

There are some signs of improvement in the business environment that the Italian footwear industry finds itself in, although it's clear that further progress will be required before the mood among many manufacturers becomes buoyant again.

Italian shoe firms see some signs of recovery

Italy's shoe manufacturers say they are still less than satisfied with their business situation in spite of some positives in the first half of 2015. At the end of June 2015, the number of footwear manufacturing companies operating in Italy had dipped below 5,000 (the figure was 4,968), a fall of 1.3% compared with the figure in December 2014, but the number of people employed in making shoes stayed steady, and in fact rose slightly (by 0.7%) compared to December, reaching 77,119.

Export volumes down overall

The volume of shoes exported from Italy (these figures are for the first five months of the year) was down by 5.2% in 2015 compared to the same period in the previous year at 93.1 million pairs, but in value terms there was growth of 3.1%, with revenues of just under €3.5 billion overall, and growth in the average price per pair of a handsome 8.7%, with an average of €37.59 in the first five months of this year compared to €34.57 in the same period last year.

Even in volume terms, there were impressive growth figures for exports to certain important markets, including Germany (up 4.9% to more than 15.1 million pairs in the first five months), Switzerland (up 3.6% to more than 5.3 million) and South Korea (a volume of just 655,000, but an increase of almost 50% compared to the first five months of 2014).

Who pays the highest average price per pair?

Volumes were almost flat for exports to China at just under 700,000 pairs over the period, but the value of exports to China were up by more than 25% and importers in China and Hong Kong paid Italian shoe suppliers by far the highest average price per pair in the global market at more than €130. Overall, the total value of exports over the first five months, and the average price per pair of exported shoes from Italy, have gone up each year since 2002.

Nevertheless, Italy's main footwear sector association, Assocalzaturifici (Assocal), said on reporting the industry's performance for the first half of this year that "the long-

Assocal says the signs of improvement that appeared in the first half of 2015 bear testimony to the enduring quality of 'Made in Italy'. ALL CREDITS: MICAM



awaited recovery" remains "delayed", even though other areas of the Italian economy are showing signs of recovery, thanks to a decrease in the value of the euro and a fall in the price of oil.

Changing market needs

Footwear companies continue to feel the effects of what Assocal refers to as the economic and political crisis in Russia, and it bemoans also "the marked slowdown in the Japanese economy". Shipments to Russia in the first five months fell by 36.2% in volume to just over 2 million pairs and by 35% in value to €143.3 million. Those to Japan fell by 13.9% in volume to 1.3 million over the five months and by 8.8% in value to €82.4 million.

"Nevertheless," the association concedes, "there were tentative signs of slow but steady improvement in the first half of 2015." It said its member companies deserve credit for being responsive to changing fashion demands and market needs. It also said improvements in some aspects of Italian footwear's export performance, as outlined above, bear witness to the enduring appeal of Italian-made shoes. "The hope is that the signs of improvement in the domestic economy and the improving climate of confidence in Europe will be confirmed in the coming months," it concludes.

First lady

Encouraging a continuation of these improvements is the number-one priority of the new president of Assocal, Annarita Pilotti, but she has also said she believes the role will be more difficult for her than for her predecessors simply because, on being elected in June this year, she became the first woman to take up the role.

Ms Pilotti, who founded the Loriblu footwear brand in her native region of Le Marche in 1995, still runs the company with her husband and co-founder, Graziano Cuccù. Before entering the footwear industry, she worked as a police officer and as a nursery school teacher.

Speaking at the most recent Micam exhibition in September, she said: "I'm grateful to have the opportunity now to be in the position I'm in, but it's much harder for a woman. Women in leadership positions such as this one encounter more obstacles. Believe me, it's not easy."

She said she felt that her life had been far from easy because she comes from a village of only 800 inhabitants in which there were few opportunities. "But inside, I always believed in myself and in my own ability."

The Assocalzaturifici president said she was a democrat and respected people for who they are. "In the same way, though, I would like people to respect me," she said. 



Assocalzaturifici president, Annarita Pilotti, says all she wants to do is to help Italian footwear brands to achieve success in the global market.



Best foot forward. In the first five months of this year, Italian shoe companies increased their average price per pair in export markets by 8.7% to €37.59.