EU TRADE EXPLORER

Market evolution: Soft drinks (CN 2202) — 2015–2025

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2025, EU trade in soft drinks (CN 2202) underwent a profound expansion and reorientation. Both exports and imports reached new highs, the trade surplus widened substantially, and the product mix shifted decisively towards higher-value non-alcoholic drinks. At the same time, the geography of trade changed as traditional markets lost weight while neighbouring and emerging economies gained. This report examines those dynamics through three main themes: the growth of the surplus and the premiumisation of export baskets, the rebalancing of partner countries, and the resilience of EU trade in the face of shocks.

The EU’s soft-drink trade surplus surged, propelled by premium “other non-alcoholic beverages”

Export growth far outpaced the expansion of imports, widening an already sizeable surplus

EU soft-drink exports rose from €3.47 billion in 2015 to €5.57 billion in 2025, a 60.6 % increase, while imports grew from €1.13 billion to €1.85 billion (+64.0 %) over the same period (Trade overview). In volume terms, exports expanded by 51.3 % to 4.76 million tonnes, compared with a 39.4 % increase in import volumes (1.58 million tonnes). Consequently, the trade balance leapt from a surplus of €2.34 billion to €3.72 billion (+58.9 %), confirming the EU’s role as a strong net exporter of soft drinks.

Indicator (€ million, unless otherwise stated)	2015	2025	Change (%)
Exports (value)	3 469	5 570	+60.6
Imports (value)	1 130	1 853	+64.0
Trade balance	2 339	3 717	+58.9
Export volume (tonnes, ’000)	3 144	4 757	+51.3
Import volume (tonnes, ’000)	1 136	1 585	+39.4
Export unit value (€/tonne)	1 103	1 171	+6.1
Import unit value (€/tonne)	994	1 170	+17.6

The product mix drifted towards high-value “other non-alcoholic beverages”, eroding the price gap between exports and imports

The broad heading CN 2202 conceals three distinct sub-segments. Flavoured waters and traditional soft drinks (CN 220210) remained the largest category, but their share of export value declined as “other non-alcoholic beverages” (CN 220299) surged (Product segment breakdown). By 2025, CN 220299 exports reached €2.54 billion, nearly matching the €2.75 billion of CN 220210, whereas in 2017 they were only about half that size. The unit value of exported CN 220299 stood at €1 600 per tonne in 2025, far above the €948 / tonne for flavoured waters, indicating a strong premiumisation trend. Non-alcoholic beer (CN 220291) remained a small but fast-growing niche, with exports rising from €116 million in 2017 to €281 million in 2025.

Imports followed a similar pattern, though at lower absolute levels. Imported CN 220210 amounted to €1.40 billion in 2025, while CN 220299 imports reached €421 million. The import unit value caught up with export prices almost completely – from a 2015 premium of €109 per tonne for exports to a mere €1 in 2025 – reflecting both rising import prices and the shift in the import basket towards more expensive items.

Partner geography rebalanced: the US faded while neighbours and emerging markets gained prominence

The United Kingdom remained the top destination, but the steep drop in US exports reshaped the export map

The United Kingdom was the EU’s largest export market throughout the period, growing from €1.02 billion to €1.59 billion (+56.6 %) (Top partners). In sharp contrast, exports to the United States fell by 48.9 %, from €701 million to €359 million, erasing what had been the second-largest market and reducing it to the fourth position by 2025. This decline was compensated by extraordinary gains elsewhere:

Export partner	2015 (€ million)	2025 (€ million)	Change (%)
United Kingdom	1 018	1 594	+56.6
United States	701	359	–48.9
Switzerland	214	431	+100.8
Norway	85	263	+209.2
Brazil	55	194	+249.7
Türkiye	119	221	+85.7
Israel	43	105	+141.3

Exports to the “Other” group of countries expanded from €1.23 billion to €2.40 billion, reflecting a far broader geographic footprint.

Import suppliers diversified dramatically, driven by explosive growth from Ukraine and Serbia

On the import side, the United Kingdom and Switzerland retained the top spots, but their combined share shrank as smaller suppliers leaped ahead. Imports from Ukraine soared from €2.9 million to €48.0 million (+1 545 %), propelled by a jump after 2020 before settling at a high level. Serbia multiplied its deliveries by more than five (from €22 million to €123 million, +459.7 %), while Türkiye, Korea and Bosnia also posted triple-digit percentage increases.

Import partner	2015 (€ million)	2025 (€ million)	Change (%)
United Kingdom	344	514	+49.5
Switzerland	541	578	+6.9
Serbia	22	123	+459.7
Türkiye	36	70	+93.2
Korea, Rep.	25	55	+120.6
Ukraine	2.9	48	+1 545.4
Bosnia & Herz.	8.4	18.4	+119.4

The widening supplier base is captured by the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index for imports, which fell from 3 254 to 1 853 (–43.1 %) between 2015 and 2025, while export concentration also dropped (from 1 399 to 1 046, –25.2 %) (Concentration HHI). Both measures signal a more balanced and less partner-dependent trade structure.

Resilience under pressure: price shocks, volatile suppliers, and a structural shift in EU export specialisation

Export price shocks tested the EU’s soft-drink trade, yet volumes and values proved adaptable

The algorithm detected three significant export price shocks, all originating in specific partner markets (Price shocks). In 2017, unit prices to South Africa jumped 28.6 % while volumes contracted sharply, before stabilising at a higher price level. The most disruptive event was the 2022 shock to Russia: export prices surged 55.5 % as volumes fell to 73 % of the previous baseline, and subsequent years saw a halving of quantities with even higher prices, consistent with the trade sanctions that followed Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. A smaller price shock was recorded for Côte d’Ivoire in 2023 (+16.4 %), which later returned close to baseline.

On the import side, the most notable source of volatility was Ukraine, with a coefficient of variation of 0.90 – far above the average of 0.16 for the United Kingdom or 0.13 for Switzerland (Volatility bars). Ukrainian volumes to the EU exploded from around 8 000 tonnes in 2015 to 150 000 tonnes in 2021, then fell back to roughly 65 000 tonnes in 2022–2025, illustrating the war-related instability.

The EU's net-exporter position deepened, while production specialisation shifted among Member States

The net import reliance ratio moved from –2 % in 2015 to –61 % in 2024 (the last year with production data), meaning the EU became a far larger net exporter relative to domestic production (Net import reliance). This was driven by a steep rise in export propensity – from 26.5 % of EU soft-drink production in 2015 to 44.8 % in 2024 – even as production volume itself declined from 98 million tonnes to 132 million tonnes (a 14.7 % drop compared with 2015, but with higher unit values) (Export propensity and Production volumes).

Austria, the most specialised exporting Member State in 2025 (RCA 4.58, RSCA 0.64), saw its extra-EU exports fall by 19.8 % over the decade, from €1.19 billion to €955 million (Top reporters). Meanwhile, the Netherlands more than doubled its exports to €1.22 billion (+146.2 %), Germany raised them by 114.3 % to €825 million, and Spain tripled its performance to €319 million (+162.1 %). The centre of gravity of EU soft-drink exports thus migrated towards the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, even as Austria maintained a high specialisation index because its export portfolio remained heavily weighted towards soft drinks.

Conclusion

Over the period 2015-2025, EU soft-drink trade underwent a structural transformation. The surplus grew on the back of a powerful export expansion that was increasingly nourished by high-value "other non-alcoholic beverages" rather than traditional flavoured waters. The geographical footprint widened as the US market collapsed and was replaced by surging sales to neighbouring European markets, Turkey, Brazil and other emerging destinations, while import sources diversified markedly, though not without introducing new volatility, most notably from Ukraine. Price shocks linked to geopolitical events were absorbed without derailing the overall upward trend, and the EU's export propensity nearly doubled, underlining the sector's deep integration into global markets. Austria's traditional dominance in export specialisation was progressively shared with the Netherlands, Germany and Spain, signalling a more diffuse and resilient industry structure.

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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.