

Methodological framework for the assessment and comparison of various models of regional economic integration

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Abstract

The author proposes in this article an updated methodological framework for the assessment and comparison of various models of regional economic integration in terms of assessing their advantages, strengths, weaknesses and effects. Set of criteria has been developed for this purpose (type, form, methods, mechanism, factors, terms). The proposed methodological approach also creates a framework, which allows comparing the scale, depth and dynamics of different models of integration.

Keywords: methodology, regional economic integration, regional economic groupings, models of economic integration.

Metodologiczne zasady analizy i porównywania różnych modeli regionalnej integracji gospodarczej

Streszczenie

Autor przedstawia w tym artykule znowelizowane metodologiczne podejście do badań regionalnej integracji gospodarczej, które pozwala dokonywać wszechstronnej analizy tego zjawiska z różnych perspektyw w oparciu o opracowany zestaw kryteriów: typ integracji, forma integracji, metoda integracji, mechanizm integracji, czynniki integracji, warunki integracji. Zaproponowane podejście ma służyć jako narzędzie umożliwiające porównywanie zalet, mocnych i słabych stron oraz skutków poszczególnych modeli regionalnej integracji gospodarczej.

Słowa kluczowe: metodologia, regionalna integracja gospodarcza, regionalne ugrupowania gospodarcze, modele integracji gospodarczej.

Nowadays assessment and comparison of different models of regional economic integration is not only a scientific problem, but also has a basic practical significance. The rapid dynamics of integration processes throughout the world, the emergence of new models of regional economic integration and the complication of existing ones are the key reasons that have drawn attention to this topic.

A wide variety of regional economic organisations have emerged over the last several decades, ranging from the simplest free trade areas to such complex political and economic organisations such as the European Union. Study of these processes often comes down to a detailed description of certain integration models or an analysis of their selected aspects. Such approaches allow scientists to study every model thoroughly and in detail, but they are insufficient in terms of comparing important parameters of various integration models, which is essential in assessing their advantages, strengths, weaknesses and effects.

The methodological gap and lack of applicable research tools, in turn, reduces the value of discussion on political decision-making regarding the best choice for a regional economic integration model, reducing it to slogan speculations rather than fact. Discussions about the model of future relations between the EU and the United Kingdom is the most notorious recent example of such a problem that one might notice. The difficult and frustrating negotiations about optimal models of integration between the EU and the countries belonging to the European Neighbourhood Policy is an illuminating case as well.

There is no commonly accepted methodology that would provide participants of similar discussions with facts and arguments rather than political slogans and irrational emotional judgments. Finding a way of filling this gap is the ambitious goal of this article. In this context, the aim of the article is to develop a methodological framework that would enable experts not only to analyse various models of regional economic integration, but compare them as well.

The hypothesis and research methodology

The author has the hypothesis that the research methodology of regional economic groupings should be based on analysing of a set of developed criteria that reflect the key parameters and characteristics of regional economic organisations. This would help to compare different integration models in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, which, in turn, might provide valuable knowledge for the members of regional economic organisations to make better choices.

In order to confirm the hypothesis, the following research tasks were formulated:

- a) deconstruction of the phenomena of regional economic integration,
- b) identification of the most important functional parameters of regional economic integration,
- c) development of a set of criteria that might enable the assessment and comparison of various models of regional economic integration.

The author operates according to theoretical research methods, including descriptive evaluation methods, content analysis of key sources of information, literature on the subject¹, international agreements and other official documents. Of particular importance for this research is the case study method, which has been used for analysing various regional economic groupings in detail.

Regional economic integration as a complex phenomenon

Regional economic integration is an extremely complicated phenomenon in the history of humanity and quite a thorny topic for academic research. Contrary to the fact that the definition itself indicates that it concerns the regional actors of the international arena that strive to strengthen economic cooperation, academic thought still does not even have a strict and universally accepted definition of the concept in question. Some schools treat it as a process, others as a state, and others still as a combined phenomenon (both a process and a state). In fact, every school uses its own definition, which is sometimes not suitable for academic consideration within other schools.

The common basis for all definitions is the general statement that the integration process involves merging the economies of individual countries into one whole (integration grouping). This is a compromise term, which (despite the fact that it does not fully satisfy all academic schools) does not, however, evoke any serious controversy or opposition. It is worth emphasising that the integration grouping formed is not a simple summation of national economies, but – due to the extent of the internal economic connections achieved – it stands out from other entities of the worldwide economy (Barcz et al. 2012).

Regional economic integration as a highly complex phenomenon involving many different strands permeating different levels. Describing each integration grouping does not present a problem, but comparing two or more integration groups is a more complicated task. This requires the development of a methodological tool.

In this context we are recommended to use the term 'regional economic integration model', which can be described by using a set of criteria. It is worth noting that in the literature on the subject this term is used fairly readily. For example, J. Rosiek understands it as an overview of the integration system, encompassing a set of its basic features, including in particular the division of jurisdiction between international or supranational bodies and the offices of Member States, and between central economic power centres in individual countries and enterprises (Rosiek 2003; p. 32).

On this basis, three models of international economic integration are usually distinguished, in particular:

¹ For example: Balassa 1961; Barcz et al. 2012; Bożyk 2002, 2008; El-Agraa 1999; Ładyka 2001; Molle 2006; Pelkmans 2006; Proniewski, Niedźwiecki 2004; Rosiek 2003; Sannwald, Stohler 1959; Tinbergen 1954; Zielińska-Głębocka 1999; Żołądkiewicz, Orłowska 2012; Czarczyńska, Śledziwska 2007; Wojtaszczyk, Nadolska 2015; Howarth, Verdun 2020; and others.

- d) **International integration**, which assumes that all decisions should be taken by the member countries, with integration centres playing a very limited role restricted to coordinating the actions of the member states.
- e) **Transnational integration**, where both the transnational centre and the national centres have the right to influence the integration processes within a given grouping. The scope of competence manifested by a supranational integration centre depends on the consent of the member countries, which usually delegate some of their decision-making powers to it.
- f) **A 'mixed' model of economic integration**, which, on the one hand, consists of elements typical of the model of international integration while, and on the other hand – featuring elements characteristic of transnational integration.

While agreeing that this approach is consistent with the definition of the term 'model', we nonetheless believe, that models of international integration must be analysed on the basis of wider set of criteria.

Criteria for the analysis and comparison of various models of regional economic integration

Analysis of regional economic groupings and their comparison with each other requires the researcher to identify several relevant criteria regarding integration, including: type, form, method, mechanism, factors and terms.

1. Type of integration. The literature on the subject contains several approaches to typologising regional economic integration. According to the most general one, there are four types of integration:

- contractual integration of sovereign states (equal partners),
- supranational contractual integration of states voluntarily limiting their own sovereignty in favour of integration institutions (equal partners),
- politically unequal integration (political subordination of politically unequal partners),
- economically unequal integration (economic subordination of economically unequal partners) (Proniewski, Niedźwiecki 2004: p. 13).

The above classification opens a new research perspective, pointing to an important detail of regional economic integration, namely the differences in the 'starting positions' of the countries that participate. This is extremely relevant because different types of integration will yield completely different effects for their participants.

In this context, one ought to depart from the position of the major mainstream schools of economics, which often disregard the specifics of integration participants, assuming that the process of regional integration involves the participation of several equal players in the international arena who co-create the "rules of the game". However, it is often the case that there are some countries participating in regional economic integration that are able to independently influence the processes of integration and the functioning of the entire grouping. There are also those that do not have any major impact, which is why they adapt passively to the rules of this process. This creates a certain asymmetry in the processes of regional economic integration.

2. Form (stage) of integration. When it comes to the classification of forms of economic integration, special attention should be paid to several key issues. Most scholars see regional economic integration as an evolutionary process, involving a shift from less to more advanced stages of integration. For example, according to W. Molle, regional economic integration means the gradual elimination of economic boundaries between countries, consisting of three stages. The first is the liberalisation of trade in commodities. The second concerns the removal of obstacles blocking the flow of production factors (i.e. capital, labour resources and technology), while the third involves coordination between partners in various aspects of economic policy (Molle 2006: p. 9). Molle's approach indicates that, in addition to the legal form of economic integration, real processes should be included too. After all, entering the term 'free trade zone' in an international agreement does not mean that an actual free trade zone will indeed be organised between countries.

The classical approach to the classification of forms of economic integration is systematisation, as presented by B. Balassa. This economist identified five forms of integration that reflect the various levels (or degrees) of integrated economies of the participating countries. Here the criterion of division is the scope of elimination of barriers to cooperation as well as the level of institutional cooperation of the grouping's members. These forms are as follows:

- 1) Free trade area.
- 2) Customs union.
- 3) Common market.
- 4) Economic union.
- 5) Total economic integration (Balassa 1961).

In addition to this extremely elegant classification, which was accepted by the academic community as classical, B. Balassa also introduced a hypothesis that integration proceeds along an upward trend, i.e. from a free trade zone to full economic integration.

Although the above classification is highly practical and adequately describes the majority of integration groups in the world, it is not universal. There are some cases that cannot be included in this concept. For example, the European Union cooperates – within the scope of the European Economic Area – with Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, which provides for the launch of a free trade zone between these countries and the Union and their entry into the EU single market along with the lifting of barriers against the flow of people, goods and capital. However, this model of cooperation actually bypasses one of the stages that, according to B. Balassa, would precede the common market – a customs union.

Other theorists have also pointed out the same problem. J. Pelkmans indicates that the stages of integration have tended to be established along the principle of succession for analytical purposes. According to him, there is no necessary reason to follow the adopted sequence strictly (Pelkmans 2006: p. 42).

In concurrence with this statement, S. Ładyka claims that individual stages of the integration process follow each other, but also overlap, co-participating in time. In addition,

the implemented integration processes interact, complement each other and become the causative agent of successive, new phenomena and conditions (Ładyka 2001: p. 27).

In general, despite some disadvantages, Balassa's classification and all others based upon it have tremendous academic value and allow some important conclusions to be drawn. In a situation, where one or more participants of the grouping strive for the maximum level of integration, determining the current form (stage) of integration according to the cited classification helps to signal their coordinates along this route.

3. Method of integration. J. Tinbergen introduced the concepts of positive and negative integration. By negative integration, he understands the removal of obstacles to trade between member states, and above all the elimination of mutual barriers and restrictions in the process of implementing exchange (Tinbergen 1954).

Positive integration, in turn, means creating instruments in the sphere of economic policy (and more importantly, implementing new instruments and institutions) that would facilitate the proper and effective functioning of the market in the integrated area. It requires the creation of new institutional forms that condition effective public interventions, which in many cases means the need to transfer the jurisdiction of national governments to supranational institutions, or the construction of new institutions with special powers.

In other words, negative integration means the elimination of discrimination in terms of regulations and economic policy implemented under joint supervision, while positive integration is a kind of transfer of joint institutions or joint execution of power, at least to some extent (Tinbergen 1954).

The literature on the subject mentions another approach to the classification of integration methods, according to which there exist two methods:

- functional,
- institutional (Sannwald, Stohler 1959).

Proponents of the former of these methods indicate that the main role in the process of economic integration should be played by the market mechanism, and the role of states and joint institutions should be limited to removing barriers in international trade and ensuring the free movement of goods and services as well as production factors (labour and capital).

According to the proponents of the institutional method, economic integration is possible provided that the states act in concert. Significant approximation (harmonisation) of policy is required, or even better – full harmonisation. Such an approach implies the need to set up joint institutions with supranational powers that are able to implement joint operations at the expense of limiting the jurisdiction of national authorities.

According to the approach currently prevailing in science, these methods are not contradictory, but complementary. At the initial stages of economic integration, functional integration is a more effective method, but as the integration deepens, the institutional method should be aimed for.

However, unresolved issues include how to determine exactly at what stages the functional method is sufficient and when to apply to the institutional method. Usually, there is unanimous agreement on one point only – the initial stage of international

economic integration (free trade area), in the absence of any ambition to deepen it further, the functional method will suffice for the participants in this process, but full economic integration brings the necessity for political union, i.e. deep institutional integration, expressed in a unified approach of all integrating countries towards policy in its strictest meaning – both internal and foreign.

For example, J. Pelkmans believes that at the stages of a free trade zone, customs union and a common market, effective economic integration can take place without using the positive method (Pelkmans 2006). Another scholar, P. Bożyk analysed the issue and concludes that the creation of a free trade zone and customs union does not require transnational forms of integration, but without these forms the proper functioning of a common market, monetary union, political union, economic union and full economic union is difficult, and is often not possible (Bożyk 2002: p. 27).

In general, the attempt to combine the stages of integration with the method of integration is quite a significant shift, indicating that the political and institutional factor is an essential component of the economic integration process, which at some stages begins to play a vital role.

4. Mechanism of integration. In this context, one should peruse the methodological assumptions of P. Bożyk, J. Rosiek, K. Żołądkiewicz and R. Orłowska. By mechanism of integration, Bożyk understands the principles of market functioning in an integration process determined by the functions of its parameters, i.e. domestic and international prices, exchange rates, interest rates, etc. (Bożyk 2002: p. 25–26). There are two basic integration mechanisms: the mechanism of a free market and free trade and the mechanism of a regulated market (protectionism). The 'invisible hand of the market' plays a key role in a free market and free trade mechanism. National integration centres are first and foremost the guardians of order in individual countries. They maintain the rule of law and public order, and counteract disruptions to the mechanism of perfect competition.

In the mechanism of a regulated market, the importance of national and supranational (possibly international) centres increases compared to the mechanism of a free market and free trade. Their task is not only to support the liberalisation of flows of goods, services and production factors, but also to coordinate and unify the goals, means and tools of the internal and external economic policy of the integrating countries (Rosiek 2003: p. 35).

P. Bożyk attempts to find the optimal application of individual mechanisms of integration in various types of regional economic groupings. Based on the assumptions of the school of classical economics, he proves that the free market and free trade mechanism are the best solutions for an integration grouping whereby member states represent similar levels of economic development, complementary economic structures, and competitive economic entities.

Nevertheless, in Bożyk's view, the mechanism of a regulated market is ineffective when some member states of an integration grouping do not meet certain conditions for economic integration. This is especially true when countries with lower levels of economic development, uncompetitive economic structures, and weaker entities participating in the integration process are admitted to the grouping.

According to K. Żołądkiewicz and R. Orłowska, in types of economic integration groupings such as organisations consisting of sovereign, equal partners, as well as supranational organisations, created by states voluntarily limiting sovereignty in favour of integration institutions, the mechanism of free market and free trade enables optimal economic decisions to be taken, and the benefits of integrations are divided equally among the participants in the integration process. In contrast, the regulated market mechanism is suitable for economic integration models (Żołądkiewicz, Orłowska 2012: p. 36)

5. Factors of integration. One of the most difficult tasks in the context of formulating the methodological assumptions of this research is to determine the factors of regional economic integration. The identification of such factors enables the assessment and prognosis of the dynamics and quality of integration processes. The literature on the subject contains many studies devoted to individual factors determining the course, dynamics and nature of regional economic integration. Together with this, it is difficult to find a systemic approach in this matter. To meet the objectives of this study, the factors need to be systematised and ordered.

Based on a deep analysis of regional economic integration, it was established that key factors may be categorised into three main groups: economic, legal and political. The economic factors of regional economic integration include the following:

- a) internationalisation of business activity;
- b) liberalisation of the movement of goods, services, capital and people;
- c) economic and technological development;
- d) complementarity of economies;
- e) developed infrastructure.

Economic factors naturally affect regional economic integration processes in a highly significant fashion. The accelerated internationalisation of economic activity, the positive dynamics of liberalising the flow of goods, services, capital and people, the extreme complementarity of economies and developed infrastructure are all important factors that will have a positive impact on the dynamics and quality of this process.

Nonetheless, it should be emphasised that economic factors are not the only ones that determine the process of regional economic integration; sometimes they do not even play a dominant role. Legal and political factors are also relevant in this process.

As far as legal factors are concerned, in this case it seems obvious that any law created on a community basis within a certain integration grouping translates into strictly economic processes, including the conditions underlying the conduct of business activity, and thus on the state of the enterprise sector.

In fact, legal factors are specific legal mechanisms that affect the conditions for running a business or, in a broader context, the business climate in a certain integration grouping. These include regulations, the tax system, business support system, public procurement system, etc.

Legal acts and regulations are the result of political decisions taken at an international level, and so political factors are no less important in this study. In this situation, it is difficult to determine the causal relationship between the political and economic aspects

of regional integration. As S. Ładyka rightly puts it, while analysing the integration process on the European continent, 'the processes of political and economic integration within the borders of the current EU have been closely connected since the very beginning' (Ładyka 2001: p. 19).

Some scholars hold the view that economic factors are what determine institutional and political integration. For example, A. Zielińska-Głębocka claims that "the deepening of economic integration is, in effect, a justification for the development of supranational structures and an impulse to create community political systems" (Zielińska-Głębocka 1999: p. 23). There are also scholars, who hold the opposite view. For example, A. M. El-Agraa makes a justified case that all known cases of integration result from political motivations, even when they were argued along the lines of achievable economic benefits (El-Agraa 1999: p. 32).

In this article, the resolution of the above-mentioned dispute is not a matter of priority. The main thesis is that political factors play an important role, which cannot be underestimated in the context of this research. Political discussions, positions and decisions are the object of interest in this study, primarily because they affect the institutional shape of regional economic groupings, and therefore the business climate along with the economic and financial condition of the enterprise sector.

6. Terms of integration. This is understood as a range of criteria, whose fulfilment guarantees a greater chance that the integration of several countries will be more effective than when these criteria are not met. In other words, the stability and effectiveness of regional economic groupings depend on meeting such terms.

This topic has received copious coverage in the literature on the subject. For example, P. Bożyk identifies and describes in detail the conditions that he believes necessary for the stability and effectiveness of regional economic groupings. These include:

- close geographical location,
- adequate infrastructure,
- similar level of economic development,
- complementarity of economic structures,
- state systemic compliance,
- compliance of internal economic policy,
- similarity of foreign policy (Bożyk 2008: p. 19).

The fulfilment of the above terms is undoubtedly a most relevant factor for successful economic integration. However, it should be underlined that in this research P. Bożyk was thinking about the most advanced forms of integration. For the efficiency of the functioning of less-deep forms of integration (free trade area, customs union), meeting all of the above-mentioned conditions is desirable, but not always an absolute necessity. Nevertheless, in the context of this study, the terms of economic integration described by P. Bożyk are a highly effective methodological tool.

However, it is necessary to supplement the cited classification of factors. One might suggest introducing an additional condition, referred to as the "convergence of interests of foreign economic policy". This category is borrowed from a realistic trend in

international relations theory. One of its fundamental assumptions is that each country in international relations primarily seeks to satisfy its own interests, including pragmatic economic concerns. In this context, regional economic integration is not an end in itself, but an instrument for the development of a specific country that may use it to complete higher-level operations. These include:

- achieving the highest possible pace of economic development,
- boosting exports of goods and services,
- direct investment flow from abroad,
- inflow of currencies to ensure balance of payment stability,
- price stability within the state,
- access to cheap raw materials and other production factors,
- achieving the highest possible employment rate,
- striving to achieve balance in foreign economic exchange.

It cannot be questioned that the effective implementation of these operations will encourage international actors to deepen regional economic integration, and on the contrary – disruption of these interests will weaken the motivation of some or all participants in the regional grouping to strive for deeper integration.

Conclusions

While rounding off the study, it should be highlighted that regional economic integration is a highly complex and multidimensional process. It leads to the creation of various forms of regional economic groupings that are difficult to compare without the appropriate research tool.

Research involving the description of specific integration models or specific groupings faces no major methodological problems. The situation becomes more complicated when the purpose of the study is a systemic analysis of such groupings with a concurrent need to compare the parameters of several groupings. The lack of developed criteria, on which the research of a similar nature can be based, means that academic and political discussions on the effectiveness of these or other forms of regional integration are not based on empirical facts, but political slogans. In order to fill this research gap, this paper proposes, as one possible option, a revised methodological approach to research on international regional economic integration. In this regard, the process of regional integration can be analysed according to the following integration criteria: type, form (stage), method, mechanism, factors and terms.

Analysis of integration along the lines of the developed criteria may serve to explain the purpose, nature, essence and perspective of individual groupings, as well as compare them with each other in order to choose the optimal model for each specific case. The proposed methodological approach to research on regional economic integration aims to equip researchers in this field with universal scientific tools that would analysis and comparison of the scale, scope and developmental dynamics of various regional economic groupings.

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Aleksy Motdowan – doktor ekonomii, tytuł naukowy doktora uzyskał w Narodowym Instytucie Badań Strategicznych w Kijowie na kierunku *Bezpieczeństwo ekonomiczne państwa*. Obecnie doktorant w Kolegium Nauk o Przedsiębiorstwie Szkoły Głównej Handlowej w Warszawie. Od wielu lat pracuje jako ekspert dla instytucji analitycznych i badawczych. Jest autorem ponad 50 prac naukowych w językach angielskim, polskim, rosyjskim, ukraińskim i słowackim. Zainteresowania naukowe: 1) Problemy makroekonomiczne (bezpieczeństwo gospodarcze państwa, finanse publiczne, polityka fiskalna, klimat inwestycyjny); 2) Studia Europejskie (integracja europejska, polityka zagraniczna Unii Europejskiej, europejska polityka sąsiedztwa, reformy gospodarcze w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej); 3) Realny sektor gospodarki (energetyka, przemysł wydobywczy i hutniczy).

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