

International trade in recyclable products

Statistics Explained

*Data extracted in September 2024
Planned article update: September 2025*

Highlights

" The United Kingdom was the EU's largest partner for imports of recyclable paper, plastic and glass in 2023. "

" More recyclable paper and plastic were exported than imported by the EU in 2023; whilst more recyclable glass was imported than exported. "

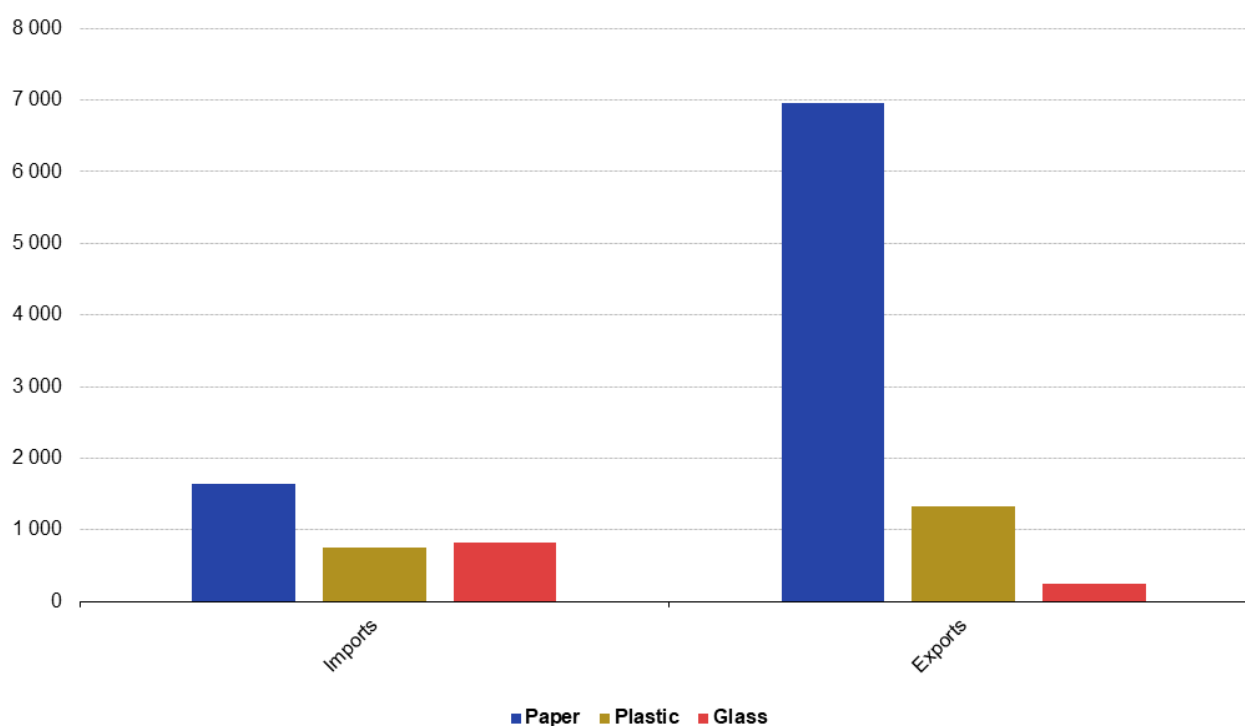
This article provides a picture of the international trade in recyclable products of the [European Union \(EU\)](#) for three products: recyclable paper, recyclable plastic and recyclable glass. It compares these three groups among themselves and shows developments over time of both extra-EU imports and exports. Finally it shows the main partners for extra-EU imports and exports for each of the three products.

The EU exports more recyclable products than they import

In 2023 the EU imported 1650 thousand tonnes worth of recyclable paper, 754 thousand tonnes of recyclable plastic and 817 thousand tonnes of recyclable glass (see Figure 2). Exports of recyclable paper (6956 thousand tonnes) and recyclable plastic (1327 thousand tonnes) were much higher than imports. By contrast, exports of recyclable glass (243 thousand tonnes) were lower than imports.

Extra-EU trade in recyclable products, 2023

(1000 tonnes)



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat 

Figure 1: Extra-EU trade in recyclable products, 2023 (1000 tonnes) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

Between 2013 and 2023, imports of recyclable paper, measured in weight dropped by 16% while imports of recyclable plastic increased by +37% (see Figure 1). By contrast, exports of recyclable paper increased by 8% while re-cyclable plastic imports decreased by 44%. For recyclable glass both imports (+11%) and exports (+15%) increased.

Extra-EU trade by recyclable products (weight, % growth rate, 2013-2023)

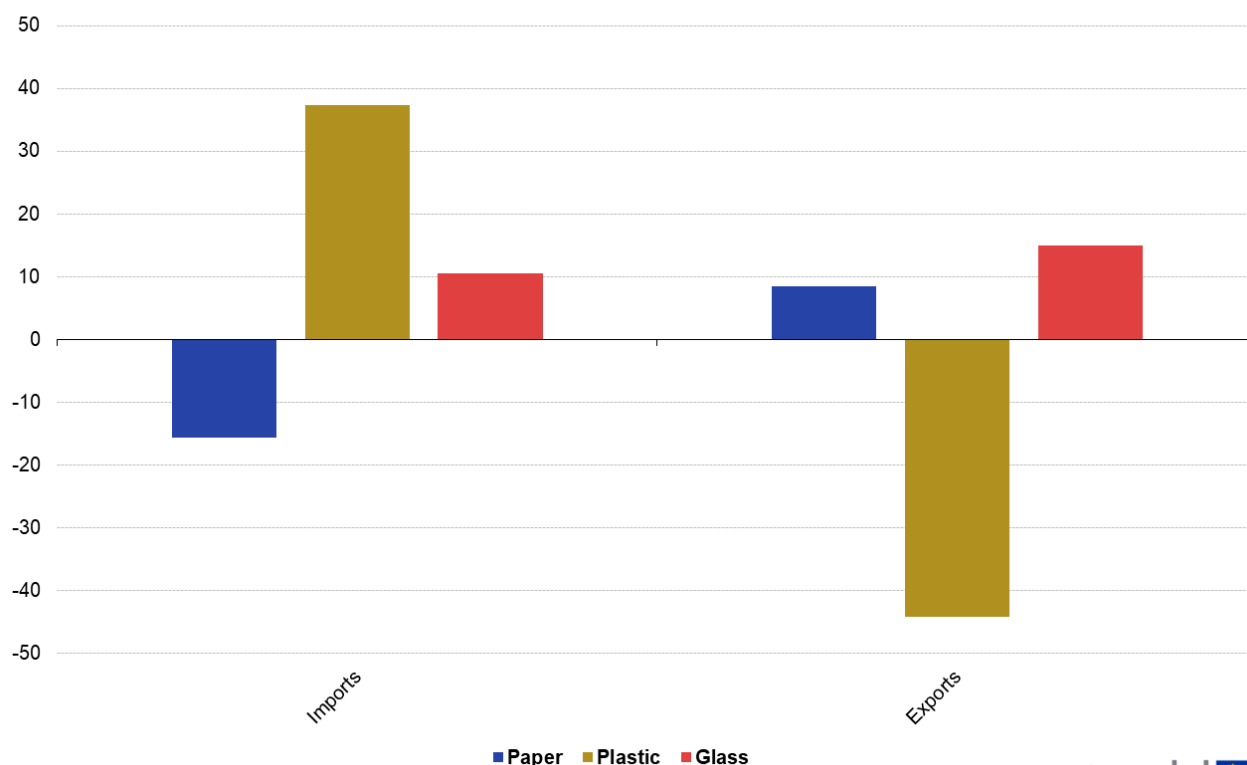
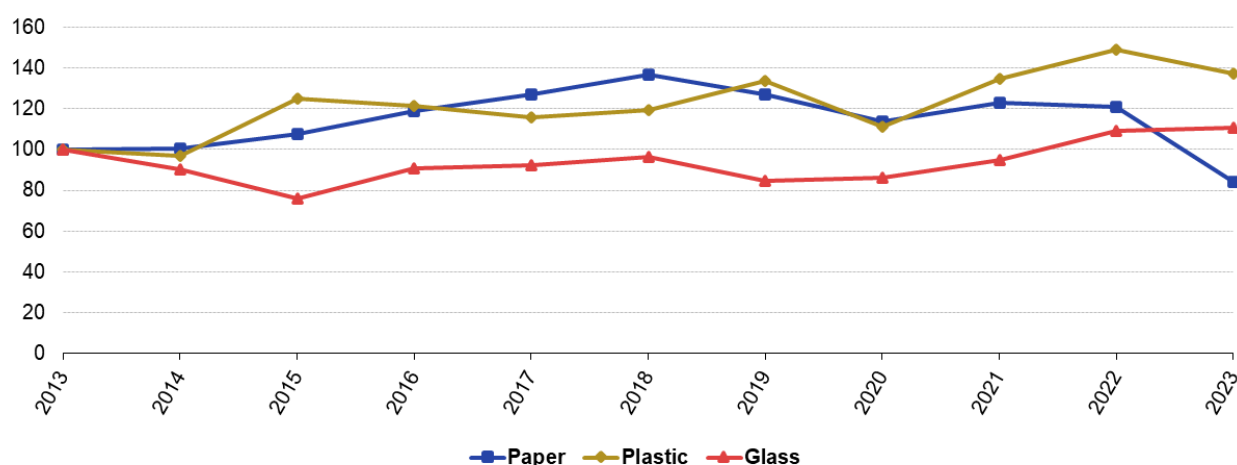


Figure 2: Extra-EU trade by recyclable products (weight, % growth rate, 2013-2023) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

Imports

When looking at the evolution of the volume imported over the past ten years, different trends are observed for those products. The import of recycled paper increased between 2013 and 2018, before starting to decline, with a significant drop of 30% in 2023 compared to 2022. The import of recycled plastic showed a progressive increase, despite some years of decline (most notably the drop in 2020 due to the COVID 19 lockdown). The import of recycled glass remained below 2013 levels, except in 2022 and in 2023.

Extra-EU imports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (weight, 2013 = 100)



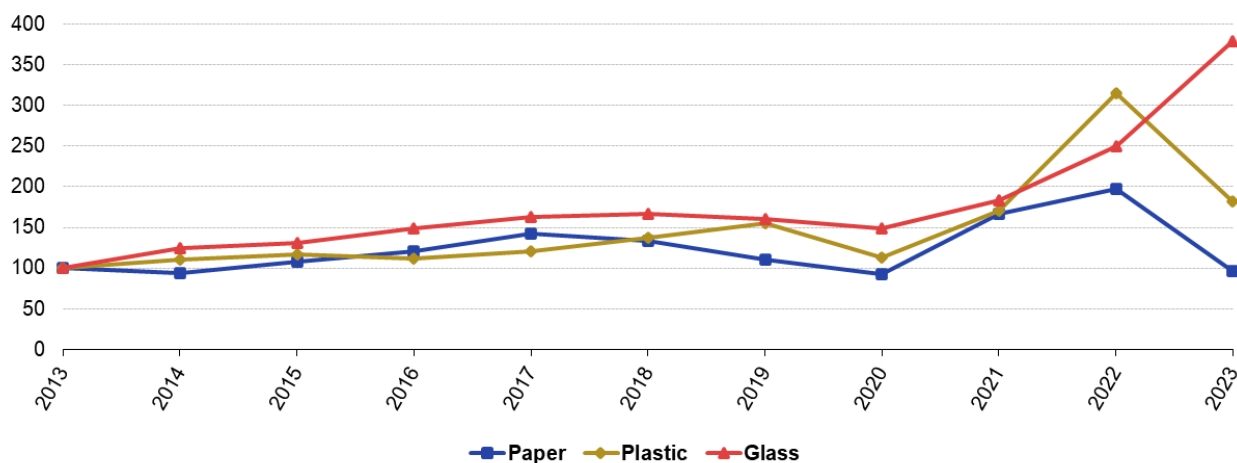
Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat

Figure 3: Extra-EU imports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (weight, 2013 = 100) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

In term of values, those products showed greater similarity to each other. Imports of recyclable paper and plastic dropped in 2023 compared to 2022, due also to the increase of unit value prices. In contrast imports of recyclable glass increased by +52% compared to 2022, continued to be facilitated by the decrease of unit value prices.

Extra-EU imports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (value, 2013 = 100)



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat

Figure 4: Extra-EU imports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (value, 2013 = 100) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

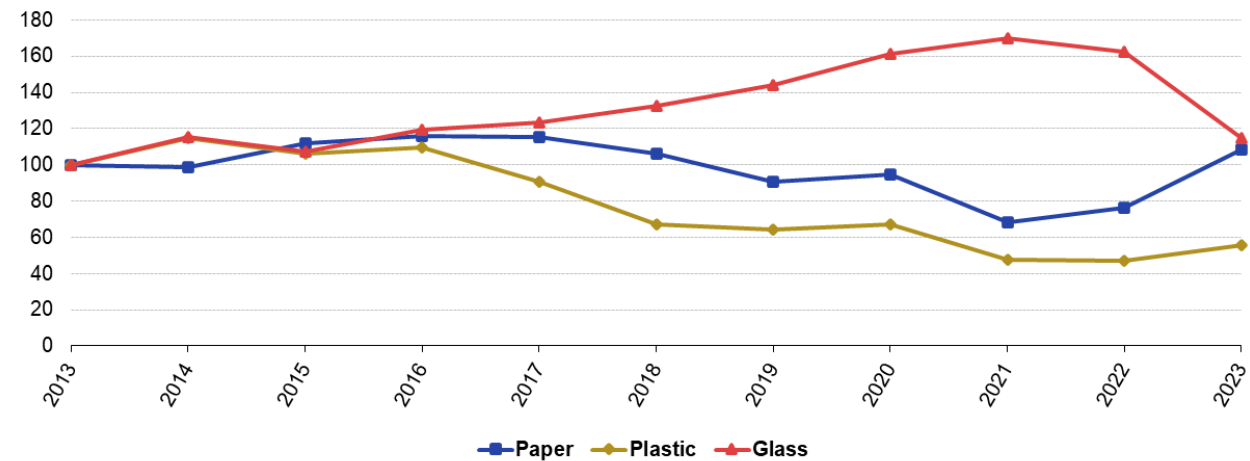
Exports

The evolution of the volume exported over the past ten years showed different trends depending on the product. The volume export of plastic has progressively decreased since 2017 and in 2023 was significantly lower than in

2013 (-44%). The exports of recycled paper fluctuated, reaching a low point in 2021 (-32% with respect to 2013) before rising again and surpassing 2013 levels in 2023. The export of recycled glass increased progressively with a peak in 2021 before declining significantly between 2022 and 2023.

Extra-EU exports of recyclable products, 2013-2023

(weight, 2013 = 100)



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

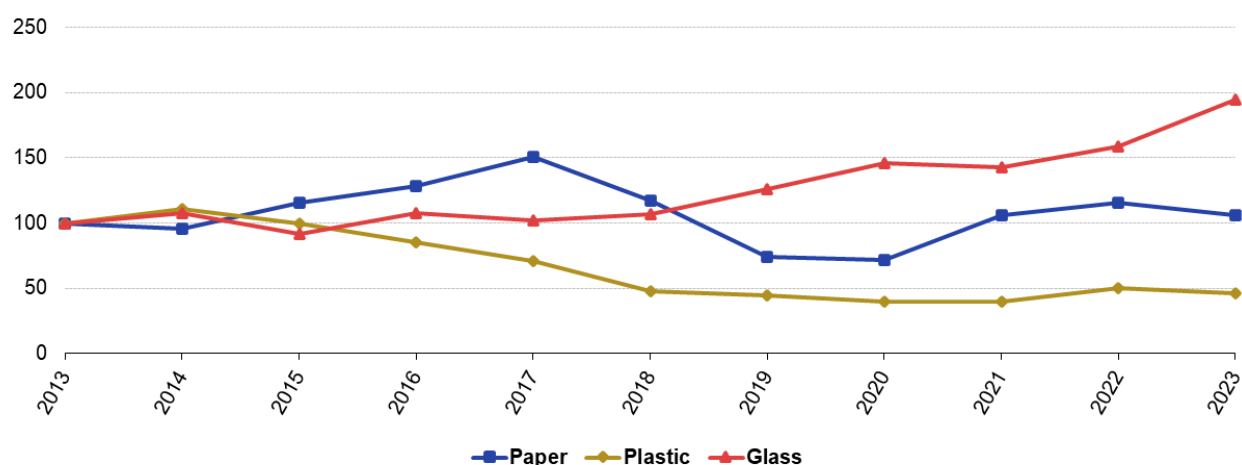
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Figure 5: Extra-EU exports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (weight, 2013 = 100) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

In terms of value, the export of recycled plastic, similar to the trend observed for volume, progressively decreased and in 2023 was significantly lower than in 2013 (-54%). Exports of recycled paper followed the same trend as volume, with 2023 levels slightly above those of 2013. Meanwhile, exports of recycled glass increased steadily, nearly doubling the 2013 levels by 2023 (+94%).

Extra-EU exports of recyclable products, 2013-2023

(value, 2013 = 100)



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat 

Figure 6: Extra-EU exports of recyclable products, 2013-2023 (value, 2013 = 100) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

Recyclable paper: United Kingdom largest import partner, India largest export partner

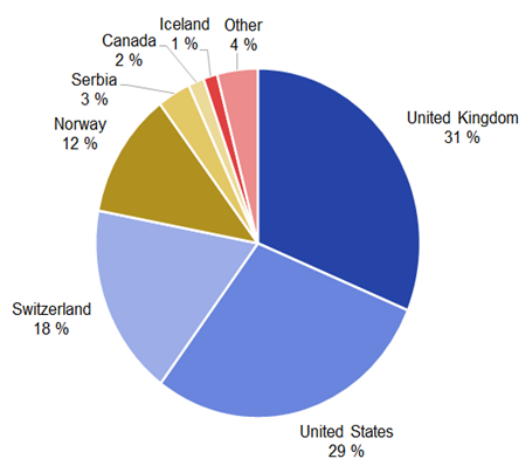
Four of the top-5 partners for extra-EU imports of recyclable paper were European countries (see Figure 7). The exception was the United States, from where 29% of extra-EU imports of recyclable paper came. Only the United Kingdom accounted for a higher share (31%).

The largest partners for extra-EU exports of recyclable paper were India (32%), Indonesia (17%) and Vietnam (13%).

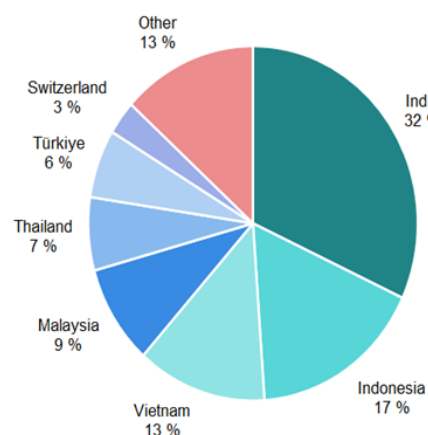
Extra-EU trade in recyclable paper, 2023

(% of trade value)

Imports



Exports



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat

Figures 7: Extra-EU imports and exports of recyclable paper, 2023 (%) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

Recyclable plastic: United Kingdom largest import partner, Türkiye largest export partner

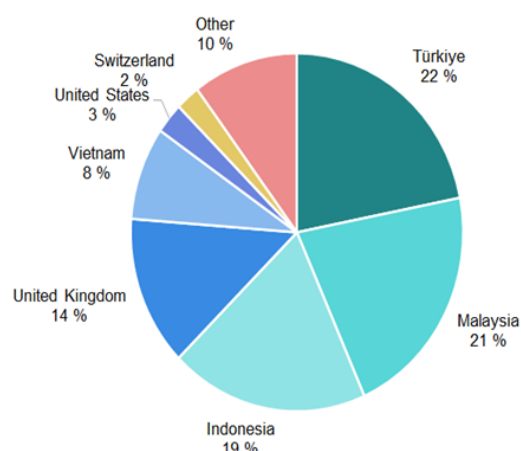
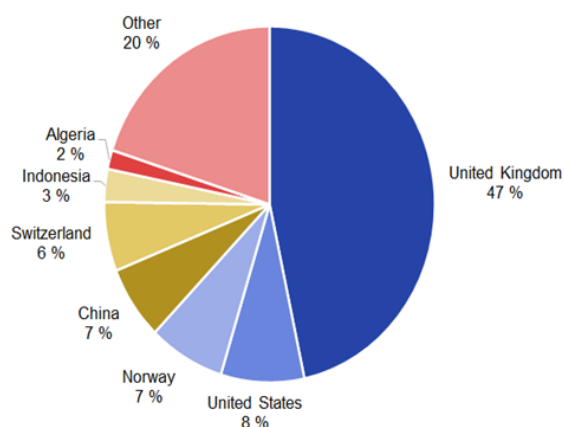
The United Kingdom (47%) had by far the largest share of extra-EU imports of recyclable plastic (see Figure 8). Türkiye (22%) was the largest partner for extra-EU exports of recyclable plastic but Malaysia (21%), Indonesia (19%) and the United Kingdom (14%) also had double digit shares.

Extra-EU trade in recyclable plastic, 2023

(% of trade value)

Imports

Exports



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat 

Figures 8: Extra-EU imports and exports of recyclable plastic, 2023 (%) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

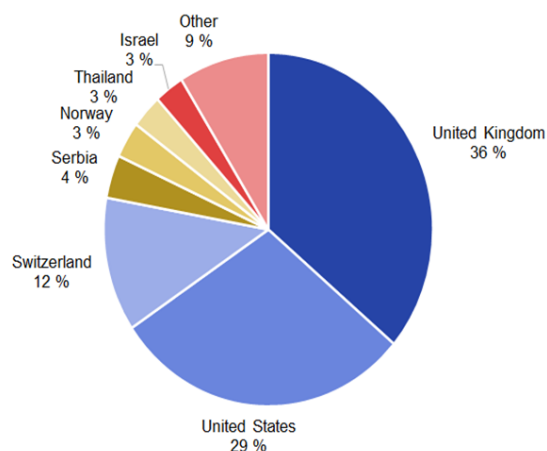
Recyclable glass: United Kingdom largest import and export partner

The United Kingdom was the largest partner for both extra-EU imports (36%) and exports (39%) of recyclable glass. The United States (29%) and Switzerland (12%) were the only other countries with double digit shares in imports while Moldova had a 10% share in exports, as shown in Figures 9.

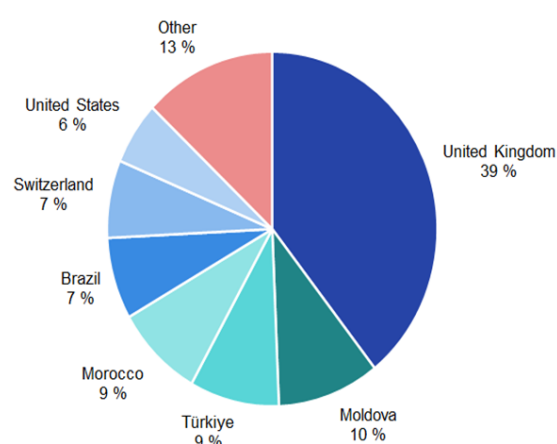
Extra-EU trade in recyclable glass, 2023

(%)

Imports



Exports



Source: Eurostat (Comext DS-045409)

eurostat 

Figure 9: Extra-EU imports and exports of recyclable glass, 2023(%) Source: Eurostat Comext DS-045409

Source data for tables and graphs

- [Download Excel file](#)

Data sources

EU data is taken from [Eurostat's COMEXT](#) database. COMEXT is the reference database for international trade in goods. It provides access not only to both recent and historical data from the EU Member States but also to statistics of a significant number of third countries. International trade aggregated and detailed statistics disseminated via the Eurostat website are compiled from COMEXT data according to a monthly process.

Data are collected by the competent national authorities of the Member States and compiled according to a harmonised methodology established by EU regulations before transmission to Eurostat. For extra-EU trade, the statistical information is mainly provided by the traders on the basis of customs declarations.

EU data are compiled according to Community guidelines and may, therefore, differ from national data published by the Member States. Statistics on extra-EU trade are calculated as the sum of trade of each of the 27 EU Member States with countries outside the EU. In other words, the EU is considered as a single trading entity and trade flows are measured into and out of the area, but not within it.

The EU data reflect the political change in the EU composition. Therefore, the United Kingdom was considered as an extra-EU partner country for the EU. However, the United Kingdom was still part of the internal market until the end of the transitory period (end 2023), meaning that data on trade with the United Kingdom for reference periods till, then were still based on statistical concepts applicable to trade between the EU Member States. As a consequence, while imports from any other extra-EU trade partner are grouped by country of origin, the United Kingdom data reflect country of consignment. In practice this means that the goods imported by the EU from the United Kingdom were physically transported from the United Kingdom but part of these goods could have been of other origin than the United Kingdom. For this reason data on trade with the United Kingdom are not fully comparable with data on trade with other extra-EU trade partners.

Methodology

According to the EU concepts and definitions, extra-EU trade statistics (trade between EU Member States and non-EU countries) do not record exchanges involving goods in transit, placed in a customs warehouse or given temporary admission (for trade fairs, temporary exhibitions, tests, etc.). This is known as 'special trade'. The partner is the country of final destination of the goods for exports and the country of origin for imports.

Unit of measure

Trade values are expressed in millions or [billions](#) (109) of euros. They correspond to the statistical value, i.e. to the amount which would be invoiced in the event of sale or purchase at the national border of the reporting country. It is called a [FOB](#) value (free on board) for exports and a [CIF](#) value (cost, insurance, freight) for imports.

Product codes The products codes from the [harmonised system](#) for the products discussed in this article are:

- recyclable paper: 4707
- recyclable plastic: 3915
- recyclable glass: 70010010

Context

Trade is an important indicator of Europe's prosperity and place in the world. The bloc is deeply integrated into global markets both for the products it sources and the exports it sells. The EU trade policy is an important element of the external dimension of the 'Europe 2023 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth' and is one of the main pillars of the EU's relations with the rest of the world.

Because the 27 EU Member States share a single market and a single external border, they also have a single trade policy. EU Member States speak and negotiate collectively, both in the [World Trade Organisation](#), where the rules of international trade are agreed and enforced, and with individual trading partners. This common policy enables them to speak with one voice in trade negotiations, maximising their impact in such negotiations. This is even more important in a globalised world in which economies tend to cluster together in regional groups.

The openness of the EU's trade regime has meant that the EU is the biggest player on the global trading scene and remains a good region to do business with. Thanks to the ease of modern transport and communications, it is now easier to produce, buy and sell goods around the world which gives European companies of every size the potential to trade outside Europe.

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