# Towards a Sustainable European Sovereignty

## Forging a progressive path

Policy Conference 2026 – 30/09 & 01/10

### Background and objectives

The European Union has been experiencing recurring geopolitical and economic disruptions for the past years, from the energy crisis following the war of aggression against Ukraine to the trade uncertainties of the second Trump mandate and now the new energy crisis prompted by the conflict between the US/Israel and Iran. The EU has also felt increasing pressure on key environmental, social and digital regulations, whether coming from the US or from conservative and far-right political groups relaying the interests of a few industrial lobbies.

This context highlights the **importance of building a *sustainable European sovereignty***, by breaking away from our fossil fuel dependence, protecting citizens' and workers' rights, and purposefully investing in economic activities fit for a healthy and climate-neutral future. The European Union must **reaffirm the ambition of its project and its development model, rooted in social justice, climate and biodiversity protection, and fair digital innovation**.

With the current EU legislative term dominated by deregulation and a narrow perspective on competitiveness, and a few days after the State of the Union in the European Parliament, **the 2026 Policy Conference, led by FEPS with the support of FES and a consortium of civil society partners, will be a call to action to define and advance an agenda for a European sovereignty that serves people and the planet**.

The Policy Conference 2026 will take place on **30th September and 1st October 2026 in Brussels** bringing a programme of high-level debates, thematic sessions and networking opportunities. It will focus on key issues such as energy independence and affordability, the next Multiannual Financial Framework and quality jobs for the green and digital transition, with a diverse range of progressive policy makers, trade unionists, civil society representatives, and experts. The Policy Conference 2026 builds on two successful editions in 2024 (shaping the priorities for the new legislative term) and 2025 (on a clean, just, and competitive European industry).

This conference is organised by FEPS in partnership with FES, ETUC, IndustriAll Europe and Solidar.

## Provisional agenda

***30th September 2026 - Day 1***

**16.00 – 17.00** **Registrations**

**17.00 – 17.30** **Keynote welcome remarks**

- **Nicolas Schmit**, FEPS President
- **Claes-Mikael Stahl**, ETUC Deputy Secretary General
- Introduced by **Laszlo Andor**, FEPS Secretary General

**17.30 – 18.30** **Dialogue with:**

- **Teresa Ribera**, EC Executive Vice-President
- **Sandrine Dixson-Declève**, Honorary President of the Club of Rome and Executive Chair of Earth4All
- Moderation: **Dave Keating**, France 24

***18:30 – 20:00*** **Networking reception**

***1st October 2026 – Day 2***

**08.30 – 09:15** **Registrations and welcoming coffee**

**09:15 – 09:30** **Welcome remarks**

**09.30 – 11.00** **Session 1 – Beyond the EU budget: innovative public investment instruments for sustainability and innovation scale-up**

- **Matthias Ecke**, MEP, S&D
- **Ludovic Voet**, Confederal Secretary, ETUC
- **Anna Krzyzanowska**, Adviser, Startups and Scale-ups, DG RTD, European Commission
- **Dora Piroska**, Associate Professor at Central European University

**11.00 – 11.30** **Coffee break**

**11.30 – 13.00** **Session 2 – The electrification challenge: how can Europe accelerate electrification while protecting its households and workers?**

- Expert scene-setting by **Frauke Thies**, Director Europe, Agora Energiewende
- **Nicolas Gonzalez Casares**, MEP, S&D
- **Judith Kirton-Darling**, General Secretary, IndustriAll Europe
- **Nicola Rega**, Executive Director Climate Change and Energy, CEFIC

**13.00 – 14.00** **Networking lunch**

**14.00 – 15.30** **Session 3 – AI, work, and the future: where is the social-democratic agenda?**

- **Dragoș Adăscăliței**, Research Officer, Eurofound
- **And more speakers TBC**

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**15.30 – 16.00** **Closing remarks / Key takeaways**

- **Mariam Asghari**, Secretary General, YES

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- **Session 1 – Beyond the EU budget: innovative public investment instruments for sustainability and innovation scale-up**

*Financing of EU priorities is a hotly contested topic in the ongoing MFF negotiations. While the need for more ambitious EU spending is widely acknowledged, finding the needed resources remains a challenge. We witness heated discussions about the size of the EU budget, but also disagreement on the priorities of spending. The way to alleviate this tension is to mobilise more resources outside the EU's budget. In particular, there is significant untapped potential in off-budget tools, such as government guidance funds, development banks, and others. In this session, we discuss these instruments and the role of the European Competitiveness Fund in coordinating them. This new ambitious design should serve both money mobilisation purposes and foster a sustainable and sovereign EU economy.*

*Questions for discussion:*

- *Given that lack of innovation scale-up is identified as the major weakness of the European industry, what are government-led instruments that could be used to support the scale up of innovative investments (government guidance funds, EIF, EIB, national promotional banks) How to make these instruments bigger?*
- *How can the European Competitiveness Fund facilitate a more strategic approach to investments?*
- *How should sustainability and sovereignty be factored into investment decisions?*
- *De-risking private investments: How to ensure a fair distribution of costs and rewards between public and private investors?*
- *What are strengths and limitations of government equity investments?*

**Session 2 – The electrification challenge: how can Europe accelerate electrification while protecting its households and workers?**

*Electrification is the foundation of a competitive and decarbonised European economy. It is the most efficient pathway to reduce dependence on volatile fossil fuel markets for industry, buildings and transport, and deliver energy sovereignty. Accelerating electrification is not simply a technological challenge; it raises important economic, social and political questions. Despite growing renewable electricity generation, many households and businesses continue to face high electricity prices. In several Member States, electricity remains disproportionately taxed compared to fossil fuels, weakening incentives to switch to clean technologies. At the same time, electrification will require significant investments in grids, skills, manufacturing capacity and consumer support schemes. Without adequate safeguards, there is a risk that parts of society may perceive electrification as another burden rather than an opportunity.*

*How can electrification be designed in a way that is socially fair, economically beneficial and politically sustainable? The following questions will guide the panel discussion:*

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- *What is the role of electrification in achieving the 2030 renewables target (42.5-45% in final energy consumption)? How to reach 100% of renewable energy by 2040?*
- *Are EU regulations and legislation fit to guide and support electrification, especially industrial electrification? Is anything missing?*
- *How can policymakers ensure that citizens see tangible benefits from electrification and in particular vulnerable consumers? How can electrification lower energy costs for households in the medium and long term? What policy changes are still needed, including improving the electricity-to-fossil-fuel price ratio?*
- *How can local and regional authorities support electrification strategies? And vice versa, how can the EU support the electrification process at local and regional levels?*
- *How can planning processes better integrate heating, and electricity infrastructure?*

**Session 3 - AI, work, and the future: where is the social-democratic agenda?**

- *When we talk about sustainable European sovereignty, the question of AI looms large. The EU is dependent on the US, which operates on the belief that the relentless roll out of AI across the economy will lead to productivity gains and geopolitical advantages that ultimately benefit US workers. But there is an increasing backlash, as the negative effects become clear, with US politicians calling for data centre moratoriums, as well as an AI sovereign wealth fund to redistribute profits from AI.*
- *It is increasingly clear that without active labour market and political responses, there will be no sustainable AI transition. And yet, what is happening in the EU? Apart from the AI Act, which is not labour law legislation and offers only moderate rights for workers that have partially been weakened (AI Omnibus), there is no credible response that combines the drive for technological autonomy with sustainable social outcomes that benefit labour. This is a conversation about tax, social conditionality, and worker protections as the pre-conditions for sustainable productivity growth and sovereignty.*

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