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When a home becomes a privilege

Solving the housing crisis is not just social policy. It is democratic self-defence

A decent home should not be a luxury. Yet across Europe, it increasingly is. Many young people working full time struggle to leave their parents' homes without financial help. Nurses, teachers, firefighters or police officers can no longer afford to live in some of the very cities they serve. And homeownership increasingly depends on inherited wealth rather than earned income.

The housing crisis is taking different forms. In many of Europe's major cities, rents and property prices have surged over the past 15 years. In Berlin alone, property prices increased by almost 70 per cent within a decade. Tenants often end up spending up to 40 per cent of their household income on rent. Meanwhile, many rural and structurally disadvantaged regions face stagnant housing markets, vacant buildings and declining opportunities. Housing no longer merely reflects social inequality; it has become one of its main drivers. Despite these differences, the frustration is similar everywhere: people increasingly feel that the promise of a better life is slipping out of their reach.

Political leaders have so far failed to respond with the urgency that this crisis demands. It is hardly surprising then that many people have lost confidence in progressive parties — parties that have traditionally claimed these issues as their own. Yet the answer cannot be to leave this political terrain to the far right, which promises simple explanations for complex problems. Instead, progressives need to reclaim housing as a social right and offer a credible alternative to the politics of exclusion.

The far right's answer: exclusion instead of solutions

Over the past years, radical right parties across Europe have made housing a central political issue. Despite their different national contexts, they have developed remarkably similar narratives and increasingly aligned policy proposals. Rather than addressing the structural causes of

the crisis, they more often than not offer simplistic explanations and identify scapegoats.

Housing is reframed as a zero-sum conflict between nationals and migrants, homeowners and tenants, city centres and the outskirts, or between those deemed 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of social housing. By linking economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods with immigration, ghettoisation and urban decline, they shift attention away from why housing has become unaffordable and instead tell people who is supposedly to blame.

This strategy is already translating into political support. Research shows that support for radical right parties increases in neighbourhoods affected by gentrification, while structurally weak regions where housing markets have stagnated have also seen growing support for the far right.

This framing is also reflected in remarkably similar policy proposals. Social housing is often rejected – or at least reserved for nationals – and replaced by individual subsidies. In France, the *Rassemblement National* has called for introducing national preference in access to social housing. In Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* argues for supporting 'people rather than bricks', replacing investment in affordable housing with individual subsidies that risk simply inflating already excessive rents without creating new affordable homes.

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In Italy, the Meloni government has combined weak action on affordable housing with a crackdown on grassroots social responses. After the eviction of Askatasuna, a long-standing social centre in Turin that provided space for community and housing initiatives, pressure has intensified on initiatives such as Rome's Spin Time, which combines housing with employment support, childcare, education and cultural activities. Such spaces are treated as public-order threats rather than as forms of social infrastructure and inclusion.

More broadly, these policies reflect a common ideological vision. They prioritise the traditional national family and homeownership, particularly in rural areas, while treating housing primarily as inheritable property that guarantees social order and stability rather than as a social right.

This logic also shapes the radical right's approach to the ecological

transition. In France, the *Rassemblement National* has opposed stricter energy-renovation requirements for rental properties, prioritising the interests of property owners over measures to improve housing quality and reduce energy poverty. At the same time, access to housing for newcomers is increasingly questioned, while social housing is transformed from a universal instrument of solidarity into a privilege reserved for those who supposedly belong.

This strategy is proving politically effective. In Germany, for example, far-right actors have successfully slowed down or blocked housing projects linked to social housing, migration or ecological transformation through intimidation campaigns and pressure on local authorities. In doing so, they deepen social divisions and turn housing into a marker of identity rather than a shared social right.

Reclaiming housing as a progressive project

Yet the simplistic solutions proposed by the far right would only deepen the housing crisis. Restricting access to housing, weakening public investment or replacing social housing with individual subsidies would further inflate prices, increase wealth concentration and widen inequalities. Those on low and middle incomes would lose the most, while property owners and investors would continue to benefit.

For Social Democrats and Socialists across Europe, tackling the housing crisis must therefore become a political priority. Above all, housing should be treated as essential infrastructure and a public good — not primarily as an asset. Everyone – young people, families, older people and low-income households – should be able to find a decent, affordable home close to where they work and live. Housing should provide security, not anxiety. Achieving this requires ambitious public action: investing in social and public housing, regulating private rental markets and ensuring that homeownership is not reserved for those with inherited wealth, but remains within reach for ordinary households through public financing and support schemes.

But policies alone will not be enough. Progressives also need to reclaim the narrative. They must offer a positive and convincing vision of how we want to live together — one rooted in equality, justice and solidarity. Rebuilding trust requires not only effective public action, but also genuine engagement with citizens and civil society. People in cities and rural communities alike need to see that politics can once again deliver something as basic as a secure place to live.

The far right tells people who should not belong. Progressives must defend a different idea of society: one in which everyone deserves a place. Because housing is not simply about bricks and mortar. It is about dignity, security and belonging.

Solving the housing crisis is therefore not just social policy. It is democratic self-defence.



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