This article discusses the development of the European Union’s (EU) international trade in goods. It considers the EU’s share in world import and export markets, intra-EU trade (trade between EU Member States), the EU’s main trading partners, and the EU’s most widely traded product categories.

The EU-27 accounts for around 15% of the world’s trade in goods. The value of international trade in goods significantly exceeds that of services (by about three times), reflecting the nature of some services which makes them harder to trade across borders.

This article is part of an online publication providing recent statistics on international trade in goods, covering information on the EU’s main partners, main products traded, specific characteristics of trade as well as background information.

The three largest global players for international trade: EU, China and the USA

The EU-27, China and the United States have been the three largest global players for international trade (see Figure 1) since 2004 when China passed Japan. In 2018, the total level of trade in goods (exports and imports) recorded for the EU-27 was EUR 3 967 billion (note this does not include intra-EU trade), which was EUR 50 billion higher than the value for China and EUR 342 billion above the level recorded for the United States; Japan had the fourth highest level of trade in goods, at EUR 1 260 billion.
In 2018, the ratio of exports to imports (the cover ratio) was particularly high in favour of exports for Russia and China (see Figure 2), who in absolute terms also had the largest annual trade surpluses.
In 2018, the United States had the largest deficit (see Figure 3), continuing a pattern that has been apparent over the whole of the last decade for which data are available.
Figure 3: Trade balance for international trade in goods, 2008 and 2018, (billion EUR) Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_introle) and UNCTAD

Looking at the flows of exports and imports, the EU-27 had the second largest share of global exports and imports of goods (see Figures 4 and 5) in 2018: the EU-27’s exports of goods were equivalent to 15.5 % of the world total. Only China (15.8 %) had a higher share while the United States (10.6 %) followed at some distance.
The United States had a larger share of world imports (15.8%) than either the EU-27 (13.7%) or China (13.0%) in 2018.
A surplus for extra-EU trade since 2012

EU-27 international trade in goods with the rest of the world (the sum of extra-EU exports and imports) was valued at EUR 4 067 billion in 2019 (see Figure 6). Both imports and exports were higher in comparison with 2018, with the increase for imports (EUR 27 billion) smaller than that for exports (EUR 73 billion). As a result, the EU-27’s trade surplus of EUR 152 billion in 2018 increased to EUR 197 billion in 2019.

Between 2009 and 2012, the EU-27 saw its exports rise quickly from EUR 1 184 billion to EUR 1 771 billion. Between 2012 and 2016 exports remained relatively stable but in the next three years increased from EUR 1 867 billion in 2016 to EUR 2 132 billion in 2019. Imports followed roughly the same pattern as exports; they increased from EUR 1 193 billion in 2009 to EUR 1 666 billion in 2011. Between 2011 and 2016 they remained relatively stable but in the next three years increased from EUR 1 602 billion to EUR 1 935 billion in 2019.
Among the EU Member States, Germany had by far the highest share of extra EU-27 trade in 2019, contributing 29.6% of the EU-27's exports of goods to non-member countries and accounting for more than one fifth (21.0%) of the EU-27's imports (see Figure 7). The next three largest exporters, France (11.6%), Italy (11.0%) and the Netherlands (10.3%) were the only other EU Member States to account for a double-digit share of EU-27 exports. The Netherlands (17.5%), France (10.7%) and Italy (9.5%) followed Germany as the largest importers of goods from non-member countries in 2019. The relatively high share for the Netherlands can, at least in part, be explained by the considerable amount of goods that flow into the EU through Rotterdam, which is the EU’s leading sea port.
The largest extra EU-27 trade surplus in goods, valued at EUR 224.3 billion in 2019, was recorded by Germany, followed by Italy (EUR 51.9 billion), Ireland (EUR 40.6 billion) and France (EUR 39.2 billion). The largest trade deficits for extra-EU trade in goods were EUR 118.7 billion for the Netherlands and EUR 30.7 billion for the Spain (see table B in the excel file attached below).

**Highest share for intra-EU trade in goods in Luxembourg and Slovakia**

Trade in goods between EU Member States (intra-EU trade) was valued — in terms of exports — at EUR 3 061 billion in 2019. This was 44 % higher than the level recorded for exports leaving the EU-27 to non-member countries of EUR 2 132 billion (extra-EU trade).

Intra EU-27 trade — again measured by exports — increased by 1.5 % across the EU-27 between 2018 and 2019. Considering exports, double digit growth between 2018 and 2019 was registered only for Cyprus (16.4 %), while only Sweden (-0.6 %), Belgium (-0.3 %) and Slovakia (-0.1 %) saw a reduction of their intra-EU exports. In imports, only Croatia (7.8 %) and Portugal (7.4 %) had growth above 5 %, while the imports of Ireland (-3.9 %), Belgium (-1.4 %), Malta (-1.3 %) and Sweden (-0.9 %) declined.

As with extra EU-27 trade, Germany was also the EU Member State with the highest level of intra EU-27 trade in 2019, contributing 22.8 % of the EU-27’s exports of goods to other Member States and 23.2 % of the EU-27’s imports of goods from other Member States (see Figure 8). The Netherlands (13.5 %) was the only other Member State to contribute more than one tenth of intra-EU exports, again a consequence of the Rotterdam effect, while France (12.5 %) was the only other Member State to account for more than one tenth of intra-EU imports.
Figure 8: Intra EU-27 trade in goods, 2019 (% share of EU-27 exports/imports) Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_intratrd)

The significance of the EU’s internal market is underlined by the fact that intra-EU trade in goods (exports and imports combined) was higher than extra-EU trade (exports and imports combined) for all EU Member State, except Ireland (see Figure 9). The proportion of total trade in goods that was accounted for by intra-EU and extra-EU flows varied considerably across the Member States, reflecting to some degree historical ties and geographical location. The highest shares of intra-EU trade (above 75% of total trade) were recorded for Luxembourg (82.0%), Slovakìa (79.5%), Czechia (76.6%) and Hungary (75.1%) with this ratio falling to 51.5% for Greece and 37.5% for Ireland.
Strong increase in trade in goods with China in 2009-2019

Between 2009 and 2019, the development of the EU-27’s exports of goods by major trading partner varied considerably. Among the main trading partners, the highest average annual growth rate was recorded for exports to China (9.9 %) and Mexico (9.5 %), see Figure 10. The lowest growth was seen for exports to Russia (3.3 %) and Norway (4.1 %).

On the import side, between 2009 and 2019 imports of goods from Mexico (10.5 %) and Turkey (8.1 %) had the highest average annual growth rate. The smallest growth rates were registered for imports from Norway (0.3 %) and Russia (2.3 %), who were both large exporters of energy products, and also for Japan (2.2 %).
Figure 10: Extra EU-27 trade in goods by main trading partners, EU-27, 2009 and 2019 (billion EUR) Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_maineu)

The United States remained the most common destination for goods exported from the EU-27 in 2019 (see Figure 11) with a share of 18.0%. The United Kingdom was the second largest destination for EU-27 exports (14.9% of the EU-27 total), followed by China (9.3%). The seven largest destination markets for EU-27 exports of goods — the United States, United Kingdom, China, Switzerland, Russia, Turkey and Japan — accounted for almost three fifths (59.3%) of all EU-27 exports of goods.
The seven largest suppliers of EU-27 imports of goods were the same countries as the seven largest destination markets for EU-27 exports, although their order was slightly different (compare Figures 11 and 12). These seven countries accounted for a larger share of the EU-27’s imports of goods than their share of EU-27 exports of goods: just over three fifths (60.7 %) of all imports of goods into the EU-27 came from these seven countries. With almost one fifth (18.7 %) of all imports, China was the largest supplier of goods into the EU-27 in 2019. The United States (12.0 %) and the United Kingdom (10.0 %) followed at some distance.
Main trading partners for imports of goods, EU-27, 2019 (% share of extra EU-27 imports)

Figure 12: Main trading partners for imports of goods, EU-27, 2019 (% share of extra EU-27 imports) Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_maineu)

Large trade surplus for machinery & vehicles and chemicals

Between 2014 and 2019, the value of the EU-27’s extra-EU exports increased for most product groups shown in Figure 13, with the exception of exports of energy which fell by 8.2%. The highest growth rate for exports was reported for chemicals with an increase of 35.8%. Increases of more than 20% were also recorded for food & drink (22.7%) and raw materials (20.1%).

On the import side, there was a similar pattern observed, with a large overall reduction in the level of extra-EU imports of energy (-15.2%) between 2014 and 2019 (note that some of the losses may be attributed to price changes and/or exchange rate fluctuations, with oil being priced on global markets in US dollars). By contrast, extra-EU imports of machinery & vehicles rose by 45.4%, with relatively high growth rates also recorded for chemicals (28.6%) and other manufactured goods (24.1%).

The EU-27’s extra-EU trade surplus for goods of EUR 197.1 billion in 2019 was driven by large trade surpluses in machinery & vehicles (EUR 237.1 billion) and chemicals (EUR 171.6 billion) and smaller surpluses in food & drink, and other manufactured goods. These could not be offset by the large trade deficit for energy (EUR -258.2 billion) and the smaller deficit for raw materials (EUR -26.1 billion).
The structure of the EU-27’s exports of goods did not change much between 2014 and 2019 (see Figure 14) apart from a 2.4 percentage points (p.p.) increase for chemicals, rising from 16.7 % in 2014 to 19.1 % in 2019, and a decrease for energy of 1.4 p.p.
Figure 14: Main exports by product, EU-27, 2014 and 2019 (% share of extra EU-27 exports)
Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_intratrd)

For the structure of the EU-27’s imports between 2014 and 2019, there was a large decrease for the share of energy, which fell by 7.6 p.p. from 26.3 % to 18.7 % (see Figure 15). This decrease was partly due to falling prices of energy products. By contrast, over the same period the share of machinery & vehicles rose by 6.0 p.p., from 26.9 % to 32.8 %. The shares of the other products changed only slightly.
Figure 15: Main imports by product, EU-27, 2014 and 2019 (% share of extra EU-27 imports)
Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_intratrd)

Figure 16 contrasts the structure of the EU-27’s imports and exports in 2019: it should be noted that the overall level of exports was 10.2% higher than the level of imports. The most notable difference is in the share of energy which was almost four times as high for imports as for exports. This was balanced by lower import shares for machinery & vehicles and chemicals compared to exports.
Figure 16: Main exports and imports by product, EU-27, 2019 (% share of extra EU-27 exports/imports) Source: Eurostat (ext_lt_intratrd)

Source data for tables and graphs

- International trade in goods: tables and figures

Data sources

Statistics on the international trade of goods measure the value and quantity of goods traded between EU Member States (known as intra-EU trade) and goods traded by Member States with non-member countries (known as extra-EU trade). These statistics are the official source of information on imports, exports and the trade balance in the EU, its Member States and the euro area.

Statistics are published for each declaring country with respect to each partner country, for several product classifications. One of the most commonly used product classifications is the standard international trade classification (SITC Rev. 4) of the United Nations (UN); this allows a comparison of international trade statistics to be made on a worldwide basis.

In extra-EU trade statistics, the data shown for the EU-27 treat this entity as a single trading block. In other words, the data for exports relate only to those exports from the EU-27 that leave the trading block and are destined for the rest of the world, while extra-EU imports relate to imports from the rest of the world (non-member countries) coming into the EU-27. By contrast, when reporting data for individual EU Member States, international trade flows are generally presented in terms of world trade flows (including both intra-EU and extra-EU partners). Statistics on trade between the EU Member States (intra-EU trade) cover imports and exports of goods recorded by each Member State.

The statistical values of extra- and intra-EU trade are recorded at their free-on-board (FOB) value for exports and their cost, insurance and freight (CIF) value for imports. The values reported comprise only those...
subsidiary costs (freight and insurance) which relate, for exports, to the journey within the territory of the EU Member State from which the goods are exported and, for imports, to the journey outside the territory of the Member State into which the goods are imported.

EU data come from Eurostat’s COMEXT database, 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 for a significant number of non-member countries. Aggregated and detailed statistics for international trade in goods as disseminated through Eurostat’s website are compiled from COMEXT each month. As COMEXT is updated on a daily basis, data published on the website may differ from the data found in COMEXT (in case of recent revisions).

The EU-27 data reflect the political change in the EU composition. Therefore the United Kingdom is considered as an extra-EU partner country for the EU-27. However, the United Kingdom is still part of the internal market until the end of the transitory period, meaning that data on trade with the United Kingdom are still based on statistical concepts applicable to trade between the EU Member States. As a consequence, while imports from any other extra-EU-27 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-27 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-27 trade partners.

Data for the non-EU major traders used in Figures 1 to 5 are taken from the UNCTAD database of the United Nations. For the calculation of shares the world trade is defined as the sum of EU trade with non-EU countries (source: Eurostat) plus the international trade of non-EU countries (source: UNCTAD).

**Context**

Statistics on the international trade of goods are used extensively by decision makers at an international, EU and national level. Businesses may use international trade data to carry out market research and define their commercial strategy. Statistics for international trade in goods are also used by EU institutions in their preparation of multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations, for defining and implementing anti-dumping policies, for the purposes of macroeconomic and monetary policies, and in evaluating the progress of the single market, or the integration of European economies.

The development of trade can be an opportunity for economic growth. The EU has a common trade policy, whereby the European Commission negotiates trade agreements and represents the EU’s interests on behalf of its 27 Member States. The European Commission consults EU Member States through an advisory committee which discusses the full range of trade policy issues affecting the EU including multilateral, bilateral and unilateral instruments. As such, trade policy is an exclusive power of the EU — so only the EU, and not individual Member States, can legislate on trade matters and conclude international trade agreements. More recently, this scope has been extended beyond trade in goods, to cover trade in services, intellectual property and foreign direct investment (in chapter 4).

Globally, multilateral trade issues are dealt with under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The WTO has 164 members (in March 2020), with several candidate members in the process of joining. The WTO sets the global rules for trade, provides a forum for trade negotiations, and for settling disputes between members. The European Commission negotiates with its WTO partners and participated in the latest round of WTO multilateral trade negotiations, known as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA).

**Other articles**

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  - International trade in goods - long-term indicators (t_ext_go_lti)
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Database

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Data visualisations

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Legislation

- Regulation (EC) No 471/2009 of 6 May 2009 on Community statistics relating to external trade with non-member countries
- Summaries of EU Legislation: Extrastat: statistics relating to trade with non-EU countries
- Summaries of EU Legislation: Intrastat: statistics relating to the trading of goods between EU countries