleagues begin to consider them reliable partners thus allowing them to defend the opinion of their governments in the elaboration of international agreements.

In the early 1960s, prominent personalities such as the Hungarian permanent representative at the Comecon, Antal Apro, started criticizing the strong influence of the member states' governments on experts involved in international negotiations. In a letter to the secretary of the Council, Apro wrote in 1961:

*In their meetings these specialists, according to the instructions they have received, do not defend the interest of the member states of the Comecon as a whole, but only the apparent interest of the country that delegated them and consequently, cannot elaborate proposals that would be advantageous for the whole [socialist] camp.*<sup>9</sup>

For the first time, the concept of a specific interest of the socialist camp as a whole was used, even though it still referred to an aggregated interest of the member states. Thus, the definition of Comecon agents as national ambassadors could be criticized. International civil servants rapidly understood that the exclusive defence of their countries' national interests would lead to sub-optimal situations at the Comecon.

7 Foundation for the archives of the parties and mass-organizations of the GDR (hereafter SAPMO-BArch), DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 18 April 1964, f. 13.

8 Interview with Peter Hübler, in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc*, p. 258.

9 German federal archives (hereafter BArch), DE1-61271, Brief von Apro an Faddejew, 2 November 1961.

Indeed, the acculturation process in the international organization was neither the origin of a shift in identity among international civil servants,<sup>10</sup> nor did pre-existing international socialization at the national level alone explain their commitment to the Council.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the cultural hybridization experienced by Comecon agents reveals how the frontier between national and international levels has to be considered a transitional space and not a clear dividing line.<sup>12</sup>

Studies about the socialization of international civil servants mainly focus on the European Commission and concentrate on a very limited number of high-ranking members of its staff or of the member states' permanent representation offices.<sup>13</sup> Instead, this text focuses on middle-ranking agents of the Comecon secretariat and of the member states' permanent representation offices. Unlike their counterparts at the European Commission, all international civil servants at the Comecon were delegated for four years by their government and could be recalled at any time. This precarious status distinguishes the Comecon from its Western counterpart and explains the necessity for the staff members to constantly articulate the global interest of the Comecon with the national interests of their countries.

Two different groups of experts can be characterized among Comecon agents. According to Kurt Borch, who served as an expert in a general direction of the secretariat in the early 1970s, before he took charge and became the deputy secretary of the Council in 1986,

*these member states' representatives were [...] politicians. That is to say, they mostly defended the interests of the country, and the members of the Comecon staff, they wanted that, to strengthen economically and politically the international community of states, and this together.*<sup>14</sup>

Middle-ranking Comecon cadres did not slip into a transnational space, cutting themselves from their national roots. Numerous agents understood their duty as a paradoxical injunction. They were not allowed to act in a political way and were supposed to deliver technical expertise to the international secretariat. In doing so, they embodied the political rhetoric of socialist internationalism, which their governments publically promoted.

10 J. Lewis, The Janus Face of Brussels: Socialization and Everyday Decision Making in the European Union, in: *International Organization* 59 (2005), pp. 937-971.

11 L. Hooghe, Several Roads Lead to International Norms, but Few Via International Socialization: A Case Study of the European Commission, in: *International Organization* 59 (2005), pp. 861-898.

12 J. Beyers, Multiple Embeddedness and Socialization in Europe: the Case of Council Officials, in: *International Organization* 59 (2005), pp. 899-936.

13 D. Georgakakis and M. de Lassalle, Genèse et structure d'un capital institutionnel européen. Les très hauts fonctionnaires de la Commission européenne, in: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 166-167 (2007), pp. 38-53; On the opportunity to compare communist international organizations with Western international organizations, see L. Crump and S. Godard, Reassessing communist international organizations: A comparative analysis of COMECON and the Warsaw Pact in relation to their Cold War competitors, in: *Contemporary European History*, published online on 15 December 2017, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/contemporary-european-history/article/reassessing-communist-international-organisations-a-comparative-analysis-of-comecon-and-the-warsaw-pact-in-relation-to-their-cold-war-competitors/1AAAA7D09D79D7D48844585BEB556390>, accessed 15 December 2017.

14 Interview with Kurt Borch, in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc*, p. 181.

Confronted with these paradoxical requirements, the East German basis organization at the Comecon in 1963 discussed the questions: “What does it mean, representing the interests of the GDR at the Comecon; how do we combine our national conception [of cooperation] with the international division of labour?”<sup>15</sup> The point was to decide whether East German members of the Comecon staff had to act as diplomats, helping enforce directives elaborated in Berlin, or should consider their specific experience in the secretariat as an original learning process, giving them some professional autonomous legitimacy. Indeed, in an attempt at being recognized as specific economic diplomats, some agents of the organization were starting to consider bilateral and multilateral cooperation as two opposite poles of international relations.<sup>16</sup> Berlin subsumed this debate under a political discourse, imposing national loyalty first. In 1971, the basis organization had a discussion on

*the use in the actual context of Lenin's theory according to which, 'one should not think only about its own nation, but put higher the interests of all the nations', that is to say, the question of the higher organic unity between socialist internationalism and socialist patriotism. The organic unity of the national and international interests guiding our party was correctly put forward and it was clearly exposed that there was no confrontation between 'national' and 'international'.*<sup>17</sup>

The metaphor of the living organism allowed the party to install a naturalized physiological interdependence between the national and the international interest. However, this ideal vision did not match the reality of Comecon activity. According to Kurt Gregor, deputy secretary of the Council in the early 1960s, the international civil servants were not even in the position to act as mere transmission belts for national interests. As he put it

*almost all the colleagues complain [that] they rapidly do not possess concrete knowledge about the situation of their economic branch in the GDR [...]. Consequently, they cannot really take into account the point of view of the GDR in their international duty.*<sup>18</sup>

Because the Comecon was a space of abandonment neglected by its member states' governments, the national instrumentalization of the Council's agents was weak, which opened new opportunities for transnational acculturation.

## 2.2. Toward a “Common Interest” of the Socialist Community

To a certain extent, the discursive use of concepts like “unite strategy”, “mutual advantage”, or even “common interest” constituted a resource, which legitimized a socialization process specific to the international organization. Putting the common interest

15 SAPMO-BArch DY3023-81, Untersuchungen des ZK der SED in den SED-GO in Moskau, 10-20 December 1963, f. 31.

16 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 28 November 1966, f. 76.

17 Ibid., 27 March 1971, f. 231.

18 BArch N2512-29, Grundsatzdokumente für die Verbesserung der Arbeit im RGW, f. 149.

forward in political discourses established the bloc as a scale at which economic projects could be developed that were considered better solutions to common issues than the ones proposed at national levels. Thus, defining the common interest became a challenge for the Comecon. Marc Abélès advocates a flexible definition, according to which the common interest is

*an ideal scheme articulated around the representation of a Europe that is yet to come [...]. It is a 'floating signifier' [...] whose signified cannot be assigned: the European interest is an 'overflow of sense'.<sup>19</sup>*

Creating a common interest made sense out of the Council's activity and defined its future duties, although it remained most influential in discourse. However, the regular repetition of this "incantation"<sup>20</sup> in the European Commission's or in Comecon's discourses imposed the idea of its actual existence. Yet the administrative secretariat of the Comecon was not the executive branch of the organization, unlike the European Commission, and the use of the concept of a common interest relied on the tolerance of the member states' governments.

Contemporary actors made significant use of the notion. In a report by an Austrian bank published in the bulletin of the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies in 1989, the activity of the Comecon was described as

*being more and more complicated over time, most of all when the idea of a 'common interest of the Community' taking into account the Comecon specific composition, associating a dominant superpower and small states with different levels of development, became untenable.<sup>21</sup>*

The quotation marks might indicate that the bank found the notion of common interest in the official publications distributed by the Comecon itself. Already by 1961, the organization had mentioned its quest to find "the interest of each state and of the whole socialist camp"<sup>22</sup> in the final communiqué of its 14th session. The state and socialist camp were not presented as antagonistic, but for the first time were explicitly distinguished and juxtaposed in the same sentence.

In 1964, the representative of the GDR at the Comecon exposed the "mutual advantage" his government should seek in the Council, which would not be incompatible with each member state pursuing its own national interest.<sup>23</sup> He echoed a technical debate, which took place simultaneously in the highest organs of the Comecon on the crucial issue of the economic rationality of the people's democracies importing raw materials and energies from the USSR. According to the minutes of the Executive Committee's bureau,

19 M. Abélès, Pour une anthropologie des institutions, in: L'Homme 35 (1995) 135, pp. 80-81.

20 M. Abélès and I. Bellier, La Commission européenne. Du compromis culturel à la culture politique du compromis, in: Revue française de science politique 46 (1996) 3, p. 449.

21 Stasi Archives (BStU) MfS HAXVIII-11088, Vierzig Jahre RGW-Tätigkeit, f. 264-270.

22 SAPMO-BArch BA32965-1961, Wirtschaftsbulletin des RGW, Nr. 7, April 1961.

23 SAPMO-BArch DY3023-789, Tagungen des Exekutivkomitees des Rates, 20 July 1964.

*for one or several member states of the Comecon, the import of fuel from the Soviet Union is advantageous. However, from the point of view of the common interest of the member states of the Comecon, this import is economically inadequate. In this case and in others, where there are contradictions between the interests of one or several member states and the common interests of the member states of the Comecon, these will be resolved through negotiations on the basis of the general principles of the Comecon.*<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the pricing system for oil and raw materials established within the Comecon was advantageous for the people's democracies in comparison to prices on the world market.<sup>25</sup> As a consequence, intra-Comecon trade of these commodities was not only disadvantageous for the Soviet Union but also for the whole bloc. Low prices did not encourage the member states to modernize their industrial infrastructure, neither did they promote the rationalization of the extensive use of raw materials and energies in their production processes. The notion of common interest here was directly opposed to the interests of the member states and this opposition presented a potential source of conflicts, or at least sub-optimal decisions, for the bloc as a whole. It promoted a new way of thinking about multilateral economic cooperation – not as a negative or zero-sum game, in which gains and losses are determined within national borders, but as a positive-sum game on the bloc scale.

Nevertheless, the common interest was never decoupled from the national interests. It was always referred to in the Council's documents as an interest by juxtaposition, as the common interest "of the member states" and not "of the Comecon". Yet its Western equivalent was not different, since

*the common interest of the Community always needs to cohabit with the national interest. The change of scale characterizing the political culture of the Commission does not imply bringing in the national levels in a common unit that would be superior to its parties.*<sup>26</sup>

The identification of a common interest and its use in public discourses reveals the construction of a complex identity among Comecon agents, who seemed able to step away from national opinions on common economic issues, in order to propose an autonomous scientific synthesis. Thus the common interest, elaborated by the international organization as a compromise, helped establish a new identity whose "living incarnation" was the international civil servants themselves.<sup>27</sup>

National interests are usually associated with the influence of nation states, described as powerful imagined communities, whereas the weak symbolic attachment created by in-

24 BArch DE1-54441, Protokoll der 13. Tagung des Büros des Exekutivkomitees des RGW, 17-19 October 1964.

25 F. Lemoine, Les prix des échanges à l'intérieur du CAEM, in: NATO-Directorate of Economic Affairs, Comecon: progress and prospects, Brussels 1977, pp. 135-176.

26 M. Abélès and I. Bellier, La Commission européenne, p. 448.

27 M. Abélès, Homo communautarius, in: Riva Kastoryano (ed.), Quelle identité pour l'Europe? Le multiculturalisme à l'épreuve, Paris 1998, p. 45.



ternational organizations would shape a very superficial “European interest”.<sup>28</sup> However, studies on the European Commission’s civil servants have shown that

*the notion of ‘serving the Community’ has a meaning, which leads to the creation or the defence of the European interest in their professional activities, even when faced with interlocutors of their own nationality.*<sup>29</sup>

This analysis raises the question, whether or not the same professional socialization can be observed at the Comecon.

The Comecon was indeed soon promoted as a valuable, integrative community. This was true even in the member states, particularly during the debate about its transformation into a supranational planning commission in the first half of the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> In 1962, the newly created East German office for cooperation with the Comecon was assigned the task to “create a united socialist economic organism in the organs of the Comecon”.<sup>31</sup> In 1964, the members of the East German basis organization at the Council accomplished their goal announcing that “progressively a united economic organism of the member states of the Comecon and later of all countries of the socialist world-system is established”.<sup>32</sup> Once again, the metaphor of a living organism embodying socialism established the organization as a real imagined community.

This image was positively reinforced by the comparison made by several actors in the Council to the Soviet model of the federation of socialist republics. The Polish government referred to a well-known federal system when in 1969 it proposed financial solidarity within the Comecon.<sup>33</sup> Potential contributors, such as the GDR, rejected this revolutionary idea according to which the organic solidarity of the member states could imply financial transfers from the wealthiest to the poorest countries. Nonetheless, it resonated in the ears of Soviet authorities. In the same year, the Soviet permanent representative at the Comecon, Alexander Sademidko, stated that

*lots of things would be done more easily if we were a real community. This should not necessarily be a community similar to the national grouping that is the USSR with a redistribution of national wealth. Especially important would be that the states cooperate with more trust. [...] The principle should be to invest where the existing conditions are the most favourable.*<sup>34</sup>

28 L. Hooghe, *Several Roads*, p. 880.

29 I. Bellier, *A Europeanized Elite? An Anthropology of European Commission Officials*, in: *Yearbook of European Studies* 14 (2000), p. 145.

30 J. van Brabant, *Economic Integration in Eastern Europe*, New York 1989, pp. 63–80.

31 BArch DC20-10111, Statut des Büros für wirtschaftliche und technische Zusammenarbeit mit dem Ausland, 8 October 1962.

32 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 18 April 1964, f. 2.

33 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-195, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 27 Mai 1969, f. 60.

34 SAPMO-BArch DY3023-797, Gespräch zwischen Möke und Sademidko, 9 April 1969, f. 53.

Sademidko did not call for the transformation of the Comecon into an enlarged copy of the USSR. However, he drew an explicit parallel to the Soviet model and used the term socialist “community” in a positive sense.

The geopolitical concept of a socialist community entered discourses on multilateral economic cooperation in the late 1960s as a remote ideal whose implementation remained suspect to some people’s democracies. Yet it enjoyed great success among Comecon agents. In the early 1970s, the board of the East German basis organization at the Comecon even had to refute the idea, proclaiming that the technical divisions of the Council’s secretariat were “international ministries”.<sup>35</sup> The spread of this self-perception among international civil servants illustrates the progressive evolution of the framework defining their work.

However, this evolution was never a linear movement leading to the imposition of the common interest over the various national interests.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Comecon agents mainly advocated the subsidiarity of bloc interests to national interests. Common interest and the notion of subsidiarity refer to two different approaches of international cooperation. The common interest is associated with a centralizing and hierarchical vision of national and international interests, while subsidiarity is associated with decentralization and a non-hierarchical combination of these interests.<sup>37</sup> The experts of the Comecon used the idea of a common interest in the latter subsidiary approach, presenting the socialist community as a complementary and non-binding framework.

Heidelore K., who worked as expert of the nuclear energy division of the Council in the 1980s, exemplified the Comecon approach when she mentioned a project concerning the decommissioning of nuclear power plants. Such proposals were only rational on a bloc scale, even though they directly impacted a strategic industry. They could be discussed because the member states were only interested in building nuclear plants and did not have plans for their decommissioning.<sup>38</sup> Thus the socialist community can be considered a space established to coordinate very specific projects, rather than an integrated economic territory where international civil servants would oppose national economic structures.

Nevertheless, some conflicts arose between certain Comecon agents and their countries, which invites questions of the mechanisms behind the recombination of socialist identities within this group.

35 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 27 March 1971, f. 297.

36 J.-M. Coicaud, *Réflexions sur les organisations internationales et la légitimité internationale*, in: *Revue internationale des sciences sociales* 4 (2001), 170, pp. 579-580.

37 M. Abélès and I. Bellier, *La Commission européenne*, pp. 449-450.

38 Interview with Heidelore K., in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc*, p. 248.

### 3. Conflicts as Elements of the Reconfiguration of Socialist Identities at the Comecon

#### 3.1. Between a Well-Spread Culture of Dispute and Borderline Cases

Unlike most studies on the Comecon, which concentrate on the outcomes of international cooperation, the following analysis – based on original interviews with experts who worked for Comecon between the 1960s and the 1980s and documents from the Comecon and from the archives of the East German basis organization at the Council – focuses on the practice of negotiation at the Comecon. It reveals the influence on the international staff's socialization of the intertwining of their professional and personal life within the organization.

Conflicts between Comecon staff members and representatives of their countries allow for monitoring the transnational acculturation of the former, since they can be seen as a tool of socialization:

*If every reaction among men is socialisation, of course conflict must count as such, since it is one of the most intense reactions [...]. It is in reality the way to remove the dualism and to arrive at some form of unity.<sup>39</sup>*

Conflict paradoxically reinforces the cohesion of a society. It regularly arose between international civil servants working for the Council's secretariat and representatives of the member states employed in the permanent representations or enrolled as experts in national delegations participating in Comecon meetings. These conflicts reveal the challenges and limits of the reconfiguration of professional and personal identities in the process of shaping international economic cooperation. They attest to the culture of dispute, understood as fruitful discussion between agents representing diverging interests during moments of confrontation. The critical nature of social interaction during conflicts and the arbitration between two principles of legitimacy – national and international – makes it possible to analyse to what extent international civil servants of the Comecon willingly adopted new roles and perceptions about themselves and their duty.

When conflicts arose between an East German staff member of the Comecon secretariat and representatives of the GDR participating in a negotiation at the Council, the expectations Berlin had placed in "its" international civil servant collapsed. The Comecon expert no longer acted as the ambassador of the GDR's point of view, but rather he or she promoted solutions developed within the secretariat and considered rational at the bloc level.

This culture of dispute shows – regardless of the modalities of conflict resolution – how the defence of the common interest could appear in the discourse of international civil servants. Even the Polish and the East German permanent representatives considered diverging opinions helpful and in 1965 advocated for the freedom of the Council's sec-

39 Georg Simmel, The sociology of conflict. 1, in: American Journal of Sociology 9 (1903), p. 491.

retariat to address controversial topics. According to the Polish permanent representative Piotr Jaroszewicz,

*we do not delegate our comrades in the secretariat so that they represent there the interests of our country, but rather so that they analyse objectively the issues of our cooperation. It is the only way to understand the duties of the secretariat, otherwise, it cannot work at all.*<sup>40</sup>

His East German counterpart supported this analysis, saying that “the secretary and its deputies must encourage an autonomous work in the general directions and support initiatives of the staff. New questions and new projects must be presented to the member states without fear, even when the opinions of the member states on these topics are not known in advance, or even not taken into account.”<sup>41</sup>

High-level national representatives not only mentioned, but most importantly normalized the possibility of conflicts between them and the Council’s secretariat. They understood that a strict monitoring of multilateral cooperation by the member states’ governments could lead to economically sub-optimal situations, which would not only prevent the international organization from fulfilling its duties in the common interest of its members as a whole but also prevent decisions coinciding with their respective interests.

Conflicts arising between an international civil servant and the authorities of his country constitute a tool by which the reconfiguration of personal and professional identities at the Comecon may be measured. Conflicts form the only situations where the intellectual shaping of the rationality and the legitimacy of secretariat’s staff members’ actions can be questioned. The focalization on these particular conflicts reduces the number of sources available. Nevertheless, mission reports, debates of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany basis organization, and Stasi documents monitoring the international meetings describe several cases of conflict. Despite the limited number of data, the trivial character of the situations described sustains the hypothesis that these examples are the tip of the iceberg of conflict within the organization, which is not limited to its East German agents.

Three different forms of conflicts can be distinguished: the accusation of international incompetency, the passive resistance against respective member states’ attempts at taking control of the international cooperation, and finally, frontal opposition. In these three cases, conflict occurs when the balance of power within the international organization shifts. Conflicts provide information on the reverse of the “normal” situation when consensus was achieved at the Comecon.

In the first case, conflict arose between a Comecon staff member blaming his compatriots delegated by their government for not developing professional practices of international negotiation that conform to the specific norms defined by the secretariat. In other words, a Comecon expert put forward his knowledge of the informal definition of the

40 BArch DE1-51766, Bericht über die Tätigkeit des Sekretariats, 25 Mai 1965.

41 Ibid.

behaviour of a “good” international civil servant to delegitimize his compatriots working as “submarines” for the mere defence of national interest.<sup>42</sup>

In 1970 Josef Prohaska, head of the general direction for mechanical engineering of the secretariat and president of the basis organization of the Czechoslovak members of the Comecon staff, criticized the decision of his government to appoint Karel Polaček as chairman of the standing commission for mechanical engineering.<sup>43</sup> Polaček had already held this position between 1956 and 1967, before he returned to Prague and became the leader of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement. Prohaska wrote a letter to the Czechoslovak government in which he conveyed his opinion that the appointment of Polaček was an “unfortunate choice” and tried to delay his confirmation. According to him, Polaček did not follow the evolution of the work of the commission and most importantly did not possess the appropriate network of influence in Czechoslovakia to enforce the implementation of Comecon agreements.

Thus, above all Prohaska criticized the missed opportunity to select a technically qualified expert who would have been willing and politically capable of promoting international economic cooperation. A personal conflict between him and Polaček, resulting from different opinions during the 1968 crisis in Czechoslovakia, might also partly explain this accusation of international incompetency. Polaček seems to have been removed from the Czechoslovak staff at the Comecon and from the circles of power in Prague because of his opposition to Šik’s policy. On the contrary, Prohaska, like most of the Czechoslovak agents at the Comecon, tended to support economic reforms and was relatively protected after 1968 by his position in the international organization. He judged Polaček in the light of his own expertise, acquired as head of a general direction of the secretariat, and viewed his compatriot as not possessing the skills necessary to master his task in the very specific Comecon space.

Albina D. experienced a similar situation, although criticism was reversed in her case. As she was working as an expert of the Council’s secretariat in the 1980s, she faced criticism from Soviet representatives. They blamed her for being too deeply involved in the international community of the secretariat and for defending the common interest more than the Soviet national interest. Albina D., who was born in the USSR, had married an East German before settling in the GDR. She was delegated by the East German government to work for the Council’s secretariat in 1986 and refused the notion of defending any particular national interest in her work: “Here at the Comecon, I was not a Russian. [...] I did not stand for the GDR, we were all Comecon and we had to defend common goals.”<sup>44</sup> Because of her internationalist stance, Soviet representatives threatened her. She called them “narrow-minded Russians”, who considered her situation an “intellectual disaster”, and in return accused them of international incompetency. In her opinion, their practice of international economic cooperation could at best be suboptimal, since they

42 I. Bellier, *A Europeanized Elite?*, p. 143.

43 BAArch DC20-19980, Ständige Kommission Maschinenbau, f. 228-233.

44 Interview with Albina D., in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc*, p. 140.

were insufficiently aware of the specific culture developed by the secretariat. Albina D. made experts standing for national interests responsible for the failure of the Comecon. Thus, she revealed her own appropriation of an original transnational socialization based on the idea that international civil servants should, above all, promote the common interest before taking into account strategic economic calculations of the member states that delegated them in the first place.

Passive resistance against the national governments' attempts at defining Comecon cooperation as a mere coordination of national bargaining represents a second form of conflict within the organization. An East German expert illustrated this type of conflict in his report on a session of the standing commission for construction in 1962:

*During all the discussions, two Soviet comrades argued very concretely against the position of Nikulin [leader of the Soviet delegation], in this case comrade Lukinov, representative of the Council's secretariat, and comrade Dotshilin, expert of the USSR in the general direction for construction at the secretariat. In the evening following this discussion, comrade Dotshilin went to the head of the general direction for construction of the Comecon, comrade Lammert, and told him: "please make me responsible for another section. I cannot cope with comrade Nikulin anymore. This morning, we agreed on a decision within the working group. Now Nikulin formulates this decision in the exact opposite way".<sup>45</sup>*

Here, a Soviet agent of the international organization's secretariat tried to achieve a compromise between all national delegations when he faced opposition, or at least an evident unwillingness to cooperate, from the delegation of his country. Nonetheless, Dotshilin refused to support Nikulin's position and preferred asking his supervisor, an East German, to discharge him from the case. Aware of his inability to convince representatives of his own country to engage in a compromise based on the common interest of the whole bloc, Dotshilin escaped conflict and refused to participate any longer in the negotiation. His strategy reveals how agents managed to avoid having to choose between two supposedly alternative and exclusive loyalties: to their government or to the international organization.

The last form of conflict nevertheless suggests the possibility of a borderline transnational acculturation among certain agents of the organization. In some cases, experts engaged in open conflict with their country, putting the common interest above national interests. The civil servants who adopted such a radical attitude did not consider their position as brokers between national and international levels as an opportunity to develop a dual loyalty. The examples of W.L. and Gerhard Kosel illustrate this confrontational approach.

45 BStU, MfS AIM2169-87, IM "Hammer", Teil II, Band 1, Information über die Tagung der ständigen Kommission Bauwesen 19-24 November 1962, f. 225-230.

W.L. started his career at the Comecon in 1962 as an expert of the secretariat.<sup>46</sup> After going back to the GDR in the 1970s, he returned to the Council in 1981 where he held a very high-ranking position in the secretariat in which he faced difficulties defending both the autonomy of the Council and the interests of the GDR. The Stasi monitored his activity and criticized him for, according to Berlin's opinion, regularly putting his loyalty to the international organization first. In an article he wrote at the end of 1982, W.L. publicly exposed the main problems of the Comecon, urged for its strengthening, and criticized the deliberate non-cooperative attitude of several member states. Bypassing the national monitoring of public discourses about the organization, W.L. submitted his article to the GDR authorities and to the secretary of the Council at the same time without waiting for the authorization of the former. As a consequence, he was summoned to an interview with the East German permanent representative in Moscow who had to deliver the message

*that L. does not publically teach ministers or other high-ranking officials from the GDR during sessions and meetings of Comecon executive organs and that he does not dictate them what they have to think or to decide, but rather that he accepts the opinion of the GDR and above all, that he tries to impose it in performing his duty. He must give up his 'internationalist role', which he overemphasises too much, and feel bound to the GDR.*<sup>47</sup>

Although extremely rare, the case of L. is interesting for different reasons. It shows how violent conflicts could be between international civil servants and their own country as well as highlights how confrontation could be counterproductive, even though L. kept his position in the Council. Since he knowingly failed to comply with the national interest of his country, L. risked losing his ability to convince Berlin to participate in multilateral agreements that could have paved the way to the increased international cooperation he was advocating. Thus, keeping a dual social integration at the national and at international levels was a prerequisite for the effectiveness of the international civil servants' work at the Comecon.

Gerhard Kosel represents another rare case of a specific international socialization. Coming from Germany, Kosel lived in exile in the USSR from 1932 to 1954. He returned to his homeland, which had become the GDR, and became chairman of the standing commission for construction of the Comecon in 1958, a position he held until 1972. In 1987, at the age of 78, Kosel discussed recent evolutions of the international organization with agents of the secretariat in Moscow, who had mentioned their disappointment at the reforms weakening the Council and described the "dreadful atmosphere" prevailing in the international administration.<sup>48</sup> He offered to intervene with the East German Ministry in order to prevent the complete dissolution of the commission. Fifteen years

46 According to the BStU's right to privacy rule, applying to individuals, who have been spied on by the Stasi, we have anonymized this case.

47 BStU, MfS HAXVIII-2855, 25 January 1983, f. 21-22.

48 BStU, MfS AIM6945-88, IM "Thomas Mann", 19 November 1987, f. 278-279.

after leaving service in the organization, Kosel still cared about the Comecon. In July 1992, he wrote on the first page of his personal copy of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary's special edition of the journal of the standing commission for construction (published in 1978):

*In 19... the commission, under the chairmanship of W. Jünker, was dissolved. This dissolution was mainly organized at the instigation of the GDR – the traitor G. Mittag. During its last session in Berlin, all the leaders of the national delegations agreed that the commission should continue its work since it really benefited all the member states. Nevertheless, the dissolution was decided under pressure coming from Mittag. Even Jünker had a great fear of reprisals. The dissolution of the standing commission for construction, [was] an element of the dissolution of the USSR, of the GDR.<sup>49</sup>*

Even though it came one year after the dissolution of the Comecon, this violent statement was rooted in the discussion Kosel initiated in 1987. In this particular case, he directly opposed two conflicting interests: the common interest of the whole socialist camp and the interest of the GDR – Kosel himself siding with the international organization. W.L. and Kosel, both convinced communists who had lived a long time in the USSR before working for the Comecon, were in many ways exceptional cases. However, they can be considered the exceptions that prove the statement that conflict, in more or less violent and open forms, was everywhere at the Comecon. Conflict was the result of the frequent discrepancy between national interests, which the member states' governments asked "their" international civil servants to promote, and the common interest, which these experts shaped at the Comecon level.

### 3.2. Transnational Identity as the Practice of a Dual Loyalty

None of the conflicts analysed above led to a clear break between Comecon agents and their country. Historicizing the transnational acculturation process of the Council's agents in the long term helps explain why "there is not intrinsic contradiction between national and international norms".<sup>50</sup> The international civil servants of the Comecon did not display an instrumental loyalty to the organization, which would have revealed how they had mastered the rules of the multilateral game without actually committing to it and neither did they shed the defence of their national interests.<sup>51</sup> The common experience at the Comecon allowed them to develop a specific ethos.<sup>52</sup>

According to Jan Beyers, international civil servants do not shift their self-definition from national agents to transnational experts, but instead learn how to master multiple roles.<sup>53</sup>

49 BArch N2504-249, Tagebücher 6.-12. Tagung der ständigen Kommission Bauwesen, 1978.

50 L. Hooghe, *Several Roads*, p. 888.

51 J. Checkel, *International Institutions*, pp. 804-805.

52 D. Georgakakis, *Comment les institutions (européennes) socialisent. Quelques hypothèses sur les fondements sociaux de la fabrique des euro-fonctionnaires*, in: H. Michel and C. Robert (eds.), *La fabrique des "Européens"*, pp. 144-158.

53 J. Beyers, *Multiple Embeddedness*, p. 904.



In 1964, the basis organization of the East German experts at the Council laid out a non-hierarchical articulation of the national and international interests, stating that

*the defence of the interests of the GDR is the first partisan duty of all the comrades of our basis organisation. This does not imply a contradiction with the duties of the comrades as international civil servants of the Comecon, since defending the interests of the GDR is in the interest of the whole socialist states' community.*<sup>54</sup>

Even though the basis organization gave a very political answer to the question of the compatibility of different systems of social and professional entanglements, it highlights the concern of the international civil servants to publically debate about the tension between two principles of legitimacy in which they were embedded.

The socialization promoting compromise prevailed in the international organization because it was the most rational attitude to adopt for the three different types of actors. It was a professional necessity for each agent of the organization, an economic challenge for the member states, and an important issue for the international staff as a collective actor. Every day the experts of the Comecon were confronted with “a duty to find solutions”,<sup>55</sup> if they did not want to be individually side-lined by the secretariat or to be summoned to return to their country by their government. According to Günter H., who worked as an East German expert in the commission for the peaceful use of atomic energy and defined himself as a diplomat with an atypical career, people who started as nationalists “were immediately blown away”.<sup>56</sup>

The governments of the member states were also fully aware of the necessity to search for international compromises at the Comecon. International negotiations had a political and financial cost for the people's democracies, which were expecting economic gains in return. Thus, the member states encouraged the transnational empowerment of the agents they delegated to work for the Comecon. According to Kurt Borch,

*people naturally promoted the interests of their country in the secretariat [...] but always while keeping in mind 'I can carry through my point of view only if it takes into account the interests of the others in the first place' and then, it was our job to tell in return the institutions back home, which had delegated us, 'the idea that you have here, that we have, it does not work [...] we have to find a compromise'.*<sup>57</sup>

National experts delegated at the Comecon became brokers advocating the interest of compromises, which they then had to implement. This analysis unveils the social and cognitive rationale that the international civil servants and their national authorities had to take into account. However, the veto right that every partner kept on global solutions

54 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 18 April 1964, f. 13.

55 J. Lewis, *The Janus Face of Brussels*, p. 939.

56 Interview with Günter H., in: S. Godard, *Construire le bloc*, p. 190.

57 Interview with Kurt Borch, in: *Ibid.*, p. 180.

and the attempts by the governments of the people's democracies at always pushing their interests regularly ended up in empty multilateral agreements.<sup>58</sup>

The actual implementation of these agreements was left to bilateral negotiations, over which the Comecon experts had no power. Nevertheless, the Council remained one of the rare places in the socialist world, where experts could develop a transnational identity based on their professional experience.<sup>59</sup> Analysing the socialization of the European Commission civil servants, Jan Beyers stated that

*through European experiences – domestic actors get a better sense of other member states' interests, the salience of specific issues for the other actors, and the willingness to compromise. This not only has consequences for individual actor opportunities; it also leads to an esprit de corps and mutual understanding.*<sup>60</sup>

Unlike the economic or foreign trade experts of the national embassies in Moscow, the agents of the Comecon developed a professional identity oriented toward the quest for multilateral agreements, which they neither put above their national identity nor did the former replace the latter. This “cognitive blurring”<sup>61</sup> established the Council as a specific place for the transmutation of its staff's professional and personal identities at the international level. As a group, the international civil servants of the Comecon cultivated the originality of their acculturation, which became a resource mobilized in advocating their empowerment in front of the member state's governments.<sup>62</sup> Summing up its activity in the end of 1966, the East German basis organization at the Comecon explained that

*when working towards the implementation of our ideas, we have to take into account that the international work is complicated and requires, on top of fighting spirit, a good quantity of patience (Geduld).*<sup>63</sup>

Meaning both patience and tolerance, usage of the German term *Geduld*, shows how the Council's staff members promoted the difficulty and the originality of their work. They engaged the national governments in changing the way they thought about international relations in the socialist world in order to understand and to value their acculturation. Thus grass roots analysis of the conflicting internationalization of economic debates in the socialist world allows for describing the Comecon as interstitial space<sup>64</sup> in which

58 André Steiner, The Comecon. An Example of Failed Economic Integration, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 39 (2013), pp. 240-258.

59 L. Stanek, Socialist Networks and the Internationalization of Building Culture after 1945, in: *ABE Journal* 6 (2014).

60 J. Beyers, Multiple Embeddedness, p. 908.

61 J. Lewis, The Janus Face of Brussels, p. 967.

62 S. Godard, Le CAEM et la construction d'une diplomatie économique parallèle dans l'Europe socialiste (1962–1989), in: V. Genin, M. Osmont and T. Raineau (eds.), *Reinventer la diplomatie. Sociabilités, réseaux et pratiques diplomatiques en Europe depuis 1919*, Bruxelles 2016, pp. 171-187.

63 SAPMO-BArch DY30-IVA2-20-193, SED Grundorganisation RGW, 28 November 1966, f. 106.

64 P.-Y. Saunier, Circulations, connexions et espaces transnationaux, in: *Genèses* 57 (2004) 4, p. 117.

experts could simultaneously handle multiple roles between national and international levels, thus shaping the bloc as a new professional frame of reference.

#### 4. Conclusion

This article illustrates how Comecon agents remained embedded in power relations tying them to national interests. They discussed their status as national ambassadors and the relationship of that status with their duty as collaborators of an international organization. In this vivid debate, the experts of the Comecon refused any strict assignment to a single role and the simplistic alternative of choosing between national and international allegiance.

The progressive shaping *by* the international organization *for* its member states of the concept of the common interest of the socialist community initiated conflicts, which revealed how international civil servants perceived and used the transnational identity promoted at the Council. Conflicts existed at the Comecon and were even common, but they always found a resolution. Indeed, the staff members involved had learnt how to deal with multiple roles in the elaboration of compromises, intertwining the national and the international spheres instead of opposing them.

This analysis of individual conflicts and of the dual loyalty of the international civil servants proves how the transnational approach does not describe a new scale of action, situated above the nations, but rather it is a method for analysing in the same movement the interconnected relations beyond the national levels and between local, national, and international levels.<sup>65</sup>

65 P. Clavin, Defining Transnationalism, in: Contemporary European History 14 (2005) 4, pp. 421-439.