

Market evolution: Organic chemicals (CN 29) — 2015–2025

Introduction

The EU's trade in organic chemicals (CN 29) underwent a dramatic transformation between 2015 and 2025. The period was marked by a sharp decoupling of value from volume, a shift from a net-export position to a significant net-import reliance, and a profound reordering of its most important partner countries. This report draws exclusively on the data provided to describe and interpret the main dynamics, concentrating on the reversal of the trade balance, the reconfiguration of partner relationships, and the shock-driven increase in market concentration.

1. The value-driven surge and the erosion of the trade surplus

The total value of imports and exports nearly doubled while physical quantities stagnated or declined

Over the ten-year window, both export and import values expanded dramatically, but the change was almost entirely attributable to price developments rather than volume growth. Exports rose from EUR 52.3 billion to EUR 103.0 billion (+96.9 %), whereas export quantities fell by 22.9 % (from 12.4 to 9.5 million tonnes). Simultaneously, the average export unit price climbed by 155.3 %, from about EUR 4,225 per tonne to EUR 10,787 per tonne (General Overview).

Imports followed a similar pattern but with a less pronounced price increase. Import value grew by 92.0 % (from EUR 56.0 to EUR 107.6 billion), while the imported quantity edged up only 2.4 % (from 24.4 to 25.0 million tonnes). The import unit price rose by 87.0 %, from EUR 2,298 to EUR 4,298 per tonne.

Indicator	2015	2025	Change (%)
Exports (value, EUR bn)	52.3	103.0	+96.9
Exports (quantity, million t)	12.4	9.5	–22.9
Export price (EUR/t)	4,225	10,787	+155.3
Imports (value, EUR bn)	56.0	107.6	+92.0
Imports (quantity, million t)	24.4	25.0	+2.4
Import price (EUR/t)	2,298	4,298	+87.0
Trade balance (EUR bn)	–3.7	–4.6	–23.2

The EU flipped from a small net exporter to a net importer heavily reliant on foreign suppliers

A critical consequence of the price-driven value surge was the swing in net-import reliance. After several years of near-balance or a modest export surplus in the early part of the series, the indicator turned decisively negative. As shown in the Net Import Reliance data, net import reliance climbed from 6.7 % in 2015 to 19.6 % in 2024, meaning that almost one-fifth of EU consumption of organic chemicals was met by imports from non-EU countries. The trend illustrates a growing dependency that contrasted sharply with the net-exporter status observed in earlier years (the indicator was –1.8 % in 2006).

2. A partner geography reshaped by geopolitics, regulation, and price competition

The United States emerged as the overwhelmingly dominant export destination, while Brexit caused a steep contraction of UK trade

The composition of the EU's export markets changed radically. Exports to the United States jumped by 296.5 %, from EUR 17.2 billion in 2015 to EUR 68.0 billion in 2025, making the US by far the largest single destination. In contrast, exports to the United Kingdom fell by 47.5 % (from EUR 5.5 to EUR 2.9 billion) over the same period, a decline that intensified after the UK's exit from the EU single market. Imports from the UK also nearly halved (–50.3 %), confirming a structural decoupling. A significant and growing share of exports (EUR 1.4 billion to EUR 4.0 billion, +194.9 %) went to “Countries and territories not specified for commercial or military reasons”, indicating an expanding but opaque category (Top Partners).

China replaced Russia as the leading import source, and Russia's role collapsed

On the import side, China's share surged by 347.7 %, from EUR 7.6 billion to EUR 34.1 billion, reflecting both price inflation and higher volumes of intermediates used in EU

industry. Imports from the United States also rose strongly (+148.4 %). At the same time, imports from Russia plummeted by 82.8 % (from EUR 1.2 billion to EUR 0.2 billion) as a result of sanctions and trade restrictions. Saudi Arabia, Norway, and Trinidad and Tobago maintained more stable positions, though with varying volatility.

Partner	Exports 2015 (EUR bn)	Exports 2025 (EUR bn)	Change (%)	Imports 2015 (EUR bn)	Imports 2025 (EUR bn)	Change (%)
United States	17.2	68.0	+296.5	10.2	25.4	+148.4
United Kingdom	5.5	2.9	−47.5	5.2	2.6	−50.3
China	3.0	3.1	+2.3	7.6	34.1	+347.7
Russian Federation	—	—	—	1.2	0.2	−82.8
Countries not specified*	1.4	4.0	+194.9	—	—	—

*Export side only, representing “Countries and territories not specified for commercial or military reasons in the framework of extra-Union trade”.

3. The 2022 price shock and rising concentration exposed vulnerabilities

A sharp price surge in 2022, especially from China and the UK, reshaped import costs

The Market Shocks data reveal that 2022 was a year of extreme price disruption. The import price from China shot up by 146.5 % relative to the 2020-2021 baseline, while the import price from the United Kingdom jumped by 146.8 %. Even export prices, such as those to Norway, experienced a 57.7 % shift. These shocks were not accompanied by a proportional increase in volumes; in many cases quantities fell, indicating a classic supply-side price spike likely linked to energy costs and logistics disruptions. The high abnormality score of the Norway export price event (52.7) underscores how deeply the organic chemicals market was affected.

Both supplier and buyer concentration intensified, adding to structural vulnerability

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for import partners rose from 1,318 to 2,024, and for export destinations from 1,531 to 4,813, the latter more than doubling (Market Concentration). The export concentration increase was driven in large part by the US’s enormous share. Meanwhile, the most specialised EU member states—Ireland (RSCA 0.76), Belgium (0.42), and Malta (0.37)—together accounted for a disproportionate part of the EU’s

organic chemicals exports, while many eastern and southern members had very low specialisation scores (Specialisation Map). This dual concentration—on a few external buyers and on a narrow set of producing countries—amplifies the sector’s sensitivity to trade disruptions and price swings.

Conclusion

EU trade in organic chemicals between 2015 and 2025 was defined by a powerful price-led expansion of values, a reversal from net exporter to net importer, and a sweeping reorientation of partner relations. The United States became the EU’s dominant customer, while China consolidated its role as the leading supplier. The coronavirus-induced and energy-price shocks of 2022 left a lasting imprint on import prices, deepened trade concentration, and pushed net-import reliance to near 20 %. The data show a sector that has grown in monetary terms but has become more vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, supplier market power, and the volatility of a concentrated partner base.

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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](#).