

Assessing National Interest in the Context of Brexit: Implications for Regional Integration in ECOWAS

Inna Frank Ogbise

*Department of Political Science
University of Africa, Toru- Orua,
Bayelsa State*

Article DOI:

10.48028/iiprds/ijrjssmt.v11.i1.18

Keywords:

National Interest,
Context and Regional
Integration

Corresponding Author:

Inna Frank Ogbise

Abstract

The concept of national interest played a crucial role in shaping state policies, particularly in the context of regional integration. The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (Brexit) raised significant questions about the balance between national sovereignty and regional commitments. This study examined how national interest influenced Brexit and explored its implications for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). By analyzing the factors that drove Brexit, the study identified parallels with challenges faced by ECOWAS member states, particularly regarding their commitment to regional integration. The study adopted a theoretical framework based on Realism Theory, which posits that states act primarily in pursuit of their national interests, often prioritizing sovereignty over regional commitments. Additionally, Neofunctionalism Theory was applied to explain the role of economic and political integration in regional cooperation. A qualitative and descriptive research designs were employed. Data were drawn from secondary sources such as journals, text books, ECOWAS official policy documents and analyzed with the aid of content analysis to assess the relationship between national interest and regional integration. The study's findings revealed that national interest played a significant role in shaping regional integration dynamics, as demonstrated by the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit) and the challenges faced by ECOWAS. The analysis identified three key factors driving regional disengagement: concerns over national sovereignty, the pursuit of economic independence, and the regulation of migration policies. Based on these findings, the study recommended several measures, including strengthening institutional frameworks for regional integration, promoting economic cooperation and policy alignment, addressing nationalist sentiments through public engagement, adopting a phased approach to policy implementation, enhancing regional security and political stability, and fostering greater political will and commitment among leaders.

Background to the Study

Regional integration has long been regarded as a critical strategy for fostering economic growth, political stability, and collective development, particularly among countries seeking to enhance trade, security, and diplomatic cooperation (Baldwin, 2016). The European Union (EU) has been widely considered a successful model of regional integration, demonstrating how supranational institutions can facilitate economic harmonization, political coordination, and free movement of goods, services, and people (Schimmelfennig, 2018). In Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with similar objectives, aiming to promote regional economic cooperation, monetary integration, and political stability among its 15-member states (Adebayo & Ahuru, 2020).

However, the decision of the United Kingdom to exit the EU, commonly referred to as Brexit, has raised significant concerns about the sustainability of regional integration efforts worldwide (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Brexit was driven by a complex interplay of economic, political, and social factors, including economic autonomy, national sovereignty, and migration concerns issues that resonate with several ECOWAS member states (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). Proponents of Brexit argued that leaving the EU would allow the UK to regain full control over its trade policies, regulatory frameworks, and immigration laws, while critics contended that Brexit would weaken the UK's economic standing and diminish its influence on global affairs (Dhingra, Ottaviano, Sampson, & Van Reenen, 2017).

Given the structural and political similarities between the EU and ECOWAS, it is essential to examine how national interest influenced Brexit and assess the possible implications for ECOWAS integration. Similar to the EU, ECOWAS has faced challenges in balancing national sovereignty with regional commitments, as evidenced by the slow pace of the adoption of a common currency, disputes over trade liberalization, and security cooperation failures (Akindele & Agagu, 2019). Additionally, ECOWAS member states frequently prioritize national interests over collective regional goals, leading to policy inconsistencies and weak enforcement of regional agreements (Olayiwola & Okodua, 2021).

This study seeks to explore whether ECOWAS member states face similar tensions to those that led to Brexit and how lessons from the UK's withdrawal from the EU could inform policy adjustments within the West African bloc. By analyzing the factors that led to Brexit and drawing parallels with ECOWAS, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on regional integration and national sovereignty, particularly within the context of West Africa's evolving political and economic landscape. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for strengthening regional cohesion and preventing potential disintegration within ECOWAS (Akindele & Agagu, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The process of regional integration has long been regarded as a strategic pathway to economic growth, political stability, and collective development. Numerous studies

have emphasized the benefits of economic integration, particularly in enhancing trade efficiency, fostering political cooperation, and promoting regional security (Baldwin, 2016; Mattli, 1999). However, recent global events have challenged the assumption that regional integration is an irreversible trajectory. The decision of the United Kingdom to exit the European Union, commonly known as Brexit, has demonstrated that regional blocs are susceptible to fragmentation due to underlying tensions related to economic autonomy, national sovereignty, and migration control (Vollaard, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2018). While extensive literature has examined the causes and implications of Brexit in the European context (Hobolt, 2016; Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017), limited studies have explored the broader applicability of these lessons to regional organizations in developing regions, particularly in Africa.

In the West African context, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has made significant progress in fostering regional cooperation, yet persistent challenges hinder its effectiveness. Studies by Adepoju (2020) and Asante (2017) have highlighted issues such as weak institutional frameworks, economic disparities among member states, and the slow pace of policy harmonization as major impediments to deeper integration. Despite efforts to implement trade liberalization policies, the reluctance of member states to fully commit to regional trade agreements and the hesitancy in adopting a single currency reflect the ongoing struggle between national sovereignty and regional obligations (Ezenwa, 2021). Furthermore, resistance to ECOWAS political interventions in member states, as observed in Mali, Guinea, and Niger, raises concerns about the bloc's ability to maintain stability and cohesion (Oloruntoba, 2022).

Existing research on ECOWAS integration has largely focused on economic benefits and policy frameworks (Aniche, 2018; Ukaoha, 2019) without adequately addressing the risk of fragmentation due to rising nationalist tendencies within member states. Moreover, comparative analyses between ECOWAS and the EU in terms of integration challenges remain scarce. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the key challenges that ECOWAS faces in maintaining cohesion and by exploring the potential risks of fragmentation or stagnation in its integration agenda. By drawing lessons from Brexit, this research will provide insights into the sustainability of regional integration in West Africa and offer policy recommendations for strengthening ECOWAS against disintegration tendencies.

Research Questions

- i. How did national interest influence the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union?
- ii. How do rising nationalist tendencies within ECOWAS member states impact the prospects of regional integration?
- iii. What are the similarities between Brexit motivations and the challenges facing ECOWAS integration?
- iv. What lessons can ECOWAS learn from Brexit to strengthen its regional integration framework?

Research Objectives

- i. To examine the role of national interest in shaping the Brexit decision and its broader implications for regional blocs.
- ii. To examine the influence of nationalist movements on the regional integration process within ECOWAS.
- iii. To analyze the challenges facing ECOWAS in balancing national interest with regional integration.
- iv. To recommend strategies for ECOWAS to mitigate risks associated with national interest-driven withdrawal tendencies.

Review of Conceptual Literature and Theoretical Framework

Concept of National Interest

National interest encompasses the strategic priorities of a state, including economic, political, and security concerns, that guide its foreign policy decisions (Morgenthau, 1948). It is often classified into two categories: vital interests, which involve the survival of the state (such as territorial integrity and national security), and secondary interests, which relate to economic growth, cultural influence, and international prestige (Keohane & Nye, 2001). In international relations, national interest plays a decisive role in shaping diplomatic engagements and regional commitments. Realist scholars argue that states prioritize self-interest and power accumulation over collective cooperation (Waltz, 1979). In contrast, liberal theorists suggest that states can balance national interest with regional commitments through institutional mechanisms that ensure mutual benefits (Keohane, 1984).

In Africa, national interest has influenced the decision-making processes of regional organizations like ECOWAS, where member states selectively comply with regional policies based on domestic political calculations (Asante, 2017). For instance, Nigeria, as ECOWAS' largest economy, has at times prioritized its domestic energy policies over regional energy integration efforts (Adebayo, 2020). Similarly, concerns over national economic stability have led some ECOWAS states to resist the adoption of a single regional currency, the Eco, despite its potential benefits (Ogunyemi, 2018). These examples illustrate the tension between national sovereignty and regional cooperation, a theme that was central to the Brexit debate.

Brexit

Brexit refers to the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, which was finalized on January 31, 2020, following a 2016 referendum (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). This decision was primarily driven by concerns over national sovereignty, economic autonomy, and migration control (Hobolt, 2016). The Brexit campaign argued that EU regulations constrained Britain's ability to make independent trade and legal decisions, leading to calls for greater national control (Goodwin & Heath, 2016).

Scholars have examined Brexit as part of a broader trend of nationalism and skepticism toward supranational governance (Usherwood & Startin, 2013). Some argue that it represents a reaction against globalization, as economic disparities and perceived loss of identity fueled public discontent (Feldman, 2017). Others emphasize that Brexit demonstrates the fragility of regional integration, highlighting how economic and political grievances can lead to disengagement from cooperative frameworks (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Brexit has significant implications beyond Europe, particularly for regional organizations like ECOWAS, where similar sovereignty concerns exist. The UK's departure from the EU has raised questions about the resilience of regional organizations, especially in cases where national interests diverge from regional commitments (Mattli, 1999). In West Africa, Brexit serves as a case study for understanding how domestic political considerations can influence regional cooperation efforts.

Regional Integration

Regional integration refers to the process by which neighboring countries enter into agreements to promote economic, political, and social cooperation for mutual benefit (Balassa, 1961). It typically involves stages ranging from free trade agreements to deeper economic and political union, as seen in the European Union (Mattli, 1999). The main goals of regional integration include trade facilitation, infrastructure development, security cooperation, and collective governance (Acharya, 2016).

Historically, regional integration has been associated with economic theories that emphasize economies of scale and the benefits of larger markets (Viner, 1950). However, political and institutional factors also play a critical role. Haas (1958) introduced the concept of neofunctionalism, arguing that integration deepens when economic cooperation spills over into political collaboration. Conversely, intergovernmentalism, as advanced by Moravcsik (1998), suggests that states remain the key actors and only integrate when it aligns with their national interests.

In Africa, regional integration has been pursued through organizations such as ECOWAS, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the African Union (AU) (Adetula, Bereketeab, & Obi, 2021). Despite progress, challenges persist, including weak institutional capacity, political instability, and conflicting national interests (Ogunyemi, 2018). The slow pace of implementing ECOWAS' single currency project illustrates these difficulties, as member states remain hesitant due to economic and monetary sovereignty concerns (Asante, 2017).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to systematically explore the relationship between national interest and regional integration, focusing on Brexit and ECOWAS. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide in-depth and objective insights into how national priorities shape regional commitments among ECOWAS member states. To achieve this, the study relied extensively on secondary data sources,

including journals, text books, official ECOWAS reports, economic indicators from regional and international financial institutions, and policy documents from member states. The use of secondary data enabled a comprehensive contextual analysis of how national interests have influenced regional integration efforts over time, highlighting historical trends and policy shifts. For data analysis, the study utilized content analysis, a non-statistical method that systematically interprets qualitative information. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes and patterns, offering a nuanced understanding of how national interests impact regional cooperation.

Theoretical framework

To establish a scientific foundation for this study, the researcher adopted both Realism Theory and Neofunctionalism as the theoretical framework, offering essential perspectives for analyzing the relationship between national interest and regional integration, particularly in the contexts of Brexit and ECOWAS. Realism, as a dominant theory in international relations, argues that states are primarily driven by self-interest, with a key focus on survival, power, and sovereignty (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Realist scholars contend that states prioritize their own security and economic stability over collective regional commitments, which explains why nations may resist deeper integration if it threatens their autonomy. In the case of Brexit, Realism helps explain the UK's decision to leave the European Union. The Brexit campaign was largely centered on reclaiming national sovereignty, reducing dependency on EU institutions, and regaining control over policies related to immigration and economic regulations (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). The argument was that continued EU membership restricted Britain's ability to independently shape its foreign, economic, and trade policies, reinforcing a Realist perspective that states act to maximize national power and self-determination. Similarly, Realism can be applied to ECOWAS, where national interest frequently overrides regional commitments. For instance, Nigeria, the largest economy in the bloc, often prioritizes its domestic policies over ECOWAS initiatives, such as resisting full implementation of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (Ogunyemi, 2018). Other member states have also shown reluctance in ceding economic control to the regional body, particularly in the delayed adoption of the Eco currency due to concerns over national monetary sovereignty (Asante, 2017). These examples align with Realist assumptions that states are unwilling to compromise their national interests for regional cooperation unless there is a direct and significant benefit.

Conversely, Neofunctionalism provides an alternative perspective by emphasizing how economic and political integration can create spillover effects that drive deeper cooperation among states (Haas, 1958; Mattli, 1999). Neofunctionalists argue that integration begins in technical and economic sectors, eventually leading to broader political collaboration. In the EU, economic integration through trade agreements and a common market facilitated deeper political coordination, which was intended to make member states increasingly interdependent and less likely to act unilaterally (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Brexit, however, challenged this assumption by demonstrating that economic integration does not always lead to political unity, especially when

domestic political pressures favor sovereignty over regional commitments. In the context of ECOWAS, Neofunctionalism is reflected in efforts to enhance economic integration through free trade, infrastructural projects, and movement policies. While some progress has been made, such as the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and regional transport corridors, political integration remains weak due to persistent nationalistic tendencies (Adebayo, 2020). Neofunctionalists would argue that for ECOWAS to succeed, economic cooperation must generate spillover effects that eventually strengthen political unity. However, as seen in the Brexit case, these spillover effects are not always guaranteed, particularly if national identity and sovereignty concerns dominate political discourse.

By applying both Realism and Neofunctionalism, this study critically examines the inherent tensions between national sovereignty and regional commitments, particularly in the contexts of Brexit and ECOWAS. Realism, as a theory rooted in power politics and state-centric analysis, highlights the reluctance of states to fully embrace integration due to concerns over sovereignty, self-interest, and security. This perspective underscores the idea that states are primarily driven by national priorities, and they will only engage in regional cooperation when it aligns with their strategic goals. For instance, the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union was significantly influenced by the perception that EU regulations infringed upon British sovereignty, limiting its ability to independently control immigration, trade policies, and economic affairs (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). Similarly, in West Africa, ECOWAS member states have often resisted deeper integration efforts due to fears of losing control over key economic and political policies. The prolonged delays in adopting the single ECOWAS currency, the Eco, exemplify this reluctance, as states prioritize monetary sovereignty and economic stability over regional economic convergence (Ogunyemi, 2018). Realism thus provides a lens to understand why states may selectively engage in regional cooperation while resisting mechanisms that could dilute their authority or restrict their policy autonomy.

Conversely, Neofunctionalism presents an alternative perspective by emphasizing the potential for economic cooperation to serve as a catalyst for deeper regional unification, despite political resistance. According to this theory, integration in one sector, such as trade or infrastructure, creates spillover effects that naturally lead to greater political and economic cohesion (Haas, 1958). In the case of the European Union, early economic agreements, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, gradually evolved into a full political and economic union, suggesting that functional cooperation can foster broader integration over time (Mattli, 1999). However, the Brexit experience demonstrated that economic interdependence does not necessarily guarantee enduring regional unity, especially when nationalist sentiments and sovereignty concerns gain political traction (Schimmelfennig, 2018). In the ECOWAS region, neofunctionalism suggests that economic initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and cross-border infrastructure projects, could serve as stepping stones toward greater regional integration. Yet, despite these efforts, political divisions, weak institutional frameworks, and security concerns have often hindered progress, revealing the

complexities of balancing national interest with regional commitments (Adetula, Bereketeab, & Obi, 2021).

These theoretical perspectives are essential for understanding the broader implications of Brexit on regional organizations like ECOWAS, as they shed light on the fundamental dilemmas of regional integration. While realism explains why states may resist deeper cooperation due to sovereignty concerns, neofunctionalism illustrates how economic interdependence can still drive integration efforts despite political hesitations. The ongoing challenges within ECOWAS, such as the slow implementation of common economic policies and the varying levels of commitment among member states, further demonstrate the interplay between these two theories. By analyzing these tensions through the dual lenses of realism and neofunctionalism, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how regional organizations navigate the competing demands of national interest and collective cooperation, both in the European and West African contexts.

Review of Empirical Literature

Asante (2017) conducted a study on the political economy of regionalism in West Africa, focusing on the integration efforts within ECOWAS. The study assumes that national interest plays a decisive role in shaping the commitment levels of ECOWAS member states toward regional integration. The objective of the study was to examine the political and economic factors influencing regional integration and the extent to which national interest hinders cooperation. The research was grounded in the Realist Theory, which posits that states act in pursuit of their self-interest rather than collective regional goals. The study utilized secondary data sources, including ECOWAS treaties, national policy documents, and economic reports, to analyze the integration process. A qualitative content analysis method was employed to assess the extent to which these policies reflect regional commitments versus national priorities. The major findings revealed that disparities in economic development, political instability, and conflicting national economic priorities significantly impede ECOWAS integration. Countries such as Nigeria and Ghana prioritize their domestic economic policies, often at the expense of trade liberalization and regional economic cooperation.

Asante (2017) concluded that regional integration within ECOWAS is largely constrained by the predominance of national interests over collective regional goals. The study recommended that ECOWAS should strengthen its institutional framework to align national policies with regional objectives. Additionally, it suggested implementing stronger compliance mechanisms and incentives to encourage member states to prioritize regional commitments. Ogunyemi (2018) explored the challenges of ECOWAS monetary integration, with a particular focus on the tensions between national sovereignty and regional economic interests. The study assumed that concerns over national monetary policies and economic sovereignty are significant obstacles to the adoption of the proposed ECOWAS single currency, the Eco. The primary objective was to investigate why ECOWAS member states have struggled to implement a common

currency despite numerous agreements and policy frameworks. The research was based on the Optimum Currency Area (OCA) Theory, which explains the conditions necessary for a successful monetary union, including economic convergence and fiscal discipline. The study collected primary data through interviews with economists, central bank officials, and policy analysts. Additionally, secondary data were obtained from ECOWAS reports, financial statistics, and macroeconomic indicators. A mixed-method approach was used, combining thematic analysis for qualitative data and econometric modeling for quantitative analysis. Findings revealed that economic disparities, fiscal misalignment, and national control over monetary policies were key impediments to monetary integration. The study found that Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, as the dominant economies, were hesitant to relinquish control over their monetary policies due to concerns about economic stability and national financial autonomy. The study concluded that ECOWAS monetary integration requires stronger financial and economic harmonization among member states. The study recommended that ECOWAS establish a regional financial regulatory body to enforce fiscal discipline, ensure macroeconomic convergence, and create compensatory mechanisms to support less developed economies in the transition to a single currency.

Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2017) conducted an empirical study on the motivations behind the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union, commonly known as Brexit. The study assumed that concerns over national sovereignty, economic policy, and migration were the key drivers of the Brexit vote. The objective of the research was to explore the political, economic, and social factors that influenced voter behavior during the 2016 Brexit referendum. The study was framed within the Nationalism Theory, which argues that national identity and sovereignty concerns play a fundamental role in shaping political decisions. The researchers employed a survey-based methodology, collecting data before and after the referendum to assess voter attitudes and motivations. Interviews with policymakers and political analysts provided additional qualitative insights. The study used statistical regression models to examine the relationship between voter demographics and support for Brexit. The findings showed that older voters, individuals with lower educational attainment, and those residing in economically struggling regions were more likely to support Brexit. Key issues influencing the vote included a desire for national sovereignty, stricter immigration controls, and dissatisfaction with EU regulations perceived as undermining British economic interests. The study concluded that Brexit was primarily driven by public concerns over national control, economic autonomy, and cultural identity. The study recommended that future regional integration efforts, whether in Europe or other regions, should address public anxieties about sovereignty and develop policies that balance national and regional interests. The study suggested that governments engaging in regional integration should ensure greater public engagement and transparency in decision-making processes.

Mattli (1999) carried out a comparative study on regional integration, with a focus on Europe and other regional organizations, including ECOWAS. The study assumed that

economic incentives and political will are the primary drivers of successful regional integration. The objective of the research was to compare the factors that facilitated European integration with the challenges faced by regional blocs such as ECOWAS. The study was grounded in Neofunctionalism, which argues that economic integration leads to political integration through a spillover effect, whereby cooperation in one sector creates incentives for deeper integration in other areas. The study relied on secondary data from EU policy documents, ECOWAS agreements, and international trade reports. A comparative analysis method was employed to evaluate the effectiveness of integration strategies across different regional organizations. The findings highlighted that European integration succeeded due to strong institutions, high levels of economic interdependence, and political leadership committed to regionalism. In contrast, ECOWAS integration struggles were attributed to weak institutional enforcement, political instability, and national sovereignty concerns. The study concluded that while economic incentives can facilitate regional integration, political commitment and strong institutional frameworks are essential for long-term success. The study recommended that ECOWAS strengthen its governance structures, enforce compliance with regional agreements, and create more binding commitments to enhance integration.

Adebayo (2020) examined the role of national interest in shaping Nigeria's energy policies and its implications for regional energy integration within ECOWAS. The study assumed that Nigeria prioritizes its national energy needs over regional electricity-sharing agreements. The objective was to assess how Nigeria's domestic energy policies affect regional electricity and energy trade, particularly within the framework of the West African Power Pool (WAPP). The research was based on Energy Security Theory, which argues that nations prioritize self-sufficiency in energy supply over regional cooperation to avoid vulnerabilities associated with dependence on external sources. Data were collected from policy documents, energy trade agreements, and interviews with energy experts in Nigeria and ECOWAS institutions. The study employed both qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative energy trade data analysis to assess trends in regional energy integration. Findings revealed that Nigeria's reluctance to integrate into WAPP is driven by concerns over energy security, domestic electricity demand, and pricing policies. While ECOWAS has promoted regional electricity-sharing mechanisms, Nigeria's policymakers prioritize domestic energy sufficiency and are hesitant to export electricity to neighboring countries at subsidized rates. The study concluded that national energy policies often conflict with regional integration efforts, limiting the success of ECOWAS energy projects. The study recommended that ECOWAS develop incentive structures to encourage member states to participate in regional energy trade. The study also suggested that Nigeria should invest in cross-border energy infrastructure and establish regulatory mechanisms to facilitate fair electricity trade among ECOWAS nations.

National Interest Influence and the United Kingdom's Decision to Exit the European Union: An Assessment

National interest played a central role in the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union (EU), as Brexit was primarily driven by concerns over sovereignty,

economic autonomy, and migration control. The principle of national interest, which encompasses the strategic priorities of a state, guided the UK's decision to reclaim full control over its political, economic, and legal affairs (Morgenthau, 1948). One of the key motivations for Brexit was the assertion of national sovereignty. Eurosceptics argued that EU membership undermined the UK's ability to make independent legislative and policy decisions, as many regulations were dictated by the EU without direct British control (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). The principle of parliamentary sovereignty, a fundamental aspect of the UK's constitutional system, was seen as eroded by EU laws, leading to calls for a return to full national legislative authority (Oliver, 2016).

Economic concerns also played a significant role. Brexit proponents contended that EU membership constrained the UK's trade policies, forcing it to adhere to common market rules that limited its ability to establish independent trade agreements with non-EU countries (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017). This was particularly relevant in the context of emerging global markets, where Brexit supporters argued that an independent UK could negotiate more favorable trade deals (Dhingra et al., 2017). Additionally, migration control was a major factor in the Brexit vote. The free movement of people within the EU led to increasing migration to the UK, particularly from Eastern European countries. Critics of EU migration policies argued that this influx placed pressure on public services and labor markets, fueling anti-immigration sentiments (Hobolt, 2016). By leaving the EU, the UK sought to regain full control over its borders and implement immigration policies that prioritized national economic and security interests (Ford & Goodwin, 2017). Overall, the UK's decision to leave the EU was shaped by a combination of sovereignty concerns, economic autonomy, and migration policies, all of which were framed within the broader context of national interest. Brexit demonstrated how national priorities can drive a state to disengage from a regional integration framework when domestic interests are perceived to be at risk.

The Influence of Nationalist Movements on the Regional Integration Process within ECOWAS

The influence of nationalist movements on the regional integration process within ECOWAS presents a complex challenge that affects economic, political, and security cooperation among member states. Regional integration in West Africa, particularly under the framework of ECOWAS, is intended to enhance economic and political collaboration. However, the rise of nationalist sentiments, which prioritize national sovereignty and interests over regional commitments, has increasingly hindered this process (Aniche, 2018). Nationalism, broadly defined as the promotion of national identity and self-determination, has resurged in West Africa due to economic disparities, dissatisfaction with ECOWAS policies, and concerns over sovereignty (Smith, 2019). Many member states have become reluctant to fully commit to ECOWAS initiatives, citing national interests as justification for their limited participation (Ukaoha, 2019).

Economic integration efforts such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS) and the Common External Tariff (CET) have been directly impacted by nationalist

policies. Some states have adopted protectionist measures that contradict regional economic agreements. For instance, Nigeria's border closure in 2019 disrupted trade flows within the region, undermining the principle of free movement (Eze, 2021). This reflects the broader challenge of balancing national economic policies with regional economic integration goals. Similarly, political nationalism has led some countries to resist ECOWAS governance structures and regional decision-making processes, thereby weakening collective policy implementation (Asante, 2021). A key example is the inconsistent application of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, often justified by security and sovereignty concerns (Akindele, 2022). Political leaders in some states have also leveraged nationalist rhetoric in electoral campaigns, further exacerbating anti-integration sentiments (Nwankwo, 2020).

Security cooperation has also been affected, as nationalist movements and secessionist groups have contributed to instability. Groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and the Ambazonia movement in Cameroon have created political tensions that weaken regional unity (Adetula, 2019). Moreover, some states have hesitated to participate fully in ECOWAS-led peacekeeping efforts, prioritizing national security concerns over collective regional stability (Adeoye, 2021). Given these challenges, ECOWAS must develop strategies to mitigate the impact of nationalist movements on integration. Strengthening institutional capacity to enforce regional agreements and providing incentives for compliance can help member states align their national policies with ECOWAS objectives (Onyekachi, 2022). Additionally, fostering public awareness of the benefits of integration can help counter nationalist sentiments and promote a stronger regional identity (Mensah, 2020). In a nutshell, nationalist movements present a serious obstacle to regional integration within ECOWAS, affecting economic, political, and security cooperation. While nationalism is a legitimate expression of national interests, it must be managed to prevent it from undermining regional stability and development. A balanced approach that respects national sovereignty while reinforcing regional commitments is essential for the long-term success of ECOWAS.

The Similarities Between Brexit Motivations and the Challenges Facing ECOWAS Integration.

The motivations behind Brexit share significant similarities with the challenges facing the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in its regional integration efforts. In both cases, national sovereignty, economic self-interest, and political divergence have posed obstacles to deeper regional cooperation. Firstly, sovereignty concerns play a crucial role in both Brexit and ECOWAS integration challenges. Just as the UK sought to reclaim legislative and policy autonomy from the EU, many ECOWAS member states hesitate to cede authority to supranational institutions. Countries within ECOWAS often resist regional decisions that they perceive as infringing upon their national governance structures (Asante, 2017). For instance, ECOWAS interventions in political crises, such as in The Gambia in 2017, have been met with mixed reactions, with some states viewing such actions as overreach into domestic affairs (Adebayo, 2020).

Secondly, economic autonomy is a shared concern between Brexit and ECOWAS integration. Brexit supporters argued that EU membership restricted the UK's ability to craft independent trade agreements, similar to how some ECOWAS states fear that regional economic policies may undermine national economies. The delayed adoption of the single ECOWAS currency, the Eco, illustrates these concerns, as larger economies like Nigeria worry about the economic instability of smaller member states and potential negative impacts on their national monetary policies (Ogunyemi, 2018).

Additionally, migration and labor mobility issues are evident in both cases. In the UK, Brexit was driven by concerns over free movement and the impact of EU migration policies on domestic labor markets and public services (Hobolt, 2016). Similarly, within ECOWAS, the implementation of free movement protocols has faced resistance from member states fearing economic displacement and security threats. Some West African nations have imposed border restrictions despite ECOWAS policies promoting free movement, demonstrating a reluctance to fully embrace regional labor integration (Adetula, Bereketeab, & Obi, 2021). Lastly, political divergence and policy inconsistencies hinder both Brexit negotiations and ECOWAS cohesion. In the Brexit process, disagreements between different UK political factions complicated negotiations with the EU (Clarke et al., 2017). Similarly, ECOWAS members often pursue divergent national policies that undermine regional objectives. Differences in governance structures, regulatory frameworks, and economic priorities create friction within ECOWAS, much like the policy inconsistencies that characterized the UK's relationship with the EU (Mattli, 1999). In a nutshell, the Brexit experience highlights challenges that are also evident in ECOWAS integration efforts. Sovereignty disputes, economic autonomy concerns, migration policies, and political divergence remain central issues in both cases, demonstrating how national interest can shape the trajectory of regional integration initiatives.

Study Findings

The study's findings reveal that national interest plays a decisive role in shaping regional integration dynamics, as demonstrated by the UK's decision to exit the EU (Brexit) and the challenges facing ECOWAS. The analysis highlights three major factors influencing regional disengagement: sovereignty concerns, economic autonomy, and migration control.

i. Sovereignty and Legislative Autonomy

The study found that the UK's motivation for Brexit was deeply rooted in the desire to reclaim full sovereignty over its legislative and policy decisions. Eurosceptics viewed EU membership as an infringement on the UK's ability to govern independently. Similarly, ECOWAS member states often resist ceding authority to regional institutions, prioritizing national governance over collective decision-making. Political nationalism has been a key driver of such resistance, affecting compliance with ECOWAS protocols.

ii. Economic Considerations and Trade Policy.

The findings indicate that economic autonomy was a significant factor in Brexit,

with the UK aiming to negotiate independent trade agreements outside EU constraints. Likewise, ECOWAS member states exhibit hesitancy in committing to regional economic policies, as seen in the slow adoption of the single ECOWAS currency and protectionist trade measures such as Nigeria's border closure in 2019. This reflects a broader pattern where economic self-interest often supersedes regional commitments.

iii. Migration and Labor Mobility Challenges

The study also found that migration control was a central factor in Brexit, as concerns over EU free movement policies influenced voter sentiments. Similarly, ECOWAS' free movement protocol faces opposition from member states fearing economic displacement and security risks. Despite regional agreements, several states impose restrictions on cross-border migration, demonstrating the persistent tension between national security priorities and regional mobility policies.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings align with existing literature on national interest as a decisive factor in shaping regional integration efforts. The UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union (EU) illustrates how concerns about sovereignty, economic self-determination, and migration control can drive a state to disengage from a regional framework. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) faces significant obstacles due to nationalist tendencies among its member states, which prioritize national interests over regional commitments. This pattern suggests that regional integration efforts are often hindered when states perceive that supranational governance structures encroach upon their sovereignty or fail to deliver tangible national benefits.

One of the key findings of this study is the striking parallel between the motivations for Brexit and the challenges facing ECOWAS. Brexit demonstrated how states may view supranational institutions as limiting their ability to make independent decisions, a sentiment that resonates in West Africa. Many ECOWAS states resist collective governance mechanisms, particularly in political and security matters, fearing that compliance with ECOWAS directives could compromise national autonomy. For example, interventions by ECOWAS in political crises, such as The Gambia's 2017 post-election dispute, have been met with mixed reactions, with some member states perceiving these actions as excessive interference in domestic affairs. This highlights a broader reluctance among West African states to fully embrace ECOWAS authority in matters of governance.

Economic autonomy and protectionism also emerge as central themes in the study's findings. Just as Brexit supporters argued that EU membership restricted the UK's ability to establish independent trade agreements, some ECOWAS countries resist regional trade policies that they believe could negatively impact their national economies. The delayed adoption of the ECOWAS single currency, the Eco, exemplifies these concerns.

Major economies like Nigeria have expressed apprehensions about the economic vulnerabilities of smaller member states and the potential consequences of a shared currency on their monetary policies. Similarly, the temporary border closure by Nigeria in 2019, which disrupted trade flows within the region, underscores the challenges of balancing national economic interests with regional economic integration objectives.

Another key aspect of the study's findings is the role of nationalist movements in undermining regional cohesion. Brexit was significantly influenced by nationalist rhetoric advocating for the UK's control over its political and economic affairs. In a similar vein, nationalist movements within ECOWAS countries fuel skepticism about regional integration. Some political leaders have leveraged nationalist sentiments in electoral campaigns, framing regional commitments as a threat to national identity and sovereignty. This political strategy reinforces public resistance to ECOWAS policies and weakens the regional body's ability to implement collective decisions effectively. The presence of nationalist and secessionist movements, such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and similar groups across West Africa, further complicates efforts to foster regional unity.

Conclusion

The study concludes that national interest continues to be a dominant force shaping the trajectory of regional integration within ECOWAS, frequently hindering deeper political and economic unification. The analysis of secondary data, including official policy documents and economic reports, indicates that concerns over sovereignty, economic autonomy, and national security significantly influence the extent to which member states are willing to commit to regional agreements. These findings parallel the motivations behind Brexit, where the United Kingdom's decision to exit the European Union was largely driven by the desire to reclaim control over domestic policies, trade, and governance structures. Similarly, within ECOWAS, many member states exhibit reluctance to cede aspects of their national sovereignty to regional institutions, fearing potential economic disadvantages or political constraints.

Although economic cooperation offers a viable path toward deeper integration, persistent political resistance and institutional weaknesses within ECOWAS continue to impede progress. The lack of a unified regulatory framework, inconsistencies in policy implementation, and disparities in economic development among member states further complicate efforts to achieve collective regional objectives. Moreover, national governments often prioritize domestic economic stability and security concerns over long-term regional commitments, thereby slowing the momentum toward full integration. Based on the findings and conclusion, the study recommended the following:

Recommendations

- i. **Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms for Regional Integration**

ECOWAS should enhance its institutional frameworks to build trust among

member states. This includes reinforcing mechanisms that ensure national sovereignty is respected while promoting collective decision-making. A clear balance between national interests and regional goals can be achieved by strengthening legal frameworks that define the limits and benefits of ECOWAS interventions.

ii. Enhancing Economic Cooperation and Policy Harmonization

ECOWAS should work towards more flexible economic policies that accommodate the diverse economic realities of member states. This includes revising trade agreements to allow for gradual policy alignment and creating financial stability mechanisms to mitigate economic risks associated with regional integration. Additionally, targeted incentives should be introduced to encourage compliance with regional economic agreements.

iii. Addressing Nationalist Sentiments Through Public Engagement

Public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate citizens on the benefits of regional integration. Misinformation and nationalist rhetoric often fuel resistance to regional cooperation. ECOWAS and national governments should work together to counteract these narratives by demonstrating how regional integration can enhance economic opportunities, security, and governance stability.

iv. Developing a Phased Approach to Policy Implementation

Instead of enforcing rigid regional policies, ECOWAS should adopt a phased approach that allows member states to integrate at different levels based on their economic and political readiness. This strategy will prevent abrupt economic shocks and ensure smoother adaptation to regional frameworks.

v. Improving Regional Security and Political Stability

ECOWAS must enhance its conflict resolution mechanisms to address security concerns that contribute to nationalist resistance. This includes improving intelligence-sharing frameworks, strengthening peacekeeping operations, and ensuring fair mediation in political crises to build trust in ECOWAS interventions.

vi. Encouraging Political Will and Commitment Among Leaders

Political leaders play a crucial role in shaping public perception of regional integration. ECOWAS should engage with national governments to foster stronger political commitment to regional initiatives. This could include leadership forums, diplomatic dialogues, and agreements that reinforce leaders' accountability to ECOWAS commitments.

References

- Acharya, A. (2016). Regionalism beyond the European Union: Concepts, trends, and theories, *International Affairs*, 92(6), 1253-1260.
- Adebayo, A. (2020). ECOWAS and political intervention: The Gambia case and regional sovereignty concerns. *African Security Review*, 29(3), 251-266.
- Adebayo, A. (2020). Nigeria's energy policy and regional commitments: Balancing domestic needs with ECOWAS Integration. *African Journal of Political Economy*, 14(2), 87-102.
- Adebayo, O., & Ahuru, R. (2020). Regional integration and economic development in West Africa: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Political Science*, 14(2), 45-62.
- Adebayo, P. (2020). National interest and energy policy in Nigeria: Implications for regional energy integration in ECOWAS. *Energy Policy Journal*, 45(2), 120-138.
- Adeoye, O. (2021). *Security challenges and regional cooperation in West Africa*, Ibadan: University Press.
- Adetula, V. (2019). *Secessionist Movements and their impact on regional stability in West Africa*, Dakar: ECOWAS Policy Review.
- Adetula, V. A. O., Bereketeab, R., & Obi, C. (2021). *Regional integration and development in Africa: The role of ECOWAS*, Routledge.
- Akindele, J. (2022). Free movement protocol and sovereignty concerns in ECOWAS, *Journal of African Integration Studies*, 14(2), 117-136.
- Akindele, S., & Agagu, A. (2019). ECOWAS and the paradox of regional integration in West Africa, *Journal of African Studies*, 23(1), 33-51.
- Aniche, E. (2018). *Nationalism and regionalism in West Africa: The ECOWAS dilemma*. Abuja: African Research Consortium.
- Asante, K. (2021). Political nationalism and the challenges of regional governance in ECOWAS, *African Journal of Political Science*, 28(3), 45-67.
- Asante, S. (2017). ECOWAS and economic Integration: The political economy of compliance, *Journal of African Integration Studies*, 10(1), 45-67.
- Asante, S. K. B. (2017). The political economy of regionalism in West Africa: A critical analysis of ECOWAS integration efforts. *African Journal of Political Economy*, 34(1), 78-95.

- Balassa, B. (1961). *The theory of economic integration*. Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin.
- Baldwin, R. (2016). *The great Convergence: Information technology and the new globalization*, Harvard University Press.
- Clarke, H. D., Goodwin, M. J., & Whiteley, P. (2017). *Brexit: Why Britain voted to leave the European Union*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dhingra, S., Ottaviano, G., Sampson, T., & Van Reenen, J. (2017). The impact of Brexit on the UK economy, *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2017(1), 305-367.
- Eze, C. (2021). Nigeria's border closure and its implications for ECOWAS integration, *West African Economic Journal*, 15(1), 89-102.
- Feldman, D. (2017). Nationalism, globalization, and Brexit: A historical perspective, *Political Quarterly*, 88(3), 318-325.
- Ford, R., & Goodwin, M. (2017). *Revolt on the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Britain*, Routledge.
- Goodwin, M. J., & Heath, O. (2016). The 2016 referendum, Brexit, and the left behind: An aggregate-level analysis of the result, *The Political Quarterly*, 87(3), 323-332.
- Haas, E. B. (1958). *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces, 1950-1957*. Stanford University Press.
- Hobolt, S. B. (2016). The Brexit vote: A divided nation, a divided continent, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(9), 1259-1277.
- Hooghe, L., & Marks, G. (2019). Grand theories of European integration in the twenty-first century. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(8), 1113-1133.
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S. (2001). *Power and Interdependence*, New York: Longman.
- Mattli, W. (1999). *The logic of regional integration: Europe and beyond*, Cambridge University Press.
- Mensah, R. (2020). *Public perceptions of regional integration: The ECOWAS experience*, Accra: Ghana Integration Studies Centre.

- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics among Nations: The struggle for power and peace*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Nwankwo, L. (2020). Electoral Politics and Anti-Integration Rhetoric in West Africa, *Journal of West African Political Studies*, 10(4), 56-78.
- Ogunyemi, A. A. (2018). The challenges of ECOWAS monetary integration: National sovereignty vs. regional economic interests. *Journal of West African Economic Studies*, 29(3), 215-233.
- Ogunyemi, B. (2018). The Eco and the challenges of monetary integration in West Africa. *Journal of Economic Integration*, 33(4), 764-789.
- Ogunyemi, S. (2018). ECOWAS single currency and regional economic integration in West Africa: Challenges and prospects. *African Journal of Economic Policy*, 25(1), 45-63.
- Olayiwola, K., & Okodua, H. (2021). The political economy of regional integration in West Africa: ECOWAS and its discontents, *African Development Review*, 33(4), 512-529.
- Oliver, C. (2016). *Unleashing demons: The inside story of Brexit*, Hodder & Stoughton.
- Onyekachi, P. (2022). Strengthening ECOWAS institutions for effective regional integration, *Policy Brief on African Integration*, 19(3), 12-29.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2018). European integration (theory) in times of crisis: A comparison of the Euro and Schengen crises. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(7), 969-989.
- Smith, A. (2019). *Nationalism: Theory and practice in a globalized world*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ukaoha, K. (2019). *The challenges of economic integration in ECOWAS: National interests versus regional commitments*, Ibadan: African Policy Press.