Towards a Sustainable European Sovereignty

Forging a progressive path

Policy Conference 2026 – 30/09 & 01/10

BIP Meeting Center – Rue Royale 2/4, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

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**, featuring 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

30 September 2026 - Day 1

16.00 – 17.00 **Registrations**

17.00 – 17.30 **Keynote welcome remarks**

- **László Andor**, FEPS Secretary General
- **Isabelle Schömann,** ETUC Deputy Secretary General

17.30 – 18.30 **High-level Dialogue on a sustainable European sovereignty 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**

1 October 2026 – Day 2

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

09:15 – 09:30 **Welcome remarks:**

- **Richard Probst**, Director, FES Just Climate

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
- Moderation: **Anna Kolesnichenko** (FEPS) and **Jonathan Schnock** (FES)

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
- Moderation: **Chloé Deffet** (FEPS) and **Stephan Thalhofer** (FES)

13.00 – 14.00 **Networking lunch**

14.00 – 15.30 **Session 3 – AI, work, and the future: elements for a pro-work agenda**

European Parliament

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- **Dragoș Adăscăliței**, Research Officer, Eurofound
- **Zuzanna Warso**, Director of Research, Open Future
- **Vickie Dekocker,** Senior Expert, Agoria
- **Isabelle Barthès**, Deputy Secretary General, IndustriAll
- Moderation: **Justin Nogarede**, Senior Policy Analyst, FES Future of Work

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

- **Mariam Asghari**, Secretary General, YES
- Moderation: **François Balate** (FEPS)

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Contents

- **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:

- *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?*

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- *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. The following questions will guide the panel discussion:

- *What kind of active labour market policies do we need (brakes/restrictions on automation and AI use etc.), when and in which sectors? What is the 'ladder of escalation' as the impact of AI starts to materialise at an increasing scale? Do legislators need to impose conditionalities on the use of AI by employers (in particular when this impacts productivity and human resources) tied to social aspects like working conditions, collective bargaining coverage, increased contributions to social security systems etc? When should we say no to AI?*
- *Up- and reskilling are often listed as the solutions to address AI-induced job loss and displacement. However, in light of the possible scale of the impact of AI on the labour market, are these realistic solutions and if not, what else is needed?*
- *In light of the perceived comparative disadvantage of the European economy (high energy costs, low private investments etc.), how can we maintain existing levels of social protection for workers while also harnessing the benefits offered by AI?*
- *AI has a large resource footprint (critical raw materials needed for infrastructure, electricity and water use, etc.). How can we balance this with a possible positive impact on productivity and economic growth? How can we ensure that the price of using AI reflects the 'true price' of using AI to avoid examples from the past, whereby the price paid for a product or service by a consumer did not include the price of all the negative externalities? What positive externalities can the AI transition bring to workers beyond potential productivity gains? Is this the path to the collective reduction of working time?*