EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Cork and cork articles (CN 45) — 2015–2025

Introduction

The EU's external trade in cork and cork articles (Harmonised System Chapter 45) covers untreated raw cork, worked natural cork, agglomerated cork, and finished articles. During the period 2015–2025, the sector consistently generated a large trade surplus, reflecting the EU's strong position as a processor and exporter of high-value cork products. The analysis draws on yearly EU-27 (extra-EU) trade data, as presented on the Trade overview dashboard.

1. Trade volumes contract sharply while unit values soar

Over the decade, the physical volume of both exports and imports shrank considerably, yet rising prices boosted export value and kept import value relatively stable. The EU's trade surplus widened from €460 million to €516 million.

Export quantities declined by 30%, while the average export price jumped 57%

- The volume of extra-EU cork exports fell from 76 657 tonnes in 2015 to 53 571 tonnes in 2025 (−30.1%).
- Over the same period, the unit value (€ per tonne) rose from €6 810 to €10 721 (+57.4%), which pushed the total export value up by 10.0% to €574 million.

Imports followed a similar pattern of lower volumes and higher unit prices

- Import quantity contracted from 21 069 tonnes to 15 009 tonnes (−28.8%).
- Import prices increased from €2 931 to €3 861 per tonne (+31.8%), while import value slipped mildly (−6.2% to €58 million).

Table 1 – Headline trade indicators, 2015 vs 2025

Flow	Value (€ million)	Change (%)	Quantity (tonnes)	Change (%)	Unit value (€/t)	Change (%)
Exports	522.1 → 574.4	+10.0	76 657 → 53 571	−30.1	6 810 → 10 721	+57.4
Imports	61.8 → 58.0	−6.2	21 069 → 15 009	−28.8	2 931 → 3 861	+31.8
Balance	460.3 → 516.4	+12.2	–	–	–	–

Source: Trade overview

2. Geopolitical upheaval and Brexit redraw partner maps

The composition of trading partners changed markedly. Sanctions crushed exports to Russia, while the UK's exit from the EU internal market spurred strong growth in EU–UK cork trade. On the import side, North African and Chinese suppliers gained ground.

Exports to Russia collapsed; the United Kingdom became the fastest-growing major market

- Exports to the Russian Federation fell from €33.6 million in 2015 to less than €0.15 million in 2025 (−99.6%), a supply shock detected with an abnormality of 3.1 σ and a value share of 4.7% Supply shocks.
- Exports to the United Kingdom expanded by 52.9%, from €35.6 million to €54.4 million, making the UK the second largest destination. A temporary price shock of +22.8% occurred in 2023 (abnormality 2.8 σ) Supply shocks.
- The United States remained the top export market (−2.9% to €204 million), while shipments to China fell by 21.0%.

Import sourcing shifted from Morocco and Switzerland toward China, Tunisia and Algeria

- Imports from Morocco, the largest supplier, halved in value (−42.2% to €10.4 million).
- Chinese imports nearly doubled (+74.6% to €16.8 million), climbing to the top rank.
- Tunisia (+47.6%) and Algeria (+133.2%) recorded strong increases. Imports from Switzerland (−51.9%) and the United States (−50.7%) plummeted.

Table 2 – Export and import value changes for selected partners, 2015–2025

	Exports (€ million)	Change (%)	Imports (€ million)	Change (%)
United States	210.0 → 203.9	−2.9	8.6 → 4.2	−50.7
United Kingdom	35.6 → 54.4	+52.9	2.2 → 3.8	+71.7
China	31.4 → 24.8	−21.0	9.6 → 16.8	+74.6
Russian Federation	33.6 → 0.15	−99.6	–	–
Switzerland	23.5 → 20.9	−11.0	12.6 → 6.1	−51.9
Morocco	–	–	18.1 → 10.4	−42.2
Tunisia	–	–	4.9 → 7.2	+47.6
Algeria	–	–	2.3 → 5.5	+133.2

Source: Top partners

Market concentration declined moderately

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for export value fell from 1 868 to 1 569 (−16.0%), and for imports from 1 803 to 1 642 (−8.9%), indicating a gradual diversification of partner countries Concentration HHI.

3. Structural shift toward agglomerated and high-value natural cork products

The chapter-level trade data masks a deep transformation at the four-digit heading level. Agglomerated cork (CN 4504) gained in value share, while articles of natural cork (CN 4503) remained central but declined in volume. Raw cork (CN 4501) saw significant price increases on both the export and import sides.

Exports: agglomerated cork overtakes natural cork articles in volume and value growth

- Agglomerated cork and articles thereof (CN 4504) dominated export quantities, declining from 56 020 t to 37 005 t but seeing its unit price more than double from €4 273/t to €9 336/t. Consequently, its export value rose from €239 million to €345 million.
- Articles of natural cork (CN 4503) recorded a volume drop from 10 408 t to 6 040 t and a value decline from €263 million to €196 million, despite a price increase from €25 223/t to €32 517/t.
- Raw natural cork (CN 4501) exports remained relatively stable in quantity but saw value climb from €17.5 million to €26.6 million as unit prices rose 49%.

Imports: raw natural cork and agglomerated cork prices surged while finished articles became cheaper

- Raw natural cork (CN 4501) imports contracted in volume (−36.0%) but rose in value (+38.6%), driven by prices jumping from €829/t to €1 794/t.
- Agglomerated cork (CN 4504) imports similarly saw volume drop (−28.5%) but value gain (+27.4%) thanks to a 78% price increase.
- In contrast, finished articles of natural cork (CN 4503) imports fell in both quantity (−28.3%) and value (−43.7%), with unit prices declining by 21.5%, suggesting a competitive pressure from EU-made articles.

Table 3 – Export and import performance by four-digit heading, 2015 vs 2025

Heading	Flow	Quantity (t)	Value (€ million)	Unit price (€/t)
4504	Exports	56 020 → 37 005	239.4 → 345.5	4 273 → 9 336
4503	Exports	10 408 → 6 040	262.5 → 196.4	25 223 → 32 517
4501	Exports	9 619 → 9 813	17.5 → 26.6	1 817 → 2 708
4501	Imports	11 330 → 7 257	9.4 → 13.0	829 → 1 794
4504	Imports	7 370 → 5 269	20.3 → 25.9	2 756 → 4 909
4503	Imports	2 247 → 1 612	31.1 → 17.5	13 852 → 10 871

Source: Product comparison

The EU’s revealed advantage remains overwhelmingly concentrated in Portugal and Spain

In 2025, Portugal’s Balassa index (RCA = 43.2, RSCA = 0.95) and Spain’s (RCA = 4.6, RSCA = 0.64) were the only positive specialisation scores among member states Most specialised reporters. Portugal accounted for 59.8% of intra-EU exports of these products, while Spain contributed 26.4%. Other large economies such as France or Italy showed negative RSCA values, although France doubled its export value over the period (+100.4%), and Bulgaria saw an extraordinary jump (+1 070%) from a low base.

Conclusion

The EU cork sector between 2015 and 2025 demonstrated a clear “less-is-more” dynamic: sharply lower physical volumes were offset by steep price increases, particularly for agglomerated and natural cork articles, enabling export value to grow and the surplus to widen. Geopolitics reshaped trade flows—most dramatically the near-elimination of the Russian market and the post-Brexit acceleration of trade with the United Kingdom. Sourcing of raw and semi-processed cork pivoted toward North Africa and China, while the finished-goods import segment contracted, hinting at improved EU competitiveness in higher-value products. Throughout, the sector remained heavily specialized in Portugal and Spain, yet a modest diversification of export destinations and an emerging role for smaller exporters like Bulgaria suggest a slowly evolving but resilient trade structure.

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