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Current Trends in Russian Trade in Goods with the EU and China

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the current trends in Russia's foreign trade with the EU and China in the context of sanctions restrictions imposed by "unfriendly" countries.

Aim. The study aims to explore current trends in Russia's foreign trade in goods with the EU and China in 2022. ***Objectives.*** The author conducts an analysis of the dynamics of Russia's trade with the EU and China; identifies the main commodity groups that have contributed to the changes in trade with the EU and China; explores the impact of sanctions restrictions on Russia's trade with the EU; assesses the possibilities of reorienting Russia's foreign trade towards China. ***Methods.*** The main methods are the analysis of current statistics of foreign trade in goods between the EU and China; a comparative analysis of the dynamics of trade in commodity groups and individual goods with the EU and China; method of mirror statistics (due to the suspension of the publication of official data by the Federal Customs Service (FCS) of Russia). ***Results.*** The analysis shows a decrease in trade turnover between Russia and the EU and its growth with China. With the EU the decline in exports was mainly due to metal industry products, chemical products, precious stones and metals, and timber; in imports — at the expense of machinery and equipment. Trade with China in the main commodity groups has expanded, most significantly in terms of exports — in chemical products, in terms of imports — in machinery and equipment. ***Conclusions.*** The role of Russian exports of mineral fuels and energy as the basis for trade with the EU and China in 2022 has strengthened in the face of sanctions restrictions and rising prices. Russia's trade with the EU reduced mainly due to the sanctioned goods. The reorientation of Russia's foreign trade towards China is partially possible, with the restraining factors: in terms of imports — China's lack of strong positions in certain high-tech goods; in terms of exports — objective limitations on China's domestic market capacity, a slowdown in economic growth, a decrease in the energy intensity of the economy, competition with Russia.

Keywords: foreign trade; trade in goods; commodity export; sanctions; EU; China; unfriendly countries; trade reorientation

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The European Union (EU) as an integration bloc and China as a single country have traditionally been Russia's main foreign trade partners. In 2021, the EU accounted for 37.8% of Russia's merchandise exports, while China accounted for 13.9%. The share of these partners in Russia's imports was 31.9% and 24.7%, respectively.[1]

In 2022, most developed economies (except Israel) adopted unprecedented sanctions measures against Russia. At the same time, most developing countries did not join them (with the exception of Albania, Bahamas, Micronesia, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Ukraine). The massive introduction of sanctions restrictions marked a new stage of development in Russia's international economic relations, primarily in foreign trade in goods. In the context of geopolitical tensions, which escalated after 24 February 2022, it is of particular interest to study the changes in the dynamics and structure of Russia's trade in goods with the EU — the largest trade counterparty that applied sanctions measures, as well as with China — the second most important partner that did not join these measures.

A number of scientific publications have been devoted to the study of trends in Russia's foreign trade in goods with the EU and/or China. The latest studies published since 2021 either consider long-term trends in Russia's trade relations with these economies [1–5], or focus on foreign trade in the context of the spread of a new coronavirus infection [6]. The relevant issues are also touched upon in monographs [7]. There are also works devoted to Russian exports in general, with preliminary estimates of the consequences of sanctions restrictions in 2022. [8, 9]. At the same time, a comprehensive study of Russia's foreign trade with the EU and China, based on the results of the "sanctions" year to date, is not presented in domestic scientific publications, including due to the inaccessibility of Russian data on foreign trade in goods for 2022.

The objective complexity of the study of the issues under consideration is due to the fact that the Federal Customs Service (FCS of Russia) suspended the publication of official foreign trade statistics in April 2022.[2] In this regard, the analysis for 2022 is based on "mirror" statistics using data from the relevant statistical services of the EU and China. In order to avoid systematic discrepancies between "direct" and "mirror" statistics, which are possible for a number of reasons [10], it seems methodologically sound to compare "mirror" data for 2022 and 2021, despite the availability of "direct" data for 2021.

If we consider the dynamics of Russia's foreign trade with the EU (*Table 1*), the mutual trade turnover decreased in 2022 against 2021 by 8.9%: from USD 299.0 bln to USD 272.5 bln. This was due to a decrease in imports, while exports even increased slightly. As a result, the traditionally positive balance of Russia's foreign trade with the EU widened further (by 77.5%) and in 2022 reached a record USD 156.3 bln.

The reduction in mutual trade turnover in 2022, despite the sanctions measures, is not intense by historical standards. For example, in 2020, when measures restricting economic activity were administratively imposed to curb the spread of the new COVID-19 coronavirus infection, Russia-EU trade turnover fell by 23.8%. The drop was even greater in 2015 — by 38.8%.

The reason for the relatively weaker than expected decline in 2022 is due to a number of factors. Firstly, the dynamics of Russia's trade with the EU is traditionally determined by supplies of fuel and energy products. The

[1] Calculated by the author according to Customs Statistics of Foreign Trade of the Russian Federation. URL: http://stat.customs.gov.ru/

[2] The FCS will temporarily not publish import and export statistics. URL: https://www.interfax.ru/business/837264

Table 1

Russia-EU foreign trade in 2021–2022, USD billion

TN VED code (Customs commodity code)	Name of Goods	Exports			Imports		
		2021	2022	Growth rate, %	2021	2022	Growth rate, %
All goods		193.5	214.4	10.8	105.5	58.1	–44.9
01–24	Food products and agricultural raw materials	3.2	3.4	4.0	8.4	7.3	–13.0
25–27	Mineral products	125.7	156.9	24.8	1.3	0.6	–52.0
incl. 27	Fuel and energy products	123.0	156.0	26.8	0.9	0.5	–45.3
28–40	Chemical products, rubber	9.5	8.5	–10.5	26.7	20.7	–22.3
41–43	Leather, fur and articles thereof	0.1	0.1	10.3	0.5	0.2	–56.2
44–49	Wood and pulp-and-paper articles	4.6	2.2	–51.0	2.5	1.0	–57.6
50–67	Textiles, textile products and footwear	0.2	0.2	–9.4	4.5	2.7	–40.6
71	Pearls, precious stones and metals	5.5	3.7	–32.4	0.2	0.0	–80.8
72–83	Metals and articles thereof	17.8	16.0	–10.0	5.4	3.2	–40.0
84–90	Machinery, electrical and transport equipment	2.6	1.5	–41.1	51.0	19.7	–61.3
68–70, 91–97, 99	Other goods	5.5	3.3	–40.4	4.1	2.1	–47.9

Source: compiled by the author based on Eurostat. URL: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/newxtweb/

27.5% decrease in the physical volumes of exports of the relevant products was balanced by a sharp rise in world prices for fuel and energy products. Thus, in 2022, the World Bank price index for fuel and energy products increased by 60%.[3] As a result, the value of Russian exports of fuel and energy products to the EU in 2022 increased by 26.7%. Secondly, the sanctions measures on crude oil and oil products came into force partly in December 2022 (at the end of the year) and partly in February 2023, i.e., they did not affect most of 2022 (although even before these measures came into force, the EU sought to reduce imports of fuel and energy products from Russia). Thirdly, the decline in trade may have been offset to a small extent by the ongoing post-COVID 19 recovery, at least in January-February 2022.

Russia's commodity exports to the EU are traditionally dominated by fuel and energy products (63.6% in 2021). In 2022, the share of this group increased (to 72.8%), which further consolidated the raw material orientation of Russian exports. Other relatively large (but significantly smaller in volume) commodity groups of Russia's exports to the EU include

[3] Calculated by the author according to World Bank. Commodity markets. URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/research/commodity-markets.

metal industry products, chemical industry products, precious stones and metals, wood and pulp-and-paper products. All of these groups displayed negative dynamics of Russia's exports. It is also noteworthy that shipments in the classified 99 HS group fell by almost one third.

The decrease in supplies of metal industry products (by 10 per cent) was mainly due to a reduction in exports of iron and steel (–32.4 per cent). Many products from this group were included in the EU sanctions lists.[4] In addition, the EU applies internal market protection measures to Russian ferrous metallurgy products, in particular ferrosilicon, silicon-electrical steel, certain types of cold-rolled and hot-rolled flat steel, and corrosion resistant steel. The fall in ferrous metal exports was partially offset by a 34.5% increase in nickel supplies.

Within the framework of chemical industry products, the decrease in supplies was due to the reduction in exports of certain types of organic chemicals (–33.0%), plastics (–37.4%) and rubber articles (–32.6). In particular, supplies of cyclic hydrocarbons, polymers of ethylene and propylene, new pneumatic tyres decreased. These goods are among those that bring Russia significant revenues and are not coincidentally included in the relevant EU prohibited list.[5]

The decrease in exports of precious stones and metals (–32.4%) was primarily due to diamonds. Despite their absence in the sanctions list, some European companies began to refuse to buy precious stones and minerals from Russia [11]. At the same time, the idea of banning the import of diamonds from Russia as a commodity that brings significant revenues to the country is discussed in the EU.

The entire commodity group of wood and articles thereof was included in the sanctions list. Supplies to the EU dropped more than twice. At the same time, even earlier some goods of this group were included in the Russian list of goods,[6] exports of which is banned to unfriendly countries.

Thus, the main commodity groups of Russia's exports to the EU (except for fuel and energy products and foodstuffs) showed decrease in supplies in 2022. At the same time, the decrease in supplies is mainly due to the goods that have fallen under the sanctions restrictions. At the same time, even for goods that are not sanctioned, the EU seeks to diversify supplies (primarily natural gas).

Russia's imports from the EU in 2022 decreased in all aggregated commodity groups without exception (*Table 1*). The basis of Russian imports from the EU is machinery and equipment (in 2021 they accounted for 48.4% of supplies). This group of goods was mainly responsible for the reduction in imports. This is due to the entry of a wide range of machinery and equipment into the sanctions lists of products prohibited for delivery to Russia.[7]

These include goods used in oil refining; maritime navigation goods and technologies; luxury goods; goods and technologies used in the aviation or space industries; dual-use goods and technologies; and goods that can contribute to the strengthening of Russian industrial capacities. For Russia, this unfavourable dynamic is very sensitive, as the EU accounted for about a third of its imports of machinery and equipment until 2022, and more than half of its imports in certain groups.

Given the imposed sanctions restrictions, growth in Russia's mutual trade with the EU

[4] Council Regulation (EU) 2022/428 of 15 March 2022. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/428

[5] Council Regulation (EU) 2022/1904 of 6 October 2022. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/1904/oj

[6] Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of 09.03.2022 No. 313. URL: https://base.garant.ru/403681900/

[7] Council Regulation (EU) 833/2014 of 31 July 2014 (consolidated version). URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02014R 0833–20230201

seems unlikely. Russia's exports to the EU are likely to decline, primarily due to the entry into force of restrictions on the supply of fuel and energy products and the EU leadership's desire to reduce reliance on Russia (while the EU's reliance on US supplies is growing). In addition, one cannot rule out further expansion of the list of Russian goods subject to EU sanctions, the emergence of other barriers (e.g., new trade defence measures) and, in general, worsening conditions for access to the market of the integration bloc in question. Russia's imports from the EU, which sharply decreased in 2022, may continue to decline with less intensity or stabilise.

The dynamics of Russia's foreign trade with China (*Table 2*) shows opposite trends compared to the EU, although similar features can be identified. Mutual trade turnover with this country increased in 2022 against 2021 by 29.3% — from USD 147.1 bln to USD 190.3 bln. The growth of both exports and imports took place. At the same time, the growth of trade turnover with China (by $ 43.2 bln) is more than more than its reduction with the EU (by $ 26.6 bln).

Among the common features of Russian exports to China (as well as to the EU), I would like to point out their raw material orientation with the predominance of fuel and energy products. The value of exports of these products to China in 2022 increased even more than to the EU — by 58.7%. As a result, the share of this group grew from 67.6% to 74.8%, and the surplus of Russia's foreign trade with China more than tripled, reaching USD 38.1 billion in 2022.

Other major groups showed growing supplies to China, unlike to the EU. In particular, supplies of metal industry products increased slightly (by 6.6%). Apart from the absence of sanctions restrictions on Russian metals, China does not apply trade defence measures. By contrast, exports of ferrous metals, which contributed most to the decline in supplies to the EU, increased to China by 54.6%, demonstrating the largest absolute growth among metal industry products. Such positive dynamics is due to the 2.8-fold expansion of supplies of semi-finished products of iron and steel, which are a sanctioned commodity on the European market.

Other trends are observed in another important group of Russia's exports — wood and pulp-and-paper articles, where the increase in supplies was less than 1%. At the same time, exports to China in the largest commodity group — wood and articles thereof — decreased by 11.3%. This trend was mainly due to the reduction in supplies of wood in the rough. A related factor may have been the introduction of increased export duties on these products by the Government of the Russian Federation.[8] Russia is trying to implement a policy to curb exports of unprocessed timber in order to stimulate domestic processing and value-added creation.

Supplies of chemical industry products showed growth, primarily due to inorganic chemicals (by 3.5 times), rubber articles (by 2.4 times) and fertilisers (by 34.8%). At the same time, the increase in exports of rubber articles was provided by synthetic rubber. Supplies of new pneumatic tyres, which showed the greatest decline within the group in the EU, also decreased to China.

Thus, in terms of the main commodity groups of Russia's exports to China, supplies in 2022 expanded. This happened at the expense of goods both affected and not affected by the EU sanctions restrictions.

Russia's imports from China in 2022, in contrast to the EU, grew by the main consolidated commodity groups (*Table 2*). Like in the case of the EU, the basis of Russian imports from China is machinery and equipment (in 2021 they accounted for 52.9%

[8] Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of 27.11.2021 No. 2068. URL: http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202111300029

Table 2

Russia-China foreign trade in 2021–2022, USD billion

TN VED code (Customs commodity code)	Name of Goods	Exports			Imports		
		2021	2022	Growth rate, %	2021	2022	Growth rate, %
All goods		79.6	114.2	43.4	67.5	76.1	12.7
01–24	Food products and agricultural raw materials	4.3	6.1	42.5	1.6	2.2	38.8
25–27	Mineral products	58.2	89.2	53.3	0.2	0.4	75.0
Incl. 27	Fuel and energy products	53.8	85.5	58.7	0.1	0.3	93.6
28–40	Chemical products, rubber	2.1	3.3	55.9	7.4	12.0	62.4
41–43	Leather, fur and articles thereof	0.0	0.0	–28.7	2.1	1.6	–21.7
44–49	Wood and pulp-and-paper articles	5.7	5.7	0.7	0.5	1.1	120.1
50–67	Textiles, textile products and footwear	0.0	0.0	38.5	8.1	8.2	2.1
71	Pearls, precious stones and metals	1.5	1.6	4.9	0.0	0.0	–5.9
72–83	Metals and articles thereof	7.1	7.6	6.6	5.6	5.6	–1.5
84–90	Machinery, electrical and transport equipment	0.6	0.6	4.4	35.7	39.5	10.7
68–70, 91–97, 99	Other goods	0.1	0.0	–82.3	6.3	5.4	–13.4

Source: compiled by the author based on General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China. URL: http://stats.customs.gov.cn/indexEn

of supplies). Imports of this group of goods, as well as of chemical industry products, were mainly responsible for the expansion of imports.

The dynamics and absolute volumes of imports of machinery and equipment from China increased not very significantly, especially in comparison with the fall in supplies from the EU. At the same time, in some groups, where there was the largest decrease in supplies from the EU, there was also the largest increase from China. In particular, imports of machinery and mechanical appliances from China increased by 14.7 per cent, or $ 2.2 billion. Imports of vehicles (other than railway or tramway rolling stock) increased by 47.1 per cent, or $ 2.0 billion. In comparison, from the EU,

supplies of the above products decreased by USD 9.6 bln and USD 6.7 bln, respectively.

In general, Russia seeks to cover the reduction of machinery and equipment supplies from unfriendly countries, including the EU, at the expense of China. China, as the world's largest producer of machinery and equipment, which until 2022 accounted for about 30% (slightly less than the EU) of Russian imports of the relevant products, is largely able to cover the emerging deficit. At the same time, there are a number of crucial high-tech goods regarding which China will not be able to help Russia. Among the most important ones are, firstly, aircraft industry products, including parts thereof — one of the few sectors of China's economy where the country's position is weak. Unfriendly countries accounted for the vast majority of Russian imports of this type of products. Secondly, China will not be able to help Russia substitute certain types of semiconductors, especially the smallest ones. For example, in the world production of semiconductors <10 nm, 92 per cent is accounted for by Taiwan, and 8 per cent is accounted for by the Republic of Korea.[9]

The Russian leadership seems to be pinning its main hopes for import substitution in the aircraft industry on Iran, with which it has signed memoranda of co-operation in aviation.[10] Iran, which has been under sanctions for many years, can nevertheless supply parts and equipment for aircraft to Russia, as well as repair and maintain Russian aircraft. Iran has the relevant products primarily due to well-established parallel import channels.

In addition, in February 2021, the Civil Aviation Organisation of Iran announced plans to launch a production line of Iranian 100-seat passenger aircraft. According to the chief of the organisation, Iran has become self-sufficient in repairing and supplying aircraft components and spare parts through domestic knowledge-based companies.[11] At the same time, it is hardly possible to fully and qualitatively make up for the falling volumes of imports of aircraft industry products at the expense of Iran — it is likely to be a question of solving the problems of critical shortage of relevant goods in Russia with damage to flight safety.

Russia is trying to solve the problem of semiconductor imports by building new supply chains involving China and some other intermediary countries, such as Turkey.[12] However, it is difficult to draw a conclusion about the varieties of semiconductors obtained in this way, as well as the prospects of full-fledged substitution of imports from unfriendly countries, including the EU, given the US policy of restricting the supply of semiconductors and equipment for the production of microchips to China.

If we talk about the prospects for further reorientation of Russian exports to Chinese markets, including goods previously supplied to the EU, it is necessary to understand the objective limitations of such opportunities. The Chinese market cannot fully accommodate the volumes that were previously sent to the EU and other unfriendly countries. For example, in 2021, crude oil shipments to the EU were 52.2 per cent higher in physical volume than shipments to China.[13] Although China is increasing its imports of Russian crude oil, it is clearly not feasible to buy twice as much as it does now.

[9] Strengthening EU chip capabilities. July 8, 2022. URL: https://epthinktank.eu/2022/07/08/strengthening-eu-chip-capabilities/

[10] Iran and Russia sign memorandums of co-operation in the field of aviation. URL: https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17497805

[11] President Orders Production of Iranian Passenger Plane. URL: https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/06/17/2729896/president-orders-production-of-iranian-passenger-plane

[12] Chip shipments to Russia fully recovered despite Western sanctions. URL: https://www.cnews.ru/news/top/2023–02–28_postavki_chipov_v_rossiyu_polnostyu

[13] Calculated by the author according to International Trade Centre. URL: https://www.trademap.org/

It is also necessary to take into account the trend of China's economic growth slowdown, which emerged as early as the second decade of the XXI century, intensified with administrative restrictions during the coronavirus infection period. While China's average annual GDP growth rate was 10.5 per cent in the first decade of the 21st century, it has fallen to 7.3 per cent in the second decade (excluding 2020 data). In 2022–2027 this indicator, according to IMF forecasts, will be 4.3%.[14] This means a significant slowdown in the growth of domestic market capacity and, consequently, demand for imported products.

China is also experiencing a long-term trend towards increasing the energy efficiency of the economy (i.e., reducing the energy intensity of economic growth). The International Energy Agency estimates that energy intensity in the second decade of the 21st century (excluding data for 2020) decreased by 29.2 per cent. The decrease was faster than the world average (–16.1%).[15] In this regard, and taking into account China's green course, it can be assumed that China's needs in fuel and energy goods will rise at increasingly modest rates.

Finally, it should be taken into account that, with the exception of fuel and energy products, Russia is a competitor of China in many types of manufacturing products. A good example is ferrous metallurgy products, in the production of which China is the world leader. Thus, in 2021, China accounted for 52.9%[16] of global steel production.

In view of the above, it appears that partial reorientation of Russian exports and imports to/from China is possible, but it seems unrealistic to fully compensate for the loss of markets of unfriendly countries, primarily the EU, at least in the medium term. At the same time, the dynamics of Russia's foreign trade with China is likely to be more favourable (at least, positive) than with the EU.

[14] Calculated by the author according to World Economic Outlook Database. URL: https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2022/October

[15] Calculated by the author according to International Energy Agency. URL: https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections/energy-intensity

[16] Calculated by the author according to World Steel in Figures 2022. URL: https://worldsteel.org/steel-topics/statistics/world-steel-in-figures-2022/.

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