

Internef 2026: No Sovereignty Without Our Own Energy and Food

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At the tenth Internef, representatives from institutions, European bodies, the professional sector, and the diplomatic community warned that energy and food security can no longer be taken for granted, and that Croatia and Europe must reduce their dependence on imports and strengthen their own capacities.

The tenth International Energy Forum Internef was held today in the Crystal Hall of the Westin Hotel in Zagreb under the title *"Energy and Food Sovereignty in the Age of Deglobalization"*. It brought together representatives of state institutions, European bodies, experts, academia and diplomacy. The discussion focused on the geopolitical challenges of supply, the link between energy and food production, and the need to reduce import dependence and strengthen domestic capacity.



The forum's scientific and professional chair, Prof. **Daria Karasalihović Sedlar**, PhD, stressed that sovereignty, both energy and food, has become the main geopolitical topic. *"For years we had both energy and food available, and we expected groceries to be waiting for us in the fridge. But things change overnight,"* she said. *"Sovereignty is not about how full the fridge is today, but whether we will be able to fill it tomorrow."*

The gathering was greeted on behalf of the President of the Republic of Croatia, **Zoran Milanović**, by his envoy **Julije Domac**. *"We are aware that countries that do not control their own food, energy and water cannot be truly free,"* he said.

A permanent wave of deglobalization

Dalibor Janda of the **Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry** pointed out that energy is an important input in food production and that every energy shock is also reflected in food production.



Interenef's founder and programme director, Prof. **Anđelko Milardović**, PhD, Director of the **Institute for European and Globalization Studies**, recalled that the forum was founded in Split and that it differs from similar events in being based on strategic thinking about energy policy. He named its three markers as *energy policy, national security and energy diplomacy*. In his view, the world is in a permanent wave of deglobalization in which flows of food and energy cannot proceed as they should, and the triangle of food, energy and technology must be taken very seriously because no society can function without it.

The President of the **Management Board of the Croatian Hydrocarbon Agency**, **Marijan Krpan**, spoke about the geopolitical aspect of the energy crisis caused by events around the Strait of Hormuz. He noted that oil and gas production is growing despite forecasts to the contrary and that the Americans have



become the largest producer of both oil and gas, describing Trump's *"drill, baby, drill"* policy as entirely logical. Oil and gas, he said, still govern everything that happens on the globe. As examples he cited Venezuela, which has the largest proven oil reserves but produces little, and Greenland, which lies between the largest deposits of America and Russia. Europe has no oil and gas resources of its own and must find another way to meet its energy needs. Speaking about Croatia's response, Krpan presented the Agency's plans for geothermal energy and the recently signed contracts for additional wells at Velika Gorica, Osijek, Vinkovci and Zaprešić, highlighting the unlimited potential of **geothermal energy**

in the Pannonian region for food production. *"It depends solely on our own ability whether we end up like Venezuela or become Norway,"* he said.

Energy as a source of power

Kamilo Vrana of **SolNet** and the **Croatian Employers' Association (HUP)** said that in practice we are experiencing how energy is a source of power. From the globalization perspective, hydrocarbon supply chains are at the centre, and power lies with those who control them, with Venezuela and Norway as two extreme poles. Deglobalization, on the other hand, puts available domestic resources at the centre, including **renewable energy sources**, which, according to Vrana, are not only an economic issue but also a matter of state sovereignty.



The Director of the **Dalmatian Energy Agency, Mario Jakić**, presented the project of a **regional hydrogen centre** in Split-Dalmatia County. The aim, he said, is to build an entire ecosystem that would include transport and industry. A pre-feasibility study has been completed, and the goal is to bring the project to implementation.

Member of the European Parliament **Davor Ivo Stier** said in a video address that crises around the world carry the same strategic message: Europe needs *more sources, more supply routes and more partners*. Europe, he said, cannot be an industrial power if energy prices remain too high, and energy security is not only a matter of supply but also of competitiveness. Croatia's strategic position in this part of Europe rests on the **LNG terminal on Krk** and **JANAF**, but investment in power grids is also needed. Stier advocated technological openness and reducing dependence on Russian energy, warning that one dependence must not be replaced by another.

Energy security at the heart of sovereignty

The Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, **Borys Budka**, also addressed participants by video message. Energy security, he said, lies at the heart of sovereignty, and the EU must build **interconnectors** and develop domestic renewable energy sources. Since the EU was born out of crisis, he said, he is an optimist.

MEP **Marko Vešligaj**, substitute member of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, recalled that the **Common Agricultural Policy** is one of the EU's oldest policies and that its founders understood well that a Europe unable to produce enough food for its citizens is not secure. He warned



that the EU is losing numerous farms, most of which are run by people over 50, which makes generational renewal crucial. *"There is no strong EU agriculture without strong EU villages,"* he said, adding that Croatia has the land, a varied climate and a long tradition of food production, but that potential alone does not mean security.



Andrea Čović Vidović, Deputy Head of the **European Commission Representation in Croatia**, recalled that in 2022 Russia taught us how much dependence on a single supplier costs, and this year we learned how much dependence on a single sea route costs. The Commission's response is not to wait for the next crisis but to reduce European dependencies through *electrification and interconnection of energy networks*, with private sources of financing also being considered. She also pointed out that a third of the world's artificial fertilizers pass through Hormuz and recalled the **fertilizer action plan** adopted by the European Commission.

The grid should enable the energy transition

In the main part of the programme, **Julije Domac**, Special Adviser to the President of the Republic for Energy and Climate, presented the concept of energy sovereignty. For too long, he said, we took energy for granted, and then realised that energy is also a question of freedom. Croatia today imports **60 percent of its energy**, and in recent years not a single major hydropower plant or energy facility has been built.



Domac warned that domestic gas production had been neglected, welcoming the change of course, and that not enough is being done on energy efficiency. As examples of domestic companies successfully building projects around the world he cited **Dalekovod** and **Končar**, but warned that at home we are not building infrastructure fast enough. *"The grid should not follow the energy transition, it should enable it,"* he said.

The concept of food sovereignty was presented by Prof. **Aleksandar Mešić**, PhD, of the **Faculty of Agriculture, University of Zagreb**. Modern hunger, he stressed, is not only about the number of calories but also about their quality. He named *affordability and availability of food, its quality and safety, and sustainability and adaptability* as elements of food sovereignty. Finland, Ireland and Norway top the food security rankings, and good conditions for food production, he noted, do not necessarily correlate with a country's position on the list. Croatia is not on that list, but Mešić is convinced it would be near the bottom. He also warned that food prices in Croatia have risen by **at least 50 percent** in the past few years. Croatia has fallen short in the production of oil, sugar beet and sugar, while cereal and oilseed production is high, but the surplus is mostly exported as raw material while the main food products are imported. He sees the solution in a system that would connect the different sectors of agriculture.



Leon Stille of the **Dutch New Energy Institute** linked the two concepts using the example of **artificial fertilizers**. The EU produces 70 percent of the fertilizers it needs and imports the rest, with the key problem being the price of natural gas. When it rises, production has to be suspended, and since demand for fertilizers does not fall, imports increase. Ammonia has to be imported from the Middle East, and its prices are rising too. Stille therefore stressed the need for production in Europe, which can include **biogas and biomethane**, while part of the gas can be obtained from domestic resources. This will not affect prices, however, because gas is part of international markets.

The growing role of renewables

The diplomatic perspective was presented in the first thematic panel, moderated by Asst. Prof. **Jadranka Polović**, PhD, of the Institute for European and Globalization Studies. Italian Ambassador **Paolo Trichilo** highlighted the growing role of renewable energy sources, including in the context of food sovereignty, and the importance of hydrogen for resilience. Italy has more than a hundred projects, one of which is *trilateral cooperation with Slovenia and Croatia* on hydrogen in the Mediterranean. He also recalled that Italy has the longest experience with geothermal energy in the world, dating back to 1904 and the plant in Tuscany, and opened the possibility of cooperation between Croatian and Italian companies.

The Ambassador of Azerbaijan, **Anar Imanov**, highlighted good cooperation with EU partners and large investments in expanding grid capacity, because producing energy alone is not enough, which has helped significantly increase green energy production. Azerbaijan has signed several important agreements on developing the sector and will produce **around 8 gigawatts** from green energy alone.



Polish Ambassador **Paweł Czerwiński** warned that after the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, fuel supply has become a political issue affecting the stability of individual states and the EU itself, and that the EU's entire democratic system could be threatened. Poland, he said, is building capacity to *diversify supply*.

British Ambassador **Javed Patel** recalled several major geopolitical shocks over the past seven years and stressed that dependence on fossil fuels also affects food security. The United Kingdom's goal is to shift fully to *clean energy*. The UK, he said, was the first major economy to cut emissions by **54 percent**, showing that an economy can grow while reducing emissions. He also stressed the importance of **nuclear energy** and the development of **small modular reactors (SMRs)**, a fleet of which could be built around the world, starting in Europe.

The grid is the foundation

The second thematic panel was devoted to the role of energy, agricultural and food companies in promoting energy and food sovereignty. In the keynote, **Viktor Lučić**, Director of Corporate Strategy and Business Development at Končar, spoke about how energy security goals can be achieved in practice, stressing that when it comes to electricity, the **power grid** is the foundation of everything. He also asked *whether sovereignty is a goal or a means*, concluding that one should bet on the option that is least bad at a given moment and focus on the whole rather than the parts.

"Energy is today a key factor of competitiveness, which is why it is important for companies to invest in their own energy independence," said Mirko Budiša, Deputy Director of the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund. Investing in renewable energy sources, he stressed, is not only a matter of cutting costs but also of long-term sustainable business and competitiveness, and Croatia is slowly entering the segment of energy and food independence.



The panel was moderated by Prof. **Đula Borožan**, PhD, of the **Faculty of Economics in Osijek**. Prof. Emer. **Ruben Mnatsakanian**, PhD, of the **Central European University (CEU)** in Vienna recalled that the **UN's global outlook** covers the full range of environmental problems, but that recommendations by region have so far been very general. This year the authors of the report wanted to take a step forward and for the first time considered interconnected environmental problems together, from *land degradation and biodiversity to pollution and climate change*. Many countries, however, opposed such direct recommendations.

Prof. **Matúš Mišík**, PhD, of **Comenius University in Bratislava** recalled that at the beginning of this year Slovakia went through a **major gas crisis**, the likes of which it had not seen since 2006, and has had several smaller ones in the meantime. Thanks to European funds, he said, much has changed in the energy infrastructure, but in Slovakia there is not enough discussion of renewable sources and energy security. Asked whether energy sovereignty can exist in countries that import a lot of energy, such as Croatia and Slovakia, he replied that from an energy security perspective Slovakia is not a good example because its government does not agree with replacing Russian energy sources with others.

Tonči Tokić, Head of LNG Business Development at **EA Gibson** in Singapore, gave his personal opinion that **natural gas** is irreplaceable in today's situation. This will probably change in the future, he said, but gas is today the *main and stable driver of energy production*.

A concrete example of adaptation was presented by **Marina Prusina**, President of the Management Board of **Ribnjačarstvo Končanica**, the oldest fish farm in Croatia, where fish have been raised in the traditional way for 125 years. The biggest problem on the ground is the lack of water, without which there is no fish production, and staff are already seeing the consequences of climate change in the field. Together with experts, the fish farm has developed an *integrated business model* in which all segments are connected. The project includes a **floating solar power plant** on 20 percent of the ponds, which reduces water losses through evaporation while also producing electricity.



Energy, food and technology

The third panel dealt with the interweaving of energy, food and technology. The keynote was given by **Ivan Güttler**, PhD, Director General of the **Croatian Meteorological and Hydrological Service**, who spoke about global climate change and its impact on energy and food sovereignty. The link between emissions and the planet's temperature is clear, he said, noting that more than 50 percent of CO₂ is absorbed by the oceans and natural systems. The EU and Croatia are moderately successful in *mitigating climate change*, but this is not enough; adaptation to a world with a higher risk of floods and fires is also needed. An adaptation system already exists and embankments are being built, but climate change increases the intensity of such events. Güttler also highlighted the quantum leap that **artificial intelligence and machine learning** are bringing to meteorology, with forecasts 10 to 15 percent better and much faster, which is very important for public warning systems.

In the panel moderated by **Robert Hadžić**, adviser in agriculture and rural development, **Mislav Kontek** of **Energovizija** warned that there is little understanding of how present energy is in the food sector, with the food chain using **30 percent of total energy consumed**. All of his company's projects are linked to agriculture, and in addition to energy communities he proposed the establishment of **agro-energy communities**.

Prof. **Dimitrios Psaltopoulos**, PhD, of the **Aristotle University of Thessaloniki** disagreed with the assessment that the world is in a phase of deglobalization. "*We are in a phase of reglobalization*," he said, adding that every attempt at deglobalization has ended this way so far. He also stressed the importance of data and artificial intelligence, which increases competitiveness and reduces costs.

Prof. **Agata Malak-Rawlikowska**, PhD, of the **Warsaw University of Life Sciences** noted that the geopolitical tensions that began after the pandemic have accelerated processes. Food supply security, she warned, is not a question of the quantity of food but of *economic access to it*. The number of people at risk

in food supply has increased over the past ten years; there is enough food, but it is not equally accessible to all, so many cannot afford any food at all, let alone healthy food.

Ivana Rendulić Jelušić, PhD, Director of **Alti Agro**, said that digital resources will not replace real ones, but that **smart agriculture**, robotics, sensors and artificial intelligence will enable their optimised use. Smart agriculture tools will allow resources to be dosed in precisely defined quantities, leading to more *sustainable production*.

The Dean of the **Faculty of Agrobiotechnical Sciences Osijek**, Prof. **Tomislav Vinković**, PhD, warned of a *domino effect* in the food production system, which can be triggered in various ways: gas prices affect fertilizer prices, and these in turn affect food prices. He also raised the issue of **cybersecurity in agriculture**.



Diversified sources

The **fourth panel** placed energy and food sovereignty in the context of national security. The keynote was given by Dutch geopolitical strategist and energy maritime analyst **Cyril Widdershoven**, PhD, in whose view the world is in a phase of regionalization, and global society is no longer the priority. *"Geography, not politics, decides where we are and what we do,"* he said. We became obsessed with the idea that globalization would solve everything because everything was open, when in fact nothing was open, he said. He noted that in today's world there is gas and oil elsewhere, not only in Russia, and that oil and gas from the Middle East go to Asia, while the perception that they go to Europe was wrong. He also commented on fuel prices: *"The price you are currently paying for diesel in Croatia is one we in the Netherlands would gladly pay."*

The panel was moderated by **Davor Rendulić** of **Croatian Radio**, who also hosted the entire forum. Prof. **Andrej Pustišek**, PhD, of the **Hochschule für Technik (HFT) Stuttgart** stressed that energy self-sufficiency cannot be complete and that it is important to have diversified energy sources. He also raised the question of who is responsible for energy self-sufficiency and supply: it is usually thought to be the state, but in many countries companies have been responsible for it.

State Secretary at the Ministry of the Interior Nevenka Lastrić Đurić said that Croatia is better prepared for crises than five years ago, *"but less than we think"*. After the pandemic, two earthquakes, fires

and floods, we have shown that we know how to respond to crises, but the question is whether that is enough. *“Strategic autonomy is not measured by how quickly you can react, but by how long you can endure,”* she said, stressing the need to move from a reactive to a proactive model. In the event of a prolonged crisis, she warned, **food supply chains** could be the weak point.



Long Jing of the **Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS)** said that in China agricultural land must be guaranteed and must not be converted to urban use, a *red line that is not crossed*. China is addressing challenges not only at home but also helping the peoples of Africa. Food security is very important, but a balance must be maintained between it, climate change and biodiversity.

Tomislav Vazdar, an expert in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence and President of the Management Board of **Riskoria Advising & Professional Services**, recalled that last year Croatia was among the first to adopt a new **law on critical infrastructure**, in which supply chain management is one of the measures. *“Being compliant does not mean being resilient,”* he warned, stressing that organisations must be resilient in order to continue functioning in crisis situations.

Israel’s experience was presented by **Yakov Poleg**, Senior Deputy Director General of the Center for Foreign Trade and International Cooperation at Israel’s **Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security**. Israel is a small country, half of which is desert, and it faces serious water shortages. Its first national project was the **national water carrier**, and under the **water resources law** natural resources belong to the public and there is no private ownership of them. The water authority manages quantities and allocates water according to the country’s needs, and Israel is today, 60 years later, *almost self-sufficient*. Poleg disagreed with panellists who considered self-sufficiency impossible and stressed that Israel leads global trends in **water recycling**.

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