Do Economic Integrations Improve E-Commerce Performance in Member States? A Study on the European Single Market

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Abstract

Many of the international trade theories hold the view that reducing the barriers to foreign trade will result in an increase in welfare in all the countries that are party to the trade. The regional integrations established in different parts of the world in the period following the Second World War enabled this theory to be translated into practice, at least on a regional basis. The European Single Market, which was founded in 1993, is significantly different from the economic integrations established in the aforementioned period by incorporating many innovations. One of these innovations is that the Digital Single Market strategy pursues to guarantee better access for customers and enterprises to online goods and services across Europe, which was put into effect in 2015.

The contribution of economic integrations on e-commerce performance of the member countries has been examined in the context of the European Single Market in this study. In the study, e-commerce statistics of the European Single Market countries covering the years 2010-2021 and the Digital Economy and Society Index covering the years 2017-2022 were used. The data is collected from Eurostat, Benchmarking Digital Europe and European Commission, Digital Scoreboard databases. The results of the study present that the Digital Single Market Strategy has contributed to the less developed countries of the Single Market rather than the developed countries.

1 Introduction

It is argued by a range of theoretical approaches that economic integration within a single market benefits collective welfare by encouraging productivity in diversified ways. Suggested opinions include comparative advantages from classical trade theory or new trade theory from economies of scale and new economic geography (Bublitz, 2018). Regional integration assists countries prevail over divisions that obstruct the flow of capital, goods, services, and people. These divisions are a limitation to economic growth, particularly in developing countries (Worldbank, 2022). Although many examples of regional integration can be counted today, The European Single Market differs from other integration examples by providing the largest contribution to the regional integration literature.

Common internal market of Europe is one of the most essential pressures behind the integration of the European countries. It allows capital, goods, services, and people to move between member countries based on the four pillars of free movement. As one of the largest single markets in the world with no tariffs among member countries, it facilitates the lives of more than 450.000.000 European consumers and facilitates trade between businesses, including around 22.000.000 small and medium-sized businesses. It also accelerates growth, inspires innovation and creates jobs (EU2020, 2020).

Our world is transformed by the digital technologies and internet in all features of life and business area. Europe seeks to open digital opportunities for individuals and enterprises by taking on the digital revolution and controlling the power of its Single Market. The European Commission is fulfilling one of its top priorities by defining the details of creating a Digital Single Market. The Digital Market is an economic concept that refers to a market in which goods are bought and sold through digital means such as the internet, and which aims to unite individual digital markets throughout the Union.

Therefore, in today's world where commerce has started to be carried out mainly through digital channels, the digital single market strategy will also present experiences about whether economic integrations will contribute e-commerce to thrive in the region where they are active. Considering the developments, this study investigates if economic integrations contribute to e-commerce performance of the member countries has been examined within the framework of the European Single Market case.

2 Economic Integrations

From the 1960s on, a large literature emerged that sought to describe what happens to trade when countries decrease or remove some of the barriers to free trade between them. Even though the topic is not very new, the increase in interest is due to the formation of trade areas in many parts of the world (Mayes, 1978: 1). After being discussed at the theoretical level for a long time, after the Second World War, international economic integrations gained the opportunity to be applied in different regions, between developed and underdeveloped countries, as a solution to this demand (Guran ve Akturk, 1997: 12).

Economic integrations often involve agreements between countries that include the elimination of the barriers on trade and the harmonization of monetary and fiscal policies, leading to a more connected worldwide economy. Economic integrations are coherent with economic theory that holds that the worldwide economy is better off if markets can operate in harmony with minimal government mediation (CFI, 2022). Regional economic integration theory proposes that economic integrations have a positive effect on the national economies of member states and looks for promoting the reinforcing effects of regionalization in a region. Overall, the elimination of the barriers on trade and the creation of a common regional market have been related to a growth in the trade between member states. As a result, they create growth opportunities for institutions to develop within the region, and in the long run this will lead to the improvement of the overall economic situation of the overall integrated region (Alhorr et al. 2012: 45).

Economic integrations promote economic growth through channels such as internal and external economies of scale, faster technological development due to the R&D sector in these economies of scale, reduced uncertainty due to improved competition and integration of financial markets, creating a more conducive environment for economic activity and lower capital cost (Balassa, 1961). Access to a wider consumer base, additional sources of finance, a larger pool of skilled workers and new technologies can be promoted by economic integrations. A greater market with a smooth playing field where all firms can compete could also stimulate innovation (Ungerer et al, 2018).

The first economic integration movements in the world started with the Zollverein customs union organized between the German states in 1834, and in the following period, small-scale similar formations were seen in the USA and Europe. The development that accelerated the economic integration movements was the adoption of GATT in 1948 and its institutionalization by transforming into World Trade Organization. After this development, major economic integration movements emerged in North America, Asia-Pacific and Europe (Incekara and Savrul, 2011: 12), namely the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union (EU). Evidence shows that trade within these 3 leading economic blocs multiplied faster than global trade and regional economic blocs fostered integrated regional capital markets in the 1980s (Lee, 2002).

Of these, the EU differs from the others in that it reaches a more advanced integration stage than other examples of implementation and, accordingly, adds many innovations to the concept of economic integration. Therefore, in the continuation of the study, the European Single Market and the innovations brought by it will be focused.

3 European Single Market

Since its founding as the European Communities in 1957, but particularly since 1992, the EU has moved to create a single market. The concept outlines the creation of a region within the EU with no internal borders or other supervisory barriers to the free movement of goods and services. One of the most important accomplishments of European integration is the establishment of the Single Market which increased European GNI considerably. The European Single Market is estimated to have increased EU GDP by 5% since 1992 (Metcalf and Papageorgiou, 2018: 8).

The European Single Market has opened itself up to more competition, decreased trade barriers and created jobs since its inception in 1993. The Single Market Law was laid out in 2 parts in 2011 and 2012, which included suggestions to take more advantage of the opportunities provided by the Market to increase employment and confidence in European trade (European Commission, 2022a). The Treaty of Maastricht was an important step forward and introduced the opinion of an Economic and Monetary Union, with a single currency introduced at the beginning of the century. However, the Single Market covers more countries than the Economic and Monetary Union and requires special arrangements. The Agreement on the European Economic Area extended the Single Market to a total of 31 states in 1994 (Bublitz, 2018).

The free movement of goods approach is the result of the Single Market strategy, which refers to a single region for the free movement of goods and services without any regulatory barriers or internal borders. A functioning single market sets off trade and competition, improves quality, enhance efficiency and drop prices. Hereof, the European Single Market is among the remarkable achievements of the EU. It has facilitated the everyday life of European customers and enterprises and fuelled economic growth. The European Commission made The Single Market Strategy regulation to reveal the full potential of the Single Market. The Single Market is at the centre of the European project, however advantages of it aren't fully noticed or other barriers weaken them. The European Commission therefore determined to support the Single Market by upgrading access to goods and services across the EU, boosting mobility for service providers, facilitating business across borders for retail dealers and helping development of innovative business models (European Commission, 2017).

Today, selling and buying goods in Member States with about half billion people is simplified by internal markets. Consumers are offered a wide variety of goods and are made to purchase the best offer available. The European Single Market was created over the past decades to provide EU enterprises with a robust platform in an open, diverse and competitive atmosphere. This internal power boosts economic growth and job creation in the

EU and helps the EU enterprises to stay ahead in world markets by providing them the resources they will need (Savrul, 2018: 44).

In a time when our world is being transformed by the internet and digital technologies, the EU people and enterprises often face barriers when they use online tools and services. Therefore, moving from 28 national digital markets to a single one, the European Commission wishes to make the Single Market fit for the digital age. As a result, the Commission adopted the Digital Single Market strategy in 2015 and it is one of the ten political priorities of the Commission (EU4Digital, 2022; Eurostat, 2022a).

3.1 The European Digital Single Market

The Digital Single Market is characterized as a market where free movement of goods, services, people and capital is assured and, people and enterprises can smoothly access and practice events under fair competition conditions regardless of their domicile or nationality. The job of adjustment is to ensure that the Single Market operates in the digital world as it does in the analog world. This covers better access to online goods and services for customers and enterprises across the Europe. Digital networks and services are improved in order to develop and maximize the growth potential of the European digital economy (European Commission, 2015a).

Vision of the EU for the Digital Single Market as outlined in the Digital Single Market Strategy is to ensure the free movement of capital, people and services and that people and enterprises can effortlessly access and implement online events under fair competition conditions and a high level of customer and private data protection regardless of their place of residence or nationality (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2022).

The EU built the Digital Single Market Strategy on 3 pillars (Eurostat, 2022):

- Improving access to digital goods and services: By eliminating barriers to cross border e-commerce and access to content online, the Digital Single Market strategy aims to provide consumers and businesses with greater admission to online goods and services across Europe.
- An environment in which digital networks and services can flourish: By serving secure, reliable and high speed framework and services backed by the right regulative terms, the Digital Single Market wants to create the right atmosphere for digital networks and services.
- Digital as a driver for growth: The Digital Single Market Strategy aims at maximizing the growth potential of the European Digital Economy thus all the Europeans can take full advantage of the benefits necessary for an inclusive digital community.

The purpose of the Digital Market Strategy is to contribute to European people, enterprises and the environment by building a fair, sustainable and competing digital economy. Completion of the Digital Single Market Strategy is intended to contribute to the annual growth of the European economy of more than €260 billion, which will create jobs and reshape public services. Furthermore, the increased use of digital technologies should result in an improvement in people’s access to information, culture and labour markets (Latoszek, 2021: 81).

Entrepreneurs will be provided with new opportunities to grow throughout Europe by the Digital Single Market. Therefore, urgent effort is needed to remove hurdles to cross border online activities, covering distinctions in contractual and copyright laws between Member States and decreasing the VAT related difficulty. Part of forming customer trust in cross border online sales demands high quality and inexpensive cross border package delivery services that are unavailable at the moment. The strategy is also about representing an appropriate e-commerce structure and stopping unfair discrimination against customers and enterprises within the EU which tries to access substance or online purchase of goods and services. Discrimination can take the shape of residence, nationality or geographical location limitations, which are contrary to the EU's fundamental guidelines (European Commission, 2015c).

3.2 European Digital Single Market and E-Commerce

E-commerce reduced the costs in the production process by eliminating the problem of time and space in the period of transition from the old economy to the new one. Consequently, e-commerce has turned into a dynamic element in the new economy. Even though technologies of electronic communication have been in use since the early 1980s, the use of these technologies in commerce became common hardly after the first half of the 1990s. Since it is still new, different institutions has perceived them in various ways, however the general expectation is that the barriers that restrict access to goods and services will decrease along with the tendency to electronic commerce (Savrul and Kilic, 2011: 251).

Considering the application dimension of the issue in Europe, it is observed that businesses and governments aren’t taking full advantage of digital tools. The purpose of the Digital Single Market is to eliminate the regulative walls and eventually enabling the transition from 28 national markets to a single one (European Commission, 2015b), and this will also ensure that e-commerce can be carried out more widely in the region. In this regard, the effects of the Digital Single Market on e-commerce can be expressed under 5 headings as follows:

- **Cross border e-commerce regulations that customers and enterprises can trust:** Customers and small enterprises will be more interested in cross border e-commerce if the rules applied to these transactions can be simple, clear and match between Member States. Because 28 different national contract and customer protection laws exist, enterprises are deterred from cross border trade and customers are prevented from taking advantage of the online offers (Beale et al, 2019: 71). The EU customers can save a lot if they can pick from a wide variety of EU goods and services when they shop online.

- **Affordable and high-quality cross border parcel delivery:** Inexpensive and high quality cross border delivery services can assemble customer confidence in cross border online trade. Partners object to the overpriced costs of small shipments, the lack of transparency and interoperability between the different operators usually involved in a cross border shipment, which results in a lack of accessibility for the end user (European Commission, 2015c).
- **Prevent unfair geoblocking:** Geoblocking refers to practices, which are used by online dealers for commercial grounds that result in blocking access to websites sited in other Member States. From time to time, although consumers can access the website, they can't buy products or services from it. The customers can be redirected to a local website of the same firm that has different products, services or prices. In other situations, sellers use geolocation tools and based on geographical location of the customers, different prices can be applied automatically (Lianos, 2019: 526-527).
- **Better access to digital content:** Copyright forms the ground of imagination and the cultural industry in Europe. The EU depend on creativity to compete universally and in some copyright-intensive sectors, it is the world leader. Digital content is one of the main factors of growth of the digital economy. 56 percent of Europeans use the internet for cultural purposes and the growth rates of digital media and entertainment and is estimated to reach 12% over the next five years. However due to copyright issues in audiovisual programmes, barriers to cross border access to content services and their mobilit are still prevalent (European Commission, 2015c).
- **Reducing VAT related burdens and obstacles when selling across borders:** The businesses, which try to do both offline and online cross border activity face many different national systems and it is an actual obstacle for the firms. After the new supply policy entered into force in 2015, VAT is charged at the location of the customer rather than at the location of the provider for all electronic, broadcasting and telecommunications services (European Commission, 2021).

4 Impact of Digital Single Market on E-Commerce Performance of the Member States

The effect of the Digital Single Market Strategy on member countries isn't limited to e-commerce and as mentioned in the pillars of the Strategy, it covers many dimensions of economy and social life. However, our main objective in this study is to determine the effects of digital comprehensive expansions of The Single Market application on e-commerce. Therefore, we will first examine the changes in e-commerce values for customers and vendors before and after the Digital Single Market implementation.

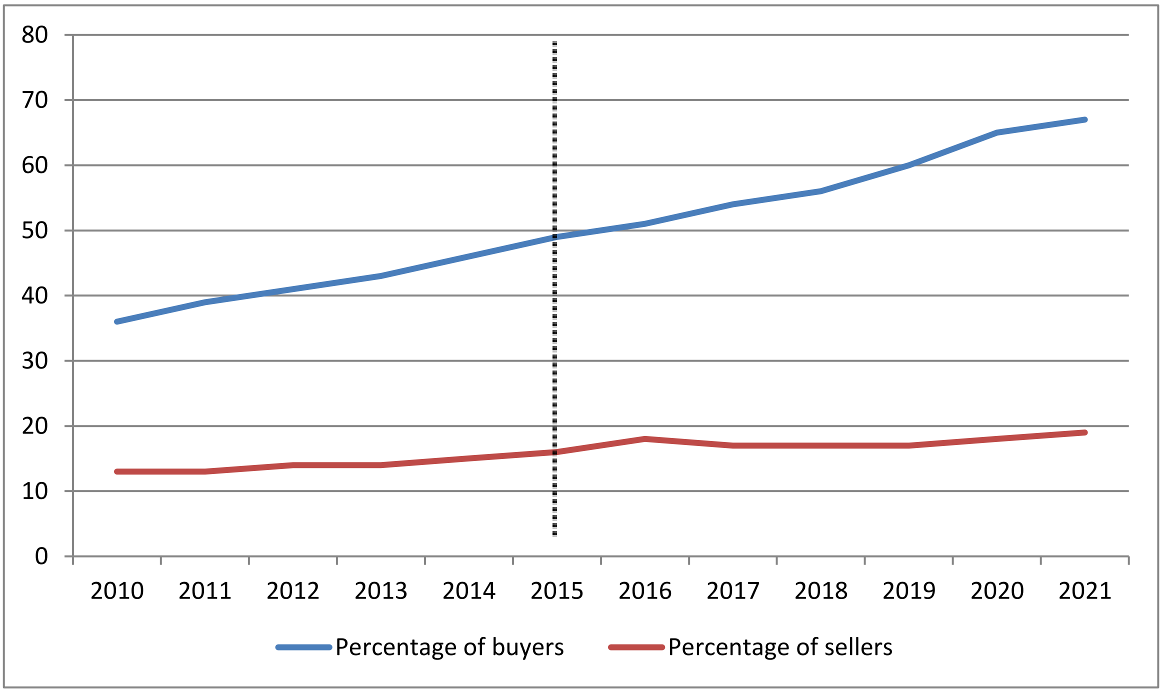

Figure 1. *Online Purchase / E-commerce Sales Statistics, EU Average, 2010-2021* ***Source:*** *Eurostat, 2022b. Benchmarking Digital Europe: Key Performance Indicators.*

The chart shows the ratio of customers and sellers who have made purchases via e-commerce in the last 1 year. The scope of customers consists of the people who purchased online in the 12 months and scope of sellers is the enterprises with e-commerce sales of at least 1% turnover. As it can be easily read from the graph, although there is a stable increase trend in both variables, it is seen that the process is more beneficial for buyers than for sellers. Another noteworthy factor is that the trend in both variables did not change significantly after 2015, when the digital single market strategy was implemented. Therefore, it cannot be said that the strategy has made a significant contribution to the course of e-commerce in the EU as a whole. Since it would be possible to obtain different results from a member-based evaluation, the variables are analyzed on a country-by-country basis in Figures 2 and 3.

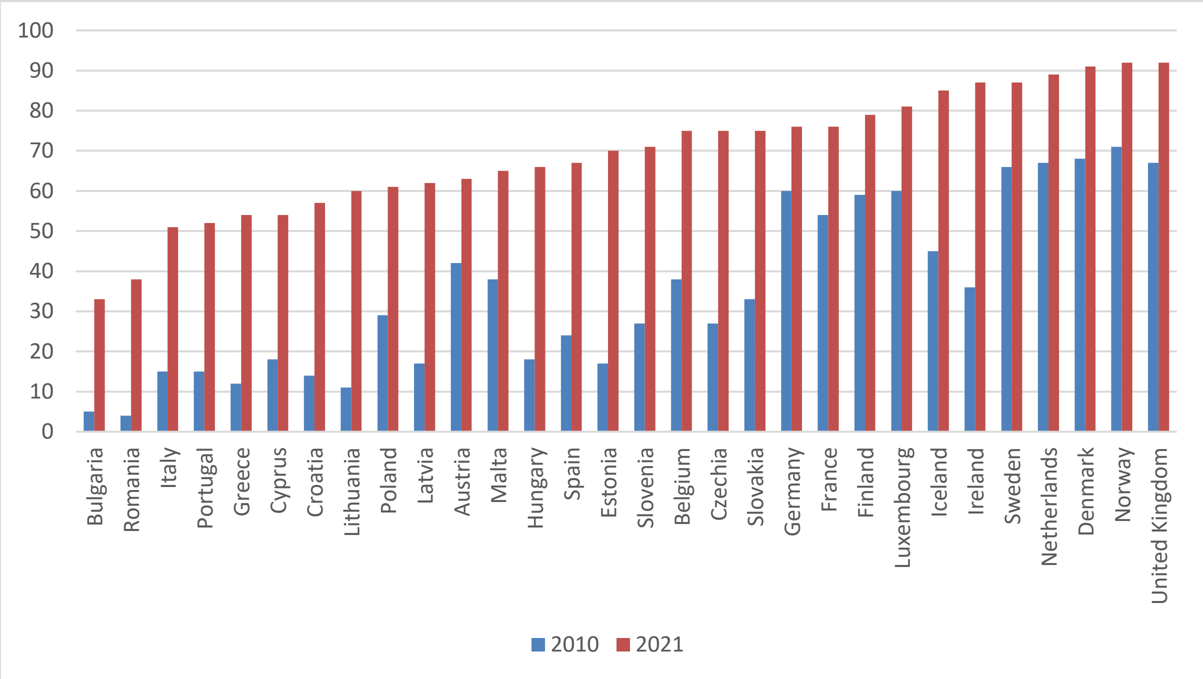

Figure 2. *Online Purchase Statistics, The European Single Market Members 2010-2021* ***Source:*** *Eurostat, 2022b. Benchmarking Digital Europe: Key Performance Indicators.*

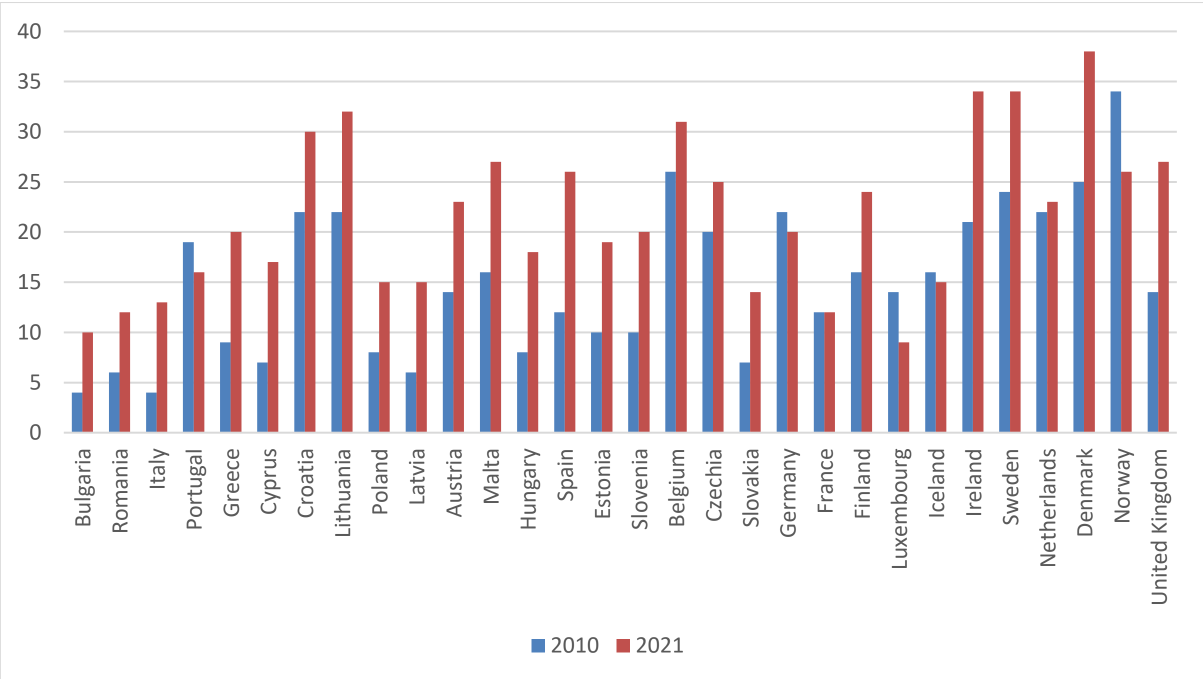

Figure 3. *E-commerce Sales Statistics, The European Single Market Members 2010-2021* ***Source:*** *Eurostat, 2022b. Benchmarking Digital Europe: Key Performance Indicators.*

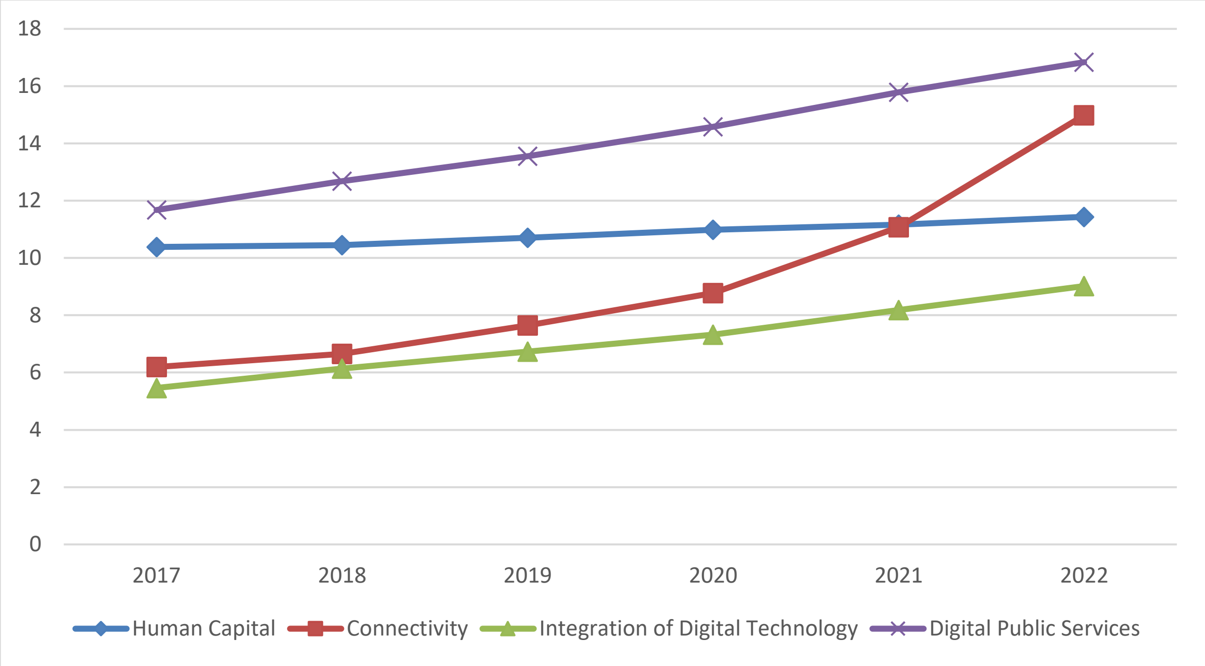

Figure 4. *Digital Economy and Society Index, Main DESI Dimensions, EU Average 2017-2022* ***Source:*** *European Commission, 2022b. Digital Scoreboard.*

In Figure 2, the change in the data of the online purchasing variable between the years 2010-2021 is presented. Quite different from the EU average values, as it is clearly seen in the figure, while the values of the economically more developed members of the union such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Netherland etc. do not change much, there are significant increases of 5-6 times in the values of the less developed countries of the union such as Bulgaria, Greece and Romania.

Figure 3 shows the change in the data of the online sales variable between the years 2010-2021. Similar to Online Purchase Statistics, while the data of the more developed countries of the Market did not change much in the mentioned period, the change in the economically less developed countries was more significant. As a result, when we evaluate the issue in terms of the contribution that the Digital Single Market may have made to e-commerce performance of the member countries, we can conclude that the Digital Single Market strategy has contributed to both buyers and sellers of the less developed countries of the Market rather than the developed countries.

Finally, as mentioned before, the Digital Economy and Society Index set by European Commission, which presents economic and social advantages of the Digital Single Market strategy to the market member countries in a more general way, is presented in Figure 4. The index includes Connectivity, Digital Public Services, Integration of Digital Technology and Human Capital dimensions covering the years 2017-2022. Considering that the Digital Single Market strategy implemented in 2015 has a direct impact on these dimensions, it is seen that the human capital dimension provides the least benefit from the strategy, while the connectivity dimension provides the most benefit. It is seen that the dimensions of Digital Public Services and Integration of Digital Technology have improved up to 60% in the aforementioned period.

5 Conclusion

In line with classical economic theories, economic integrations aim to boost the flow of goods and services by reducing or completely removing the foreign trade barriers between the countries of a certain region and ultimately to increase the welfare in the relevant region. European regional integration, which was established in 1957 as the European Economic Community and transformed into a single market in 1993, is one of the most important actors of this.

The European Single Market, which made significant contributions to the economic integration literature with its innovations, once again demonstrated this feature with the Digital Single Market strategy, it put into effect in 2015 to adapt to the technological developments of the period. Purpose of The Digital Single Market strategy is to guarantee better access for enterprises and consumers to Europe-wide online goods and services by eliminating barriers to cross border e-commerce and access to online content. Consequently, in today's world where commerce has started to be carried out with digital channels to a large extent, this study aims to determine if the economic integrations contributed to the development of e-commerce in the region where they are effective.

The evaluations obtained from the examination of e-commerce statistics and Digital Scoreboard data obtained from Eurostat and European Commission databases reveal the following results.

- In terms of the EU average, e-commerce usage by both sellers and buyers is on a steady increasing trend. However, buyers were more positively affected by the process than sellers.
- After 2015, when the Digital Single Market strategy came into effect, no notable deviations were observed in the relevant trends. Therefore, it is not possible to say that the Strategy contributes to the development of e-commerce in terms of the Market in general.
- When the data of the same period is analyzed on a country basis, between 2010-2021, very minor changes can be seen in terms of both online sales and purchasing in the more economically developed countries of the market, such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, France, Germany and Denmark.
- In the less developed countries of the market like Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia both online purchasing and online sales shares increased 5-6 times in the same period.
- The Digital Economy and Society Index values, which evaluate the effects of the Digital Single Market Strategy on member countries beyond e-commerce show that the connectivity dimension increased by 145% between the years 2017-2022, while the size of the Human Capital increased by about 60%, and the size of the Human Capital increased only by 9%.
- Therefore, it is seen that the feature of developing the technological infrastructure of the Strategy takes precedence over its social features.

When the results obtained are evaluated in terms of the question investigated by the study, it can be concluded that the integrations established among developing countries will contribute more to the e-commerce performance of the member countries than those established among the developed countries. When we look at the issue in the European Single Market, some deficiencies have to be eliminated in order to acquire the expected benefits throughout the union. National legislations such as copyright laws and security regulations have not yet been homogenized sufficiently and this hinders the full freedom of e-commerce within the Single Market. Measures to regulate market-wide e-commerce are complicating rather than liberalizing the online marketing of goods and services. These measures lead to monopolization in e-commerce as they are at a level that sometimes small and medium enterprises cannot afford. A more digital and more technological single market means more jobs are lost for some sectors and regions, and it will not be possible for certain segments to support the Digital Single Market without creating new sectors to which the lost jobs can be directed.

In this study, based on the fact that both local and foreign trade is carried out more and more through online channels, how e-commerce can be developed in a controlled way is questioned. However, the Digital Single Market Strategy was only implemented in 2015 and has not yet created enough data. When a longer time series is reached, the evaluation of the study will be empirically updated and more reliable results will be sought.

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