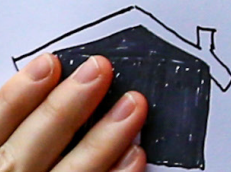


HOUSING THE PEOPLE: TOWARDS A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THE DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES OF THE FUTURE

Francesco Trupia, Lilit Zeltsburg

HOUSING
FOR PEOPLE
NOT PROFIT



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INTRODUCTION

Among the challenges facing European countries and communities in the 21st century, what is commonly called the housing crisis is of particular concern to progressive and social political movements. Policymakers grapple with issues including the scarcity of affordable housing, the challenge of renovating old properties to make them habitable for the future and high (and rising) rates of homelessness, among other questions. Meanwhile, most urban communities are faced with gentrification, the manifestations of which transform neighbourhoods and the culture of the public space accordingly. As people are pushed out of (central and historical) neighbourhoods they can no longer afford to live in, the physical urban spaces and pre-existing sociopolitical networks are disrupted. Solidarity is replaced by fragmentation, and vibrant and lively streets become residential areas where individuals simply spend the period of time between the end of one working day and the beginning of another.

A number of approaches to tackle the housing crisis have been presented, including the European Commission's Affordable Housing Initiative and the installation of a commissioner for housing.¹ However, it seems that parties on the left have found it challenging to formulate an ideologically distinctive vision of how to tackle the aforementioned issues. The neoliberal categorisation of the politics of housing as a question of balancing supply and demand in a free market also encourages a limited perspective on the root causes of and possible interventions for the housing crisis. The term "housing crisis", which in actuality can encompass any number of real or perceived problems related to housing, is itself emblematic of this form of tunnel vision. Where some political parties may understand the housing crisis to refer to the scarcity of affordable housing due to insufficient construction or lax regulation, many far-right parties in Europe, such as

the PVV² in the Netherlands, promote a view of the housing crisis as being caused by migration. Yet, diverse issues that range from economic mobility to homelessness, construction, urban planning and the sustainability of existing housing stock, as well as the balance between ownership and rentership of homes and the cost and availability of housing, among others not yet listed here, all fall under the umbrella of the singular "housing crisis". It follows that understanding what exactly one understands the housing crisis to be is just as much a question of ideology and vision as any proposed solutions to the housing crisis as it is understood.

This policy study suggests a new way of thinking about the future of housing by reframing the 'housing crisis' from a crisis of insufficient affordable habitable units to one of neighbourhoods and communities based around an understanding of housing as a fundamental human right and a critical social good. We contend that the variety of crises that fall under the umbrella of the 'housing crisis' cannot be definitively addressed from a perspective on housing policy that treats these crises as separate from one another and inherently tied to individual socio-economic circumstances. Therefore, we employ the term "Housing Crises" to signify the interconnectedness of all socio-political and economic issues related to the question of housing, thereby highlighting the importance of perceiving the latter through the lens of social justice.³ This demands a shift from viewing housing as an instrument for profit making to an approach that prioritises residential stability, community wellbeing and the right to a dignified life for all. Reframing housing in this way is essential for countering the commodification of urban spaces and facilities and fostering more inclusive, resilient communities. This is why we advance policy recommendations aimed at building comfortable neighbourhoods, fostering local culture, and allowing for both traditional and innovative forms of

living together for communities to contextualise the question of housing on progressive and democratic terms rather than (exclusively) the terms of the free market.

To come to this reframing, this policy study highlights the intersection of gentrification and the rise of the far right in gentrified and contested cities, departing from the observation that the current Housing Crises play a critical role in the rise of far-right sentiments in urban areas. It explores how broader urban challenges facing the EU are played out at the junction of gentrification, socio-economic inequalities and social fragmentation. These dynamics have disproportionately impacted marginalised communities by shrinking their spaces

of political participation while simultaneously creating fertile ground for support for far-right actors. To address these issues, the policy study advocates for local, national and European Union level policy interventions aimed at counteracting the adverse effects of gentrification, improving the availability and accessibility of housing, and revitalising communities. It analyses interventions on different levels with a focus on the reassessment of the potential for policies that affect housing, mandating the preservation and expansion of social housing across member states, and including anti-displacement regulations to protect vulnerable populations from speculative real-estate practices.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Drawing on professional views and daily experiences of policy experts, practitioners and activists, this policy study combines first-hand information collected from a series of in-depth interviews and structured conversations with insights from both policy and academic research in different EU countries.⁴ Qualitative data is analysed to shed light on the political factors that shape and drive continuing processes of gentrification that atomise communities and create fertile ground for an increasingly reemerging far right with regard to the absence of housing policy.⁵ Pundits and commentators have already shed light on the correlations between increasing rents and property prices and votes shifting to the far-right spectrum.⁶ Although lower classes are not in and of themselves the place where right-wing attitudes originate, economic worries, pluralisation, the shift of gender relations and the dismantling of the welfare state – all phenomena connected to the Housing Crises – are some of the main causes that increase the probability that the far right will gain support.⁷

We explore this nexus by presenting examples from multiple European cities, including Gent, Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna and Sofia, as well as other major cities and gentrified neighbourhoods in Belgium and Germany. While these examples are not generalisable, generalisation is not the intention of this policy study. Drawing on Simmons and Smith's approach, we seek to *translate* the specific empirical contexts of the selected urban cases to illustrate a wide range of policies, reactions and outcomes that could help policymakers rethink housing as a common good.⁸ Residents of the neighbourhoods and cities in the examined cases feel the consequences of the Housing Crises in the form of higher rents, increased competition for available places and low housing standards. They all also have recently experienced the rise and institutionalisation of far-right political parties after years or even decades of (sometimes violent) activism at the city level. This

perspective echoes Sofia's particular phenomena of gentrification coupled with the institutionalisation of the far right and intra-EU migration patterns that are often overlooked in the analysis of the Housing Crises from Southeast to Northwest Europe.⁹ This transnational perspective avoids over-scrutinising any specific segment of the urban population, such as low-income populations or ethnic minorities, since the Housing Crises affect societies on multiple levels. Finally, this case selection aims to highlight good practices (or attempts) by affected communities to resist gentrification processes, fight back and seek new alternative forms of living.

Hence, we propose a vision of high-quality housing and diverse forms of living as the cornerstone of healthy democratic communities that can withstand the challenges of the 21st century. Two main research questions guide this policy study:

1. How can local-, national- and EU-level policy interventions be designed to effectively address different facets of the Housing Crises?
2. How can policymakers operationalise the vision of housing as a common good in strategies to counter the Housing Crises, political disenfranchisement and far-right exploitation?

“FOR YOUR OWN GOOD”: UNDERSTANDING GENTRIFICATION

The concept of gentrification is ubiquitous in discussions of the Housing Crises. The term has been defined in different ways. For example, Nadia Urbinati understands it to be the radical reconstruction and reorganisation of urban spaces through “business plans”, with strategies to integrate financial flows that re Commodify housing and displace lower-income tenants.¹⁰ Other scholars have noted that some existing definitions of gentrification are too narrow, and they have attempted to broaden the concept. These broadened definitions share the understanding that gentrification is fundamentally about the division of urban space in favour of more affluent users.¹¹ The field of gentrification studies is thus fundamentally concerned with questions of class and power. However, historically, a significant proportion of the literature on gentrification has drawn on single case studies pertaining to lagging regions, peripheral cities or even neighbourhoods. This has left the historical dynamics of gentrification understudied, making it difficult to include this perspective in policy. Thus, it is necessary to bring the dynamics of gentrification into focus in conceptualising interventions for the current Housing Crises.

At times, gentrification has been seen and (mis) understood as a “lifejacket” for most European cities. However, what is often overlooked is the fact that most European cities do not face gentrification in the same way. In some cities, gentrification is largely driven by touristification (e.g., AirBnB, short-term rentals), whereas in other cities, gentrification is linked to high levels of poverty, leading to attempts to “improve” a neighbourhood to make it more “livable”. In the latter case, gentrification is specifically considered to be essential for tackling various social crises.¹² In addition, gentrification is sometimes seen as the transformation of urban geography driven by migration, the arrival of students due to international mobility programs, the replacement of “ethnic enterprises” with IT

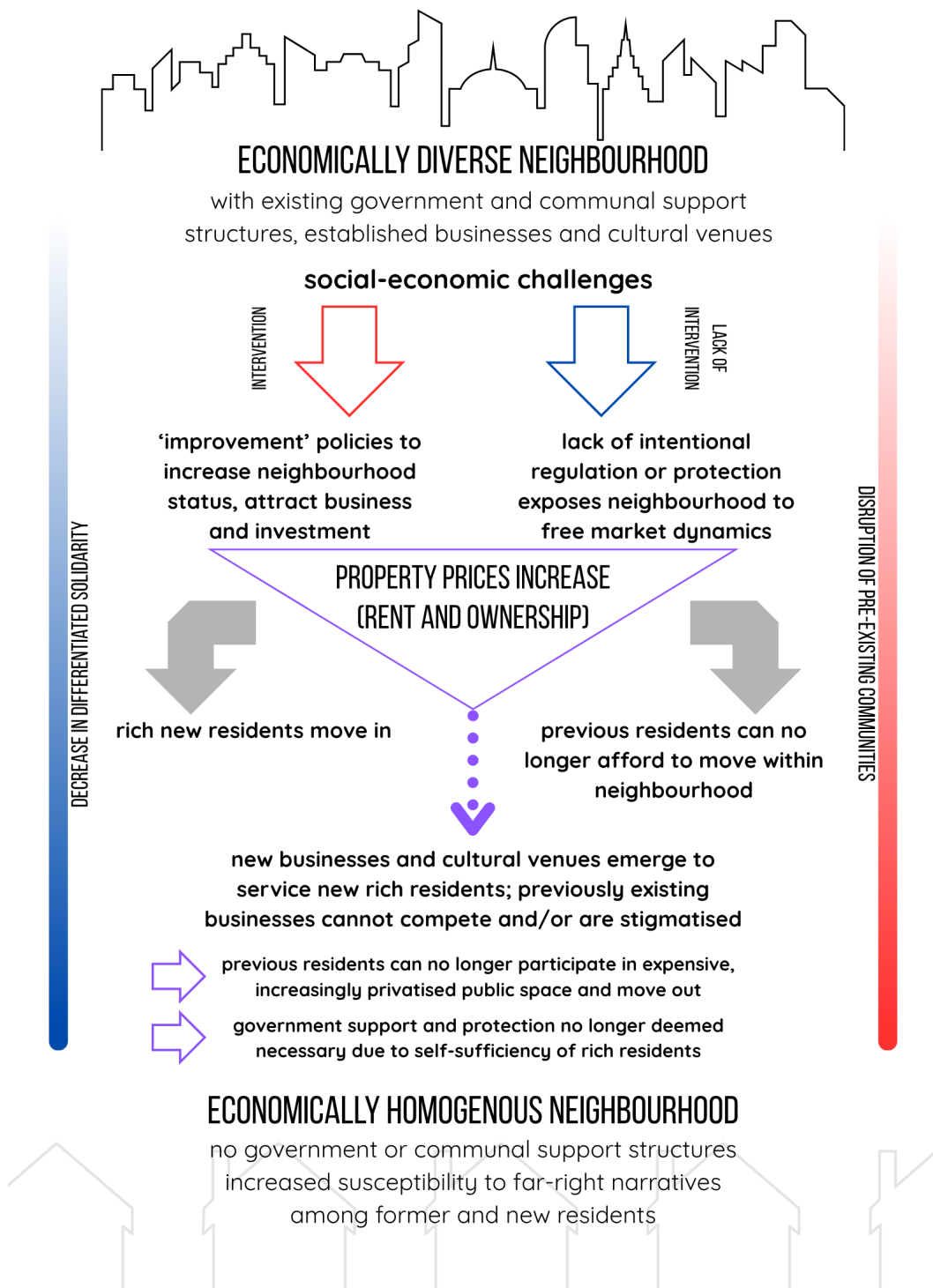
hubs and international finance corporations, as well as landlords taking advantage of renting to higher-income households in disinvested historic downtowns and/or lower-income urban areas (often formerly working-class neighbourhoods).¹³ Finally, in some areas, gentrification comes in the form of the acquisition of property by companies for whom lack of regulation makes it unprofitable to develop or facilitate opportunities for housing or invest in the neighbourhood in any other way.

Although gentrification was historically often assumed to be a spontaneous process, the role of governments in processes of gentrification has received increasing attention. According to Verlaan and Hochstenbach, gentrification has become a “blueprint urban policy” used to both increase the economic status of neighbourhoods and impose order by controlling behaviours and populations seen as “deviant”.¹⁴ To this end, gentrification cannot be separated from displacement. Here, displacement must not only be seen literally as (forced) physical or spatial relocation, for example, in the form of evictions, as it can also take the form of inhabitants being “priced out” of previously affordable neighbourhoods or experiencing a loss of belonging as a result of the disruption of local social networks. Moreover, the displacement of populations as a result of gentrification policies has at times been not only deliberate, but also discriminatory.¹⁵ Not only do minoritised communities often bear the brunt of gentrification, the concentration of minorities in a given area is sometimes seen to be a threat to the local order and a social problem in and of itself. As such, governments have promoted policies to “diversify” neighbourhoods (and thereby, dissolve minority concentrations) by building more expensive housing at the expense of social housing and stigmatising “ethnic” businesses while encouraging the establishment of amenities aimed at higher-income customers.¹⁶ Although the communities facing this stigmatisation may employ

various tactics to try to resist displacement, the fact that they are resisting government policies – often policies introduced or endorsed by progressive and left actors – instead of being protected by the government contributes to their disenfranchisement and distrust.

At the policy level, less has been written about the interrelation of the power struggle between gentrifiers and inhabitants.¹⁷ Research has been produced about the alarming correlation between facets of the Housing Crises and the (sometimes violent) proliferation of the far right, paving the way for potential political shifts in European countries that have not historically dealt with right-wing radicalisation and extremism.¹⁸ Across Europe, economic downturns and the “sink estate” markets are turning gentrified middle-class (white) communities of residents and their sense of uncertainty into a window of opportunity for right-wing political actors. After all, intra-city dynamics and within-city spaces provide far-right actors with the opportunity to offer a sense of belonging

deeply embedded in nationalism, chauvinism and ideologies of inequality and division to a collective without everyday social bonds.¹⁹ Thus, the topic of housing has historically also been a fertile ground for political mobilisation for the far right. Together with the perceived de-coupling of the left from the poorest and most gentrified neighbourhoods of most European cities, a connection emerges between political disenfranchisement and decreasing trust toward institutions and gentrification. This nexus is part and parcel of the current Housing Crises and not simply an incidental outcome of new spatial rescaling in European cities.



Gentrification, fragmentation and disenfranchisement. Visualisation by Lilit Zeltsburg.

THE FAR RIGHT AND THE DESTRUCTION OF NEIGHBOURHOODS

The disempowerment of populations most acutely affected by the Housing Crises is not a neutral political phenomenon. Rather, it is a development that works to the direct detriment of a stable democratic society. It has been suggested that by erasing existing social differentiation by pricing out lower-income members of a community, gentrification processes disrupt the emergence and exchange of social perspectives in a democratic society. As a result, an important avenue of democratic communication is erased. Furthermore, individuals within a community are increasingly surrounded by people who are similar to them in terms of socio-economic status and cultural capital. This leads to a steady decrease in differentiated solidarity, that is, the solidarity felt between individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds. Differentiated solidarity allows for and affirms individual difference and otherness without necessitating assimilation, while also assuming a degree of community connection and opposition to exclusion and segregation. Without differentiated solidarity, formerly diverse communities, having become bubbles of homogeneity, no longer feel any urgency to consider the needs of those who are unlike them.²⁰

When the atomisation of formerly diverse communities is combined with economic disenfranchisement, this leads to an increase in populist sentiments and votes for radical parties, particularly on the right.²¹ These neighbourhoods are not only marked by gentrification, as discussed in the previous section, but also by the consequences of austerity and public service deprivation, resulting in lower trust in institutions and in society at large.²² Researchers have proposed that a sense of isolation from the other people in one's neighbourhood, shrinking possibilities for democratic participation and a feeling of being neglected by traditional politics contribute to voters in lower-income neighbourhoods moving increasingly to the far right.²³ Alarming,

the causes of this political and ideological shift are self-reinforcing, leading to a vicious cycle of disempowered populations feeling isolated, voting for parties that profit from their continued isolation and growing all the more disempowered.

While this does not necessarily and automatically lead to increasing support for the far right, there are indications that mainstream left-wing parties have underappreciated this phenomenon. In turn, this has left peripheral neighbourhoods without political representation and, when ongoing, people's struggles against gentrification have remained unrepresented at the institutional level. In fact, there is a common perception of mainstream left-wing parties as having "abandoned" neighbourhoods to gentrification and its related issues.²⁴ In his ethnographic research, Mullis notes that residential areas in Frankfurt, where renovations of the housing stock were carried out in a socially progressive manner, the SPD and The Left remained strong, and the community of residents seemed to be more active and engaged.²⁵ However, where residential units were modernised and smaller flats merged to create bigger ones with higher rents, the AfD has shown increasingly improving results since the 2017 federal elections. In Ireland, too, where the housing crisis is a driving force in domestic politics, neighbourhood riots over the past few years have been motivated by the scarcity of council housing and egged on by claims that council housing is given to foreigners.²⁶ In parts of the Netherlands and in Belgium's Flemish cities of Gent and Antwerp, the far-right parties Vlaams Belang and the Dutch PVV have carried out "islamsafaris" to demonstrate that non-Dutch and non-Flemish communities are slowly but surely taking over Western "autochthonous" (native) society, which is politically presented in opposition to the "allochthonous" (non-native) inhabitants.²⁷

This process of division is furthered by the ideological character of far-right ideologies, which divide society into two antagonistic groups: the “pure, real” people, who are negatively affected by gentrification, and the “corrupt elites”, who profit from “replacing” native communities with migrants. The fact that far-right parties connect the concept of “liveability” to the mere presence of people from ethnic minorities or with a migration background in a particular city or neighbourhood likewise fits into this populist division of society. Illustratively, one of the most prominent far-right local parties in the Netherlands is named *Leefbaar Rotterdam* (Liveable Rotterdam). The political heritage of infamous far-right politician Pim Fortuyn, the party is a staunch opponent of migration, LGBTQIA+ rights, and diversity and inclusion policies, among other things, and a proponent of a number of gentrification measures. As previously stated, gentrification is seen as essential to “liveability” by governments,

and the far right subsequently exploits this nexus.²⁸ In this way, for *Leefbaar Rotterdam* – as for far-right parties across Europe – the “housing crisis” is a narrative element of a broader nativist and anti-elite discourse, in which they act as defenders of the “real” people against a corrupt system that supposedly fails or even actively refuses to protect their interests. This vision of the Housing Crises diverts attention from structural issues like stagnant wages, real-estate speculation, insufficient and unsuitable housing supply, and elimination of community spaces. Their subsequent support for privatisation and deregulation ultimately deepens social divisions and expands the discursive space in which far-right actors can continue to gain political influence.

HOUSING AND LIVING: EXAMPLES FROM EUROPEAN CITIES

Historically, the response of progressive and social actors to housing crises across Europe and beyond has come in the form of policy reform to standardise the minimum quality of housing and mass-scale planning and construction of public housing. At the start of the 20th century, workers and working-class families in cities lived in terrible conditions. Overcrowded houses with little to no light, ventilation and hygiene facilities led to the spread of disease and worsened health overall, and tenants were at the mercy of the whims of their landlords. In the period leading up to and especially following the First World War, governments took various measures to increase the supply of high-quality housing for workers. In the Netherlands, the first Housing Law was passed in 1901. The new law set minimum standards for the quality of newly built housing, prohibited construction without a permit, allowed municipal governments to demand that landlords renovate their properties under threat of expropriation and tasked the government with providing funds to non-profit organisations for the construction of social housing. This law led to a boom in the creation of social housing that not only drastically improved the living conditions and general wellbeing of workers,

but also resulted in the development of one of the most famous styles of architecture in Dutch history, the so-called Amsterdam School. Most architects associated with this movement were either socialists or, at the very least, inspired by socialism, and they incorporated utopian ideals into their designs. As part of the radical urban expansion plans under socialist alderman Florentinus Wibaut, they built new neighbourhoods comprising thousands of apartments in unique complexes that were described as “workers’ palaces”, with intricate ornamentation and avant-garde shapes along streets with ample greenery and shared facilities, such as bathhouses and libraries.²⁹ The impact of this movement, where city planners and architects embraced the conviction that public housing for the working class needed to be beautiful, comfortable and innovative, rather than austere and simply functional, continues to inspire Dutch progressive political actors to this day. In their campaign for the 2025 national elections, the leftist party GroenLinks-PvdA released a promotional video with the slogan “Building is part of our DNA” that heavily featured footage of Het Schip, arguably the most famous example of Amsterdam School architecture.³⁰



Social housing complex Het Schip, Amsterdam. Photos by Lilit Zeltsburg

Compared to other European countries, regulated rental housing occupies a relatively large share of the total housing market in the Netherlands. Housing-corporation-owned properties accounted for 28.2% of the total stock in 2025. 57.5% of the total stock consists of privately owned homes, with the remaining 14.3% consisting of non-corporation-owned rental units. This balance varies widely across different municipalities. In Amsterdam, for example, 39.2% of the total stock was rented out by housing corporations in 2025 and 30.8% was privately owned. In Utrecht, one of the four largest cities in the country, housing corporations own 30.6% of units while 44.8% are privately owned. In the mid-sized city of Apeldoorn, those rates are 27.7% and 60.2%, respectively.³¹ As a result of government policies stimulating the buying of homes, homeownership grew significantly in the country in the latter half of the 20th century, an increase that also pushed the price of housing into an upward spiral to a point where increasing the supply of housing has only a modest effect on the price. This also led to a decrease in the construction of public housing in favour of homes intended for individual sale. As a result, people who qualify for social housing often have to wait over a decade before they can actually be assigned a home.³²

In comparison, the housing system in Vienna, also known as the Vienna Model, is seen as an example for other cities. Following the end of the First World War, the social democratic city government of Vienna bought large swathes of land and built tens of thousands of municipal housing complexes known as *Gemeindebauten* along the principles of affordability, quality and social cohesion, during a period that earned the name “Red Vienna”. Every housing unit was built to include a kitchen, at least one bedroom, a toilet, natural light and ventilation, and while the earlier housing complexes did not include a bathroom in every unit, bathhouses were constructed for communal use. Other communal spaces were also included in the building plans, such as libraries, kindergartens, theatres, sports facilities and spaces for shops. The acquisition of land and construction of more than 60,000 housing units was financed in large part using progressive taxes on private housing construction and luxury

spending.³³ After the fascist takeover in 1934 and World War II, the creation of new public housing was part of the reconstruction of the city. Currently, around three quarters of the population of Vienna lives in rental homes, while a minority of homes are owned by their occupants. Of the rental properties, social housing comprises the majority and is owned either by the municipality or by limited-profit housing corporations. Social housing is spread throughout every district of the city, ensuring a greater degree of internal diversity and less economic divisions between neighbourhoods than in many other cities. Because public housing is heavily regulated, high quality and accessible to people of different income brackets (around 75% of Vienna’s inhabitants qualify for social housing), the private rental market has to compete with social housing on price and quality, which results in the dampening of prices on the private rental market.³⁴ As more housing has been needed for the inhabitants of the city, Vienna has continued to develop new housing within and on the edges of the city. An example of this is the district of Seestadt, which is currently in development on territory that had previously served as an airfield and is expected to house some 25,000 people.³⁵

Despite its success, the Vienna Model forms the exception rather than the rule in Europe when it comes to upholding large-scale public housing development as a permanent element of housing policy. Following periods of the planning and construction of large-scale housing projects, the neoliberal turn in Europe in the 1990s brought changes in the way of thinking about housing across the political spectrum. Neoliberalism is understood here as a philosophy in which the state is seen as crucial to the facilitation of the capitalist free market, and the government is expected to provide only those goods or services which the market would under-produce.³⁶ In many places, the development and regulation of housing and public space were no longer seen as a common good and were increasingly surrendered to private market actors. In the Netherlands, the housing corporations that had built a large share of the country’s housing stock were privatised in 1995, when it was announced that, as the housing shortage had been resolved, government funding and regulation was no longer needed.³⁷ Along with

other areas of people's lives that had previously been supported by the welfare state, housing and the management of community life became a matter of "participation", that is, primarily the social, practical and financial responsibility of individuals.

Decades later, as a new housing shortage emerged alongside other facets of the Housing Crises, it became apparent that, contrary to the optimistic thinking of the 1990s, the question of housing had not been resolved for good after all, and political intervention continued to be needed. In fact, the now-privatised housing corporations were revealed to be plagued by fraud, corruption and mismanagement.³⁸ Still, in the meantime, the "participation society" has resulted in a number of local and/or grassroots initiatives aimed at mitigating the effects of the Housing Crises. For example, the city of Amsterdam stimulates the independent collective development of housing through so-called "housing cooperatives". These cooperatives consist of individuals who agree to collectively finance the acquisition of land and design and construction of housing which they themselves then rent and inhabit. The first initiatives of this kind have already been constructed and more are currently under construction. One of the first projects to open was De Nieuwe Meent, with 40 social housing units, the majority of which are reserved for "living groups" or communes.³⁹ The occupants manage the facility democratically through collective decision-making, including voting about new prospective renters. Not only does the complex boast a wealth of shared spaces, including a garden, a rooftop terrace for growing crops, laundry facilities and an event hall, but its construction also relies on progressive ecological principles and it is equipped with solar panels, making the entire complex energy-positive, as it generates more energy than its inhabitants consume.⁴⁰ Construction of three other cooperative housing projects with a total of 151 units began in 2025, and the construction of four with a total of 250 units is expected to begin in 2026. In late January 2026, in a letter to the municipal council of Amsterdam, the aldermen in charge of public housing and construction reported that, despite the worsened conditions for housing cooperatives due to rising construction costs, the

city government intends to continue to offer financial support to these initiatives.⁴¹

Community-led housing alternatives exist in other places, too. Gent hosts a number of (experimental) projects aimed at helping gentrified communities, homeless individuals and others in precarious situations to access high-quality housing units. In 2022, the Gent department of the social rights organisation SAAMO created a pilot project to tackle homelessness by using temporarily vacant land to provide a temporary housing unit and adequate support to guide residents back to the regular housing market. Originally consisting of three units and a communal space, the pilot was expanded to a total of five units in 2023. After encouraging results, in 2026, SAAMO Gent announced that it was in talks with the city government to continue the project.⁴² SAAMO also joined the *Woonzaak* (Housing Suit), a complaint against the Belgian government's housing policies presented to the European Committee for Social Rights, along with dozens of other Belgian organisations.⁴³ Finally, SAAMO Gent initiated the community land trust CLT Gent, the first of its kind in Flanders. A community land trust allows people to buy a home without having to also buy the land, because the land is owned and managed by the community. The first CLT Gent construction project consisted of 34 units reserved for buyers in the lowest income bracket and was completed in late 2024. Following the completion of this project, CLT Gent continued as an independent organisation and is now working on new projects aimed at improving the living conditions of people in the city, as well as further spreading the community land trust model.⁴⁴

While bottom-up, grassroots initiatives for collective construction and habitation are certainly laudable, and housing cooperatives like the ones in Amsterdam can be an appealing concept, they also have a crucial flaw in their exclusivity. These kinds of initiatives are comparatively small in scale and often carried by people who have the time, means, expertise, network and social capital to guide the project to completion, and the utilisation of the resulting spaces is subsequently almost entirely reserved for these same people. In contrast, government-

planned, top-down social housing complexes are open to anyone who qualifies for social housing, with little to no expectation of individual investment in the realisation of the project from the inhabitants. In a way, such grassroots initiatives can actually lay bare and underline existing inequalities in a neighbourhood, rather than contributing to its social cohesion. An example of this could be seen in Spangen, a neighbourhood in Rotterdam, where the creative collective *Dichterlijke Vrijheid* (Poetic Freedom) were allowed to move into dilapidated houses for free on the condition that they personally invested in the renovation of these properties. Other people with similar income already living in the neighbourhood did not receive this opportunity for (almost) free housing and complained that they were too busy working their regular jobs to apply for subsidies to improve their surroundings the way *Dichterlijke Vrijheid* was doing. This inequality was experienced as unfairness: while the economic circumstances of the two groups of neighbourhood-dwellers were generally equally matched, one group had the network and social capital to be able to self-organise and was rewarded for it, while the other felt neglected.⁴⁵ It follows that, while bottom-up initiatives for housing development can offer promising results, they need to exist in a context where there is also a steady and ample supply of top-down housing to avoid exacerbating existing social and class divisions in neighbourhoods.

The creation of high-quality housing for the working class through large-scale construction projects is undeniably a historically effective and immensely impactful achievement for socialist and progressive political actors. While readopting this strategy may be appropriate and necessary in some places, there are also cases in which new large-scale construction is out of the question for environmental, spatial or legal reasons. To this end, policymakers can attempt (and have attempted) to regulate the use of existing housing stock and available inner-city space, especially in (traditionally) working-class neighbourhoods. Interventions such as reserving certain units for specific groups of renters or specific types of activity, diversifying the available supply of housing and renovating housing units – as well as streets and other public spaces to

restructure the movement and activity of individuals in neighbourhoods – can be applied in different ways and lead to different results. However, some of these interventions, whether they originate from policymakers, non-governmental organisations or grassroots initiatives, have paradoxically deepened the Housing Crises and their effects on the everyday lives of residents. Community strategist, political scientist and nightlife activist Freek Wallagh points out that when conceptualising “liveable cities”, conservative and progressive actors use different words and means to arrive at the same conclusion:

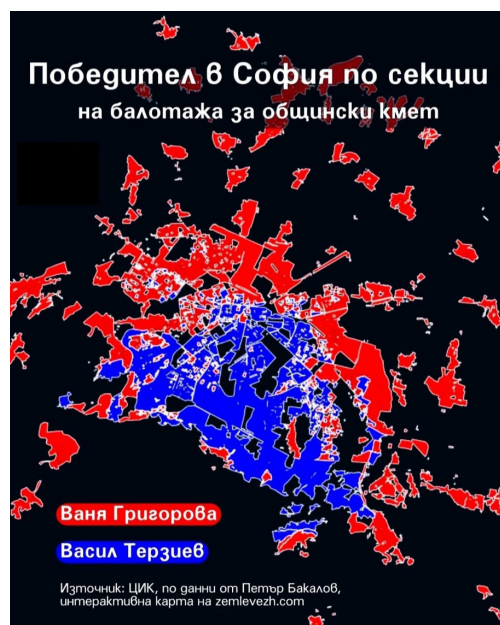
“Liveable neighbourhoods’ are calm, quiet, clean and inhabited by residents with a certain normative middle class lifestyle. The assumption is that deep down, everyone wants to and should live that way, and people either need help to be able to do so or they need to be corrected for deviating from the middle class ideal. But for the most part, life in cities has never been like that, and that is exactly why cities have always been a safe haven, and indeed a home, for so many people.”⁴⁶

This observation illustrates the underlying logic of gentrification processes, whereby interventions to “improve” neighbourhoods may, intentionally or not, target the manifestation of behaviour that is deemed deviant and objectionable, instead of improving the living conditions of inhabitants. The result of such interventions is that neighbourhoods are made more desirable by making it economically or socially undesirable, or even impossible, for their residents to continue living the way they do.

This dynamic can also be seen in Sofia. There, the *Kvartal Arts Festival* and the *Rivers of Sofia* projects, which aimed to turn the older areas of the city centre and the artificial river beds into accessible places with cultural, natural and social value, have had negative impacts on the residential areas. Both initiatives led to the commercialisation of the areas without addressing the question of housing and related issues of conviviality in the long run. Paradoxically, the original identity of the areas has been distorted, even while attempting to preserve

the heritage of the leftist and socialist tradition of urban planning and housing.⁴⁷ New projects have so far had the effect of accelerating gentrification rather than stimulating new progressive forces and up-to-date policy plans to tackle gentrification and related issues. At the same time, however, grassroots initiatives campaigning for a “just city” have also led to better examples of urban and grassroots resistance, such as in the district of Musagenitsa, against the destruction of a local green space.⁴⁸ After a decade of self-organised demonstrations and petitions, campaigners succeeded in halting the construction of a 35-metre-high building complex, and inspired similar actions in the districts of Studentski Grad, Zona B5 and Opalchenska.

Unlike in Belgium and Germany, Bulgaria’s leftist actors and progressive voices are either accused of being tied to and sympathising with the political ideology of the former dictatorship, namely, the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In this regard, Vasil Terziev’s electoral victory against socialist opponent Vanya Grigorova, in the 2023 election runoff in Sofia, turned out to highlight the profound intra-city divisions in the Bulgarian capital. Most votes for Grigorova were cast in the peripheral areas of Sofia, while the centre-right and liberal candidate gained consensus in the central areas with transformations underway in the most outlying districts.



Voter turnout in Sofia: red areas for Grigorova, blue for Terziev.⁴⁹

After successive waves of post-socialist urban configuration of Bulgaria’s major cities, the opaque state-run management of urban development has not managed to curb the rampant depopulation of the country.⁵⁰ Conversely, it has convinced homeowners to keep their properties empty, available only to the emigrant offspring once they occasionally return home. While the growing number of vacant housing units in residential areas has turned residential peripheral areas into ghost spaces of lost community

life, the state-run restructuring of the old city centre and nearby neighbourhoods and residential areas has led to a series of real-estate frauds from 2011 to 2020 and the disruption of the fabric of urban society.⁵¹

Vacant properties and “ghost spaces” have become an intractable part of the Housing Crises in other places, too. In the Netherlands, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) reports on the amount of vacant

properties in a yearly monitor.⁵² According to the CBS, in 2025, almost 18 million square metres of property were vacant, the equivalent of 200,000 apartments. Of these properties are around 50,000 apartments situated above shops in city centres, that is, in some of the most popular and sought-after, as well as gentrified, neighbourhoods. Yet, it is often more profitable to leave these properties vacant than to redevelop them into housing. There are several reasons for this. In the aforementioned shopping areas in the Netherlands, the owners of the properties are either the companies operating international retail chains or those renting from commercial property management companies. In both cases, it is sufficiently profitable to allow the business to use and modify the building in ways that make parts of it uninhabitable, for example, by closing the access to upper floors to create more shopping space. In other cases, the development of new housing in existing vacant properties can be impeded by existing zoning plans. In some cases, these can be modified, but this process can be lengthy and costly as local governments, businesses and private individuals can formally protest against new development plans. Finally, there are instances in which leaving properties vacant can be profitable in and of itself as a form of speculation. Sometimes, buildings with a protected status are intentionally allowed to deteriorate so that they can be demolished and the land can be redeveloped for more profitable uses. In other cases, the owners of properties such as hotels will simply leave them vacant indefinitely, waiting for the most profitable moment to redevelop or sell the building.

Vacant property is also a persistent factor in the Housing Crises in Paris. According to Nathan Abou, advisor to the First Deputy Mayor of Paris, the demand for housing is at a record high, whereas the supply on the private housing market is at a record low. Furthermore, the city cannot build any more housing units, as its territory is already fully occupied, and the construction of high rises is prohibited as part of the city's efforts to combat and adapt to climate change. At the same time, at 2.1 million, the city's population is far from its record of 3.2 million in the early 20th century. The primary issue, then, is the

nearly 300,000 unoccupied housing units.⁵³ Almost half of these units are structurally uninhabited, whereas the other half consists of secondary housing and short-term rentals through online platforms. With regards to the latter category, the city has undertaken efforts to return these properties to the market. It has introduced regulations on short-term rentals by forbidding tenants to sublet their unit without formal approval from the landlord, requiring anyone renting out their property online to register with the city, capping the number of days a primary residency may be rented out per year and obligating owners of secondary residencies to request that their short-term rental properties be registered as places of commerce instead of housing. However, with regards to the former category, Abou notes that approximately 145,000 housing units that are structurally uninhabited are owned by extremely wealthy people as a positional good, apparently for the sake of "being able to tell their wealthy friends they own a flat in Paris the way they would own a Rolex".⁵⁴ Since these properties are not rented out, they are not affected by rental regulations, and therefore, a different policy approach is required.

In the aforementioned cases, it is easier, more prestigious or more profitable to allow habitable buildings to sit empty than to fully utilise the available space for housing. It follows that in these cases, creating housing must be encouraged and the ownership of vacant properties must be made more expensive than profitable. In the Netherlands, several political parties have proposed measures to penalise the abandonment or vacancy of property. One of these measures is a so-called vacancy tax, which would see the owners of vacant properties pay a yearly tax until they can demonstrate that they are taking measures to return the properties to use. This policy is already in place in many municipalities in Flanders, such as in Mechelen, where both vacancy and dilapidation are taxed with a fee that increases for each year of continuing abandonment.⁵⁵ The municipality has seen a steep decline in revenue from this tax since its introduction, which indicates a correlated increase in the redevelopment and use of formerly vacant or abandoned properties. In Paris, too, to discourage the ownership of property purely

as a symbol of status, the city has been lobbying the national parliament for the right to introduce prohibitive vacancy taxes.

The problematisation of vacancy cannot be separated from the practice of squatting. While the act itself is seen as an assault on private property, and therefore, illegal in many European countries, the phenomenon of squatting must be understood as an urban social movement. Urban sociologist Miguel A. Martínez López defines squatting as

“an urban movement in which there is a close connection between a broad range of political activities (meetings, demonstrations, direct actions, campaigning, etc.) and a practical development of collective self-management on many dimensions of life. These include the rehabilitation of buildings, the sharing of food and various resources, the ethics of do-it-yourself and mutual aid, the promotion of counter-cultural expressions and radical left ideas, etc.”⁵⁷

Significantly, squatting challenges urban housing speculation and the immutability of individual property rights by “returning” space to the community, often not only for shelter but also for social interaction and cultural expression. In and around Amsterdam, many venues now seen as central to the cultural identity of the city originated in the squatting scene. Locations such as Vrankrijk, OCCII and the former shipyard NDSM were squatted and later legalised; the village of Ruigoord, squatted in 1973, continues to exist as an artists’ village and “cultural free haven” to this day.⁵⁸

In this light, the 2010 ban on squatting in the Netherlands is seen as a painful development by local activists. The criminalisation of squatters’ movements and the act of squatting highlights the supremacy of property rights over the right to housing by punishing the use of vacant space, instead of punishing the withdrawal of habitable space from the public, according to Freek Wallagh. He recalls an incident where a group of squatters, who intended to transform the abandoned building they had squatted into a communal meeting

place, found that the owner had made the space uninhabitable on purpose to make it more difficult to squat:

“We see this a lot, that property owners invest a lot of energy into making their empty buildings un-squattable or just let them deteriorate so nobody wants to squat them. So there are uninhabited buildings full of anti-squatting obstacles at a time when thousands of people are looking for a home or a community space.”⁵⁹

In contrast, squatted spaces can be seen as a form of a communal reclaiming of the city. According to Wallagh, in the urban context, the squatting scene contributes to creating an organic community in which musicians, artists and other creators thrive and which shapes the spirit of the neighbourhood. Because of this, in Amsterdam, as well as in other cities, squatting has been a form of “emancipation from below”.⁶⁰

Naturally, social and political engagement with the question of housing is not limited to the squatters’ movement, but shared by other civil society actors. While Germany’s civil society engagement appears as a middle-class “German” thing, a myriad of different grassroots actions are enacted by activists from the cities of Bremen and Dortmund who have been interviewed.⁶¹ The struggle for connecting the “struggle for the house” with that for workers’ rights, and the reverse, could be seen in the Marxloh neighbourhood of Duisburg. There, the independent volunteer organisation Stolipinovo in Europa, founded by a group of migrants, activists and researchers, mobilised thousands of workers at the ThyssenKrupp factory to demand better labour conditions in the wake of the workplace death of Refat Süleyman.⁶²

At Solidarisch in Gröpelingen, a local neighbourhood union (*Stadtteilgewerkschaft*) in Bremen, disenfranchised residents, mostly with a common migration background, have been supported to partake in class actions at Job Centres. In the grassroots campaigns against the intra-city systemic racism and far-right violence coupled with

labour exploitation, activists who were interviewed have lamented that the Housing Crises are not only interconnected with democratic practices of political participation but also the lack thereof.⁶³ Against this backdrop, *Solidarisch in Gröpelingen's* recursive campaign at the Job Centre elucidates similar ideas and/or phenomena across other European contexts. The activists have recently begun to cooperate with other emerging neighbourhood networks in several German cities, such as Oldenburg, Jena, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Berlin, as well as in Nijmegen, Amsterdam and Groningen in the Netherlands.⁶⁴ In an attempt to share information at the grassroots level about their expertise in worker's rights and neighbourhood activism, they seek to build an organised social movement where people's voices can resonate, despite divisions, different political goals or language. The desired result is a broader and stronger series of local initiatives supporting a wealth of neighbourhood communities in the pursuit and exercise of their rights. They often speak of alternative forms of living against the backdrop of the neoliberal restructuring of cities, providing opportunities for enacting transnational postulates of solidarity and class action against the shortage of houses and the deprivation (or denial) of the right to housing.

Progressive activist engagement with the housing question, especially in low-income or gentrifying neighbourhoods, also comes in the wake of the perceived disengagement of left-wing

political parties from these neighbourhoods. As expanded previously, the far right capitalises on the vacuum left by the left's inability to respond to the Housing Crises on a grassroots level.⁶⁵ Gent is instructive in understanding how every resident is somehow affected by gentrification.⁶⁶ While most neighbourhood collectives invite locals and residents to transform their (high level of) disenfranchisement into political activism, most socialist representatives and progressive voices no longer live in gentrifying neighbourhoods. This political absence impinges on their political credibility at the local level and confirms the long-lasting decoupling of these representatives from gentrified neighbourhoods. Not only does this contribute to the political disenfranchisement of local inhabitants, but it also leaves a vacuum for the far right to exploit by addressing the "housing crisis" through nationalist and racist stances.

"We must admit that once we organised an event for 'rethinking the neighbourhood' [and] the only politicians who came were from the far-right groups in Gent. The local far right knows that the rental market is skyrocketing, and that young people struggle to buy an apartment; moreover, the far right also knows how to hit people's nerves: they focus on 'exotic neighbourhoods' where it is hard to deny high level of petty crime, poor living conditions and political disenfranchisement."⁶⁷



"Stop Replacement – Remigration" – an anonymous flyer in the (post) migrant-majority Rabot neighbourhood in Gent.
Photo by Francesco Trupia

In neighbourhoods such as Sleepstraat, Dampoort, Rabot and Brugse Poort, residents bear the brunt of the almost complete political disenfranchisement of the community. Meanwhile, far-right and conservative actors advance the interests of big corporations in the public sector by exploiting issues of housing and political disenfranchisement

disguised as criticism of illegal migration and the war in Ukraine, among others.⁶⁸ As a result, Gent's progressive identity and spirit are put into question.⁶⁹ Furthermore, skyrocketing housing prices and the unaffordable costs of renovating their own homes are also dividing low-income residents within local communities.



"Physical regeneration of real estate near Rabot, one of Gent's multicultural neighbourhoods.
Photo by Francesco Trupia

According to the scholars and practitioners interviewed, many progressive policymakers often overlook the structural issues that obstruct both sociality and the political alternatives for innovative housing policy, for example, the lack of public and accessible meeting spaces where residents come to know each other and address problems that unite rather than divide.⁷⁰ In this regard, the Housing Crises provide an opportunity to make room for new forms of political participation: it is, in other words, a perspective of untapped potential for housing the people while tackling the interlinked structural issues of living. In fact, the question of housing goes hand in hand with education and social rights, and, more importantly, with democracy and the rule of law. In Gent and Belgium in general, addressing the issues of scarce affordable housing concerns the direct application of constitutional rights to Belgian citizens.⁷¹

While the connection between the various Housing Crises and far-right campaigns may manifest

differently across Europe, this connection can clearly be seen in the intra-city dynamics in major Bulgarian and Belgian cities: far-right actors stigmatise people with low income, migration and minority backgrounds by rejecting their capacity to catch up with the new transformation of their places of residence. In an interestingly comparative perspective, the urban reorganisation of both Sofia and Gent includes a racist component that is often overlooked. Here, political disenfranchisement of city dwellers, which at times is driven by evictions from their places of residence, is not only the byproduct of urban replanning but also its first intention. In Sofia, for instance, the question of housing is coupled with the ongoing gentrification of Roma-majority areas, where state interventions disenfranchise local residents and deter political actions from emerging.⁷² Liberals and the far-right political party "Revival" employ xenophobic and racist campaigns in support of state-run practices of biopolitical population management that *enclose* and *reorder* spatial relations in Sofia. In other words,

in the context of retreating government support for communities in the context of the Housing Crises, right-wing and far-right groups step into the ensuing vacuum and capitalise on the discontent and disenfranchisement of increasingly atomised neighbourhoods.

Turning the tide of disenfranchisement in urban communities across Europe and increasing resistance to far-right narratives thus require the rebirth of solidarity in neighbourhoods. To this end, policymakers must defend neighbourhoods against the free market. The urban environment, particularly in the most popular cities in Europe, is not a level playing field, but one where local solidarity networks, cultural initiatives, protected housing and other actors driven by social rather than financial profit are at a permanent disadvantage. Directed regulation is needed to counter this disadvantage, for example, in the form of policies that require a certain amount of space be reserved for use by the community, be it for social functions, cultural expression or shelter. As Freek Wallagh explains,

"In general, we should see living less as something individual and permanent that you do within your own house and more as the sharing of public space. People buying up individual pockets of urban space and considering that bit of the city to be inalienably and permanently theirs is detrimental to the formation and existence of communities. It literally breaks up the city."⁷³

To protect the shared identity of neighbourhoods from gentrification and financialisation, he proposes that the use of the Agent of Change principle be expanded in urban planning, so that new actors must accept responsibility for the change they introduce in their environment. For instance, this would mean that new inhabitants of a lively neighbourhood must accept a certain degree of noise as part of their choice to move to that neighbourhood, instead of demanding that a pre-existing community upend its lifestyle for them. Another example of safeguarding neighbourhood identity is the reservation of space for protected categories of occupation. While De Pijp, a popular neighbourhood in Amsterdam, is heavily gentrified, it has also managed to preserve a strong local identity, in part due to the city's recently introduced policy of the protection of craftspeople. According to this policy, when a craftsperson decides to leave their workspace, the space is reserved for use by another craftsperson and is not simply returned to the market.⁷⁴

In summary, to keep the city together, policies are needed that establish housing and communal use as prioritised functions of available space. In other words, the right to live, interact and form networks of solidarity must be elevated above the right of property owners to profit from the ownership of habitable space. Only through the facilitation of communal use of urban space can networks of solidarity be (re-)built that inoculate communities against the instrumentalisation of their struggle by the far right.

CONCLUSION

Discussions on how to tackle the various problems related to housing are ubiquitous across the political spectrum. To remark on the salience of the topic would verge on cliché, were it not for the fact that this salience highlights the importance of formulating a vision of housing for the 21st century left. While there is a degree of consensus across the political spectrum about the fact that at least some measures should be taken to address issues related to housing, it appears that there is no unified progressive “take” on housing that is immediately recognisable as distinct from the conservative and liberal approach. Historically speaking, across Europe, the left’s response to Housing Crises often consisted of building new housing projects on a mass scale to raise the quality of life and lower the cost of housing for the working class. The merit of these projects cannot be understated, and many of them were not only effective in the most practical sense but also socially, politically and architecturally impactful. Yet, the left cannot afford to rest on its laurels, as parts of the present-day Housing Crises are direct outcomes of gentrification policies that the left itself either proposed or supported, sometimes in the very same neighbourhoods that the left had built generations earlier. Returning to policies from the past without critical evaluation of the inequalities that these policies may have caused or perpetuated carries the risk of simply continuing the unending cycle of ever-developing Housing Crises and further alienating anyone affected by their outcomes. Thus, the struggle to formulate a progressive vision on housing is not simply a matter of finding the right words to illuminate political campaigns: rather, it is the fundamental question of how progressives believe society should be built (figuratively and literally) and wealth and power should be distributed, which distinguishes the movement from other political movements.

This policy study has laid the groundwork for what a progressive vision of housing for the 21st century

can look like, based on both the left’s historical accomplishments with regard to housing and an analysis of current approaches and initiatives in response to the Housing Crises in different parts of Europe. In that sense, this vision is a “new” way of thinking about the future of housing that is rooted in progressive tradition, in the critical evaluation of its merits as well as its shortcomings and modern challenges. After all, understanding housing as a human right and a social good is not a new approach, but applying this understanding to the facets of the Housing Crises that we see today requires the ability to correctly identify these facets in their modern context. To this end, this policy study has demonstrated that, rather than simply a singular crisis of insufficient affordable habitable units, we are faced with multiple interconnected crises that intersect and interact in neighbourhoods. Feelings of disempowerment, disenfranchisement and distrust stem from an experience of being disconnected or displaced from one’s own neighbourhood by gentrification and stigmatisation. These feelings can – and often do – lead to increased support for far-right parties, which subsequently capitalise on this discontent by scapegoating minoritised communities instead of engaging with structural solutions to the Housing Crises. Conversely, the solidarity that is a necessary condition for resilient communities emerges from a feeling of shared responsibility for and belonging to the neighbourhood. Thus, more than just allocating sufficient housing units to inhabitants in need of shelter, the Housing Crises are felt, and therefore, must be addressed, at the neighbourhood and community level.

Left and progressive policymakers interested in further developing decisive and visionary housing policy based on this understanding of housing as a social good must be prepared to come to terms with a number of observations. First of all, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of top-

down interventions, where policymakers impose development and renewal plans on neighbourhoods under the assumption that they have the best possible perspective on what these neighbourhoods need. Instead, policymakers should complement their macro-scale analyses with insights from the inhabitants of neighbourhoods. It must be acknowledged that these insights cannot always be quantified. After all, how does one plot feelings of belonging or solidarity on a chart? Nevertheless, making a conscious effort to understand what makes a neighbourhood feel like a community, and a community like a home, is necessary for all those seriously concerned with fostering social cohesion. Second, policymakers must be willing to challenge the established paradigm of housing as the individualised division of space by the market. Instead, we can conceive of the urban landscape as a space that is flexibly and impermanently shared by all of its users: renters; homeowners; squatters; businesses; and visitors. Prioritising the health of the shared space requires that the right to access and use the space be distributed more fairly and that the local social, cultural and economic diversity be fostered, which ultimately benefits all of the

users of the space. Finally, policymakers at all levels must actively push to elevate the right to housing and the right to living above the right to extract profit from property ownership, thereby protecting communities from the pressures of the market. To that end, they must also accept the inevitability of political resistance from affluent property owners, as well as the established economic doctrine of the housing market, and be prepared to navigate this pushback.

While this radical reimagining of housing and redirecting the focus of the housing question from balancing market supply with demand to housing justice may require significant adjustments in policy outlook, the reward is very alluring: a framework that allows policymakers to address all present and emerging facets of the Housing Crises, combat the advance of far-right movements, and foster lively and resilient communities. In the context of the omnipresent pressures on democratic systems and social values, the road to these outcomes represents a more hopeful path forward.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the presented case analysis, we arrive at the following recommendations. While we believe all policymakers can benefit from the insights discussed above, these recommendations are aimed in particular at policymakers looking to inform their work from a progressive vision that prioritises social and economic justice. The recommendations are divided along different levels of policy: local; national; and European. We recognise that some of the recommended policies may not be immediately implementable in all places and situations. We see this fact not as a limitation, but as a reflection of the diversity and disparity of the effects of the Housing Crises. Therefore, wherever possible, we emphasise the importance of allowing space for local and grassroots initiatives that prioritise residents' immediate needs.

Local

- **Identify and protect actors that fulfil crucial social and cultural roles in neighbourhoods.** Locally owned small businesses, artisans, youth clubs and cultural venues, among others, are crucial meeting places and sites where both older and newer residents can contribute to the community. Neighbourhood identity and solidarity are inextricably linked with the presence of these actors. At the same time, these actors cannot compete with larger investors and real-estate speculators. This is why policymakers must proactively and intentionally adopt policies that recognise the importance of these actors.
- **Involve residents in discussions on the "improvement" of their neighbourhood and prioritise their interests.** The best experts on "liveable" neighbourhoods are the people who live in them. Any outcome in which residents would not be able to continue living and participating

in their community should be considered undesirable. Residents' rights to remain in or return to their neighbourhood, even after necessary renovations, must be enshrined and enforced at all levels. Furthermore, gentrification is not only a form of housing displacement, but also a phenomenon that can, intentionally or otherwise, disproportionately affect people with a migration background or from cultural or religious minorities. Policymakers must deliberately consider and protect these communities' ability to continue to participate in the communal life of their neighbourhood.

- **Impose rules on vacant properties.** It is unacceptable that there are people who do not have access to housing and people who profit from owning property that is structurally vacant. At the same time, squatters are penalised for seeking shelter in abandoned buildings. The burden of guilt must be reversed. This can be done by making it prohibitively expensive to speculate on property value by keeping a building vacant instead of developing spaces for businesses or housing. Where the owner of a vacant building cannot be found, local governments should be able to seize the property and develop housing themselves.
- **Prioritise the creation of social and affordable rental housing in local development plans.** In setting standards for new construction projects, whether they be carried out by public or private actors, policymakers should aim to significantly increase the availability of affordable rental homes for a large segment of the population. By making rental homes more easily accessible and appealing, especially in urban environments, policymakers can improve mobility on the housing market and counteract gentrification.

- **Keep money in communities.** Require that real-estate developers (re)invest a significant proportion of their revenue from newly developed properties in the community. This helps prevent real-estate speculation and ensures that neighbourhoods receive regular upkeep, diminishing the need for later large-scale “improvement” projects.
- **Establish and maintain regular formal and informal contact with housing activists and neighbourhood organisations.** Policymakers must remember that political trust and solidarity decrease in neighbourhoods when people perceive that the government is receding from them. Far-right activists capitalise on and even amplify these sentiments. Interaction with housing activists, neighbourhood organisations and other local initiatives helps directly counteract the decrease in political trust and offers policymakers a valuable source of information, helping them to develop new policies.
- **Allow for opportunities to address challenges on a case-by-case basis.** Not all problems can – or should – be fixed through changes in policy. Policymakers should be prepared to tackle issues through negotiation, mediation and exception, where needed. This does not negate the requirement for equal treatment under the law for all people. Rather, this approach allows policymakers to give due consideration to the needs, wishes and initiatives of communities when these are not or cannot be covered by policy. This also creates opportunities for creative and innovative solutions to long-standing community challenges.

National

- **Construct housing strategies around the creation of (diverse) neighbourhoods.** The Housing Crises will not be remedied solely by the construction of more habitable units. To flourish, communities need meeting places,

schools, cultural venues, access to medical and social services, and other sites of interaction for different groups of people. Some of these sites can be planned, for example, by including schools, hospitals and spaces for businesses in development plans. However, it is also important to dedicate funding and allow for spaces where community culture can develop in accordance with the needs of residents. This organic development of neighbourhood culture(s) is part of the solution to the Housing Crises, not an obstacle or inconvenience. Policymakers must insist on the need to include these facilities in the construction of new housing projects.

- **Enshrine equal rights and protections for renters and homeowners in national law as much as possible.** Housing is a human right, but one that is not protected equally for all humans. Institute strict limitations on eviction. Equalise tax breaks and exemptions for renters and homeowners when all other conditions are equal. Where possible and relevant, consider rent payments in the same way as mortgage payments in the evaluation of individuals’ financial profiles.
- **Encourage renting over owning property as a strategy for a healthy housing market.** Homeownership has historically often been seen as a guarantor of economic stability and upward mobility. However, in many places, the ability to purchase property is one of the biggest markers of social and economic inequality. Increases in homeownership are associated with increased housing prices for everyone. Furthermore, homeownership discourages mobility on the housing market. Especially in times of housing scarcity, this means that people are unwilling or unable to move between houses to better suit their needs, and limited space is not used efficiently. By contrast, a housing market where renting is as financially and socially appealing as owning one’s home can be regulated more effectively. Governments can thus intervene more readily to affect the cost, quality and availability of housing.

- **Regulate all rent for all income levels.** While it is evident that not all property can or should be rented out for the same price, clear and transparent rules on how rent should be calculated are beneficial on all fronts. These standards can be applied in accordance with the local context and in tandem with the strengthening of renters' rights.
- **Recognise diverse forms of living under law.** Zoning laws and rules pertaining to who is and is not a recognised resident have historically affected and continue to affect people whose lifestyle is seen as illegitimate or even reprehensible. This is acutely visible in many countries' discriminatory treatment of Sinti, Roma and traveller communities, but also in laws limiting other forms of communal living or squatting in response to abandonment. Communities must not be problematised, stigmatised or criminalised for their choice to live differently from the normalised majority. On the contrary, initiatives such as communally owned building cooperatives are an example of community solidarity that should serve as inspiration for how to counter the Housing Crises. While people's right and access to "conventional" housing must be guaranteed, the choice to live differently must also be respected.
- **Allocate resources to amenities such as public transportation outside "big cities".** In many places, both the benefits and burdens of urbanisation are not distributed fairly. Capitals and other major metropolitan areas are well-connected by public transport, while smaller cities and rural areas struggle to keep what connections they have, let alone expand their interconnectivity. By deliberately allocating resources to connect urban and rural areas, the pressure from the concentration of people, capital and movement will be relieved from metropolitan areas, while "medium cities" and rural areas will benefit from new investments.

European

- **Recognise the right to housing and protection from displacement as a fundamental human right in European law.** Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that "Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence."⁷⁵ This article states that people have the right to privacy and respect in their own home, but not that people have the right to have a home. Similarly, the European pillar of social rights promises social housing or housing assistance "for those in need", but not the right to (adequate) housing in itself.⁷⁶ The right to housing and the responsibility of governments to provide housing are recognised in the constitutions of several EU member states. Policymakers should strive to codify this in European law as well.
- **Review European fiscal frameworks and state-aid rules to allow national investments in housing to be qualified as non-discretionary spending.** In many member states, European fiscal rules act as an obstacle to state investment in public housing. Removing this obstacle both underscores the importance of investing in housing as a priority and encourages member states to develop policies to increase the housing stock. This is also in line with recommendations formulated in the European Housing Action Plan put forward by the Mayors for Housing Alliance.⁷⁷
- **Mandate that residential construction projects which receive EU funding must include social and affordable housing.** Although creating a unified definition of social and affordable housing may not be feasible, considering the widely diverse landscape of housing policy in European member states, the EU can stimulate the development of social and affordable housing in accordance with member states' own definitions and standards by adjusting the requirements for European funding. This

recommendation can be implemented within the pillars of the European Affordable Housing Plan, as presented in December 2025.⁷⁸

- **Regulate international real-estate investors.** Housing in Europe is a common good, not a profit-making machine. While private investment in housing can contribute to addressing facets of the Housing Crises, in many parts of the EU, international real-estate investors capitalise on housing shortages by extracting value from renters. The regulation of predatory real-estate speculation must go further than just identifying speculative behaviour, promoting transparency and encouraging member states to limit speculative behaviour in their own housing markets. In this respect, the EU's single market is a great strength, as it allows the EU to set standards for potentially exploitative non-EU real-estate investors.

- **Assess where European legislation may inhibit the development of social and affordable housing.** The measures outlined in the European Affordable Housing Plan are a promising first step in this respect. Still, the question of how European policies may be negatively affecting member states' ambitions to create more diverse, high-quality and affordable housing stock and neighbourhoods warrants further scrutiny. For example, in the Netherlands, the housing corporations responsible for the construction of social housing are required to pay the same corporate tax as for-profit real-estate investors. It is worthwhile to investigate and outline instances where European policies may have unintended negative outcomes, so that these policies can be amended and future policies can be improved.

ENDNOTES

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This policy study highlights the intersection of gentrification and the rise of the far right in gentrified and contested cities, departing from the observation that the current housing crises play a critical role in the rise of far-right sentiments in urban areas. It explores how broader urban challenges facing the EU are played out at the junction of gentrification, socio-economic inequalities and social fragmentation. These dynamics have disproportionately impacted marginalised communities by shrinking their spaces of political participation while simultaneously creating fertile ground for support for far-right actors. To address these issues, the policy study advocates for local, national and European Union level policy interventions aimed at counteracting the adverse effects of gentrification, improving the availability and accessibility of housing, and revitalising communities. It analyses interventions on different levels with a focus on the reassessment of the potential for policies that affect housing, mandating the preservation and expansion of social housing across member states, and including anti-displacement regulations to protect vulnerable populations from speculative real-estate practices.

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