UDC 911.3 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15501179

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ECONOMIC AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

Abstract. *This article analyzes the role and significance of regional integration and economic cooperation processes in economic geography. Economic integration is considered a crucial factor in strengthening trade and economic relations between countries and regions, coordinating production processes, and developing market economies. Regional integration accelerates territorial development, creating opportunities for expanding infrastructure capabilities, efficient utilization of labor resources, and implementation of innovations. Furthermore, economic integration processes serve to form production clusters, reduce economic disparities between regions, and introduce common market mechanisms. The article examines the impact of economic geographical factors, population density, production concentration, labor market, and transport-communication networks on economic development. Additionally, it discusses the challenges encountered in regional integration processes and mechanisms for addressing them. The research draws upon scientific works of international and local experts, as well as contemporary trends in the field of economic geography.*

Key words: *economic integration, regional integration, economic geographical location, concentration, specialization, infrastructure.*

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ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКАЯ И РЕГИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ В ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОЙ ГЕОГРАФИИ

Аннотация. *В данной статье анализируются роль и значение процессов региональной интеграции и экономического сотрудничества в экономической географии. Экономическая интеграция является важным фактором укрепления торгово-экономических отношений между государствами и регионами, координации производственных процессов и развития рыночной экономики. Региональная интеграция ускоряет территориальное развитие и создает возможности для расширения инфраструктурного потенциала, эффективного использования трудовых ресурсов и внедрения инноваций. Кроме того, процессы экономической интеграции способствуют формированию производственных кластеров, сокращению экономических диспропорций между регионами и внедрению общих рыночных механизмов. В статье рассматривается влияние экономико-географических факторов, таких как плотность населения, концентрация производства, рынка труда и транспортно-коммуникационных сетей, на экономическое развитие. Наряду с этим обсуждаются проблемы, возникающие в процессе региональной интеграции, и механизмы их преодоления. В исследовании использованы научные труды зарубежных и отечественных специалистов, а также рассмотрены современные тенденции в области экономической географии.*

Ключевые слова: *экономическая интеграция, региональная интеграция, экономико-географическое положение, концентрация, специализация, инфраструктура.*

Introduction and problem statement. The year-on-year population growth, intensification of population mobility, globalization, and expansion of cities in width and length are leading to rapid development of integration processes, especially integration ties between regions. Integration processes, as in all spheres of society, are becoming increasingly widespread across various disciplines and research fields. In particular, integration processes in economic geography are accelerating with the growth of production specialization. Currently,

economic integration processes are gaining increasing importance and becoming one of the main directions of international cooperation. In this context, the economic-geographical position of regions and their opportunities for entering international markets are of decisive importance. Notably, integration processes between states at different stages of economic development are important from the perspective of effectiveness and stability.

When implementing policies for developing national economies, the following geographical aspects are taken into account: economic-geographical position, population size, age structure, density, and distances. The differences between these concepts reflect the variations in social, economic, and political geography. The geographical density, economic geographical position, territorial division, and distance necessary for economic development help determine the main economic mechanisms and relevant policies at three primary geographical levels - local, national, and international. The first of these, population density, plays an important role at the local level. Specifically, the costs of developing transport, communication, and other infrastructure facilities in regions with higher density will be relatively lower. The concentration of production, necessary for addressing issues, ensures the achievement of desired outcomes using market mechanisms that help equalize the standard of living in rural areas, large and small cities at the national level. Economic production is concentrated primarily in several regions of the world - North America, Northeast Asia, and Western Europe, which are considered the most integrated areas. Other regions, by contrast, are divided and poorly integrated territories.

This process occurs through migration flows, investments, and redistribution of jobs. For example, densely populated areas may be inclined towards industrial and service sectors, while less densely populated areas may lean towards economies based on agriculture or natural resources. In regions with higher density, social ties and networks develop more strongly, and favorable conditions are created for the growth of the service sector (education, healthcare, trade, etc.).

Study of the problem. The topics of integration and regional integration in economic geography have been extensively studied in the works of many renowned foreign scholars, including Ian Clark [6], D. Urwin [20], Allen Scott [17], M. Cini [5], Mc. Gowan [10], V. Cable [5], R. Axtman [1], Brulhart Marius [3], Clemens Michayel, Claudio Montenegro, Lant Pritchett [7], Colliyer Paul [8] and others. Economic integration is based on various theories, and its development and impact are explained through different approaches. The economic development theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber elucidate the role of economic integration in the progress of society and regions. Additionally, there is a model of step-by-step development of economic integration, developed by Balassa, which explains the processes from a free trade area to a complete economic union [2].

Some practical and methodological aspects of economic integration are examined in the works of Russian scientists and specialists such as Zubarevich N.V. [23], Vardomskiy L.B. [22], Kuznetsov A.V. [15], Glazev S.Yu. [9], Kheifets B.A. [12], Kosikova L.S. [13], Shmelev B.A. [16]. In particular, the scientific foundations of economic integration and regional integration processes are illuminated in the works of Uzbek scholars such as A. Soliyev [18], Z. Tojiyeva [20]. From the perspective of economic geography, integration is based on a system of mutually beneficial cooperation, which ensures the efficient distribution of production and consumption resources. This process is especially accelerated in countries with developed transport and communication infrastructure [14].

Aim and objectives of research. The purpose of this work is to study the issues of integration and regional integration in economic geography.

Research objectives:

- To substantiate economic integration and regional integration processes;

- To reveal the essence of geographical aspects in the implementation of countries' economic development policies, namely economic-geographical location, population size, age structure, density, and distances;

- To justify the role of economic-geographical location, concentration, specialization, and territorial division of labor in the development and placement of productive forces in rural and urban development;

Materials and methods. During their research process, the authors of the article thoroughly examined the catalogs of dissertations, abstracts, and scientific articles at the National Library of Uzbekistan named after Alisher Navoi, the Main Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Library of the National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek. Based on these sources, significant theoretical and practical materials related to the research topic were compiled and analyzed.

The scientific foundation of the research comprises official reports, analytical reviews, and advanced scientific developments in the field, provided by official state organizations, macroeconomic and statistical institutions of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Using this information, the conceptual approach of the research was formulated.

In the analysis process, in accordance with scientific research methodology, methods of historical-retrospective analysis, systemic-structural analysis, econometric modeling, comparative analysis, and economic analysis were extensively utilized. Each method served as a crucial tool for deeper exploration of the specific aspects of the chosen topic, identification of regional characteristics, and drawing scientific conclusions. These approaches, in turn, not only ensure the reliability of the research results but also serve to bring this scientific work closer to practical application.

Results and their discussion: In the process of integration in economic geography, the economic-geographical position of regions acquires special significance. This factor not only determines the internal economic capabilities of the region but also ensures its connection with foreign markets. Therefore, the participation of regions in the process of economic integration depends on their economic and geographical location, which forms the foundation for regional development and economic growth.

Economic-geographical location is important not only in terms of access to natural resources but also in terms of logistics, transport networks, and access to world markets at the international level. Regions with strategically advantageous locations have the opportunity to actively participate in international economic relations and gain an advantage in attracting investments. Economic-geographical location creates great opportunities for the development of foreign economic relations of states. However, for countries with an unfavorable geographical location, integration into the global economic system is a rather complex and difficult task. In particular, although economic-geographical location has certain significance from the point of view of access to world markets at the international level, sometimes the impermeability of regional borders, differences in currencies and their regulatory systems are considered quite serious obstacles to economic-regional integration. For small countries neighboring a large state with a strong economy, joining the global economy and developing integration ties remains one of the most challenging issues. Therefore, practical study of the influence of economic geographical location and the development of effective strategies in this area are of great importance. Economic-geographical location is an important factor influencing regional and global economic integration, and the effective use of its opportunities is one of the crucial conditions for the economic development of countries.

Economic integration is one of the most realistic and effective methods used in the concentration of production and in equalizing the standard of living of the population [16]. The implementation of the principle of economic integration requires the establishment of market mechanisms and state policy measures that make a worthy contribution to the concentration of economic activity and the equalization of living standards between different regions. In all cases, the influence of economic-geographical location and geographical conditions on economic opportunities is significant.

In particular, the importance of economic integration is growing in the modern world. This process is an important tool for reducing socio-economic disparities between different

regions and stimulating economic development. Today, many scientists recognize that the effectiveness of economic integration depends not only on political or economic factors but also on geographical factors. Specifically, as economic integration continues to develop, the fulfillment of complex tasks for the country's comprehensive development in accordance with policy measures is determined by the geographical features of the economy.

Economic integration processes, especially for developing countries, occur unevenly across regions. This unevenness is related to geographical conditions, the availability of natural resources, the level of transport infrastructure development, and demographic characteristics. Today, political debates about geographical disparities in economic development are often closely tied to the implementation status of measures in different regions. Moreover, economic integration with neighboring and distant countries is currently of great importance for developing nations. In cases where achieving integration ties is challenging, it is necessary to implement comprehensive work at the regional level when executing state programs. All these efforts are aimed at ensuring the well-being of the population living in the regions. This stimulates regional economic growth and serves to improve the quality of life by creating new jobs, developing infrastructure, and increasing the population's income. Additionally, economic integration contributes to the enhancement of interregional transport and logistics systems, expanding the population's access to goods and services. The development of education and professional development programs helps train competitive personnel for the labor market. As a result, regional economic integration increases the socio-economic well-being of the population and creates a solid foundation for sustainable development and innovative progress.

In parallel with economic integration, regional integration is increasing the concentration of economic production, and as countries develop, their population and economic activity are growing. Regional integration should not create isolated pockets, but rather provide opportunities for underdeveloped regions to access markets in developed regions [2]. However, the pace of these processes varies depending on the geographical scale of the region. The fastest concentration of population and production is observed at the local level, while at the international level, it occurs at a slower rate.

The process of concentration occurs more rapidly at the local level (in large and small cities). Firstly, the concentration of population in large and small cities is increasing. Additionally, due to limited job opportunities in rural areas, many residents are compelled to move to cities for work and residence. This leads to increased population density in cities, and in some areas, economic density rises as countries develop; people increasingly relocate to larger and smaller cities or their outskirts. "When countries transition from the low-income category to the middle-income category (approximately $3,500), the share of urban population there sharply increases from about 10% to 50%" [11].

The current pace of urbanization in today's developed countries does not differ from the indicators of the same stage of development. "In low-income countries, urban population growth rates were observed. They averaged 3% per year, which is twice the growth rate in middle-income countries and three times higher in high-income countries" [8]. Concentration on an international scale is slower and longer-lasting. In countries where the per capita income level "exceeds US$25,000 and the concentration of production and wealth on an international scale is high," this process continues today.

In areas with low levels of development, the population is large and density is high, therefore, a potential geographical issue is that production is developed and concentrated elsewhere. In today's era of globalization, the increasing migratory mobility of people is helping to address geographical issues to some extent. Particularly, economically developed regions have numerous production and industrial enterprises, which necessitates the utilization of labor resources. In underdeveloped regions, the main economic activity depends on agriculture, with relatively low efficiency and insufficient labor productivity. Consequently, people migrate to large cities and industrial centers to take advantage of economic opportunities.

This enables the involvement of people in production through various means and eliminates geographical disparities in their income. The experience of economically developed countries necessitates the implementation of policies that eliminate regional disparities in the main indicators of the population's standard of living. Thus, it simultaneously leads to the concentration of production and the equalization of living standards. This serves to reduce disparities in regional development, ensure the effective use of labor resources, and maintain social stability. At the same time, to ensure stable economic growth and minimize socio-economic disparities between regions, the state must implement measures for regional integration.

Prosperity is largely determined by geographical factors. For example, "over the past few decades, the average American has earned a hundred times more than the average Zambian, and the former's life expectancy has been relatively thirty years longer. However, behind these national averages lie even more alarming figures. If the situation doesn't change radically, a child born in a Zambian village, far from the country's capital Lusaka, will live less than half as long as a child born in New York and will earn only one percent of the latter's income over their respective short lives. A person living in New York earns about 4.5 million dollars in their lifetime, while a person living in a Zambian village earns less than 10 thousand dollars" [7]. This "geographic premium" is very significant in all developing countries, and on a global scale, the best predictor of income is not what or who you know, but where you work.

Differences in income and living standards among populations of countries and regions, as well as economic development with population growth, are due to territorial unevenness in economic-geographical location, specialization, and territorial division of labor. It is impossible for all regions to flourish simultaneously and develop prosperity everywhere at once. This is because each region has different economic and geographical locations, natural resources, labor resources, and transport links. Furthermore, the specialization of regions and production sectors differ from one another. These factors lead to imbalances in regional development. Some regions are rich in natural resources and rapidly develop in the industrial sector, while others may specialize in agriculture or the service sector.

These all pertain to geographical areas - local, national, and urban scales. In terms of development, villages lag behind cities and are always rushing to catch up with them. The standard of living is rising in some regions and parts of countries, while others are falling behind. Some countries are becoming wealthier, while others remain poor. If economic density were to be reflected on a world map, it would never be smooth and uniform, but would consist of irregularities and protrusions, just like the Earth's terrain [20].

One of the indicators of geographical prosperity and economic development is the provision of housing to the population. However, this indicator is less significant in wealthy countries compared to poor countries. In other words, as countries' level of economic development increases, housing provision means less for families and more for companies. Housing provision is more of an issue in countries with negative natural population growth, as opposed to economically developed countries, while for high-income entrepreneurs, it is a reliable investment and business opportunity. In such cases, natural geographical and economic geographical factors are not important for either party.

At the state level, cities, villages, urban neighborhoods, their economic and geographical position, specialization, role in the country's and region's territorial distribution, and their development are extremely important. The population surrounding prosperous large cities rarely lives in poverty. If a region achieves economic success, sooner or later the level of well-being in the area will rise. As a result, conditions are created for the future prosperity of countries' economic development. Within regions, some areas developed faster than others, and consequently, the level of well-being in cities and villages of each region of the country did not and does not occur simultaneously. Excessive economic development leads to an "overflow" of economic activity and results in regional prosperity. However, it should not be forgotten that

the ability to "exceed the norm" is also characteristic of negative phenomena. For example, excessive "poverty," "instability," "conflicts," etc [14].

Geographical imbalance usually means the state's inability to simultaneously expand economic development and ensure equal distribution of production throughout the country [9]. Politicians striving to solve economic development problems in progress aim to achieve harmonious equality in the concentration of economic production and living standards in different places. First and foremost, all processes must be closely intertwined with factors such as market, integration, migration, and specialization. In particular, economic, regional, or rather territorial integration processes play an important role in ensuring economic well-being.

The problem of geographical imbalance is one of the important issues in economic development today. This problem is especially relevant for developing countries, leading to uneven distribution of economic activity and differences in the population's standard of living. Regional integration processes serve as an important mechanism for addressing this issue. To eliminate geographical disparities in economic development, it is necessary to effectively use regional integration mechanisms. Through regional integration, it is possible to efficiently distribute economic resources, ensure the free movement of production factors, and strengthen interregional economic ties.

Another important aspect of regional integration is the optimization of regional specialization, thereby increasing economic efficiency. Each region has its own relative advantages, and regional integration creates opportunities to effectively utilize these advantages. This process takes into account the economic and geographical location of regions, their natural and climatic conditions and resources, population size, age structure, density, labor resources, and infrastructure facilities.

Regional integration processes expand access to local and international markets, opening up new prospects for small and medium-sized cities. Simultaneously, strengthening interdependence between national economies plays a crucial role in ensuring economic stability [15]. For instance, it enables reducing dependence on external markets, efficient resource distribution, and development of high-tech industries. Moreover, as globalization processes impact national economies, regional integration serves as a vital tool in enhancing international competitiveness. However, economic integration processes also face certain challenges. Foremost, disparities in economic development levels among different countries can impede integration processes. Additionally, excessive interdependence of national economies may, in some cases, lead to economic crises. Furthermore, political and legal differences, as well as administrative barriers, create specific difficulties in successfully implementing economic integration [2].

To enhance the effectiveness of regional integration processes, states need to implement a series of measures. Primarily, it is essential to coordinate economic policies, harmonize legislation, and improve the investment climate. Government measures aimed at supporting infrastructure development projects, forming production clusters, and promoting innovation can yield effective results. Improving the quality of labor resources through enhancement of education and professional training systems is also a crucial factor.

At the international level (in some regions and leading countries of the world), concentration persists for some time. Similar economic activity is observed at the international level. At the national level, the growth rate of concentration is relatively stable. Here, the best regional development indicators are measured by the production potential of the regions and population growth.

It is difficult to imagine the quantitative composition of the concentration process, but "when the per capita income reaches $10,000-15,000, it slows down or stops altogether" [11, 18]. Initially, the concentration process proceeds rapidly, and in developed countries, the concentration of production increases until it brings high income.

Conclusions. The results of the study necessitate defining control over urban growth as one of the important tasks in the context of integration in modern economic geography. This

calls for a rapid reduction in the income gap between urban and rural populations, support for territorial development programs in economically lagging local settlements, and inner regions far from the world market. In this, integration, especially regional integration ties, is extremely important in overcoming the growing geographical disparity between regions.

Analysis of the significance of economic geography and regional integration processes shows that strengthening economic cooperation is one of the important factors stimulating regional development. Regional integration not only ensures economic growth but also enables efficient use of labor resources, modernization of production, and introduction of innovations. Therefore, developing regional economic cooperation and integration processes is one of the priority tasks for developing and developed countries.

From the perspective of economic geography, integration processes serve to reduce the imbalance between economic centers and territorial development. Infrastructure investments play a particularly important role in reducing economic disparities between large economic centers and remote areas. Strong transport and logistics networks facilitate trade between regions, accelerate commercial processes, and serve to expand the market. Additionally, the free movement of labor resources allows for effective distribution of workforce and increases production efficiency.

In conclusion, economic geography and regional integration processes are of great importance in the development of states and regions. Through these processes, it is possible to achieve economic growth, increase production efficiency, and improve the well-being of the population. However, taking into account the challenges in integration processes, it is necessary to pursue a consistent policy to address them and strengthen economic cooperation. Only then can regional integration processes yield positive results and ensure sustainable development.

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For citation:

Tojieva Z.N., Jaloliddinov N.Kh. (2025), Economic and regional integration in economic geography, *Central Asian Journal of Geographical Researches*, No. 1-2, pp. 87-94.

Для цитирования:

Тожиева З.Н., Жалолиддинов Н.Х. Экономическая и региональная интеграция в экономической географии // Центральноазиатский журнал географических исследований. 2025. № 1-2. С. 87-94. (На англ. яз.).