EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Paper and paperboard products (CN 48) — 2015–2025

Introduction

This report examines the extra-EU trade of Customs Code 48 – **paper, paperboard, and articles thereof** – from 2015 to 2025. The analysis draws exclusively on official trade and production data, covering value, volume, unit prices, partner hierarchies and supply-side indicators. Over the decade, three defining dynamics stand out: a pronounced divergence between traded values and quantities, a dramatic re-routing of trade flows following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and a broad inflationary pulse that peaked in 2022. Despite those shocks, the EU remains a substantial net exporter, but its surplus has narrowed and its reliance on a handful of partner markets has deepened. The following three sections dissect these trends and their implications, referring throughout to the interactive dashboard links provided.

1. Value–volume divergence and the reshaping of product flows

1.1. Export values edged up 3.5%, yet shipped quantities sank by a fifth

Between 2015 and 2025, the total value of EU exports of CN 48 goods rose from €24.6 billion to €25.5 billion, a 3.5 % change. However, the physical volume moved in the opposite direction, falling from 24.6 million tonnes to 19.7 million tonnes (-19.8 %). The sharp contrast is explained by a 29.1 % jump in the average export unit price, from €1 000/tonne to €1 291/tonne. Trade overview

1.2. Imports grew 36.5 % in value while volumes hardly moved

Extra-EU imports paint an even starker picture. While the import value climbed from €7.7 billion to €10.6 billion (+36.5 %), the quantity rose by a mere 1.9 %, from 6.69 million tonnes to 6.81 million tonnes. Import unit prices surged by 34.0 %, from €1 157/tonne to €1 550/tonne. Consequently, the EU's trade surplus in this chapter contracted from €16.9 billion to €14.9 billion (-11.6 %). Trade overview

1.3. The product mix tilted towards higher-value packaging and coated grades

Seven sub-headings account for the bulk of trade. On the import side, **packaging containers (4819)** became the largest segment by far, reaching €2.25 billion in 2025 against €1.39 billion in 2015. Coated and impregnated papers (4811) and coated kaolin papers (4810) also exceeded the €1 billion import threshold. Among exports, **coated paper (4810)** remained the top category (€5.07 billion in 2025), followed by coated/impregnated sheets (4811, €3.75 billion) and packaging (4819, €2.88 billion). Newsprint (4801) continued its structural decline, falling to just €0.14 billion of exports and €0.45 billion of imports by 2025. Product segment breakdown

Export segment (CN 4-digit)	Value 2015 (€ bn)	Value 2025 (€ bn)
4810 – Coated paper	6.10	5.07
4811 – Coated/impregnated	3.52	3.75
4819 – Packaging containers	2.20	2.88
4805 – Other uncoated paper	1.70	2.43
4802 – Uncoated graphic paper	3.20	2.59
4804 – Kraft paper	1.70	2.58
4801 – Newsprint	0.57	0.14

Import segment (CN 4-digit)	Value 2015 (€ bn)	Value 2025 (€ bn)
4819 – Packaging containers	1.39	2.25
4811 – Coated/impregnated	0.82	1.18
4810 – Coated paper	0.80	1.00
4802 – Uncoated graphic paper	0.65	0.62
4804 – Kraft paper	0.73	0.51
4805 – Other uncoated paper	0.42	0.49
4801 – Newsprint	0.40	0.45

2. Geopolitical reorientation: from Russia’s collapse to China’s ascent

2.1. China has become the EU’s dominant extra-EU supplier

EU imports from China more than doubled, rising from €1.40 billion in 2015 to €3.36 billion in 2025 (+139.8 %). By the end of the period China supplied roughly one-third of all extra-EU paper imports, lifting the import concentration index (HHI) by 11.6 %. Chinese imports were, however, often volatile: the coefficient of variation of shipped quantities reached 32.2 %, reflecting a sharp price-quantity shock in 2022 when unit prices spiked

76 % while volumes contracted. Meanwhile, EU exports to China grew more modestly (+14.8 %), from €0.76 billion to €0.88 billion. Top partners · Concentration HHI

2.2. Russia's share vanished after 2022

Russia was historically a top-5 extra-EU partner. In 2015 the EU imported €0.36 billion of paper goods from Russia and exported €1.42 billion. From 2022 sanctions and self-restrictions caused a near-total breakdown: imports collapsed by 99.2 %, falling to just €2.9 million by 2025, while exports retreated by 90.8 %, reaching €0.13 billion. The exit was abrupt and accompanied by a strong price increase on the remaining flows, with export unit prices to Russia almost tripling to €4 452/tonne by 2025. Russia supply shock (see supply events)

2.3. Türkiye and Norway stepped in; the UK gradually recedes

Imports from Türkiye jumped from €0.31 billion to €0.87 billion (+183.9 %), making it the fourth-largest extra-EU import source. Norwegian imports also grew by 26.8 %, hitting €0.38 billion. At the same time, trade with the United Kingdom – still the EU's main export destination – steadily declined. EU exports to the UK fell 12.0 % from €5.61 billion to €4.94 billion, and imports dropped 15.4 % from €1.94 billion to €1.64 billion, reflecting the lingering effects of post-Brexit trade frictions. Top partners

2.4. 2022 delivered a synchronised price shock across all key lanes

The energy crisis triggered by the Ukraine war sent unit prices soaring on almost every major route. The most extreme shocks occurred on exports to Ukraine (+30.2 % price surge, abnormally high score of 106.7), the United States (+38.7 %), Mexico (+58.6 %) and the UK (+35.6 %). On the import side, Norway experienced a 39.9 % price spike, while Switzerland and the UK saw jumps of 39.6 % and 37.1 % respectively. These episodes were concentrated in 2022 and drove a temporary peak in total trade values (€31.3 billion exports, €12.5 billion imports) before prices partially normalised. Price shock events (price events)

3. Production, specialisation and strategic autonomy

3.1. EU production value rose steeply, far exceeding volume growth

Total EU production quantity of paper and paperboard (as reported by PRODCOM) grew modestly from 129.4 billion kg in 2015 to 130.2 billion kg in 2024. However, the value of that production surged from €113.9 billion to €138.5 billion (+21.6 % using reported figures; the long-term change from the earliest available full year yields 53.7 %). This value uplift, driven by higher input costs and greater added-value per tonne, meant that domestic absorption could absorb a larger share of output, tempering the growth of export propensity. Production volumes

3.2. Finland, Sweden and Portugal remain the specialisation anchors

Based on 2025 revealed comparative advantage (RCA), **Finland** (RCA 5.91, RSCA 0.7108) and **Sweden** (RCA 3.48, RSCA 0.5532) are by far the most specialised member states in paper exports. **Luxembourg, Portugal and Austria** also display strong specialisation. At the opposite end, Malta, Ireland and Cyprus are de-specialised, reflecting their services-oriented economies. In absolute export volumes, Germany remained the largest member-state exporter (€5.63 billion in 2025), followed by Sweden (€3.89 billion) and Finland (€2.83 billion). Specialisation map

3.3. Net import reliance has weakened, and import sources are more concentrated

The EU remains a net exporter – net import reliance was negative throughout – but the degree of that net export position eroded: from -15.7 % in 2015 to -11.3 % in 2024. This reflects the faster growth of imports relative to exports and production. At the same time, the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index for imports rose by 11.6 %, signalling a thicker concentration of supply risk, mainly due to China’s ballooning share. On the export side the HHI declined by 8.8 %, indicating a slight diversification of destination markets. Net import reliance · Concentration HHI

Conclusion

EU paper trade over the 2015–2025 decade has been defined by a consistent value–volume dislocation: imported and exported quantities stagnated or shrank, yet values were propelled by steep price increases, especially in the 2022 energy-price spike. Geopolitically, the sector underwent a forced re-alignment: China’s role as a supplier became dominant, Russia was eliminated as a trade partner, and post-Brexit ties with the UK slowly loosened, while Türkiye and Norway gained ground. On the supply side, the EU’s production base remained robust, with Finland and Sweden anchoring a highly specialised export core. However, the narrowing net export surplus and rising import concentration suggest that the paper value chain’s resilience will depend on managing input costs and diversifying procurement beyond a handful of critical suppliers.

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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.