Market evolution: Plastic sheets (CN 3920) — 2015–2025

Introduction

EU trade in plastic sheets, films, and foils (CN 3920) expanded markedly over 2015–2025. Total exports rose from €5.30 bn to €6.17 bn (+16.6 %), while imports grew faster, from €3.98 bn to €5.41 bn (+36.0 %) – trade overview. The trade surplus shrank from €1.32 bn to €0.76 bn (–42.1 %). Behind these headline figures lie a profound reconfiguration of partner geography, a sharp episode of price turbulence centred on 2022, and a resilient EU production base that became more export oriented, though its net supplier position weakened. This report quantifies those dynamics, drawing solely on the provided data.

Reconfiguration of trade partners: the pivot away from Russia and the rise of Asian suppliers

The Russian market collapsed under sanctions, while near-total trade destruction occurred by 2025

Exports to Russia, which stood at €373 million in 2015, plummeted to €2.4 million in 2025, a drop of 99.3 % – top export partners. The decline accelerated after 2022, and by 2025 trade was effectively halted. On the import side, Russian quantities similarly crashed (coefficient of variation of 0.754, the highest among major partners), reflecting the EU's sanctions-driven decoupling – import volatility.

China surpassed traditional partners to become the second-largest import source

EU imports from China grew from €304 million (2015) to €782 million (2025), a 157.1 % increase, making China the second supplier after Türkiye – top import partners. The quantity imported nearly tripled, while prices fluctuated significantly. This rapid ascent reflects a strategic sourcing shift.

The United States became the EU's fastest-growing export destination

EU exports to the United States jumped from €479 million to €874 million (+82.4 %), making the US the second-largest export market after the United Kingdom. By 2025, the UK (€1.35 bn) remained the top destination, though its share stagnated, while US demand absorbed an increasing portion of high-value sheet products – export partners. Türkiye, Switzerland, and Norway also saw moderate export gains, but the US surge was the standout.

Trade partner (exports)	2015 (€ m)	2025 (€ m)	Change (%)
United Kingdom	1,339.0	1,352.9	+1.0
United States	478.9	873.7	+82.4
Switzerland	482.2	556.1	+15.3
Türkiye	332.5	412.3	+24.0
Russian Federation	373.5	2.4	–99.3
China	298.9	322.7	+8.0
Norway	169.7	214.0	+26.1

Trade partner (imports)	2015 (€ m)	2025 (€ m)	Change (%)
Türkiye	513.4	1,008.3	+96.4
China	304.3	782.5	+157.1
United Kingdom	873.7	897.8	+2.8
United States	610.9	713.1	+16.7
India	134.2	225.3	+68.0
Egypt	64.1	149.9	+133.9
Saudi Arabia	117.2	124.7	+6.4

Price shocks and market volatility: the 2022 inflation spike and its aftermath

Import price surges hit multiple suppliers in 2021–2022

The system flagged several statistically abnormal price shifts – price shock events. The strongest import shocks occurred in 2022: Switzerland (+26.1 %), Türkiye (+27.8 %), India (+21.7 %), Israel (+26.4 %) and Saudi Arabia (+33.7 % already in 2021). China's import price jumped 19.4 % in 2021, then remained elevated. These increases were often accompanied by stable or growing quantities, indicating that the EU absorbed the price hikes rather than cutting volumes drastically.

Export price shocks were led by North America and Morocco

On the export side, the most pronounced shock hit Canada in 2022 (+36.6 % price rise), followed by the United States (+32.8 %) and Morocco (+34.7 %). For the US, the price per tonne soared from €4,718 (baseline) to €6,265 in 2022 – price shocks exports. EU exporters thus benefited from higher unit values, contributing to the 19.5 % overall export price increase recorded across the decade.

Selected price shocks (2021–2022)	Flow	Shift (% price)	Centre year
Switzerland	Import	+26.1	2022
Türkiye	Import	+27.8	2022
China	Import	+19.4	2021
Israel	Import	+26.4	2022
India	Import	+21.7	2022
Canada	Export	+36.6	2022
United States	Export	+32.8	2022
Morocco	Export	+34.7	2022

Persistent elevated prices despite post-shock retreats

After 2022 many prices partially corrected, but most remained above pre-shock levels. For example, China’s import price rose from €2,526/t in the 2019–2020 baseline to €3,168/t in 2022–2023 and was still €2,497/t in 2025. Similarly, US export prices, after peaking at €6,265/t in 2022, settled around €5,610/t in 2025, well above the €4,718 baseline. The data thus reveal a step-change in the price level for this commodity class.

EU production expansion and increasing trade integration: the narrowing surplus

Strong growth in production volumes and value

EU production of CN 3920 goods rose from 7.63 billion kg (2015) to 9.51 billion kg (2024), an increase of 24.7 %, while the production value climbed from €15.7 bn to €26.1 bn (+66.8 %) – production volumes. The implied unit price of EU-made sheets rose from €2.47/kg to €2.75/kg over the same period, mirroring the general inflation in raw materials and energy.

Rising export propensity and trade intensity signal deeper global integration

The share of EU production sent to non-EU markets (export propensity) moved from 17.4 % (2015) to 24.0 % (2024). Trade intensity (extra-EU trade relative to production) climbed from 24.7 % to 37.1 % – export propensity & trade intensity. These indicators show that the EU industry became considerably more outward-oriented, even as production expanded.

A shrinking trade surplus as import growth outpaces exports

Despite rising exports, the trade surplus contracted from €1.32 bn to €0.76 bn. The net import reliance ratio, though still negative (showing a net export position), moved from –

8.5 % to –3.4 % – net import reliance. In other words, while the EU remains a net supplier of these plastic sheets, its surplus has nearly halved, driven by a 38.0 % rise in import quantities versus a 2.4 % decline in export quantities. The average export price rose by 19.5 %, more than compensating for the volume drop in value terms, but the quantity-based surplus narrowed considerably.

Conclusion

The 2015–2025 evolution of EU trade in plastic sheets (CN 3920) is characterised by three interwoven trends: a decisive shift in sourcing and destination markets—away from Russia, towards China, Türkiye, and the United States; a pronounced inflationary shock in 2022 that left prices permanently higher; and a growing EU production base that became more export-intensive yet saw its trade surplus dwindle as imports outpaced exports. These developments underscore the sector's adaptability in the face of geopolitical disruptions and global cost pressures, while also highlighting a more balanced—and thus potentially more interdependent—trade position at the end of the decade.

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