Market evolution: Leather goods and travel bags (CN 42) — 2015–2025

Introduction

This report examines the evolution of European Union external trade in Chapter 42 goods—articles of leather, saddlery, travel goods, handbags and similar containers—over the eleven-year period from 2015 to 2025. The analysis is based solely on the quantitative evidence provided by the Trade Dashboard. The sector emerges as one that has undergone a profound structural transformation, evolving from a balanced marketplace into a powerful net export engine driven by soaring unit values, Asian luxury demand and deep specialisation within certain Member States.

1. A luxury export boom driven by surging unit values and premiumisation

EU exports vault by 72 % in value while volumes actually decline, confirming a decisive shift towards high-priced goods

Aggregate exports of CN 42 goods expanded from EUR 11.35 billion in 2015 to EUR 19.50 billion in 2025, a leap of 71.8 %. Over the same period, the export tonnage contracted by 9.4 %, falling from 118.0 thousand tonnes to 106.9 thousand tonnes. The resulting unit price (value/quantity) consequently surged by 89.6 %, from EUR 96 155 per tonne to EUR 182 322 per tonne. This decoupling of value and volume points unequivocally to a premiumisation strategy: EU producers are shipping fewer items of much higher average value.

Imports continue to grow, but at a far more moderate pace and with stable unit prices

Imports of leather goods rose from EUR 10.52 billion to EUR 11.68 billion, an increase of just 11.0 %. Volumes expanded more rapidly (+13.6 %, from 807 thousand tonnes to 917 thousand tonnes), while the average import price edged down by 2.2 % (from EUR 13 032 to EUR 12 739 per tonne). The EU therefore continues to buy large volumes of relatively low-cost goods from non-EU suppliers, reinforcing a pattern of value-oriented sourcing.

The trade surplus balloons by more than 800 %, turning the EU into a massive net exporter

The combination of explosive export value growth and sluggish import performance propelled the sector's trade balance from a surplus of EUR 0.83 billion in 2015 to EUR 7.81 billion in 2025—a rise of 846.3 %. The net import reliance indicator flipped from +7.97 % in 2015 to –364.22 % in the latest available year, meaning exports now vastly exceed the domestic production that is absorbed at home. This is the most visible symptom of a sector that has morphed into a global luxury export champion.

2. Geographic reorientation: the rise of US and Asian luxury demand and the post-Brexit recalibration

The United States and China become the top destinations for EU leather goods, multiplying several times over

Partner-country trade values reveal a dramatic redirection of exports. Shipments to the United States soared from EUR 1.66 billion to EUR 3.50 billion (+111.7 %), making it the single largest export market by 2025. Exports to China exploded by 448.6 %, jumping from EUR 0.55 billion to EUR 3.01 billion. Japan, too, more than doubled (from EUR 1.09 billion to EUR 2.43 billion; +122.3 %). Meanwhile, exports to the United Kingdom, the former top partner, fell by 12.2 % (EUR 1.53 billion to EUR 1.35 billion). Switzerland, which had ballooned to an exceptional EUR 4.48 billion in 2019, collapsed to EUR 0.91 billion in 2025 (–39.8 % over the full period), suggesting a temporary trans-shipment or luxury-watch channel that unwound after the pandemic.

Import sourcing remains concentrated in Asia, with exceptional growth from Cambodia and Indonesia

On the import side, China remains the dominant supplier (EUR 5.67 billion to EUR 6.54 billion, +15.3 %), but its share is gradually challenged by fast-growing alternative producers. Imports from Cambodia vaulted from a mere EUR 24 million to EUR 249 million (+922.7 %), while Indonesia recorded a gain of 210.3 % (EUR 103 million to EUR 319 million). Vietnam rose by 49.5 % and India by 7.0 %. In stark contrast, imports from the United Kingdom plummeted by 57.4 % (from EUR 589 million to EUR 251 million), a direct consequence of post-Brexit trade barriers and the loss of frictionless market access. The import concentration HHI remains moderately high (3 381 in 2025, up from 3 164 in 2015), even as the supplier base widens somewhat.

Export destination diversification is slightly increasing, cushioning concentration risk

The export HHI stayed low and relatively stable, moving from 928 to 981 over the decade, indicating a well-diversified customer base. However, the export *volume* concentration fell sharply (from 1 062 to 688), meaning that large-value shipments to a few luxury markets are now complemented by a broader distribution of lighter, less expensive goods across many countries. This growing diversification helps mitigate shocks affecting individual sales channels.

3. France and Italy cement their dominance as the EU's leather goods powerhouses

France's export value nearly triples, while Italy records steady high-value growth

The member-state export figures show that France has emerged as the undisputed leader, with exports soaring from EUR 4.13 billion to EUR 9.78 billion (+136.6 %). Italy, though growing more slowly (+32.9 %), reached EUR 6.55 billion in 2025. Together these two countries account for the bulk of the EU's leather goods exports. Germany expanded by 39.2 % (to EUR 1.00 billion), Spain by 61.9 % (to EUR 0.62 billion) and Poland by 171.1 % (from EUR 69 million to EUR 186 million), signalling a broadening of export capabilities within Eastern Europe.

Specialisation indexes confirm Italy and France as the bloc's true leather-goods hubs

According to the latest revealed comparative advantage (RCA) data, Italy (RCA 2.82) and France (RCA 2.15) exhibit by far the strongest specialisation in Chapter 42 products. Spain (RCA 1.38), Portugal (RCA 1.21) and Romania (RCA 1.04) also hold a comparative advantage, though on a smaller scale. At the other extreme, Ireland, Luxembourg and Lithuania show almost no specialisation, with RCA values below 0.20. This pattern underscores that the export boom is driven by a handful of established fashion- and luxury-goods clusters.

Production value doubles while tonnage rises only modestly, reflecting the same premiumisation trend seen in trade

EU production of leather goods (volume) increased from 91.7 million pieces in 2015 to 109.7 million pieces in 2024 (+9.9 %). Over the same horizon, the value of production surged by 132 %, from EUR 4.66 billion to EUR 10.80 billion. The implied unit production price therefore jumped dramatically. This mirrors the trade dynamic: both domestically produced and exported goods are increasingly upscale, while import volumes consist predominantly of lower-priced mass-market articles.

Conclusion

The EU’s trade in leather goods and travel accessories has undergone a remarkable transformation between 2015 and 2025. The bloc has evolved from a modest net exporter into a commanding global luxury supplier, recording an eight-fold increase in its trade surplus. The underlying engine is a profound premiumisation of the export basket—fewer tonnes shipped at far higher unit prices—fuelled by booming demand from the United States, China and Japan. On the import side, the EU continues to source large quantities of affordable items from China and fast-rising Southeast Asian producers, while the United Kingdom has receded sharply as a trade partner following Brexit. France and Italy stand out as the indispensable manufacturing and design hubs, with a cluster of Southern and Eastern European Member States increasingly joining the value chain. As long as global appetite for high-end European leather goods remains strong, the sector’s outsized trade surplus and its orientation towards premium markets are likely to persist.

Generated on 2026-07-24 based on data from tradedashboard.eu