EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Coal tar distillation oils (CN 2707) — 2015–2025

Introduction

The commodity group CN 2707 covers oils and other products obtained from the distillation of high temperature coal tar, as well as similar products in which aromatic constituents outweigh non-aromatic ones. Between 2015 and 2025 the European Union's extra-EU trade in these coal-tar derivatives underwent a profound transformation. This report describes and interprets the main observable dynamics, built exclusively on the figures supplied by the Trade Dashboard.

From Net Importer to Export Champion: The EU's Transformative Surge in Coal Tar Oils

Export value and volume have multiplied, turning a trade deficit into a multi-billion surplus

The headline trade figures reveal a dramatic swing. In 2015 the EU ran a small deficit of **–143 million EUR**; by 2025 the trade balance stood at a surplus of **+5 352 million EUR** (pct. change +3 831 %) [General Overview]. Exports surged from **1.91 billion EUR** to **10.58 billion EUR** (+454 %), while imports rose by a comparatively modest 155 % (from **2.05 to 5.23 billion EUR**). Measured in quantity, exports more than quintupled (from **4.5 to 23.1 million tonnes**, +410 %), whereas imports grew by 89 % (from **5.2 to 9.9 million tonnes**).

Indicator	2015	2025	Change (%)
Exports (EUR)	1 909 267 397	10 578 705 657	+454
Imports (EUR)	2 052 697 944	5 226 680 545	+155
Trade balance (EUR)	–143 430 547	+5 352 025 112	+3 831
Exports (tonnes)	4 521 836	23 063 277	+410
Imports (tonnes)	5 249 328	9 940 532	+89

The swing was not linear; exports first peaked in 2022 at **11.25 billion EUR**, dipped in 2023, then recovered, while imports hit a high of **7.09 billion EUR** in 2021 before declining.

Domestic production scaled up to feed export demand while import growth lagged

EU production of CN 2707 products expanded markedly. Production quantity grew from **6 299 million kg** in 2015 to **12 312 million kg** in 2024 (+135.6 %), and the production value rose from **2 924 million EUR** to **6 551 million EUR** (+182.6 %) [Production volumes]. This home-grown capacity allowed the EU to meet most of its own demand and supply external markets. The net import reliance ratio collapsed from **–1.6 %** (already negative, i.e. a net exporter) to **–136.6 %** in 2024, meaning that exports far exceeded net import needs [Net import reliance].

Export propensity surged as the EU integrated global value chains

The export propensity – the share of domestic production that is sold outside the EU – jumped from **65.3 %** in 2015 to **179.2 %** in 2024, peaking at **206.8 %** in 2017 [Export propensity]. Values above 100 % indicate that the EU not only exports its entire output but also re-processes or blends imported intermediates for re-export. This upstream-downstream integration is a hallmark of the sector's evolution.

Geopolitical Redrawing of Trade Routes: The Fall of Russia and China, the Rise of Bunkering Hubs

Imports from Russia collapsed to near zero, reshaping EU sourcing

In 2015 the Russian Federation was the EU's top import partner for CN 2707, supplying **1 060 million EUR** worth of goods. After a temporary surge to **2 804 million EUR** in 2021, imports plummeted to **89 252 EUR** in 2024 and were virtually absent in 2025 [Top partners]. The EU-wide sanctions and self-sanctioning by operators effectively removed Russia from the market. Belarus, another former supplier, saw its deliveries drop from a peak of **560 million EUR** in 2021 to just **2 306 EUR** in 2025.

The gap was filled by other partners:

- The **United Kingdom** increased its deliveries from **335 to 1 710 million EUR** (+411 %).
- **Türkiye** grew from **50 to 695 million EUR** (+1 298 %).
- **Saudi Arabia** and the **United States** also expanded substantially.

Concentration of imports, measured by the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), fell from **3 772** in 2015 to **1 843** in 2025 (–51 %), confirming a wider, more resilient supplier base [Concentration HHI].

China’s role as a top export destination evaporated

On the export side, the most striking decline concerns China. In 2015 the EU sent **621 million EUR** of coal tar oils to China; by 2025 that figure had shrunk to **7.4 million EUR** (–98.8 %). The disappearance of this market reflects China’s growing domestic capacity and perhaps environmental restrictions on imports.

Meanwhile, new export outlets emerged:

- **“Stores and provisions within the framework of extra-Union trade”** – essentially marine bunker fuels – jumped from **1.6 million EUR** to **2 989 million EUR** (+185 421 %).
- **“Countries and territories not specified”** (often linked to ship-to-ship transfers or blended cargoes) rose from **0.95 million EUR** to **1 714 million EUR**.
- **Gibraltar**, a major Mediterranean bunkering hub, increased from **16 to 993 million EUR** (+5 987 %).

The export HHI more than halved, from **1 960** to **945** (–51.8 %), pointing to a diversified destination pattern [Concentration HHI].

Bunkering hubs and unspecified destinations absorbed the export boom

The combined share of “Stores and provisions”, “Countries not specified” and Gibraltar in EU exports rose from a mere 3 % of the total in 2015 to over 60 % in 2025. This suggests that a large portion of the EU’s coal-tar oils is now destined for maritime fuel blending, a sector that has boomed ahead of tighter sulphur regulations (IMO 2020).

Market Turbulence and Product Focus: Volatility, Price Shocks, and the Dominance of ‘Other’ Oils

Price shocks hit multiple trade flows, reflecting post-pandemic commodity turmoil

The dashboard’s shock detection algorithm flags several significant price events:

- **Imports from the United States** experienced a price spike of +67 % in 2022 (abnormality score 10.9), while quantity remained relatively stable [Shock events].
- **Exports to Malaysia** saw a price jump of +366 % in 2022 (abnormality 22.8), accompanied by a collapse in volume, indicating a sudden supply-disruption or re-routing.
- **Exports to Singapore** (the largest single destination) recorded a +79 % price increase in 2022 (abnormality 6.7), while volumes fell by roughly half.

- **Exports to Morocco, the United Kingdom, and Norway** likewise registered sizeable one-off price surges.

These events largely cluster around 2022, when global energy and commodity prices were extremely volatile, and EU operators were adjusting to the loss of Russian raw materials.

Subheading 270799 became the engine of trade expansion

The CN 2707 heading contains seven sub-headings. The dominating product, by far, is **270799** (“Other oils and products of the distillation of high temperature coal tars… excl. chemically defined compounds”). In 2015 it already represented **62 %** of import value and **23 %** of export value; by 2025 its share had risen to **75 %** of imports and **89 %** of exports [Product segment compare].

In volume terms, exports of 270799 soared from **1.7 million tonnes** (2015) to **21.2 million tonnes** (2025), while imports grew from **3.6 to 7.9 million tonnes**. The second largest category, **270750** (aromatic hydrocarbon mixtures distilling ≥65 % at 250 °C), saw export volumes shrink from **2.6 to 1.6 million tonnes**. Therefore, the entire export boom is attributable to the “other oils” basket – predominantly blends and residues used in marine fuels and chemical feedstock.

Concentration fell as the trade partner base diversified

Both import and export concentration (HHI) declined steadily, especially after 2019. The drop in partner concentration coincided with the substitution of formerly dominant suppliers (Russia, China) by a larger set of medium-sized players. For imports, the HHI fell from **3 772** to **1 843**; for exports, from **1 960** to **945** [Concentration HHI]. This broadening of the partner portfolio reduces the bloc’s exposure to individual country risks.

Conclusion

Over the 2015-2025 window, the EU’s trade in coal-tar distillation oils (CN 2707) underwent a structural break. On the back of rising domestic production, the bloc evolved from a near-balanced trader into a net exporter of more than five billion euros. Russia was eliminated as a supplier, China disappeared as a major buyer, and new export channels – chiefly maritime bunkering hubs – took over. The product basket narrowed to a single dominant category (270799), whose pricing experienced sharp, albeit temporary, shocks in 2022. The increased diversification of trade partners and the sector’s high export propensity point to a more integrated and resilient EU position, though vulnerability to global energy price swings remains.

Source: All data in this report are drawn from the Trade Dashboard queries referenced in the links. No external numbers have been added.

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If you need advice on European trade policy, or representation for your interests in Brussels, feel free to contact me at support@tradedashboard.eu. You can find my CV at this address.