

## Brexit in Hindsight and the Future Direction for ASEAN<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

Over the past year, the Brexit phenomenon has generated much debate over the challenges of regional integration around the world. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature of regionalism by critically examining some of the underlying causes of Brexit as well as important lessons that ASEAN should learn from the Brexit experience. In doing so, it looked into a number of socio-political issues that gave rise to the Brexit result. In addition, it also investigates if any similar issues can be discerned from the context of ASEAN. In this respect, the findings revealed that insufficient public awareness of regional integration and a lack of public involvement in decision-making of some key policies are the fundamental causes of Brexit. Notably, similar issues can also be detected within the ASEAN context. The suggestion for ASEAN therefore includes strengthening the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns and public involvement with policy formulation.

**Keywords:** Brexit, ASEAN, institutionalization, economic integration, political communication, public awareness

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## แลหังกรณีเบร์กชิท และทิศทางอนาคตของอาเซียน

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### บทคัดย่อ

ในรอบปีที่ผ่านมา ปรากฏการณ์เบร์กชิทนำไปสู่การถกเถียงอย่างมากmanyเกี่ยวกับความท้าทายของการบูรณาการภูมิภาคทั่วทุกมุมโลก บทความนิ่งมุ่งที่จะสนับสนุนการรวมต้านภูมิภาคนิยม ด้วยการศึกษาสาเหตุพื้นฐานบางประการที่ทำให้เกิดกรณีเบร์กชิท พร้อมทั้งวิเคราะห์บทเรียนสำคัญจากประสบการณ์กรณีเบร์กชิทที่อาเซียนควรจะเรียนรู้ในการศึกษาสิ่งที่เกิดล่ามานั้น บทความนี้จะค้นคว้าประเด็นปัญหาเชิงสังคมการเมืองบางประเด็นที่เป็นสาเหตุของเบร์กชิท นอกเหนือนี้ ยังศึกษาว่า ปัญหาคล้ายคลึงกันกับกรณีเบร์กชิทสามารถพบได้ในบริบทของอาเซียนหรือไม่ จากการศึกษาดังกล่าวมานี้พบว่า การตระหนักรู้ของสาธารณะชนต่อการบูรณาการภูมิภาคที่ไม่เพียงพอ และการขาดการมีส่วนร่วมของสาธารณะชนในกระบวนการกำหนดนโยบายสำคัญ ๆ เป็นสาเหตุหลักนำไปสู่เบร์กชิท อนึ่ง ปัญหาคล้ายคลึงกันกับกรณีเบร์กชิทสามารถพบได้ภายในตัวบุคคลของอาเซียน เช่นกัน ดังนั้น ข้อเสนอแนะของอาเซียนจากบทเรียนกรณีเบร์กชิทจึงประกอบด้วย การสร้างเสริมประสิทธิภาพการรณรงค์การตระหนักรู้ของสาธารณะชน และการมีส่วนร่วมของสาธารณะชนในกระบวนการกำหนดนโยบาย

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## Introduction

On June 23, 2016, British people were asked in a historic referendum whether the United Kingdom (UK) should remain a member of the European Union (EU). The result was the Leave camp<sup>1</sup> won 51.9 percent of votes while the Remain camp<sup>2</sup> took 48.1 percent (BBC, 2016). Afterward, Article 50 of the Treaty on the European Union (the Lisbon Treaty) has been triggered in March 2017. Britain has now become the first EU member state to leave the Union in its current form (Witte, Adam & Balz, 2016).

Arguably, Brexit<sup>3</sup> does not just create significant impacts upon various aspects of relationships between the UK and the EU, it also carries some implications for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially at the time where ASEAN's economic integration project – ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) – is now under way. In the aftermath of the EU referendum in Britain, some analysts have warned that ASEAN should be more cautious about approaching the AEC to prevent a Brexit-like phenomenon happening in the region. Some others argued, however, that ASEAN and the EU are distinctively different; hence, people should not react with alarm to the possible impacts of Brexit on ASEAN (Wong, 2016). That said, Brexit can arguably be a wake-up call for ASEAN.

This paper critically examines some of the underlying causes of Brexit as well as important lessons that ASEAN should learn from the Brexit experience. In so doing, it looked into a number of socio-political issues that gave rise to the Brexit result. In addition, it also investigates if any similar issues can be discerned from the context of ASEAN. This paper starts with a review of the theoretical background of regional integration in the next part. There followed a brief discussion about the EU and ASEAN as regional bodies and key differences between the two. Then, it critically examines Brexit by looking into the fundamental causes contributing to a Leave vote. Next, the situation under which ASEAN is now developing will be extensively discussed to see if there are any specific lessons that ASEAN can draw from the Brexit experience.

## The Theoretical Background of Regional Integration

Here, this paper reviews key theories explaining the formation of regional integration. A review of theories helps promote some understanding of basic concepts of integration and also helps shed light on the nature of the European Union (EU) and ASEAN.

Historically, regional integration posed some difficult theoretical questions as to what the precise legal and political nature of the entity in the making was (Avbelj, 2011). The difficulty of grasping the development of an integrated entity was partly due to a confused understanding of people about the term 'integration' which has always been used interchangeably with 'cooperation', 'community' or even 'unification' (Nye, 1968).

Haas (1958), amid different interpretations, has proposed the definition of ‘integration’ to mean:

*“the process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities toward a new centre, whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over the preexisting national states”* (Haas, 1958: 16)

From legal and political dimensions, the advocates of the international law thesis have argued that the structure of regional integration is arguably in the form of a confederacy of states (e.g. Hartley, 1999) where a broad alliance of sovereign nations is forged under international law similar to an international organization, while the opponents see the integration as a federal state in which federated nations are gradually deprived of their sovereignty (e.g. Mancini, 1998: 39) to prevent “the old order” of sovereign countries competing one another (Haas, 1976: 175). Neither of these theoretical arguments secure the majority of opinions (Avbelj, 2011).

Leaving federal-confederal perspectives to one side for now, the theory of union explains that a union is a non-statist entity comprised of three constitutive elements: the member states, the supranational body (the union in a strict sense); and the common whole (the union in a broad sense). These constitutive elements shaped a union into an entity with a three-layered structure. This unique structure makes a union distinctively different from federal and confederal regimes because a union “is composed and continuously presupposes the co-existence of sovereign Member States and an equally autonomous supranational level” (Avbelj, 2011: 821) but a federation is consisted of only a two-layered structure where the common whole is exhausted at the federate level while in a confederal regime, the common whole does not exist as separate states are only bound by loose international treaties. Apparently, a union embraces a plurality of legal orders and polities and, more importantly, as member states do not need to waive their sovereignty to become part of the union.

Regional integration’s particular emphasis is on economic integration. The interpretation of economic integration varies from region to region. In a more developed region, economic integration is seen as a mechanism for solving a tariff issue, while in a less developed region, the integration is viewed as an approach to economic development (Jaber, 1970). The theory of economic integration constructed by Balassa (1961) indicates that the gist of the integration is the elimination of discrimination between economic units belonging to different countries. This apparently distinguishes ‘integration’, as a means of abolishing discrimination, from ‘cooperation’ which merely seeks a lessening of discriminatory practices. Balassa also proposed five categories of integration according to the level of intensity ranging from a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, an economic union and total economic integration, and explained further that:

*“In a free-trade area, tariffs (and quantitative restrictions) between the participating countries are abolished, but each country retains its own tariffs against non-members. Establishing a customs union involves, besides the suppression of discrimination in the field of commodity movements within the union, the equalization of tariffs in trade with non-member countries. A higher form of economic integration is attained in a common market, where not only trade restrictions but also restrictions on factor movements are abolished. An economic union, as distinct from a common market, combines the suppression of restrictions on commodity and factor movements with some degree of harmonization of national economic policies, in order to remove discrimination that was due to disparities in these policies. Finally, total economic integration presupposes the unification of monetary, fiscal, social, and countercyclical policies and requires the setting-up of a supranational authority whose decisions are binding for the member states.” (Balassa, 1961: 2)*

Taken together, the above discussion reflects a close intertwining of economic integration and political decision. It can be concluded that the extent to which national economies would integrate inevitably depends upon political consideration. In the following part, the inseparable nature of politics and economic integration will be discussed through the development of regional integration in Europe and Southeast Asia.

## **The development of the European Union and ASEAN**

Prior to the analysis of the Brexit phenomenon and the lessons that ASEAN should learn, the history of the European Union (EU) and the relationships between the EU and Britain will be briefly discussed to enable readers of this paper to understand the development of the EU and the relationships between the EU and Britain. Following on from this, the origin and subsequent evolution of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will also be discussed to enable readers to come to grips with how ASEAN works and being able to see, at least, some key differences between ASEAN and the EU.

### **The European Union**

The emergence of regional integration in Europe resulted from the aspiration to rebuild the European continent in the wake of World War II. Much to the credit of Jean Monnet, a French bureaucrat, who had proposed the integration of the French and German economies as a means of reconstructing Europe. Monnet’s proposals enthused then French Foreign Secretary, Robert Schuman, and then West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer; shortly afterwards, the idea of economic integration was floated to some other European countries. Ultimately, four other countries including Italy and the Benelux countries (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) decided to take part

in this project. Then, the Treaty of Paris was signed to give way for a regional body, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), to be created in 1951 (Jones, 2007).

Soon after, the desire of the Benelux countries to enhance economic integration more rapidly had led to the convening of a committee chaired by then Belgian Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, to investigate the possibility of further development. Spaak had proposed closer economic integration and the establishment of a common market. It should be noted that the Spaak's proposals became the foundation for the Treaty of Rome which gave birth to the European Economic Community (EEC). The arrival of the EEC not just brought about the enlargement of the European community but also resulted in greater economic integration. However, it was, first, the Single European Act (SEA), and, later, the Treaty of the European Union (the Maastricht Treaty) that proved to be a stepping stone towards the establishment of the European Union (EU) in its current form (Jones, 2007).

The EU integration model “sits between the fully federal system found in the United States and the loose, intergovernmental cooperation system seen in the United Nations” (European Commission, 2013). The EU consists of 28 members including Britain. It is under regulatory oversight of four key institutional bodies, namely the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council and the European Commission. The European Parliament is a democratic institution as Members of European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected by the people of each EU member state to legislate and supervise other European institutions. The European Council is comprised of the head of EU member states and is in charge of the political direction of the EU in general. The Council represents EU national governments and is a decision maker of the EU's foreign policy. The European Commission exercises its power to propose new legislation and is answerable to the European Parliament (European Commission, 2013).

Under Harold Macmillan's premiership, Britain sought to be involved with the European economic project and applied to become a member of the EEC for the first time in 1961. From the very beginning. Britain's application had consistently been vetoed by Charles de Gaulle, the French President at the time, for the reason that Britain “was rather subservient to American whims” and that “it [Britain] would be the ‘Trojan horse’ that would let the United States interfere in European matters” (Jones, 2007: 15). However, Britain had eventually gained membership of the EEC in 1973.

Notably, due to a certain level of skepticism of the EEC among the British political class, Britain has always been described as an awkward partner within the EEC ever since it joined. Only two years after the accession to the EEC, the rise of British Euroscepticism had given rise to the referendum on Britain's EEC membership being organized in 1975. The rationale behind the holding of this referendum was twofold: Britain's EEC membership was an attack on the principle of parliamentary democracy and that staying in the Community would be atrocious to the UK economy.

The 1975 referendum ended in victory of those campaigned for the UK to retain the EEC membership as 67 percent of the voters had rejected to leave the Community (Dhingra, 2016).

It was not until 2016 that the second referendum on Britain's membership of the European Community was held. It is arguable that David Cameron, then UK Prime Minister, saw the increasing popularity of the UK Independent Party (UKIP), which could successfully galvanized considerable anti-European Union support, as a potential threat to the future of the Conservative Party; thus, he ultimately took a decision to pledge an in/out referendum if the Conservative Party won the 2015 general election (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015; Mason, 2016; Menon, Minto & Wincott, 2016). Finally, the Conservative Party had won the election; there followed the EU referendum being held and Britain is now on course to exit the EU.

### **The Association of Southeast Asian Nations**

In 1967, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore had agreed to establish the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a regional organization (Severino, 2008). In a similar vein to the EU, the development of ASEAN was of political reasons; mainly, to maintain regional order amid political volatility (Roberts, 2012).

The administration of ASEAN in its early development depended upon collective decision-making of foreign ministers from member states; in this respect, important decisions would be made at the Annual Ministerial Meeting (AMM). Once, a decision has been made, the implementation of ASEAN's missions would be propelled by the so called "Standing Committee" chaired by the foreign minister of the country hosting the AMM in that year (Chang, 1990).

In 1976, ASEAN member states took another important step when they signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, to promote peace and stability in the region. The effect of the treaty, in a way, formalized the relationships between member states. As shown in Article 2 of the Treaty, the following principles were developed for the sake of maintaining cordial relationships among ASEAN countries:

- Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations;
- The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion;
- Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another;
- Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means;
- Renunciation of the threat or use of force;
- Effective cooperation among themselves.

In addition to the treaty, the ASEAN Secretariat was also created in the same year to become

*“[a] central administrative organ to provide for greater efficiency in the coordination of ASEAN organs and for more effective implementation of ASEAN projects and activities”* (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 1976)

Major reforms to ASEAN’s institutional structure had been introduced in 1977. On this occasion, member states unanimously agreed that solely economic development could bring regional stability and political freedom to Southeast Asia. Heads of government of ASEAN’s member states were therefore given a role in making decisions; meanwhile, economic ministers were also entrusted to involve in the operation of ASEAN. The reforms ultimately shaped ASEAN to properly become an intergovernmental body (Chang, 1990).

At present, ASEAN is consisted of 10 member states, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. With a combined population of 622 million, ASEAN is the third largest labour force and the seventh largest economy in the world (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2015).

#### **Some Reflections on the Nature of the EU and ASEAN**

Given an interview on Brexit and the implications for ASEAN, Surin Pitsuwan, former ASEAN Secretary General, highlighted that “the EU has been our inspiration but not our model,” and that European integration and ASEAN integration “has not been on the same level of intensity” (Kotani, 2016). The comments were offered to alleviate concern over the impacts of Brexit upon the implementation of the AEC and also to indicate that a comparison between the EU and ASEAN is asymmetrical.

The EU and ASEAN are distinctively different in two key aspects; the intensity of institutionalization and a model for economic integration. As noted, the EU is operated under the administration of four institutional bodies namely the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council and the European Commission. EU member states all delegated certain level of their national sovereignty for collective interests of the EU. Take the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) as an example. Each EU member state needs to be under strict adherence to the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) – fishing quotas – proposed annually by the European Commission (EC) (Hirst, 2017).

Another example is the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Citizens of EU member states are able to bring a case or file an appeal against the judgement of their national court on the matters of human rights violations to the ECtHR; notably, the ECtHR’s judgements and orders have increasingly been embedded in the legal system of each EU member state (Helper, 2008). All of this highlights a high degree of institutionalization and legalism of the EU project which falls squarely into the theory of union.

In a sharp contrast to the EU, ASEAN is not committed to a high level of institutionalization as it can be seen that ASEAN Secretariat exists as a mere operating unit not a regulatory agency (Inama & Sim, 2015). This is predominantly because ASEAN still very much adheres to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other members (Jones, 2016). ASEAN therefore “pursues intergovernmental cooperation among the sovereign equals with decision-making based on consultation and consensus” (Ha et al., 2016). In this respect, it can be concluded that the cooperation among ASEAN member states has always been in the form of diplomacy in order to avoid undue institutionalization (Acharya, 1997).

We now turn to the differences in the EU’s and ASEAN’s economic integration models. One of the ultimate ends of having the European Community is to ensure the creation of a single common market in the European economic area. “The idea of the Single Market was based upon what were described as the ‘four freedoms’: freedom of movement for goods, people, capital and services” (Jones, 2007: 18). The emergence of a single market means that EU member states could no longer interfere with cross-bordering matters concerning with trade.

With limited space in this paper, we therefore will be discussing solely the aspect of freedom of movement. As regards free mobility of people in Europe, it was “the conclusion of the two Schengen agreements, i.e. the Agreement proper of 14 June 1985, and the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement, which was signed on 19 June 1990 and entered into force on 26 March 1995” that eventually guaranteed freedom of movement for European citizens. Under the Schengen arrangements, citizens of EU member states are not just able to travel freely within the EU economic area but are also permitted to work and reside in any member countries without visa restrictions (Marzocchi, 2017).

In ASEAN, heads of ASEAN national governments have signed the ASEAN Charter in 2007 with a view to introducing ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2015 (Oba, 2014). The creation of the AEC is based on the aspiration of creating:

*[a] single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive, economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and services; facilitated movement of business persons, professionals, talents and labour; and freer flow of capital... (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2007, art.1(5)).*

The arrangements for a single market within the AEC, however, are totally different from that of the EU.

To actualize a single market, free labor mobility is an important milestone. Notably, free movement of labor in the EU is enforced as a right to each and every citizen of EU member states; on the contrary, labor mobility in ASEAN is not guaranteed as a right. Furthermore, free movement

of labor in ASEAN is limited to those working in the following sectors: architectural services; accountancy services; surveying qualifications; medical practitioners; dental practitioners; engineering services; nursing services and tourism professionals. Even though people serving in the aforementioned professions are given priority over free movement, they cannot move from one country to another freely as a visa system is still retained in each ASEAN member state (Ha et al., 2016).

Given the differences between the EU and ASEAN, it would be false making comparison between the two; nonetheless, it is arguable that, as ASEAN wishes to make further progress on the AEC, it should draw on the experience of Brexit and the EU to avoid falling into any similar pitfalls.

### The Underlying Causes of Brexit

Goodwin and Milazzo (2015) offered their analysis on the way in which British people would vote in the EU referendum a year before it was organized, they claimed the following:

*“Those who are currently planning to vote to leave the EU are motivated mainly by their dissatisfaction with how, in their view, democracy is working at the EU level, and also by their strong concerns over immigration and its perceived effects on Britain’s economy, culture and welfare state”* (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015: 1)

The analysis was apparently substantiated as, over the course of the EU referendum campaign, the Leave camp has highlighted the issues of mass EU migration into the UK and parliamentary sovereignty to galvanize support for a leave vote.

On *The ITV EU Referendum Debate*, Andrea Leadsom, one of the leading figures in the Leave camp, argued that:

*“[Britain], as a member of the EU, it is uncontrollable immigration and that’s where the problem is. And so, what we’re finding, according to the Bank of England, that uncontrollable immigration is having a dampening effect on wages. So people are unable to earn and what we’re finding is school places have pressure on doctors’ surgeries appointments and of course getting onto the housing ladder, concreting over the green belt. These are the problems of uncontrolled immigration. We need to take back control and vote leave on June the 23<sup>rd</sup>”* (ITV News, 2016)

In addition to the immigration issues, Mrs. Leadsom also put forward the point about national sovereignty to convince people to vote to leave the EU. She claimed that:

*“This [being in the EU] isn’t a pooling of sovereignty, this is a take-over by an unelected European super state...we cannot control our borders, we cannot control our taxes, we cannot control the rules and regulations.... We have to take back control” (ITV News, 2016)*

On the same occasion, Boris Johnson, one of the most prominent Brexiteers,<sup>4</sup> also emphasized that “[We can have] more influence if we take back control and come out of the EU because what happens in the EU is that we are more outvoted than any other country” (ITV News, 2016). Last but not least, another prominent Brexiteer, Michael Gove (2016) also made a case that:

*“[I]f we vote to leave, we take back control. We can take back the £350m we give to the EU every week. We can spend more on our priorities like the NHS. We can take back control of our economy.”*

Apparently, “taking back control” was the most resonant message the leave camp could successfully get across to ordinary people during the referendum campaign (Mason, 2016). A number of commentators pointed out that the success of the leave camp achieved via the arousal of nationalist sentiments among the people who are already sceptical about the EU (Hobolt, 2016; Mason, 2016; Corbett, 2016). No doubt, a sense of nationalism played a part in the EU referendum result, but, arguably, it alone, could not produce the Brexit result. Indisputably, it was a lack of effective communication from political elites to ordinary people over many years about the EU as an institution and the benefit of Britain being part of it that allowed Brexit to happen. Why so?

In 2016, Ipsos MORI conducted a survey, *The Perils of Perception and the EU*. The findings of this survey demonstrate that a sizable proportion of British people are unaware of some of the basic facts about the EU and the relationship between Britain and the EU. For instance, it was found that:

*“Only 6 in 10 [survey participants] know that members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected by the citizens of each member state. One in five (18 percent) think that MEPs are not elected and a quarter (25 percent) say they don’t know whether they are or not” (Ipsos MORI, 2016)*

It is astonishing, considering Britain as a member of the EU for four decades, that a certain proportion of British people are still unaware whether MEPs are elected or not. Managing Director of Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, gave the following comments in relation to the findings:

*“The public have been calling for the “facts” to help them make up their minds on how to vote [in the referendum] – but this survey shows that many of us are still very shaky on fundamental aspects of our [Britain] relationship with the EU” (Ipsos MORI, 2016)*

All of this shows not just insufficient awareness of the British public on the EU, also it reflects that there are some key communication challenges between the political class and ordinary people in Britain.

Leaving aside low awareness, it was also the government's scaremongering tactic during the referendum campaign that encouraged the spread of nationalist sentiments. For instance, George Osborne, a former UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote in a *Time* article during the upcoming of the EU referendum that:

*"The conclusion is clear for Britain's economy and for families – leaving the EU would be the most extraordinary self-inflicted wound... Put simply: over many years, are you better off or worse off if we leave the EU? The answer is: Britain would be worse off, permanently so, and to the tune of £4,300 a year for every household"* (Watt & Treanor, 2016)

In addition, appearing on the BBC programme, *Question Time*, David Cameron stood by what he previously claimed that the leader of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) would be happy if Britain left the EU. In response to the audience's question, Mr. Cameron said the following:

*"I actually think that's true [the leader of ISIS would be happy if Britain left the EU]. I think if the terrorists that want to do us harm they want the West to be divided. They don't want Britain and France and Germany and Belgium to work together to defeat terrorism. They'd like to see us separate from each other"* (BBC, 2016)

This apparently shows that the Remain side was obsessed about convincing British people to vote to remain by striking fear to their heart, and hoped that fear of economic calamities and insecurity would help maintain the status quo.

In the course of the referendum campaign, positive message has been overshadowed by scaremongering tactics. British people lost opportunity to understand, for instance, that it is spurious to claim that immigration especially from the EU member states is only bad for British economy especially from the aspects of wages being undercut. However, the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) (2010) apparently indicated that migration into the UK created small impacts upon average wages. Effectively, the falling of wages was due to the global financial crisis rather than the level of immigration (Wadsworth et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is immigration (both from within and outside the EU) that helped "fill vacancies in specific regions and specialisms" (p. 171). In addition, the study of Dustmann and Frattini (2013), highlighted that, over the period between 1995 and 2011, EU migrants contributed to the UK economy 10 percent more compared to natives; also, it was found that migrants lived

in the UK in any year in the aforementioned period of time have been less likely to receive state benefits and have been less likely to reside in social housing compared with the locals.

The Remain camp's project fear also reduced opportunity of the British public to understand that the Leave camp's 350 million argument was a half-truth, in reality, the UK gets certain amount of a rebate that helps reduce its contribution to the EU as well. For example, in 2014, the UK contribution to the EU after taking account of a rebate was approximately 275 million a week (Emmerson et al., 2016).

Turning next to another issue seen by many people to also be the underlying causes of Brexit – the rise of populist politics. Corbett (2016: 15) elaborated that “populism can be described as an antiestablishmentarian discourse that emphasizes ‘the people’ against ‘the elites,’ partly through mythmaking, but also through the simplification of complex issues.” After Brexit, the British Election Study (BES) team has conducted a survey to investigate the extent to which those casted their votes in a referendum have regretted the choice they themselves made. The findings revealed that 6 per cent of those who voted for Britain to withdraw her membership of the EU have said that they are now filled with remorse for voting Leave.

Judging from the 51.9 versus 48.1 result, six percent of Brexit<sup>5</sup> seems to suggest that if there was another EU referendum today the Remain side would have won. BES also highlighted that “the popular narrative about Brexit was that many Leave voters had not really expected to win and voted to Leave out of protest or just to give the political elite a bloody nose.” In recent years, the political establishment in the UK has been engulfed with scandals including the MP's expenses scandal, the Milly Dowler phone hacking scandal to name but a few, these outrageous events profoundly added to the decline of public trust in politics (Ipsos MORI, 2016) and, in turn, reinforced the anti-establishment trend (Corbett, 2016; Hay, 2007).

Leconte (2015) argued that a populist discourse portrays the EU as “a regulatory monster” (p. 258) who seeks to intervene into each and every aspect of ordinary people's lives. The characterization of the EU may sound unfair, this does not mean that people have no foundation for being critical towards the EU. Take the European Commission Regulations on quality standards for cucumbers and bananas, for instance, these EC regulations, which have now been repealed, divided cucumbers and bananas into different types ranging from premium to low quality. They classified “crooked cucumbers” to be of low quality (EEC No 1677/88) and prescribed that bananas must be “free from malformation or abnormal curvature of the fingers” (EEC No 2257/94).

Even though curved cucumbers and bent bananas have never been banned under these regulations, the regulations themselves can be indicative of how the EU was seeking to set rules for almost every single matter. Mariann Fischer Boel, a former EU Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development reinforced the argument as she said: “It shouldn't be the EU's job to regulate

these things. It is far better to leave it to market operators. It will also cut down on unnecessary waste and benefit consumers" (European Commission, 2008).

Leaving aside the over-regulation issue, let it not be forgotten that the EU is an elite project. The formalization of policies has always been done through a top-down management style which aroused controversy from time to time. An anti-establishment trend is therefore also due to the fact that EU citizens felt that they have no stake, directly or indirectly to be consulted about major EU-related policies. For example, in Britain, the opening up of UK borders to migrant workers from Eastern Europe (Watt & Wintour, 2015) made people feel that their opinions on certain EU-related policies were ignored (Hooghe & Marks, 2007).

In light of the discussion about Brexit, it is worth examining whether any similar issues can be discerned within the ASEAN context.

### Brexit – A Wake-Up Call for ASEAN

As noted, some critics argued that the Brexit phenomenon would not occur in the ASEAN context since the level of intensity of ASEAN's economic integration is not comparable to that of the EU; moreover, ASEAN still adheres to the principles of non-interference in domestic matters of member states (Das, 2015); most importantly, there is no exit clause in the ASEAN Charter to allow member states to leave the organization (Ha et al., 2016). Accordingly, people should not react to the implications of Brexit for ASEAN and the AEC project with alarm let alone thinking about ASEAN disintegration (Wong, 2016; Chalermpalanupap, 2016). However, the Brexit experience is still vitally important for ASEAN because nothing is certain in today's politics; added to this, the Brexit lesson can serve as a warning to ASEAN that there is no room for complacency.

As we now understand that insufficient awareness of the EU was one of the key contributory factors for an increase of nationalist sentiments which ultimately brought about Brexit as a consequence; thus, for the AEC to succeed in the long run, ASEAN awareness is of necessity. As regards generating public awareness of the AEC, a lot has been discussed in the ASEAN region. Ong Keng Yong, a former ASEAN Secretary General, said "every member state has to grapple with issues and priorities...but there should be some space (for promoting ASEAN awareness)" (Min, 2015). The question arises to what extent the people of ASEAN are now alive to the development of ASEAN and the AEC.

In 2012, the survey on ASEAN Community Building Effort has been conducted to explore to extent to which the general public living in the capital cities of ASEAN countries are aware of ASEAN and its development. The findings underlined that 76 percent of respondents have no basic understanding of ASEAN while 19 per cent of them said that they have never heard of ASEAN (The ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Apart from the above, Thompson and Thianthai (2008) also

conducted a survey on behalf of the ASEAN Foundation to look into the attitudes and awareness of university students in Southeast Asia towards ASEAN.

The survey findings highlighted that “Myanmar students were among the least objectively knowledgeable about ASEAN” while “students from the Philippines also exhibited a relatively weak domain knowledge of the regional Association and its members”; furthermore, the findings also suggested that the attitudes of students from Singapore “would best be described as ambivalence. They were among the least likely to see ASEAN members as sharing similarities, least likely to consider themselves citizens of ASEAN and their domain knowledge was average to below average” (Thompson & Thianthai, 2008: 23).

Siraprapasiri and N Thalang (2016) assessed the knowledge and attitudes of ASEAN among Thai students in particular and found that although 70 per cent of the respondents could demonstrate a sound understanding of ASEAN, the knowledge of ASEAN they possess is about well-known aspects of ASEAN, they, however, were unable to give correct answers when being probed into more difficult matters. Added to this, it should be noted that the findings also indicated that most respondents view that the Thai educational system does not help much in improving the knowledge of the Thai public about ASEAN.

When it comes to raising awareness among young students in universities in particular, Azmawati and Quayle (2017) pointed out that, even though the ASEAN Secretariat has done to certain extent in offering information and knowledge about ASEAN to a wider public, they however found that this is inadequate to raise public awareness effectively. Central reasons for this are, first, numerous universities in the region still lack opportunity for getting involved with networking arrangements that help improving knowledge about ASEAN among university students. Second, ASEAN Secretariat’s publications are complicated for students to understand let alone the common people; even worse, access to both primary and secondary material from the ASEAN Secretariat is limited.

For ASEAN, there is a long way to go for awareness raising in the region since the focus of each individual ASEAN member state remains very much to be on domestic affairs. Corresponding with this argument, a former Indonesia’s Trade Minister, Thomas Lembong, has given the following comments:

*“I worry that within ASEAN, there is a similar danger [as that of in the EU] that ASEAN becomes a project of the elites, and we don’t spend enough time, money and effort socializing it to the people”* (Listiyorini, Roman & Rahadiana, 2016)

Leaving aside the issue of low awareness, it seems that most national governments in the region find talking about the benefits of ASEAN as a trading bloc most challenging and still have no clue on how to socializing this kind of matters to the people (Min, 2015).

Lee Yoong Yoong, ASEAN's director of community affairs, pointed out that "one of the lessons drawn from Brexit, not just from an ASEAN angle, is that you can't ignore the sentiment on the ground" (Listiyorini, Roman & Rahadiana, 2016). Reflecting from the Brexit experience, ordinary people felt that they have been left behind as their voice on key EU-related policies was not heard. Even though the implementation of policies in ASEAN is not based on regulatory bodies in the same way as the EU, ASEAN is run by political elites (heads of governments); thus, there is no surprise that ordinary people in ASEAN would share with the Europeans the same view on a regional body.

Rüland (2016) examined the AEC from the perspective of micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Indonesia. His study found that most MSME businessmen are not enthusiastic but rather anxious about the way in which the AEC is progressing. The prime reason for this is the fact that MSMEs have no role to play in policy decision-making. In this respect, Rüland (2016) underlined that "the concerns and interest of Indonesian MSMEs played virtually no role at the time of decision on AEC, nor when the details were mapped out" (p. 1133). The findings of this study can be indicative of the importance of public engagement in policy making of ASEAN.

Although ASEAN was created out of a vision of political elites in the region, it should be borne in mind that sustainable development of ASEAN and the AEC arguably relies on the support and involvement of the general public (Postigo, 2013; Das, 2015).

## Conclusion

Pongsudhirak (2016) pointed out that "the chief Brexit lesson for Asia is to pursue continued regional cooperation without going all the way to integration." Under the circumstances, it seems a little early to conclude that ASEAN should not carry out its economic integration plan. However, the most important mission of ASEAN following Brexit should be the re-evaluation of its approach to economic integration. It should also be noted that whether ASEAN is still keen on full integration or on shifting its position in the wake of Brexit, the Brexit phenomenon teaches ASEAN at least one vital lesson. Although it was the elite that gave birth to a regional organization, it was ordinary people that sustain it. Either regional cooperation or integration is no longer a subject of political elites, the success of it in the future relies on public support; therefore, people need to be put center stage.

Given the issues discussed in the preceding parts, it can be seen that insufficient awareness among members of the public about regional integration was one of the most serious issues hampering the development and sustainability of integration. Even though low public awareness of ASEAN and the AEC is a well-known fact for national governments in Southeast Asia (Das, 2015), as yet, not much has been done to make further progress in raising public awareness of ASEAN and the AEC. Thus, awareness-raising campaigns should now be at the top of the agenda. In addition,

sustainable development of ASEAN means that, at national level at least, people from all socio-economic backgrounds need to be on board for key policy decision-making process to ensure that, as ASEAN is developing, no one will be left behind.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> ‘Leave camp’ refers to the campaign for voting to leave the EU during the EU referendum campaign in Britain.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Remain camp’ refers to the campaign for voting to stay in the EU during the EU referendum campaign in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Brexit’ is an abbreviation for Britain exiting the EU.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Brexiteer’ is the term used to describe the people who believe in Britain staying outside the EU.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Bregret’ is the term used to describe the people who have regretted voted to leave the EU.

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