Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe
Volume 27, Number 1, 2024
https://doi.org/10.18778/1508-2008.27.02

A Comparative Analysis of Key Integration Blocks

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Abstract

Why is integration progressing successfully in some parts of the world but not in others? Why are only some integration blocks hugely important for member countries? And why this is not the case globally? This article provides a comparative analysis of international economic structures, aiming to identify the factors that contribute to the validity and effectiveness of integration.

The article examines eight economic blocks: the European Union, the Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States and Canada, the Southern Common Market, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Euroasian Economic Union, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the African Union, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. We take into account five stages of integration: free trade area, customs union, single market, economic union, and monetary union. To understand the progress of integration, one must consider a number of developments and indicators. The coefficient of economic gravity, which we describe in this paper, is a convenient method to find out how important integration structures are for contracting states.

Keywords: integration block, economic gravity, stage of integration, economic coefficient

JEL: F10, F14

Received: 25.02.2022. Verified: 8.07.2023. Accepted: 21.12.2023

Introduction

Our objective is to find a measure of how strong integration blocks are today. Are they merely political arrangements, or are they well-built economic structures? If they are real economic powers, they are important for all sides concerned. All the evidence points to integration blocks being different from each other. The question is how big these differences are. This will be measured with a tool described in this text.

Integration blocks and stages of integration

The subject of our analysis is the following integration blocks:

- the European Union (EU): built by 27 European states,
- the Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States, and Canada (USMCA): the USA, Mexico, and Canada,
- the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR): Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela (suspended),
- the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Phillippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam,
- the Euroasian Economic Union (EEU): Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia,
- the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka,
- the African Union (AU): 55 African states; no state on the continent is outside the AU,
- the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP): Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam.

This is not a comprehensive list of all integration blocks that were in force in the first decades of the 21st century. The number of free trade areas is very large, and many of them are alleged constructions. The group of eight structures chosen for this paper may shape the global economy of tomorrow, or at least they seem to have such a chance now. These blocks are formed by states which already heavily influence the international economic stage, and this is what makes this research interesting (Carlsnaes, Risse, and Simmons 2002).

To complete the area of analysis, we must first define the stages of integration we will discuss (Blank, Clausen, and Wacker 1998). International economics usually defines

more than five stages of integration, although five is sufficient for this paper. The next stage should come provided the previous one has already been implemented with success. The first stage is a foundation for all others, and if it is not well set, the subsequent stages do not have enough ground to function properly. We will mention the following economic arrangements:

- FTA (*free trade area*): where the elimination of tariffs and import quotas takes place,
- CU (*customs union*): where a common external tariff is set up,
- SM (*single market*): where the free movement of capital, labour, and services is started,
- EcU (*economic union*): where a common economic policy and transnational economic standards are implemented in many areas, but not all of them,
- CU (*monetary union*): where a common currency and a joint monetary policy are living realities (Winters 1991).

Economic theory makes it clear that integration is not just a trade unification, although in many cases, it does nothing more than facilitate trade (Machlup 1977). All advanced stages of integration need a proper trade basis (Jovanovich 1998).

What makes an integration block effective? Is it when its base, i.e., trade, is well-shaped? There are many answers to these questions (Daimov 2008). To have a successful monetary union, four conditions, which lead to the real convergence of economies, are especially important:

- the trade cycles of the countries concerned converge,
- partners are competitive enough to get rid of exchange rates,
- the public finance systems demonstrate the capacity to run a reliable stabilisation policy,
- the unified market is an economic fact (Jasiński 2021).

Trade blocks, namely free trade areas, customs unions, and single markets, serve as a starting point for further stages of integration. Without them, an economic or monetary union can become a soft solution for the participating countries. The following three conditions are vital for trade integration and, in the long run, they lead to advanced practices:

- a high level of gravity, which is the economic force that works for the mutual attraction of trade partners; for this purpose, a coefficient of economic gravity is used,
- a high revealed trade dependence, i.e., the share of inter-block trade in every partner country's foreign trade as a whole,
- member states' openness to foreign trade, measured by comparing their exports to GDP.

If these three conditions are met, integration can accelerate significantly. It is not driven by the desires or cravings of politicians but rather a necessity for the contracting states. Three conditions indicate the significance of a trade bloc for all parties involved in a multinational deal and when member states are collectively committed to maintaining its viability. If this does not happen, a trade block loses its relevance and does not garner significant attention from governments. The later stages of integration lose their justification and should not be implemented. A block that falls far from meeting these three conditions can become a political, not an economic, initiative with little valuable contribution to the global economy.

The second and third conditions mentioned above are easy to understand and explain why they are included in our analysis. What economic gravity is and how it can be measured with a special coefficient will be described in the next sections of the paper (Jasiński 2018).

The Advancement of present-day integration blocks

The following table gives a comprehensive view of what stages were already reached by the integration blocks in this article. The declared objectives of, for example, the EU and RCEP are quite different, as is their *acquis communautaire*. The EU's intentions go beyond being merely an economic bloc; in contrast, the RCEP is expected to evolve into more of a free trade area, with this transformation projected to occur in approximately 20 years. There is also a big difference between the EU, Mercosur, and the AU (Pinder and Usherwood 2013).

Table 1. Stages of integration in the most important blocks

Blocks	FTA	CU	SM	EcU	MU
EU	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
USMCA	Yes	No	No	No	No
MERCOSUR	Yes	Yes	Proposed	No	No
ASEAN	Yes	No	Proposed	Proposed	Proposed
EEU	Yes	Yes	Yes	Proposed	Proposed
SAARC	Yes	Proposed	Proposed	No	No
AU	Yes	Proposed	Proposed	Proposed	Proposed
RCEP	Proposed	No	No	No	No

Source: author's elaboration.

There are big differences between the eight blocks, and in many cases, the political declarations are not in line with current political and economic action. This is why a delay in implementing what was agreed in an international treaty can be quite big. There is always a danger that time will change the political will to keep to commitments made some years ago. Another problem is that the economies of integration blocks' member states are, in some cases, not fully market systems. In some cases, government powers are much bigger than in a typical mixed economy, reducing the utility and importance of integration agreements.

RCEP is a cooperation platform for a vital component of the global economy, with its signatories accounting for approximately 30 per cent of global GDP. This new arrangement aims to become a free trade area within 20 years, starting from 2022, eliminating up to 90 per cent of import tariffs. However, whether RCEP will fully function as a free trade area in the years to come remains to be seen. RCEP is not yet an operative zone of this kind. It comprises China, Japan and the ASEAN area, and from the point of view of its economic structure, it is not a typical integration block. This three-component structure is reinforced by significant partners: Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand. For years, China did not sign any free trade agreements. However, this changed, and as of January 2023, there are now 17 deals of this kind in force, and RCEP seems to be China's most important trade arrangement. However, time will tell how important it really is.

There is no doubt that the EU is the most advanced integration structure worldwide (McCormick 2014). No other structure follows, or sometimes even tries to follow, the European integration pattern. Their plans are not as far-reaching. Consequently, in some cases, member states may not be required to fulfil advanced requirements and stages of integration.

Economic gravity coefficient: definition

The coefficient we introduce measures the economic proximity between the economies of a given group of states that form an integration block. How big is the force that drives these states to enhance mutual relations?

This indicator will represent the outcome of m criteria, which make the gravity force bigger, and m criteria, which are expected to work in the opposite direction. The number of economic areas under investigation is n. The Economic Gravity Coefficient (EGC) for areas $A_1,..., \mathrm{A}_n$ is as follows

$$R\left(A_1,..., \mathrm{A}_n\right) = \frac{\sum_{\mathrm{j}=1}^{n} p_j V_j}{\sum_{\mathrm{j}=1}^{n} q_j W_j},$$

where V_1,..., V_m and W_1,..., W_m are partial indicators, making the coefficient grow or decline respectively, and p_1,..., p_m, W_1,..., W_m are weights

$$0 \leq p_j, q_j \leq 1, \sum_{j=1}^{m} p_j = \sum_{j=1}^{m} q_j = 1.$$

The job of weights is to strengthen or weaken certain criteria. They do not have to be of the same importance in the analysis. If weights p_j and q_j are all equal, they can be omitted.

How should we define partial indicators V_j and W_j? Let u_{j1},..., u_{jn} inform us about the position of a given area from the point of view of criterion *j* (*j* = 1, ..., *m*). We obtain an *mxn* dimensional matrix $\left[u_{ji}\right]$ for all criteria and areas. The partial indicator V_j, which makes the gravity grow, will be the following:

$$V_j = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^{n} \frac{u_{ji}}{P_j},$$

where:

$$P_j = M_j - N_j$$

$$M_j = \max\left\{u_{j1},...,u_{jn}\right\}$$

$$N_j = \min\left\{u_{j1},..., vu_{jn}\right\}$$

M_j is the maximal value for criterion *j*, and N_j the minimal value. This peak value cannot be crossed by elements of the matrix $\left[u_{ji}\right]$. Indicators W_j, which make the gravity weaker, are defined analogously.

Many economic variables can serve as particular criteria for the EGC. This analysis uses six. Three of them are designed to support EGC growth, while the remaining three are intended to have a suppressing effect. They are:

- V_1 – the country's propensity to trade, i.e., the export growth rate divided by the GDP growth rate; the higher the indicator, the better it is for the EGC,
- V_2 – the share of trade inside the group; if this indicator grows, so does the EGC,
- V_3 – the total imports as a per cent of the GDP of a given country; the higher the indicator, the better it is for the EGC,
- W_1 – the average distance between the chosen states; if this indicator grows, the EGC declines,

- W_2 – the competitiveness of a given economy; the World Competitiveness Ranking can be useful (*World Competitiveness Ranking*, n.d.); the higher the indicator, the worse it is for the EGC,
- W_3 – the rating of sectorial structures; the Index of Economic Complexity was applied (Hausmann et al. 2012); the higher the indicator, the worse it is for the EGC.

We did not include GDP as a partial indicator. There is some similarity between GDP and mass, which is important in physics when discussing gravity. This was done because big and small economies often engage in trade and seek improved institutional access to foreign markets. In many cases, it does not matter whether the economy and GDP are big or small; in both situations, they find it advantageous to join an integration block.

The indicator we have just defined is a sum of the contributions of the countries concerned. Every country influences the total in its own way. This contribution depends on partial indicators. They are usually different from each other, but some of them, i.e., the share of trade inside the group and the average distance between the chosen states, are the same for all countries concerned. If we compare the EGC for different blocks, all partial indicators are not at the same level.

It is no surprise that two indicators, the geographical distance between countries and customs protection, work against economic gravity. We are also of the opinion that the sectorial structures of countries must be complementary to expand trade. The Index of Economic Complexity is a good tool to make objective evaluations.

The EGC was presented as an unweighted arithmetic average. All partial indicators affect the synthetic indicators with the same force. However, this can be changed if we conclude that some partial indicators are more important than others. In practice, there are two versions of the EGC: unweighted and weighted.

Our coefficient was defined for a specific time, namely a year. It means that it can change every year, although one should not expect big differences from year to year to arrive. Despite this, it is a good choice to use an average for a few years in the EGC rather than data for a single year.

We have suggested a tool to measure the economic gravity that is easy to interpret and comment on (Hamanaka 2009; Ekanayake, Mukherjee, and Veeramacheneni 2010; van Bergeijk and Brakman 2010; Shepherd 2013; Kabir, Salim, and Al-Mawali 2017). The calculations required to get statistical results are time-consuming to run because of the extensive data collection process. However, the general idea of the coefficient is simple. We think that there should be minimal complexity associated with discussing economic interdependence, especially when looking for measurements of the phenomenon.

The Economic gravity coefficient: Integration blocks

We are now ready to implement the new analytical tool that makes it possible to compare the integration blocks we chose earlier. Averages from 2015–2019 were the basis of our research. Despite many turbulences, this was a time of great stabilisation in the world economy. This is why we wanted to omit the influence of the COVID–19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and get a view of a stable global economy, at least for a number of years. The data we used are now historical, which is standard in economics and statistics. To have a new picture of economic ties, one needs a new period of stable structures in the global economic system – once again, a time free of trade and investment shocks. Naturally, it is possible to find the EGC for any single year, but this result will quickly lose its usefulness for predictions and conclusions about the future.

Table 2 presents the EGC for the trade blocks under consideration. The results are weighted and unweighted measures. Any set of weights is debatable; nevertheless, it is difficult to claim that all partial indicators are equally important. These remarks do not apply to the unweighted EGC.

Table 2. The weighted and unweighted Economic Gravity Coefficient for the main integration blocks, 2015–2020

Blocks	Weighted EGC	Unweighted EGC
EU	1.33	1.11
USMCA	1.66	1.64
MERCOSUR	0.77	0.83
ASEAN	1.09	1.06
EEU	1.04	1.31
SAARC	0.98	1.08
AU	0.89	0.91
RCEP	1.10	1.08

Source: author's elaboration.

It is not surprising that the EGC is highest in the case of USMCA. Canada and Mexico together account for a third of US exports, much more than China. As regards US imports, China is number one, but the share of its two neighbours is also high. More than 70 per cent of Canadian and Mexican exports are US-oriented. The same is not true of imports, however. So, there is no doubt that the legal arrangement for trade within the North American triangle was necessary for all sides concerned.

The EU member states trade mainly with each other or European non-members. The share of exports and imports from the block is relatively small. Before the EU was established and expanded, trade inside the area was already huge. The new integration arrangements made it much bigger.

At its inception, RCEP was not an advanced trade block, and it is not clear when it will become a full free trade area. Currently, China is the main trade partner of the ASEAN countries, as well as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. However, this is not true of Vietnamese exports. China is also a main import partner for Japan. The bulk of Australia's exports and imports are with China, and the same is true of South Korea. The trade inside the ASEAN is relatively big.

The problem of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation is that trade relations between India and Pakistan, the countries that dominate this structure, are limited. Big neighbours are often not close economic partners. For example, Sri Lanka trades with India heavily, but not India with Sri Lanka.

The African Union was started to integrate countries which, from a geographical trade structure perspective, have little in common with their continental partners. Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa, the largest economies in Africa, have few trade ties inside the continent. Big trade exchanges between African countries are rare.

MERCOSUR faces the same problem. Brazil is the main trade partner for Argentina but not vice versa. Meanwhile, for Uruguay, Brazil – the largest state in the region – is important, as is China. The Latin American countries trade mainly with China, the USA and Europe. Mexico is the exception – it is US-oriented.

The countries of the EEU are not the main trade partners of Russia. The only exceptions are, to some extent, Armenia and Belarus. Russia is important for Kazakhstan in exports, but not in imports. From an economic exchange perspective, the EEU and facilitating trade do not seem to be a necessity for member states. All these comments describe the situation before the 2022 war against Ukraine.

The gravity model does not take into consideration that foreign trade in some EEU countries is highly influenced by the government's political decisions. This means there is both economic and political gravity.

To better understand what the EGC is and how it works, we have made similar calculations for a number of economic groups which are not integration blocks. One can expect that, in these cases, the values of the EGC will be high. The results are given in Table 3.

Table 3. The weighted and unweighted Economic Gravity Coefficient for the integration blocks, 2015–2020

Group of countries	Weighted EGC	Unweighted EGC
Eurozone	1.42	1.13
EU6*	1.82	1.43
Vysegrád group	1.79	1.40
Scandinavian countries	2.11	1.63
BENELUX	1.44	1.16
UK and Ireland	1.63	1.25
Spain and Portugal	1.61	1.23

* 6 first member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands).
Source: author's elaboration.

All cases included in Table 3 are indeed examples of very strong gravity, which is what one could expect and what did happen. We have chosen groups of many countries and two pairs of countries. The data in Table 3 can serve as a reference to convince us that economic gravity in trade blocks is sometimes very strong but sometimes weak. That was the case for some blocks, and was also seen in Table This is what we intended to get when looking for a gravity indicator.

The Economic dependency ratio

The Economic Dependency Ratio (EDR) measures the strength of the interconnection between two areas. This measure should not be overly complex, as it could make it challenging to provide a clear and convincing interpretation of its subject for analysis. Naturally, the EDR will not be the same as the EGC. The new indicator should also be easy to calculate, which was not the case of the EGC.

In practice, the trade dependency of a small country on a much larger country can lead to two situations: A stronger partner wants to buy products from a weaker partner, or the weaker partner is more active in finding ways to buy abroad. This leads to the supply effect and the influence effect, respectively (Hirschman 1945). Both effects are difficult to measure; the EDR is an attempt to get the necessary information on this point.

We will consider two indicators: the share of area A_1 in the foreign trade of area A_k, and the share of foreign trade in the GDP of area A_k. An economist can intuitively conclude that the EDR of area A_k on area A_1 will usually be not equal the EDR of area

A_1 on area A_k. This asymmetry is a fundamental characteristic of the EDR concept. The EDR is not reversible. Now, let us look for the definition.

The EDR of area A_k on area A_1 is as follows

$$ED(A_k, A_1) = \sqrt{u_{k1} \cdot w_k},$$

where u_{k1} is the average of shares of area A_1 in the exports and imports of area A_k, and w_k is the average of the rates of exports and imports to the GDP of area A_k. To get the averages, we need observations from a number of years, as we did using the EGR. The first multiplier above signifies the importance of one partner for another; the second multiplier signifies the importance of external trade as a whole for the reference economy. The geometrical mean we use lets us avoid very small values of an indicator.

The bigger $ED(A_k \cdot A_1)$, the stronger the dependence of area A_k on area A_1. It is now clear that the measure we defined is not convertible. Economic knowledge does not suggest that the economic dependence of area A_k on an area A_1 should be as high as the dependence of area A_1 on area A_k. It means we have received the following:

$$ED(A_k, A_1) \neq ED(A_1, A_k).$$

Table 4 includes the EDRs for pairs of countries or for a country and a certain block. In all cases, it is reasonable to assume that there are close economic ties, at least in one direction. This research shows how big the EDR can be in extreme situations, which is also helpful to understand the values of the EGC in Table 3.

Table 4. The Economic Dependency Ratio, 2015–2019

Area A_k	Area A_1	Dependency	
		A_k on A_1	A_1 on A_k
Canada	United States	0.43	0.11
China	United States	0.17	0.13
China	Japan	0.10	0.16
Argentina	Brazil	0.16	0.09
Belarus	Russia	0.53	0.09
Russia	Ukraine	0.08	0.10
France	Germany	0.20	0.18
Austria	Germany	0.35	0.13
Ireland	United Kingdom	0.26	0.08

Area A_k	Area A_1	Dependency	
		A_k on A_1	A_1 on A_k
Spain	Portugal	0.13	0.30
Czechia	Slovakia	0.24	0.36
Germany	Poland	0.13	0.34
Poland	Russia	0.15	0.08
United States	European Union	0.14	0.15
Russia	European Union	0.28	0.10

Source: author's elaboration.

In many cases, a significant asymmetry is observed in the results, as expected. Let us repeat that the economic dependence of a given area on another area is not as high as the dependence in the opposite direction. The inequality of EDRs is especially big for pairs of countries of divergent economic sizes, especially divergent GDPs.

Our suppositions on bilateral relations between particular countries were verified by the empirical research, and the results are generally in line with expectations. For example, Canada's trade dependence on the USA is three times bigger than the dependence of the USA on Canada. The EDR shows Canada needs the USA as a market for its exports. The dependence of Argentina on its main trade partner, Brazil, is bigger than the inverse relation. For Brazil, the main trade partners are China and the USA, not Argentina. The interdependence of the United States and the European Union is shown to be small, which is caused mainly by the small share of trade in the GDP of both subjects. The same situation can be observed for three other pairs: Czechia–Slovakia, Ireland–the United Kingdom, and Austria–Germany.

The introduced indicator helps to analyse trade relations but not the capital links. To some extent, merchandise trade can be substituted by the foreign direct investment. Because of this, the EDR is not a full presentation of economic relations between countries.

Conclusions

The indicator that shows the strength of an integration block provided evidence that the eight economic blocks (the European Union, the Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States and Canada, the Southern Common Market, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Euroasian Economic Union, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the African Union and the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership), are different from each other. Thus, the consequences of integration in all these cases will not be the same.

There is no doubt that the EU is a strong economic and integration structure, and new initiatives in this area are not very important for the participating parties. The economic dependence between the countries of the world is also differentiated and, in every case, is not the same.

We did not start this paper with any hypothesis on economic relations between countries. Because of this, our job was not to prove anything. Despite this, we can say that the economic intuition and *a priori* expectations were, in many cases, in line with the results of the statistical analysis.

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Analiza komparatywna głównych bloków integracyjnych

Dlaczego procesy integracyjne w niektórych częściach świata posuwają się w korzystny sposób do przodu, co gdzie indziej nie ma miejsca? Dlaczego niektóre bloki integracyjne są ważne dla krajów, które do nich należą, a nie dzieje się to na całym świecie? Artykuł zawiera komparatywną analizę międzynarodowych struktur gospodarczych, której celem jest wskazanie, co czyni integrację istotną i efektywną.

Przedmiotem badania jest osiem bloków: Unia Europejska, umowa Stany Zjednoczone–Meksyk–Kanada, Wspólny Rynek Południa, Stowarzyszenie Narodów Azji Południowo-Wschodniej, Euroazjatycka Unia Gospodarcza, Południowoazjatyckie Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Regionalnej, Unia Afrykańska i Regionalne Kompleksowe Partnerstwo Gospodarcze. Autor rozpatruje pięć szczebli integracji: strefę wolnego handlu, unię celną, jednolity rynek, unię ekonomiczną i unię monetarną. Aby dobrze zrozumieć postęp integracji, trzeba brać pod uwagę wiele zjawisk i opisujących je wskaźników. Współczynnik grawitacji ekonomicznej jest dogodnym sposobem określenia znaczenia struktur integracyjnych dla umawiających się krajów.

Słowa kluczowe: blok integracyjny, grawitacja ekonomiczna, szczebel integracji, współczynnik ekonomiczny