

## Position paper

# How to protect consumers in (yet) another fossil fuel crisis?



## Why it matters to consumers

The war in the Middle East has triggered another energy shock, with consumers having to pay the price again. Since the 2022 energy crisis, the EU has sought to strengthen the resilience of its energy markets, notably by reinforcing consumer protections and diversifying fossil fuel supply sources. Despite these efforts, the EU remains highly exposed to external geopolitical shocks and is not yet fully prepared to absorb a crisis of this magnitude. As prices for consumer goods continue to rise (and are expected to increase further still), BEUC has identified measures that policymakers, regulators and traders should implement in both the short and long term. These would protect consumers financially in the immediate term and better protect them against future fossil fuel price hikes.

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**Document coordinator** | Frederico Oliveira da Silva

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The European Consumer Organisation ([BEUC](#)) is the largest organisation promoting the general interests of Europe's consumers. Founded in 1962, it proudly represents more than 40 independent national consumer organisations from over 30 European countries. Together with [our members](#), we inform EU policies to improve people's lives in a sustainable and fair economy and society.

### **BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation**

Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs AISBL | Der Europäische Verbraucherverband  
Rue d'Arlon 80, B-1040 Brussels • Tel. +32 (0)2 743 15 90 • [www.beuc.eu](http://www.beuc.eu)  
EC register for interest representatives: identification number 9505781573-45



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# 1. Introduction

The war in the Middle East has started another energy shock due to Europe's reliance on fossil fuels. This is just about four years since the EU faced its last energy crisis, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Over the past four years, the EU worked to improve the resilience of its energy markets. This was done by adopting new legislation, in particular strengthened consumer protections (e.g. stronger hedging requirements for suppliers and the ban of unilateral price increases) or through efforts to diversify supply of fossil fuel imports and reduce dependencies under [REPowerEU](#). While these efforts are important, Europe continues to be heavily exposed to external geopolitical events and is not sufficiently prepared to face this sort of crisis.

While prices are not yet at the level of the 2022 crisis, the current increases on petrol, gas and electricity put consumers' budget under severe pressure. At petrol stations, drivers are already paying a heavy price. Food prices are also expected to rise in the coming months, as prices of fertilisers and transport increase. The same is likely to happen with other consumer goods which rely on fossil fuels for their production (e.g. plastic bottles, clothes, bricks, etc). The risk of fuel shortage is serious, and the European Commission is already recommending consumers to consider travelling less to ration. All of this comes on top of recurring concerns on the [cost of living](#).

This situation confirms a fundamental necessity: the EU's future resilience, competitiveness, and energy autonomy depends on accelerating the decarbonisation of our society and reducing our fossil fuel dependency.

In this paper, BEUC has identified measures that policy makers, regulators and traders need to implement, both in the short and long term, to alleviate the financial burden of consumers during this crisis but also to better protect them against future fossil fuel price shocks.

In this regard, it should be noted that considerable uncertainty remains regarding the full impact of this crisis on European consumers. The purpose of this paper is to focus on the consequences that are already observable and affecting consumers at time of writing [2 April 2026]. Additional policy measures may be required should the situation deteriorate in the coming weeks. In any event, even if military operations were to end in the near term, the disruption to global energy supply chains is likely to persist for several months, if not years, with corresponding upward pressure on consumer prices in Europe. This has also been [highlighted](#) by the President of the European Central Bank. In a recent interview, Ms Lagarde underlined the serious risk of rampant inflation and that the real shock of this crisis is still beyond what we can imagine at the moment.

## 2. Protect consumers in the short term

### 2.1. Reduce electricity taxes and levies

EU Member States should cut taxes, charges and levies not directly related to energy production from bills. For example, electricity taxes/levies represent on average 25% of households' bills. They contribute to make electricity more expensive than gas.<sup>1</sup> Their reduction will incentivise electrification, which is critical to Europe's energy security and has been proven to be the most affordable option for consumers when it comes to cars or heating and cooling. The European Commission recently suggested this measure in its Citizens Energy Package.

### 2.2. Monitor markets and stay vigilant about possible illegal practices

Crises, such as the current one, are often used by rogue traders to exploit consumers and increase their profit margins, particularly in concentrated markets. National regulators need to monitor markets to make sure that competition keep consumer prices under check and eventual increases occur within the limits of the law.

In France, the consumer authority (DGCCRF) conducted checks of possible “price-gouging” practices at pump stations. Out of the first 231 controls, the DGCCRF found that in 6% of the cases prices increases were illegal and therefore the authorities issued sanctions. In the Netherlands, the Markets and Consumer Authority published an overview of the prices that consumers must pay for the supply of electricity and gas. In the United Kingdom, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has identified existing orders for heating oil being cancelled and customers being offered new quotes at significantly higher prices. The UK Government therefore announced measures to deal with businesses unfairly putting up prices to profiteer during this crisis.

In Germany, the Federal Government proposed a Fuel Policy Package to make it easier for the Federal Cartel Office (Bundeskartellamt) to take action against abusive fuel price increases by suppliers in dominant position or benefitting of relative market power. The proposal introduces a new model under which fuel prices at petrol stations may be increased only once a day at 12:00 noon while price reductions will be permitted at any time.

In response to similar crises of the past, governments have frequently implemented public funding initiatives and tax relief measures to support both consumers and companies. While we welcome such initiatives, Member States and authorities need first to ensure public funding reaches its real beneficiaries, including consumers. Second, Member States should monitor if the measures they have taken, such as tax cuts, are

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<sup>1</sup> Too often governments use energy bills as a tax collection form in disguise (e.g. in Greece, 7 out of 10 charges of the electricity bill are irrelevant to its consumption, transmission and distribution).

effectively benefiting the intended recipients of the initiative. For example, companies can easily transfer a tax reduction intended for consumers into their own benefit, by simply not lowering prices and keeping the difference. If this is the case, Member States need to take quick corrective measures to ensure the initiatives help consumers.



### What is the role of consumer organisations?

Consumer organisations are instrumental in advising and supporting consumers navigating this crisis and uncertain times. Over the past weeks, BEUC members, national consumer organisations, have been giving consumers advice on energy tariffs, on how to reduce their energy bills or on how to find the cheapest fuel pumps. They have also been asking their government for price transparency to discourage illegal practices.

## 2.3. Provide urgent relief to vulnerable consumers

For lower income households, the crisis is already taking its toll with many consumers struggling to fill the tanks of their cars. For these consumers, Member States need to provide urgent relief measures such as direct support.

This type of direct financial support however should be targeted to those that need the most. Countries should prioritise long-term solutions over short-term relief measures to ensure the EU decarbonises its economy to avoid similar crises in future (see more about this on chapter 3.2). The direct relief approach used during the 2022 crisis by some governments<sup>2</sup> (i.e. via ‘energy cheque’) must focus on those who most needed.

To do this, countries need to identify who can be considered to be ‘vulnerable consumers’. For example, in the energy sector, the Commission recently announced an update of its [energy poverty recommendations](#). These should help countries to better identify consumers who struggle to pay their bills. In the transport sector, there is the concept of ‘[transport poverty](#)’, which looks at criteria such as the availability of public transport or consumers’ ability to afford a private car.

## 2.4. Protect consumers from energy disconnections and allow for flexibility for energy bills

One of the risks consumers face with an increase of energy prices is over-indebtedness. In 2024, around 31 million Europeans were late on their utility bills. This figure is likely to increase when prices go up.

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2022 energy crisis, some member states like Belgium distributed ‘energy cheques’ to all households.

Firstly, countries should implement effective safeguards against the disconnection of electricity and gas supplies. Consumers are not responsible for this energy crisis, and they should not be made to pay for it by having their energy cut off if they cannot keep up with astronomically high bills.

Second, when required, consumers should be allowed to pay their energy bills in instalments to make it easier for them to keep up with payments.

Third, to help consumers avoid high energy bills and payment difficulties, suppliers should provide ‘best tariff advice’ and put in place ‘early warnings systems’, as suggested by the Citizens Energy Package. The former would enable consumers to know if there is a better offer for them. The latter would work as a warning to consumers that their consumption will be higher than foreseen upon the conclusion of the contract. While both systems are not established in law, energy providers should demonstrate proof of good faith and put these in place as soon as possible. Such measures would allow consumers to adapt quickly and avoid high bills.

## 2.5. Advice on energy saving measures

The EU and Member States should roll out communications campaigns reaching consumers through the channels they use (e.g. social media, newspapers, TV, etc.) to make them aware of easy ways to save energy, such as washing at low temperatures or programming machines to wash during less expensive tariffs.

For example, together with EuroCommerce, in 2023 BEUC published a list of [tips for consumers to save energy](#). These recommendations are still valid today. Consumer organisations also provide daily advice how people can save energy through simple measures, as we summarised in [this 10-point plan](#) after a 2019-2022 [project to reduce energy poverty](#). BEUC members run collective purchase campaigns on electricity tariffs and heat pumps.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) and some Southeast Asian countries go one step further and recommend consumers to work from home as much as possible and reduce travel.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.6. Storage for next winter must start in due time

Member States should not overlook the fact that next winter is fast approaching and Europe’s gas storage reserves are at their lowest level since 2022. They should begin refilling their reserves in due time and to do so in a coordinated manner, as a disorderly rush by individual countries is likely to create scarcity in some countries and push prices upwards.

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<sup>3</sup> The IEA published an interesting online [tracker](#) to monitor policy responses to energy market impacts of Middle East conflict.

Storing gas in the EU is an indispensable safety measure to provide consumers and industry with continuous supplies, especially during winter, no matter what the external disruptions are. Due to a long cold winter, the EU's gas storage is currently being depleted and urgently needs an organised approach to refilling to guarantee sufficient levels of supply for the next winter. Filling gas storage takes time and while it is not feasible to fill storage when prices are highest, consumers need certainty that this process will be successfully completed by autumn 2026.

## 2.7. Fairer passenger rights

The current crisis impacts consumers in multiple ways beyond just price increases. Since the beginning of the war, many passengers have seen their flights cancelled at the last minute and have been stranded abroad, sometimes for weeks.

Under EU air passenger rights,<sup>4</sup> passengers affected by disruptions are entitled to key rights such as care and assistance and rerouting. However, while the Air Passenger Rights Regulation currently covers all flights departing from the EU regardless of the airline's nationality, it only applies to return flights to the EU *when operated by EU carriers*.

This creates a clear legal loophole. Thousands of consumers affected by recent crises have been treated differently depending solely on the nationality of their airline. Passengers travelling with non-EU carriers have often been left to organise and pay for their own rerouting, accommodation and meals, facing significant extra costs, estimated on average at €770 per booking. Numerous cases of stranded passengers have made headlines in recent weeks.

Beyond its impact on consumers, this gap also distorts competition, as EU airlines are subject to obligations that do not apply to non-EU carriers operating on the same routes to the EU market.

As the revision of the Regulation enters its decisive phase, extending it to cover all airlines operating flights to and from the EU, regardless of nationality, is a key issue. BEUC urges European policymakers to close existing legal loopholes, ensure equal protection for all passengers, and guarantee fair competition by subjecting EU and non-EU carriers to the same obligations.

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<sup>4</sup> Air Passenger Rights Regulation (EC) No 261/2004

## 3. Protect consumers in the long term

### 3.1. Accelerate the decarbonisation of our society

According to a [Eurostat](#) report, the EU's energy imports dependency rate is 57%. This explains why EU energy prices are so exposed to current geopolitical events. Even if the EU does not massively import fossil fuels that pass through the Strait of Hormuz, the global disruption is so significant that it impacts all importers of fossil fuels.



**A clear takeaway** from this crisis is that investment in renewables, clean technology (such as affordable heat pumps and electric mobility) and moving away from fossil fuels is the best way to achieve energy independence and affordable energy prices in the long run.

This is also reflected in the [conclusions](#) from the European Council meeting from 19 March.<sup>5</sup> A recent [report](#) from Ember also proves this: countries with lots of renewables, such as Spain, had cheaper wholesale electricity prices despite gas market chaos.

The Commission and national governments must double down on the deployment of renewable energy, clean energy tech and energy efficiency measures, standing firmly by the ambition of recently adopted legislation. Any hesitation or rollback, such as the recent weakening of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions standards for cars, risks eroding consumer trust. Most importantly, it will negatively impact the supply of affordable electric vehicles due to delayed or deterred investments the rollback creates. The reality is that both consumers and businesses need a clear and steady path moving towards clean energy. This requires stable rules that are implemented consistently across the EU, not subject to short-term political pressure or shifting priorities.

### 3.2. Increase subsidies available to finance the energy transition

Investing in the energy transition is expensive. But so is financing the fossil fuel crisis. As shown by a recent [study](#) from the UK Climate Change Committee, achieving net zero by 2050 costs less than a single fossil fuel crisis.<sup>6</sup> This means that the most cost-effective

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<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 38 of the European Council Conclusions from 19 March 2026: *The recent spikes in the prices of imported fossil fuels demonstrate that the energy transition remains the most effective strategy for achieving Europe's strategic autonomy, strengthening resilience, structurally lowering energy prices, and delivering the clean, abundant and homegrown energy needed to power the economy of the future.*"

<sup>6</sup> Reaching net zero would cost about £4bn a year, the CCC found, or close to £100bn by 2050, which was roughly equivalent to the energy-related costs of the fossil fuel shocks that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

strategy for the EU is therefore to invest in a low-carbon, energy resilient economy rather than repeatedly funding fossil fuel crisis after another.

While we recognise that some financial relief will be immediately necessary for certain groups of consumers (see chapter 2.3), the bulk of governments' and the EU's financial support should focus on long-term measures that better shield the EU from future shocks. The installation of heat pumps, purchase of an EV or renovation of a house are long-term investments and hence external factors, such as changes at political and macro-economic level, must be mitigated as far as possible.

Financial support to consumers must be offered in a stable and predictable investment environment. Sudden cancellations of public subsidy schemes happen, limiting the visibility for consumers wishing to purchase renewable energy appliances, an electric vehicle or launch a renovation project.

### 3.2.1. Emissions Trading System (ETS) 2.0 revenues

ETS2, covering buildings and road transport, will put a price on emissions, but it will also generate substantial revenues. If these revenues are effectively channelled, notably through the Social Climate Fund and well-designated national measures, they can support structural investments such as building renovation, efficient heating systems, and access to low-emission mobility. These are the kinds of measures that permanently reduce energy demand and household exposure to a price shocks.

While ETS2 may lead to price increases in fossil fuels, the cost of inaction will be higher on consumers when crises hit. Without structural changes, households remain locked into high and volatile energy costs. In that sense, the question is not whether ETS2 has a cost, but whether its revenues are used effectively to finance the energy transition and to protect consumers against price increases of fossil fuels in the long term. If well implemented, it can help shift from repeated emergency support to long-term resilience, lowering both emissions and economic risks borne by consumers in future crises.

## 3.3. Cut clean tech and home renovation red tape

The EU and Member states should cut the red tape involved in installing rooftop solar panels, heat pumps, and home renovations (e.g. building regulations or long permitting processes to get connected to the grid). This will help consumers to reduce their bills and have more stable energy prices.

BEUC has long called for clean tech to be made available, affordable, and accessible. This is the only way to make the sustainable choice the easy choice. For instance, governments should without delay create lists of certified heat pump installers so consumers receive reliable, high-quality installations, and are protected from scams. Corporate car fleets should be electrified as soon as possible, as they boost the much-needed second-hand market for electric vehicles (EVs). Consumer research shows that Europeans stand to benefit from the lower running costs of EVs in this market.

A good example where the EU can simplify is plug-in solar panels. These types of solar panels should help consumers who do not own a house or don't have a roof to produce their own energy and decrease their energy bills. Although legal in most EU countries, consumers still struggle to find out what panels are approved by the regulator and if (and how) they can be installed. We support the Commission including the need to remove barriers to these panels in its 'Grids Package'. The EU should also regulate the installation and use of plug-in solar panels by consumers across the EU, and ensure they comply with dedicated safety standards. Consumers should receive clear communication on the practical steps to buy and install.

Tenants and co-owners face specific barriers in the energy transition, as they negotiate their wishes with property owners or homeowners' association, respectively. The Commission and national governments should put in place mechanisms for renters and co-owners to get approval for any energy transition-related action they wish to undertake.

### 3.4. Protect consumers from rising food prices

The war is also expected to increase food prices in the coming months. Rising energy costs are already driving up the price of fertilisers, packaging and transport, all of which are essential to the food supply chain. Since most stages of food production and distribution depend heavily on energy, these increases will rapidly translate into higher prices for consumers. This situation highlights the structural vulnerability of the current food system to external shocks and underlines the need for policy action.

The EU and national governments need to accelerate the transition towards food systems that are less dependent on fossil fuels would reduce exposure to volatile input costs and help protect consumers from future price spikes.

### 3.5. End Europe's dependence on fossil fuel cars

The war once again exposes the vulnerability of the automotive sector to geopolitical shocks, with immediate effect on petrol pump prices, and, by extension, European household budgets.

In the medium and long term, the most viable solution is the electrification of Europe's car fleet. Policymakers must draw the lessons of this crisis and clearly commit the EU to sustainable electrification of the automotive sector. Therefore, the Commission's "Automotive Package" must be strengthened to electrify company cars faster, avoid costly flexibilities and promote truly small, made-in-EU electric cars.

This crisis must also accelerate alternatives to private car use: massive investment in public transport, better active mobility options (safe walking and cycling), carsharing. By reducing forced dependence on fossil fuel cars, Europe can protect consumers against the next crisis.

For example, “social leasing” schemes can be a solution. Already piloted in France, these schemes allow modest households to access electric vehicles, through low and capped monthly payments. Schemes aimed at supporting consumers to switch from their old petrol car to a more recent electric car (including second-hand) should also be put in place. Supply-side measures, such as dedicated incentives for small electric vehicles (preferably made in Europe) should also be introduced, in anticipation of ETS2.

### 3.6. Facilitate consumer investment in the transition

Many people want their money to support the transition to a greener and fairer economy, exchanging volatile fossil fuels for renewable sources. BEUC [research](#) has found that sustainable investors expect their investments to steer clear of fossil fuel companies, especially those still developing new oil and gas projects.

Unfortunately, many investments marketed as green fail to match consumer expectations. Weak rules on sustainable finance products allow finance institutions to make misleading sustainability claims and engage in greenwashing.

While consumers cannot, and should not, be responsible for financing the transition by themselves, consumer investment in the transition should still be enabled as an important part of the puzzle. In this regard, the [ongoing review](#) of the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation must deliver trustworthy sustainable and transition product categories. BEUC particularly supports the introduction of Sustainable and Transition product categories that exclude companies involved in fossil fuels and new fossil fuel developments, respectively.

However, a third category, ESG Basics, that would still allow investments in fossil fuels, should be removed from the proposal