

СЕКЦІЯ 3 ЕКОНОМІКА ТА УПРАВЛІННЯ НАЦІОНАЛЬНИМ ГОСПОДАРСТВОМ

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THE EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF UKRAINE'S DAIRY SECTOR IN THE CONTEXT OF EU ACQUIS ADAPTATION

The article looks into the current trends shaping milk production and the broader dairy industry in Ukraine, offering a comprehensive analysis of the sector's dynamic transformation. It examines the major structural shifts in production patterns, including changes in farm sizes, technological adoption, and the growing concentration of market players, which are reshaping the competitive landscape. The study further reveals the latest trends in the production of dairy products, as well as the evolving patterns of foreign trade, with a dedicated focus on trade relations with the European Union. By identifying the key problems and inherent weaknesses of the dairy sector, the article highlights the critical barriers to growth and competitiveness. Finally, it outlines the principal challenges confronting Ukraine's dairy sector and milk production as the country progresses toward aligning its national legislation with the EU acquis.

Key words: dairy processing, milk production, cow population, industrial farms, EU acquis.

Іванов Є.І. ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ТА ВИКЛИКИ МОЛОЧНОГО СЕКТОРУ УКРАЇНИ В КОНТЕКСТІ АДАПТАЦІЇ ДО ЗАКОНОДАВСТВА ЄС

У статті розглянуто поточні тенденції розвитку та проаналізовано динаміку трансформації галузі виробництва сирого молока і молочної продукції в Україні. Досліджено основні структурні зрушення у виробничих моделях галузі, зокрема зміни у розмірах ферм, технологічну адаптацію, зростаючу концентрацію серед гравців ринку, що разом докорінно переформатовують конкурентне середовище. Проведено порівняльний аналіз вітчизняних і загальносвітових трендів розвитку молочного скотарства і галузі виробництва молочних продуктів. Проаналізовано наявні проблеми утримання свійських корів та виробництва молока селянськими домогосподарствами як джерело тіньового ринку та виробництва контрафактної молочної продукції в Україні. Охарактеризовано базові тенденції у вітчизняному виробництві молочної продукції та еволюцію зовнішньоторговельних відносин молочної галузі, зокрема особливості розвитку двосторонньої торгівлі молоком і молочними продуктами з ЄС в умовах дії угоди про поглиблену і всеосяжну зону вільної торгівлі, а також запровадження автономних торгових преференцій з боку європейських партнерів у відповідь на початок повномасштабної війни у 2022 р. Виявлено ключові проблеми та недоліки розвитку галузі виробництва молочних продуктів в Україні, ідентифіковано ключові перешкоди на шляху зростання її конкурентоспроможності в осяжній перспективі. Окреслено основні виклики, з якими зіштовхуються вітчизняна молочна галузь і виробництво молока в умовах активізації курсу на вступ України в ЄС, що передбачає приведення українського законодавства у відповідність до права (acquis) ЄС. Серед найбільших викликів виокремлено: збереження життєздатності та забезпечення стрімкого підвищення продуктивності корів серед селянських домогосподарств; зменшення тіньового ринку й обмеження виробництва контрафактних молочних продуктів; подолання дефіциту та забезпечення стабільного постачання якісного молока на переробку; необхідність переорієнтування експорту молочної продукції на складніші види товарів з більш високим рівнем обробки, доданої вартості та цінової стабільності на світових ринках. **Key words:** sustainable development; trade; iron ore; strategic management; ESG.

Ключові слова: виробництво молочних продуктів, молочне скотарство, поголів'я корів, промислові ферми, законодавство ЄС.

Problem statement. The dairy industry constitutes one of the pivotal sectors within Ukraine's agri-food complex, exerting a substantial influence on the nation's economic stability. Beyond supplying the domestic market with daily food products, this sector enhances the country's export capacity

and contributes to foreign trade revenues. The advancement of the dairy industry acts as a catalyst for the growth of value chain segments, including livestock farming, feed production, and agricultural machinery manufacturing. By generating employment opportunities and fostering socio-economic

development in rural regions, it produces a multiplicative effect on the economy. This growth stimulates investment in agriculture, improves infrastructure, and supports the expansion of SMEs. Furthermore, the dairy sector plays a critical role in ensuring national food security. As a staple component of the population's diet, dairy products provide essential nutrients such as proteins, calcium, vitamins. Sustainable milk production and processing mitigate the risk of food shortages and reduce reliance on imports. Against the backdrop of global challenges – including climate change and geopolitical instability – domestic dairy production emerges as a strategic imperative, safeguarding the availability of vital food resources for the population.

The prospect of Ukraine's accession to the EU poses substantial challenges for its dairy sector, given that food production is among the most rigorously regulated sectors within the EU. The stringent standards for quality, safety, transparency in production processes make it imperative to assess the current economic landscape of Ukraine's dairy industry. Such an evaluation is essential for identifying the sector's strengths and potential vulnerabilities, ensuring a strategic approach to its successful integration into the European market.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The challenges facing the development of Ukraine's dairy industry have received growing attention among researchers. The interplay of globalisation, climate change, and complexities of European integration, compounded by the constraints of wartime conditions, has intensified scholarly interest in this field of study. The scholarly contributions of T. Mirzoieva et al. [1], O. Pashchenko et al. [2], A. Harastovska and O. Pietukhova [3], L. Tulush et al. [4], and L. Zapirchenko et al. [5] deserve particular recognition. Their works address many critical dimensions of Ukrainian dairy sector, including: methodological frameworks for analysing the dairy market; the evolving legal, regulatory, and institutional landscape of the industry; strategies for dairy manufacturers operating under wartime constraints; mechanisms of state support for cow farming and dairy producers; the global trends shaping dairy production, etc. These studies provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the sector's dynamics and challenges. However, several key aspects of Ukraine's dairy sector, particularly its developmental trajectories and future prospects within the framework of European integration, remain understudied in the existing scientific literature. This gap underscores the necessity for further research.

The purpose of the article is to examine the defining characteristics of Ukraine's dairy sector in its recent development and to

identify its most pressing challenges, particularly in light of the ongoing adaptation of Ukrainian legislation to the EU acquis.

Presentation of the research material and its main results. Ukrainian milk and dairy markets have taken shape against a backdrop of a sustained decline in cattle numbers. Between 2000 and 2025, the country's cow population fell sharply from 5431 thousand to 958 thousand – a decrease of 82.4%. In 1992, Ukraine produced a record 24.5 million tons of cow's milk, accounting for 3.6% of global production. By 2024, global milk production had increased to 982 million tons (a 44.3% rise compared to 1992), while Ukraine's output declined to 7.2 million tons (a 70.6% decrease), reducing its share of global milk production to just 0.7% [6; 7].

A distinctive feature of Ukraine's milk production sector is its clear division into two segments:

- industrial dairy farms;
- household (small-scale) production.

Industrial farms, driven by modernisation and intensive production methods, achieve far higher productivity and quality, ensuring their milk meets current safety standards. Consequently, industrial farms play a dominant role in the supply chain, providing approximately 90% of the milk processed in Ukraine.

Household milk production in Ukraine is largely geared toward self-consumption. Although households still maintain a larger cattle population, their cows yield low productivity, and the quality of the milk produced remains mostly substandard. As a result, household milk primarily circulates within the informal economy. Households have been the epicentre of Ukraine's ongoing decline in dairy farming. From 2014 to 2025, both the number of cows and raw milk output in rural households declined by more than half (Figure 1).

In 2014, industrial farms held 23.0% of Ukraine's cow herd and produced 23.4% of the country's milk. Over the following decade, their share expanded to 37.8% of the herd and 46.4% of total milk production. This structural transformation was fuelled by the rapid increase in productivity of industrial farms. By 2024, the average annual milk yield per cow on these farms reached 8,167 kg – an increase of 68.0% compared to 2014. Meanwhile, household farms lagged significantly, with an average yield of just 4,663 kg per cow in 2024, 42.9% lower than that of industrial farms.

The improvement in productivity has been accompanied by a significant enhancement in the quality of raw milk. The proportion of "Extra" grade milk delivered for processing rose from 11% in 2016 to nearly 40%

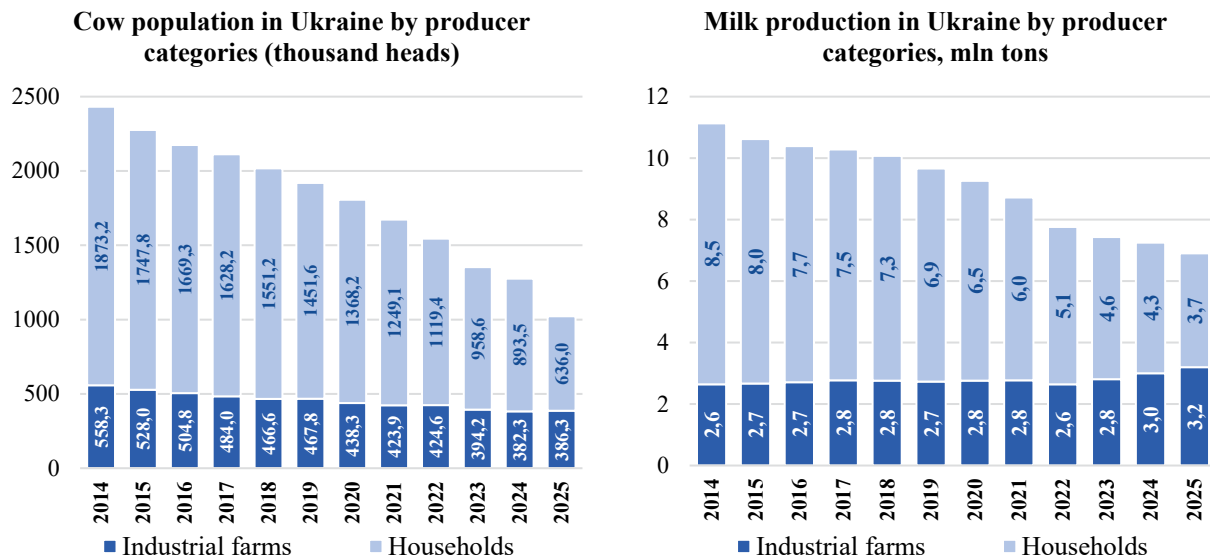


Figure 1. Cow population and milk production in Ukraine by producer categories

Source: [7]

in 2021, ultimately reaching 55.2% by 2024. Conversely, the share of low-quality Grade II milk and unsorted milk in processing has plummeted from 33.8% in 2016 to just around 2.0% in 2024. This shift in quality is largely attributable to industrial farms, which supplied 59.9% “Extra” grade milk for processing in 2024, with Grade II and unsorted milk making up a mere 0.5% of their output. Household farms, however, contributed minimally to high-grade milk supplies. In 2024, their deliveries were predominantly Grade I milk (about 80%), while the remaining portion was directed toward non-food applications, such as casein production [8].

In 2025, Ukraine processed 3.6 million tons of milk, with 3.2 million tons sourced from industrial farms and 0.4 million tons from households. The limited contribution of household milk to processing is largely due to the incomplete implementation of cow identification procedures, which require assigning unique identifiers (such as ear tags or microchips) and registering animals in the National State Animal Registry. Official identification enables farmers to legally sell their products, obtain transport permits, access livestock insurance, and qualify for government subsidies. Without it, households remain trapped in the informal economy, supplying the shadow market with substandard and non-compliant dairy products that fail to meet modern quality and safety regulations.

Ukraine is also experiencing the global shift toward consolidation in dairy farming

and the adoption of an industrial-scale dairy production model (Figure 2).

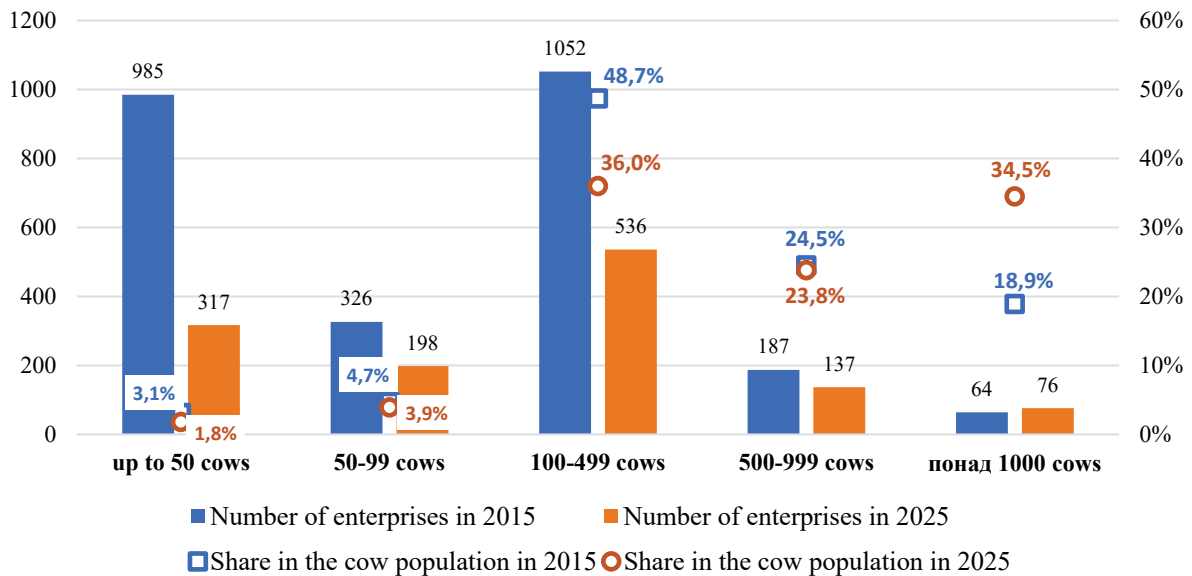
From 2015 to 2025, Ukraine’s dairy sector underwent significant consolidation. Small farms (up to 50 cows) shrunk by two-thirds, from 985 to 317, with their share of the total herd dropping from 3.1% to 1.8%. Medium-sized farms (100–499 cows) halved, from 1,052 to 536, reducing their herd share from 48.7% to 36.0%. Large farms (1,000+ cows) grew from 64 to 76, increasing their herd share from 18.9% to 34.5% – expanding their cattle numbers from 103,600 to 132,300 cows between 2020 and 2025 alone. This shift underscores Ukraine’s rapid transition toward large-scale, industrial dairy production.

Between 2014 and 2021, the number of households keeping cows in Ukraine nearly halved – from 1225.8 thousand to 616.9 thousand. During the same period, the share of households raising cows decreased from 25.8% to 15.6% (Table 1).

In 2021, the overwhelming majority of households – 478.5 thousand – kept just one cow, representing 12.1% of all rural households and 77.6% of cow-keeping households. Those with two cows totalled 106.8 thousand (2.7% of all rural households and 17.3% of cow-keeping households), while 23.7 thousand kept three cows (0.6% and 3.8%, respectively). Only 7.9 thousand households kept four or more cows.

In 2024, Ukraine’s dairy processing sector comprised 346 active enterprises¹ and 389 individual entrepreneurs registered

¹ Official statistics on active dairy enterprises in Ukraine may be overstated due to the absence of a defined procedure for revoking operational permits. While government resolution No. 930 (2015) regulates the issuance, denial, and temporary suspension of permits for food producers and storage operators, it fails to specify how permits should be revoked. This loophole enables unscrupulous operators to market counterfeit dairy products – often made from unaccounted household milk – under the branding of defunct businesses. Clarifying and enforcing a permit revocation process will help eliminate “ghost enterprises” from official records, ensuring more accurate industry data.


Figure 2. Dynamics of milk production concentration in Ukraine

Source: [8]

Table 1

Rural households keeping cows in Ukraine

Total Rural Households		Households Without Cows	Households With Cows	Households by Number of Cows			
				1 Cow	2 Cows	3 Cows	4+ Cows
2021							
Thousands of households	3954,8	3337,9	616,9	478,5	106,8	23,7	7,9
% of total	100,0	84,4	15,6	12,1	2,7	0,6	0,2
Growth rate since 2014, %	-16,8	-5,3	-49,7	-46,1	-58,4	-61,6	-58,4
2014							
Thousands of households	4751,0	3525,2	1225,8	888,4	256,6	61,8	19,0
% of total	100,0	74,2	25,8	18,7	5,4	1,3	0,4

Source: [7]

under ISIC code 10.5 “Manufacture of Dairy Products”. Of these enterprises, 70.2% were small businesses, 13 units were large-scale companies, and 90 units were medium-sized enterprises. Ukraine had 73 medium-to-large-scale dairy processing plants, each capable of handling more than 100 tons of milk daily, resulting in a total annual processing capacity of 4.9 million tons. Regional distribution of dairy processing capacities highlights the leading oblasts: Vinnytsia (646,000 tons per year), Poltava (609,000 tons), Cherkasy (602,000 tons), Kyiv (507,000 tons), Zhytomyr (449,000 tons), and Khmelnytskyi (325,000 tons), which collectively host six to ten major dairy processing plants in each region [9].

In 2024, Ukraine’s dairy processing industry operated at roughly two-thirds of its total capacity, revealing two key challenges: a structural shortage of raw milk and the underutilisation of outdated facilities.

Hence, idle processing plants require significant investment to modernise equipment and meet competitive standards.

The sector’s labour crisis has intensified over the past decade. Employment in dairy production fell from 62,600 workers in 2013 to 46,600 in 2021, and the full-scale war accelerated this decline, reducing the workforce to just 35,600 by 2024. This shortage is exacerbated by military mobilisation and rising labour costs, as businesses must pay at least 2.5 times the minimum wage to secure exemptions from conscription for critical employees.

Ukraine’s dairy production collapsed by 20.4% in 2022 due to the full-scale war, but the sector has since rebounded. From 2023 to 2025, output rose by 19.3%, and by the end of 2025, production reached 95.5% of its 2021 level. This makes the dairy industry one of the few in Ukraine to nearly recover its pre-war output by 2025 (Figure 3).

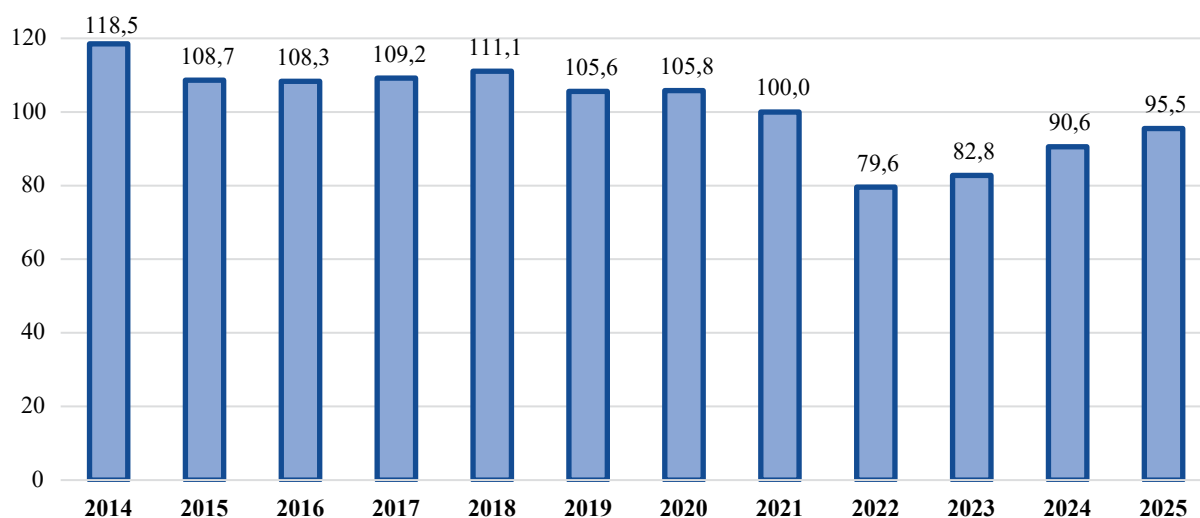


Figure 3. Indices of dairy production in Ukraine (2021 = 100%)

Source: [10]

In 2024, Ukraine accounted for 0.22% of the global dairy exports, valued at nearly \$100 billion. Between 2016 and 2024, Ukraine's exports of dairy products fluctuated between \$157.9 million and \$281.9 million. Following a rapid post-crisis recovery in 2017, exports gradually declined to \$172.2–179.8 million in 2020–2021. However, exports surged to \$253.3 million in 2022, propelled by both liberalized access to the EU market and the shrinking domestic demand, which pushed producers to seek opportunities abroad. Subsequent disruptions, particularly the border restrictions introduced by neighbouring EU member states, resulted in a decline in dairy exports to \$182.0 million in 2023. However, exports subsequently recovered, reaching \$214.3 million in 2024 and further increasing to \$312.6 million in 2025. Until 2019 and again in 2022, Ukraine maintained a trade surplus in dairy products. Meanwhile, imports steadily increased, peaking at \$296.8–364.8 million in 2020–2021, almost twice the export volume during the same period. Although imports dipped to \$224.2 million in 2022, they rebounded to \$329.6 million by 2025 [11]. The export-to-import coverage ratio for dairy trade during 2022–2025 ranged between 0.71 and 0.95.

In 2025, the value of Ukraine's dairy exports reached \$312.6 million, reflecting a 46% increase over 2024. In volume terms, export growth was recorded across nearly all product categories, with the exceptions of unconcentrated milk and cream (-17.9%) and whey (-14.1%). Notably, exports of butter and other dairy fats experienced a 2.1-times increase, while condensed milk and cream exports expanded by 1.29 times. Meanwhile, dairy imports in 2025 reached \$329.6 million, up 16.6% from the previous year. The most significant import increases in physi-

cal volume were observed for unconcentrated milk and cream, condensed milk and cream, fermented milk products, and all types of cheese [12].

The divergence between physical and value-based export dynamics for Ukrainian dairy products underscores the volatility in export performance. Although Ukraine's dairy exports portfolio is more diversified than its imports, it is heavily concentrated in commodity-based products – such as raw materials and primary processed goods – which are subject to significant global price fluctuations.

From 2016 to 2025, the most substantial shares of Ukraine's dairy exports by value were consistently represented by:

- HS 0402 (Milk and cream, concentrated or sweetened), accounting for 22.4% to 46.7% of total dairy exports, and;
- HS 0405 (Butter and other dairy fats; dairy spreads), comprising 23.0% to 48.9% of exports.

Ukrainian producers of butter operate as price-takers in global markets, lacking the ability to influence the selling prices of their products. Meanwhile, global price fluctuations for this commodity have been pronounced. According to the FAO Dairy Price Index, butter prices underwent three distinct phases of significant growth and decline over the past decade: climbing from 77 to 197 points between April 2016 and September 2017, plummeting to 92 points by May 2020, rebounding to 194 points by June 2022, declining to 129 points in September 2023, and ultimately peaking at 227 points in July 2025. Prices for skimmed milk powder (SMP), and whole milk powder (WMP) have also demonstrated high volatility, though with less dramatic swings compared to butter (Figure 4).

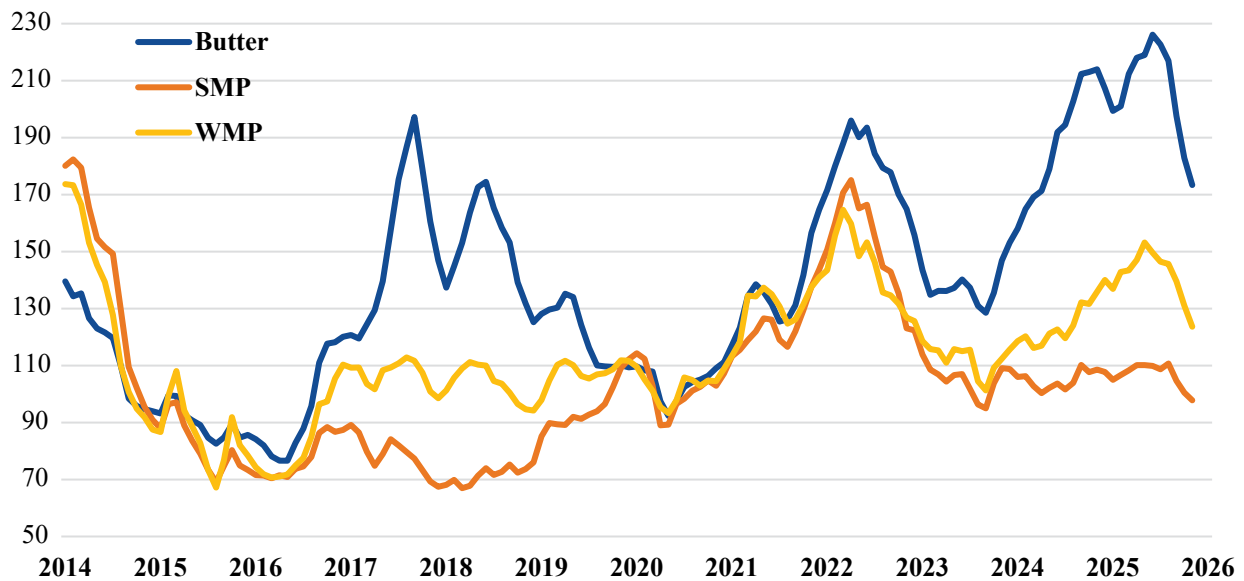


Figure 4. FAO Dairy Price Indices for butter, SMP, and WMP

Source: [13]

In volume terms, Ukraine has consistently exported more milk and dairy products than it imported, except in 2021. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, annual dairy exports ranged from 109.1 to 136.1 thousand tons, but from 2020 onward, exports declined to 85.7–98.8 thousand tons. Meanwhile, imports grew steadily, rising from 13.1 thousand tons in 2016 to 107.8 thousand tons in 2021, before dropping to 58.3–59.9 thousand tons in 2022–2024 following the full-scale invasion.

EU cheeses, particularly from Poland, have dominated and steadily increased their share of Ukraine's dairy imports. Between 2016 and 2021, cheese represented 70.5–73.1% of the total import value, climbing further to 77.8–81.1% in 2022–2024.

The EU's dominance in Ukraine's dairy imports has grown dramatically since the mid-2010s, fuelled by two key factors: trade liberalisation under the DCFTA and the disruption of Ukraine's trade ties with Russia. By 2015, the EU's share of Ukraine's dairy imports had

already climbed from 49.7% to 83.0%. After the full-scale invasion, the EU effectively became Ukraine's exclusive supplier, accounting for 98.3% of dairy imports by 2024. Conversely, Ukrainian dairy exports to the EU faced persistent barriers – tariff quotas and stringent sanitary requirements – until 2022. That year, the EU's share of Ukraine's dairy exports jumped from 3.8% to 40.0%. This shift reflects both geopolitical realignments and the EU's temporary relaxation of trade barriers in response to the war.

The EU has consistently supported easing access for Ukrainian dairy products to its market. Despite pushback from certain member states concerned about rising Ukrainian dairy exports and the reinstatement of tariff-rate quotas, the EU and Ukraine finalised a principled agreement in 2025. This agreement includes a comprehensive review of the quota system and a substantial expansion of quota volumes, particularly for dairy products (Table 2).

Table 2

Ukrainian dairy exports to the EU under tariff-rate quotas

Product Group	DCFTA tariff quotas (tons)	Revised tariff quotas (tons)	EU imports from Ukraine (tons)				
			2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Milk, cream and condensed milk	10 000	15 000*	46	62	1617	3387	6374
Skimmed milk powder	5 000	15 400**	2027	11107	11008	15604	14799
Butter and dairy spreads	3 000	7 000	132	6945	356	1427	5746
Fermented milk	2000	Liberalised	107	2	12	15	159
Processed butter	250	375	0	0	0	14	17
Milk cream processed	500	Liberalised	17	63	74	148	154

Notes: * Yogurts, buttermilk, and kefir are exempt from tariff quota restrictions.

**Whole milk powder is exempt from tariff quota restrictions.

Source: [14; 15]

The expanded tariff-rate quotas for milk, cream and condensed milk (from 10,000 to 15,000 tons) and butter and dairy spreads (from 3,000 to 7,000 tons) create real potential for Ukrainian producers to scale up exports, as these new limits surpass the actual shipment volumes recorded under fully liberalised trade regime during 2022–2024. However, the revised tariff-rate quotas for SMP and butter and dairy spreads are largely aligned with the 2025 export levels. This effectively constrains future export growth, limiting prospects to current volumes rather than facilitating further expansion.

In light of the above, the success of Ukraine's alignment with EU dairy standards will hinge on the collective capacity of businesses, government, and civil society to:

- support rural households in adapting to EU regulations while maintaining their viability and productivity;
- formalise the informal milk market and curb the production of counterfeit dairy products;
- secure a stable supply of raw milk to meet industry demands;
- shift dairy exports toward higher-value, processed products with greater price stability in global markets.

The success of these efforts will determine whether Ukraine's alignment of national legislation with the EU acquis serves as a catalyst for the sector's recovery and expansion or whether it consigns the industry to a peripheral role in both domestic and European markets.

Conclusions. Ukraine's dairy sector continues to face structural challenges, most notably the persistent decline in both cow numbers and milk yields. The industry is marked by a growing polarization: on one end, highly efficient, increasingly consolidated industrial farms; on the other, low-productivity household operations, which are struggling to adapt to modern demands and are in rapid decline. While dairy production has nearly returned to pre-war levels, the sector grapples with a chronic shortage of raw milk and an urgent need for modernization of processing facilities. In international trade, Ukraine's dairy exports are concentrated in butter and skimmed milk powder – products characterised by high price volatility, which undermines the stability and long-term growth of the industry. This precarious position complicates Ukraine's prospects for European integration, underscoring the need for systemic comprehensive reforms. Future research could fruitfully explore the impact of aligning Ukrainian legislation with specific EU standards in dairy production, assessing how such harmonization might influence the sector's competitiveness and sustainability.

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