Market evolution: Knitwear (CN 6110) — 2015–2025

Introduction

EU external trade in knitwear (CN 6110) underwent a profound transformation between 2015 and 2025. Total trade expanded substantially, but the drivers differed markedly between exports and imports. While the value of EU exports surged by 71 %, import growth was driven by a sharp rise in volumes rather than prices. The period saw a dramatic reconfiguration of trade partners, with post-Brexit realities, the resilience of Asian supply chains, and the growing importance of higher-value destinations reshaping both import sourcing and export markets. A closer look at product composition, market concentration, and specialisation reveals an EU knitwear sector that increasingly exports luxury and premium garments while absorbing massive volumes of budget-conscious apparel from a diversifying set of suppliers.

1. Value Asymmetry: Export Premiumisation Meets Volume-Driven Import Growth

EU exports of knitwear increased by 71 % in value, but volume rose only 8.2 %, reflecting a 57.9 % jump in average unit prices.

Between 2015 and 2025, the value of EU exports to non-EU countries climbed from €2.64 billion to €4.52 billion, while the quantity shipped edged up from 51.3 thousand tonnes to just 55.5 thousand tonnes. Consequently, the average export price leapt from €51,604 to €81,505 per tonne. This premiumisation indicates that EU producers moved upmarket, selling fewer but much more valuable pieces – a shift supported by the high-end wool, cashmere, and luxury ready-to-wear segments.
General trade overview

Imports rose by 33.8 % in value and 54.4 % in volume, while average import prices fell by 13.3 %.

Over the same window, EU knitwear imports went from €9.20 billion to €12.31 billion, and import volumes expanded from 472 thousand tonnes to 729 thousand tonnes. The average import price declined from €19,492 to €16,893 per tonne, signalling a continued reliance on lower-cost suppliers. The resulting trade deficit widened modestly from –€6.56 billion to –€7.79 billion, as export value growth partly compensated for the import volume surge.

Indicator (EU external trade)	2015	2025	Change (%)
Export value (€ bn)	2.64	4.52	+71.0
Export quantity (k tonnes)	51.3	55.5	+8.2
Export unit price (€/tonne)	51,604	81,505	+57.9
Import value (€ bn)	9.20	12.31	+33.8
Import quantity (k tonnes)	472.1	728.8	+54.4
Import unit price (€/tonne)	19,492	16,893	–13.3

2. Geopolitical Reshaping of Trade Flows: New Partners Rise as Traditional Links Weaken

The post-Brexit trade landscape dramatically reduced the UK’s role as an import source, its value collapsing by 60.8 %.

The United Kingdom fell from a high of €547 million in imports in 2020 to just €176 million in 2025, as customs formalities and rules of origin made UK-based knitwear less competitive. As a result, the UK dropped out of the top-five import suppliers, while the EU’s import concentration (HHI) declined from 2,385 to 2,027, pointing to a more diversified sourcing base. Top trade partners

While China remained the largest supplier, its growth stalled at only 8.5 %, as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Myanmar captured market share.

China’s export value to the EU rose from €3.87 billion to €4.20 billion, but its share of extra-EU knitwear imports eroded. In contrast, Bangladesh surged by 64.2 % (to €3.09 billion), Cambodia by 57.6 % (to €823 million), Pakistan by 216.7 % (to €510 million), and Myanmar by 393.5 % (to €215 million). This shift reflects both the expansion of preferential trade schemes (Everything But Arms, GSP+) and the ongoing search for even lower labour costs in the post-pandemic period.

Top import partners (value, € bn)	2015	2025	Change (%)
China	3.87	4.20	+8.5
Bangladesh	1.88	3.09	+64.2
Türkiye	0.98	1.30	+32.0
Cambodia	0.52	0.82	+57.6
Pakistan	0.16	0.51	+216.7
United Kingdom	0.45	0.18	–60.8
Myanmar	0.04	0.22	+393.5

Exports mirrored this diversification, with China, Türkiye, and the United States emerging as major growth destinations, compensating for the decline in the UK and Russia.

EU knitwear exports to the UK slipped by 14.8 % (to €643 million), and shipments to Russia fell by 18.9 % (to €167 million) after 2022 sanctions. Meanwhile, exports to China soared by 267.9 % (to €429 million), to Türkiye by 247.4 % (to €259 million), to the United States by 117.4 % (to €543 million), and to Norway by 121.5 % (to €155 million). Switzerland, already a major market, grew by 95.2 % to €715 million. Export partner concentration (HHI) fell from 1,263 to 846, indicating that EU exporters successfully spread risk across many high-income markets. Concentration and specialisation

Top export partners (value, € bn)	2015	2025	Change (%)
United Kingdom	0.75	0.64	–14.8
Switzerland	0.37	0.72	+95.2
United States	0.25	0.54	+117.4
China	0.12	0.43	+267.9
Türkiye	0.07	0.26	+247.4
Russian Federation	0.21	0.17	–18.9
Norway	0.07	0.15	+121.5

3. Market Structure and Product Specialisation: The EU’s Luxury Knitwear Edge

The product mix reveals a stark divide: imports are concentrated in low-to-mid-priced man-made fibres and cotton, whereas EU exports command premium prices, especially in wool and cashmere.

In 2025, two fibre categories – man-made fibres (CN 611030) and cotton (CN 611020) – accounted for the bulk of import volumes (367 k tonnes and 332 k tonnes respectively), with unit values of €15,175/tonne and €15,430/tonne. EU exports of the same codes, however, achieved unit prices of €45,464/tonne and €65,247/tonne. Wool (CN 611011) exports priced at €231,415/tonne and cashmere (CN 611012) at €644,409/tonne, illustrating the premiumisation of EU-made knitwear. The cashmere export price was over four times the import price for the same heading, underscoring the EU’s role as a creator of high-fashion branded goods. Product segment comparison

Fibre segment	Import value 2025 (€ bn)	Import unit price (€/t)	Export unit price (€/t)
Man-made fibres (611030)	5.58	15,175	45,464
Cotton (611020)	5.12	15,430	65,247
Wool (611011)	0.89	52,641	231,415
Cashmere (611012)	0.44	153,264	644,409

Italy, Spain, Poland, Denmark, and Portugal are the EU's most specialised knitwear exporters, while Eastern and Nordic member states show less specialisation.

In 2025, Denmark held the highest revealed symmetric comparative advantage (RSCA 0.52), followed by Portugal (0.31), Spain (0.30), Poland (0.27) and Italy (0.26). Italy alone exported €1.75 billion, representing the largest single country shipment. The Netherlands (RSCA 0.02) and France (–0.03) were close to the EU average, whereas Ireland (–0.86), Malta (–0.93) and Finland (–0.82) had the lowest specialisation. Italy's export value jumped by 81.3 % and France's by 187.1 %, while Spain's exports slipped by 7.6 % after a peak in 2022, reflecting a shift in competitive dynamics within the Union. EU member state breakdown

Price shocks in 2022 for major Asian suppliers and extraordinary export price spikes for Algeria and Japan highlight the market's sensitivity to disruptions and product mix shifts.

The volatility analysis identifies several significant price events. On the import side, Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Pakistan experienced combined quantity and price shocks in 2022: Bangladesh's unit price jumped 24.7 % while volumes rose 37.7 % above baseline, Cambodia's price rose 21.9 % with a 40.9 % volume increase, reflecting post-COVID demand pressure and logistics bottlenecks. On the export side, Algeria recorded a staggering 794.4 % price spike in 2023 (from €4,009 to €35,851/tonne) as volumes collapsed, pointing to a sudden switch to high-end specialty orders. Japan's export unit price more than doubled in 2023 (+152.1 %) and continued to soar, reaching €358,920/tonne by 2025, likely driven by a shift to luxury cashmere and wool products.
Volatility and supply shocks

Conclusion

Over the 2015–2025 period, EU knitwear trade was pulled by two opposing forces. On the import side, a relentless quest for volume and low prices led to a massive expansion of sourcing from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and South-East Asia, while the departure of the UK from the single market removed a traditional supplier. On the export side, EU manufacturers successfully repositioned towards premium and luxury segments, as evidenced by soaring unit values and a rapid diversification towards China, the United States, and Türkiye. Within the EU, the knitwear industry remained concentrated in a handful of specialised countries, with Italy, Spain, and Poland at the forefront. The data also reveals the market's vulnerability to sudden price shocks, whether from pandemic-related supply chain stress or abrupt changes in the product mix. The net result was a larger but more resilient and diversified trade flow, with EU knitwear firmly establishing itself as a high-value export category even as it absorbed ever-greater volumes of mass-market garments from new sources.

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