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Recognised quality, contested prices: the paradox of French competitiveness

A survey conducted among nearly 500 European buyers by Kantar Institute for Rexecode and SKEMA Business School reveals a mixed image of French exports. While quality, innovation, and design remain widely recognised, prices perceived as high continue to weigh on France's competitiveness in international markets.

At a time when global value chains are being reshaped and competition among major exporting powers is intensifying, the perception of French products abroad remains broadly positive, yet fragile. This is one of the main findings of a study conducted by Rexecode in partnership with SKEMA Business School, analysing the competitiveness of French consumer goods from the perspective of European importers.

The result: France retains solid strengths in non-price competitiveness, but continues to suffer from a price disadvantage, which weakens its value-for-money positioning compared with its competitors.

Recognised quality across several sectors

The first key finding of the study is that French products continue to benefit from a strong qualitative image among European buyers.

France ranks on the podium for non-price competitiveness in three of the four sectors analysed:

- Second place in food and beverages.
- Third place in pharmaceuticals and health & beauty products.
- Third place in clothing and accessories.

Buyers particularly praise innovation, product quality, and associated services, all of which are decisive factors in international competition.

However, home equipment remains France's weak point, with the sector ranking fifth in the non-price competitiveness classification.

Prices: a persistent handicap

The study nevertheless confirms a well-identified weakness of the French economy: price competitiveness. However, this price disadvantage must be considered in perspective, given Germany's strong performance despite relatively high prices.

In several sectors, French products are perceived as more expensive than those of their competitors. The situation is particularly pronounced in pharmaceuticals and health & beauty products, where France ranks last among the ten countries compared.

In food products and home equipment, France also sits in the lower half of the ranking.

Nevertheless, one exception emerges: clothing and accessories, where France ranks 2nd in price competitiveness—a performance that remains somewhat atypical in the overall landscape.

Declining value for money

This tension between recognised quality and high prices results in a deterioration in the perceived value for money.

In 2026, France no longer appears in the top half of the ranking in any of the four sectors studied.

It ranks:

- Sixth in food products.
- Sixth in pharmaceuticals and health & beauty.
- Ninth in clothing and accessories.
- Near the bottom of the ranking in home equipment.

This represents a decline compared with the previous survey, conducted in 2022, when France still held more favourable positions in certain sectors.

“The image of the non-price aspects of French consumer goods remains globally positive on the European market. However, our main issue lies in the fact that product prices are perceived as insufficiently competitive compared with those of our international competitors. Consequently, this affects the value-for-money perception, which is judged to be weak by the European importers surveyed, and this perception has intensified in recent years,” explains Laurent Ferrara, Professor of International Economics at SKEMA Business School and President of the International Institute of Forecasters.

Intense European competition

The analysis of France's main competitors confirms the increasing pressure on French exporters.

Germany maintains a dominant position on non-price criteria, thanks to its reputation for quality and industrial reliability. However, European buyers increasingly perceive its products as expensive.

Italy, for its part, remains a global reference in terms of design and ergonomics, particularly in clothing.

Finally, Central and Eastern European countries continue to benefit from a structural price advantage, while China is progressing on qualitative criteria, gradually narrowing the gap with European economies.

Results consistent with trade developments

The survey's conclusions echo trends observed in international trade statistics.

In clothing and accessories, where the image of French products remains strong, France's share of European exports increased from 12.1% to 18.6% between 1995 and 2024.

Conversely, in food products, pharmaceuticals, health and beauty, and home equipment, the share of French exports within the European Union has halved over the past thirty years, confirming the loss of ground to more competitive rivals.

“What clearly emerges from this survey is that French competitiveness is based on real qualitative fundamentals, but fragmented ones. Reputation and innovation are powerful levers, yet they must be accompanied by coherence across the entire value chain — quality, design and price — if European buyers are to perceive their relevance when making purchasing decisions,” notes Marlène Gonçalves Andrade, economist at Rexecode, who led the quantitative analyses of the study.

A unique survey conducted for 24 years

The study is based on a survey conducted since 2002 among 480 European importers in six countries: Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Respondents, including purchasing managers, sales directors or company executives, are those who directly decide on the choice of international suppliers.

Buyers evaluated products from ten major economic areas (main European countries, the United States, China, Japan, Asian countries, and Central and Eastern Europe) according to nine criteria that are decisive in their purchasing decisions:

- Product quality
- Ergonomics and design
- Technological innovation
- Reputation
- Delivery times
- Associated services
- Variety of suppliers
- Price
- Value for money

Based on these responses, researchers established a comparative ranking of supplier countries and constructed a synthetic non-price competitiveness indicator, measuring the overall perception of products in international markets.

“Our study provides an objective assessment of the positioning of French exports across all non-price criteria. It sheds light on our ability to sustain reindustrialisation over the long term. In a context of rising protectionist measures, non-price competitiveness is a decisive factor of resilience for our exporters,” emphasises Olivier Redoulès, Director of Studies at Rexecode.

About Laurent Ferrara, Professor of International Economics at SKEMA Business School and President of the International Institute of Forecasters

Laurent Ferrara has been a Professor of International Economics at SKEMA Business School since September 2019. Before joining SKEMA, he held senior positions at the Banque de France, where he served as the Head of the International Macroeconomic Analysis and Synthesis Unit, responsible for monitoring economic developments in advanced economies and major global economic issues.

A recognised specialist in macroeconomic forecasting and international economics, Laurent Ferrara currently chairs the International Institute of Forecasters, a leading organisation in the field of forecasting. He also sits on the executive committee of the French Economic Association (AFSE).

He holds a PhD in Applied Mathematics from the University of Paris-Nord (2001) and obtained his Habilitation to Supervise Research (HDR) in Economics from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University in 2007. His research focuses notably on business cycle analysis, international economics and finance, and forecasting methods.

He has published more than 50 articles in national and international academic journals, as well as several books and book chapters devoted to the post-crisis global economy, forecasting methods, and economic cycles.

About Olivier Redoulès, Director of Studies at Rexecode

Olivier Redoulès has been Director of the Research Department at Rexecode since October 2022. He is notably responsible for assessing the impact of public policies on the productive system, competitiveness, employment, and growth.

At Rexecode, Olivier Redoulès has published reference studies on topics such as differences in working time across European countries, comparative taxation on skilled labour, the relative positioning of French exports and industry compared with other European economies, production taxes affecting mid-sized companies and industry, the financial impact of the 2023 pension reform, and the effects of energy and carbon taxation on industrial competitiveness.

Before joining Rexecode, he served as the Deputy General Rapporteur of the permanent secretariat of the High Council of Public Finances and as Extraordinary Counsellor Auditor at the First Chamber of the French Court of Accounts.

A graduate of École Polytechnique and ENSAE, and an INSEE administrator, Olivier Redoulès began his career at INSEE in 2008 in the business cycle department as an economist and statistician, before joining the French Treasury in 2011.

Appointed financial adviser at the French Embassy in Sweden and then in Turkey, he subsequently held the positions of Director of Economic Studies (2017-2019) and Chief Economist (2019-2020) at MEDEF.

Olivier Redoulès is Vice-President of the Société d'Économie Politique.

About Marlène Goncalves Andrade, Economist at Rexecode

A graduate of the Master's programme in Economic Analysis and Policy (Research in Economics) at Paris Panthéon-Assas University, following a CPGE ENS D2 preparatory programme in economics alongside a bachelor's degree in economics, Marlène Goncalves Andrade joined Rexecode as an apprentice economist in September 2024 and has been working as an economist since December 2025.

Responsible for quantitative data analysis and research work within the Research and Modelling Department under the supervision of Olivier Redoulès, she specialises in competitiveness, attractiveness, and international trade issues.

She contributes to the department's work evaluating the impact of public policies on the productive system, employment and growth, both in France and internationally.

She notably developed this expertise through her research on the relationship between national brand image and economic performance, the subject of her thesis titled: "Does image make the exporter? Measuring and analysing the gap between perceived competitiveness and revealed performance in international trade."

About Rexecode

Founded in 1957, Rexecode is a **leading French macroeconomic research institute close to the business community**. Its funding is provided by its **70 members or clients** (companies, financial institutions, professional organisations, etc.) from a wide range of sectors, ensuring the **independence of its analyses**.

Rexecode's team fulfils a **dual mission**:

- Supporting companies in understanding their economic environment through **economic monitoring and global macroeconomic forecasts**,
- Actively contributing to the **public debate on economic policy in France**, particularly regarding ways to strengthen **sustainable growth and the competitiveness of the productive system**.

Its **Energy and Climate Department** aims to integrate the challenges of the **energy transition and climate change mitigation** into macroeconomic analyses and forecasts.

For more information: www.rexecode.fr

About SKEMA Business School

With 11,000 students from over 130 nationalities, 190 professors, and 63,000 alumni in 145 countries, SKEMA Business School is a global education and research institution that develops committed talent to sustainably transform the world. The hybridisation of social sciences and data sciences is at the heart of its model, and global exposure is its operational mode.

Multi-accredited (AACSB, EQUIS, EFMD Accredited EMBA), the school is recognised worldwide for its research, its more than 70 excellent programmes, and its international multi-campus structure across six countries: South Africa, Brazil, Canada, China, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and France.

For more information: www.skema.edu

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