Market evolution: Seamless steel tubes and pipes (CN 7304) — 2015–2025

Introduction

This report examines the European Union's external trade in seamless steel tubes, pipes and hollow profiles (CN 7304) over the period 2015–2025. The product group covers a wide range of OCTG (oil country tubular goods), line pipe, precision tubes and structural hollow sections used in energy, mechanical engineering and construction. The data show a market that has undergone a marked transformation: while physical trade volumes contracted, unit values surged, reshaping the value dynamics, the geography of supply and the EU's own strategic position. All figures are drawn exclusively from the Trade Dashboard.

Premiumisation amid Volume Decline: Value Over Quantity in EU Seamless Tube Trade

Export value held up despite a steep drop in tonnage, thanks to a powerful rise in unit prices.
Between 2015 and 2025, extra-EU exports of CN 7304 fell by 30.2 % in quantity (from 1.73 million tonnes to 1.21 million tonnes), yet export value declined by only 7.7 % (from €4.31 billion to €3.98 billion). The average export price per tonne climbed by 32.2 %, from €2,487 to €3,289. This decoupling reflects a shift towards higher-value-added, premium-grade products – a pattern visible in many engineering-intensive steel segments.

The import side shows a similar, though less dramatic, quality-upgrading pattern.
Import volumes barely changed (+1.6 %, from 0.51 to 0.52 million tonnes), while import value grew by 29.6 % (€0.93 billion to €1.21 billion). Consequently, import unit prices rose by 27.5 % (€1,824 to €2,327 per tonne). Because export prices grew faster than import prices, the unit-value premium of EU exports widened.

The outcome is a resilient trade surplus and a strong net-exporter position.
The EU's trade balance in CN 7304 went from a surplus of €3.38 billion in 2015 to €2.78 billion in 2025 (–17.9 %). Although the absolute surplus shrank, the *relative* position improved. Net import reliance (the share of apparent consumption covered by net imports)

deepened from –46.9 % to –71.1 % (a –51.5 % change), meaning the EU's reliance on foreign supply actually fell and its net export footprint grew relative to domestic production (see Net import reliance). Trade intensity rose from 63.8 % to 66.3 % and export propensity from 55.3 % to 60.0 %, confirming a deeper integration into global markets while remaining firmly export-oriented.

Indicator	2015	2025	Change (%)
Extra-EU exports (€)	4,313.8 m	3,982.8 m	–7.7
Export quantity (kt)	1,734.3	1,210.8	–30.2
Export price (€/t)	2,487	3,289	+32.2
Extra-EU imports (€)	930.1 m	1,205.2 m	+29.6
Import quantity (kt)	509.8	517.9	+1.6
Import price (€/t)	1,824	2,327	+27.5
Trade balance (€)	3,383.7 m	2,777.6 m	–17.9
Net import reliance (%)	–46.9	–71.1	–51.5

Geopolitical Reshuffling: The Transformation of EU Supply and Demand Networks

Ukraine has become the EU's dominant import supplier, while China and India surged and Belarus disappeared.

The composition of extra-EU imports changed profoundly. Ukraine moved from a value of €133.8 million in 2015 to €272.8 million in 2025 (+103.8 % growth), becoming the largest single source. Imports from China rose by 62.3 % (to €209.8 million) and from India by 69.9 % (to €195.5 million). In contrast, imports from Belarus collapsed from €32.7 million to €13.9 million in 2022 and then completely ceased as of 2023, reflecting sanctions and the disruption of trade due to the war in Ukraine. Imports from the United Kingdom fell by 41.8 % (to €51.9 million) and from the United States by 21.6 % (to €72.2 million). Brazil, while volatile, saw imports rise 183.7 % to €85.7 million in 2025, driven by intermittent large shipments.

Export destination patterns reveal a stable though volatile U.S. dominance and shifting roles in the Middle East.

The United States remained the EU's top export market, with sales rising modestly by 4.7 % to €1,053.8 million, despite a sharp drop in 2016 and a huge spike in 2022–2023. The United Kingdom held steady (+8.6 %, to €388.6 million), and Canada gained importance (+27.9 %, to €133.9 million). Saudi Arabia showed strong overall growth (+33.8 %, to €185.8 million) but with extreme yearly swings. Exports to Algeria, once a major destination, fell by 32.3 %, while shipments to China declined by 25.8 %, partly because of the EU's own shift to higher-priced product mixes that faced Chinese competition and protection measures.

Partner concentration increased on both sides, signalling a more consolidated trade network.

The Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) for import value rose from 898 to 1,315 (+46.5 %), while for export value it climbed from 825 to 1,039 (+25.9 %). Volume-based HHI grew even faster (imports +78.9 %, exports +38.0 %). This trend, visible in the Concentration dashboard, means that a handful of partners – Ukraine, China, India on the import side and the U.S., UK, Saudi Arabia on the export side – now account for an even larger share of trade, making EU-wide flows more sensitive to bilateral shocks.

Extra-EU import partner	2015 (€)	2025 (€)	Change (%)
Ukraine	133.8 m	272.8 m	+103.8
China	129.3 m	209.8 m	+62.3
India	115.1 m	195.5 m	+69.9
Belarus	32.7 m	(halted)	–57.6*
United Kingdom	89.2 m	51.9 m	–41.8
United States	92.1 m	72.2 m	–21.6
Brazil	30.2 m	85.7 m	+183.7

* last available year 2022; trade stopped in 2023.

Extra-EU export partner	2015 (€)	2025 (€)	Change (%)
United States	1,006.7 m	1,053.8 m	+4.7
United Kingdom	357.7 m	388.6 m	+8.6
Canada	104.6 m	133.9 m	+27.9
Türkiye	91.7 m	107.3 m	+17.1
Saudi Arabia	138.9 m	185.8 m	+33.8
Algeria	158.7 m	107.4 m	–32.3
China	312.9 m	232.1 m	–25.8

Riding the Price Shocks: Volatility, Sanctions and the Quest for Strategic Autonomy

The 2021–2023 period was punctuated by multiple price-shock events across key partners.

The Volatility and shock analysis identifies sharp price breaks that stood out from normal fluctuation:

- On the **import** side, Ukrainian import prices jumped 51.3 % in 2022, while Indian prices shot up 58.0 % in the same year; Brazilian import prices had already spiked 93.2 % in 2021.
- On the **export** side, EU export prices to China rose by 61.7 % in 2022, and similarly large upward price breaks occurred for Korea (2018), Kuwait (2023), Indonesia and Kazakhstan.

These price shocks reflect a combination of post-pandemic supply bottlenecks, the energy price crisis, and conflict-related disruptions that temporarily inflated steel input costs and freight rates.

A supply shock: Belarusian imports halted entirely after 2022.
Following the imposition of sanctions, imports from Belarus dropped to zero in 2023 and have remained absent ever since. This removal of a modest but established supplier (baseline of around 41 000 t per year) further concentrated import sourcing on other, often more distant, partners.

Despite severe volatility, the EU's structural position strengthened.
Net import reliance deepened from –46.9 % to –71.1 % (less reliance on foreign supply), while trade intensity and export propensity both rose. This suggests that the EU's seamless tube industry successfully absorbed shocks by moving up the value chain and expanding its export capacity. However, the rise in partner concentration (HHI) implies that the EU is now more exposed to volatility from a smaller number of countries. The presence of high-CV partners such as Brazil (CV 0.747 for imports) and Egypt (CV 0.632 for exports) adds further short-term uncertainty.

The EU's internal specialisation reinforces its export strength.
According to the Specialisation map, member states such as Romania (RSCA 0.74, RCA 6.7), Slovakia (RSCA 0.51, RCA 3.1), Sweden and Italy are highly specialised in seamless tubes. This concentration of production capability within the EU provides a solid base for continued export competitiveness, even as low-value, high-volume imports from third countries diminish.

Conclusion

The 2015–2025 period for EU seamless steel tube trade (CN 7304) can be summarised as a transition from volume-based flows to value-driven exchange. While tonnages declined sharply, rising unit prices – especially for higher-grade products – preserved much of the export value and allowed the trade surplus to remain substantial. The geography of trade underwent a radical realignment: Ukraine and India replaced traditional suppliers, Belarus disappeared, and export markets like the U.S. and Saudi Arabia became larger but more erratic. At the same time, the sector weathered a series of price shocks and a complete supply halt from one partner without losing its strategic net-exporter status; on the contrary, reliance on imports fell and integration into global markets deepened. The key challenge ahead lies in managing the heightened concentration risk and the recurring price volatility that now characterise this essential industrial product group.

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