



Interdisciplinary Conference on  
European Advanced Studies

# IDEAS

*Inequality and the European Union. New frontiers  
in European Studies.*

**15-17 May, 2024**

**Housing Justice in Europe:  
Addressing Inequality through  
Affordable Housing**

**POLICY BRIEF**

by Laura Schmeer



## Policy Brief on the IDEAS24 Policy Panel ‘Affordable Housing and (In)equality in the European Union’



‘Housing is a human right.’ This principle, upheld by international human rights law, is far from the reality for many Europeans struggling to keep a roof over their heads. Because of persisting inflation and rising energy costs, housing prices have enormously increased: average rents in Europe went up by 19 % over the past decade and house prices by an impressive 47 %. This, along with a shortage of social and affordable housing, has caused a **European housing crisis**.

The decrease in investment in the housing sector since the financial crisis and the ‘airbnbification’ (i.e. the growing number of short-term rentals) in urban and tourist areas further degrade the situation. Today, people spend a growing proportion of their income on mortgages or rent. Equally troubling, nearly half of tenants in the private renting market fear they might lose their homes due to their inability to pay the rent. In short, housing and, more generally, the cost of living has become a pressing issue affecting ever more people in more and more parts of the population increasingly severely and across all EU member states. The serious and widespread character of the phenomenon calls for a European approach to tackle the problem.

Such a picture was the starting point of the Policy Panel on Affordable Housing and (In)equality in the EU, organised by the ULB’s Institut d’études européennes, in collaboration with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), in the framework of the **#IDEAS24** conference on ‘Inequality and the European Union. New frontiers in European Studies’. The panel, chaired by **Lászlo Andor**, Secretary General of FEPS and former EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion, brought together **Michaela Kauer**, Director at the Brussels Office of the City of Vienna, **Sorcha Edwards**, General Secretary of Housing Europe, and **Ana Carla Pereira**, a member of the Cabinet of EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit.

Why is the unaffordability of housing so problematic? The lack of affordable housing has wider ramifications beyond the individual difficulty of finding a place to live. For instance, it has **negative implications for the overall health of a community** through strains on mental health, a lack of adequate warmth, or homelessness. Unable to find affordable homes in the city centres, people may also experience **limited access to health care, employment, schooling, and social and cultural life**. On an economic level, the lack of affordable housing also leads to a **lack of labour** for companies.



Beyond that, three crucial **implications of the housing crisis** emerged from the panel debate: the intersectional character of housing inequality; the interplay between the housing crisis and climate change; and democratic challenges arising from the housing crisis.

First, all panellists highlighted that the lack of affordable housing **disproportionately concerns vulnerable populations** who already experience discrimination. Particularly affected groups are women (especially single mothers), persons with disability, young people (the “generation rent”), religious and ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees, LGBTQI+ persons, and persons living in poverty. As different generations, residents of different geographical areas, and members of different social or ethnic groups have uneven access to affordable housing, **ethnic, social, and economic inequality** are, thus, all closely linked to **housing inequality**. The **intersectional nature of the housing crisis**, thereby, recalls the #IDEAS24 Keynote held by Zoe Lefkofridi on ‘Democracy and Gender Equality in Times of Backlash’, where she also emphasised that different oppressions (sexism, racism, classism, etc.) are intersecting with each other and mutually construct each other.

The second crucial theme emerging from the panel debate concerns the **interplay between the housing crisis and the green transition**. The climate and housing crises indeed interact in three main ways:

(1) the *climate crisis* affects people’s ability to enjoy their right to adequate housing (e.g., through climate-induced disasters that destroy people’s homes);

(2) *climate policies* may also negatively affect this right, especially for marginalised groups (e.g., by making new or renovated energy-efficient buildings unaffordable for low-income groups); (3) *housing itself* contributes to the climate crisis (the housing sector accounts for 37 % of global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions and, thus, has a huge carbon footprint). Indeed, as highlighted by Pereira, around € 275 billion are needed every year to make buildings more energy-efficient, while some families are not even able to keep their homes warm. As a consequence, a new issue, namely ‘**sustainable affordable housing**’ is emerging on the EU level.

Finally, **democratic challenges** linked to the housing crisis ran like a thread throughout the panel debate. For instance, as highlighted by Edwards, politicians tend to go for ‘vote winners’ in their programmes, and those often do not represent the general interest (like providing affordable housing). Moreover, different vulnerable or disadvantaged social groups are currently fighting each other for the little available housing stock, which is a deep political problem with potentially ‘explosive dynamics’ (Kauner). Last, we can witness a **politicisation of the affordable housing topic by far-right parties** in Europe. For example, far-right politicians in the Netherlands and Portugal use housing to point to migrants and refugees as scapegoats, presenting them as the cause of all problems, including the housing shortage. Such developments have also fuelled fears surrounding the 2024 European elections and the expected rise of far-right, populist parties.



The corresponding shift in the balance of political forces in the EU (within the European Parliament, but also the College of Commissioners, for example) could make it even more difficult to realise certain projects, like addressing the housing crisis in an inclusive manner.

Despite those worrying outlooks, the panellists sketched several avenues to escape the housing crisis. Not forgetting the context of the debate, panellists first gave some **homework to academia**. Further research is needed especially to closely monitor the housing situation in Europe, for example, by providing better data on investments, profits and beneficiaries, as well as prices. Another crucial area of investigation is the political and social conflicts underlying the competition for affordable living space and the implications this has for the rise of far-right parties.

One key theme of the **policy recommendations** was the importance of an **interventionist approach**. Since a market-oriented, neoliberal approach has clearly failed to provide a sufficient supply of affordable housing, states should take control over local housing stocks, achieving a price-dampening effect on the overall housing market through a critical mass of protected (public or cooperative) property. In contrast, the EU is extremely constrained in addressing the housing crisis, since the Treaties leave social protection and inclusion in the hands of the Member States. There are, however, **possibilities to legislate**, for example, through rules on the single market, the provision of services, or public investment. There is also a big

potential to **prioritise and improve the channelling of investments** (e.g., cohesion funds or the Recovery and Resilience Facility) to housing, for example, by adapting state aid rules so that they do not prevent member states from addressing the housing crisis. The so-called political guidelines of the Commission (which define the mandate of the next Commission and, thus, determine what it must deliver) could be a way for the European Parliament to exert political pressure on the EU executive to act. As highlighted by Pereira, the European Parliament can negotiate parts of these political guidelines before confirming the next Commission President.

On a more fundamental level, to exit the housing crisis, panellists suggested weakening the ownership of the housing issue by far-right parties, creating a **positive and progressive narrative** around it (Pereira), and addressing the deeper **underlying issues of distributional injustice** (Kauer). According to Kauer, a **paradigm shift in the mindsets** on the European level is also necessary to consider social housing no longer as a 'charity' but rather as a human right.

Overall, the challenge, thereby, lies in 'scandalising' the housing topic to create the necessary political will for change. A crucial condition for any potential solution to the housing crisis on a European scale is the emergence of a 'coalition of the willing' in the Council. Although such a prospect is all but certain, there are encouraging signs, such as the endorsement in March 2024 of the Liège Declaration calling for a 'European New Deal for affordable and social housing' by all European housing ministers.



**Laura Schmeer** is a FNRS Research Fellow in political science at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), affiliated with Cevipol (Centre d'Étude de la Vie Politique) and the IEE (Institute for European Studies).



BRUSSELS  
SCHOOL OF  
GOVERNANCE



UNIVERSITÉ  
LIBRE  
DE BRUXELLES



Faculté de  
Philosophie et  
Sciences sociales



Co-funded by  
the European Union



LA LIBERTÉ DE CHERCHER



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES  
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE  
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



Project: 101047382 — EUQualis —  
ERASMUS-JMO-2021-HEI-TCH-RSCH

*This policy brief is written in the context of the EUQualis  
A Jean Monnet Center of Excellence (n°10104782)  
of the Institut d'études européennes – Université libre de Bruxelles*