



International conference

Housing for all in Europe – What problems? What solutions?

Conference report

Author: Simone Tulumello

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Executive summary

The international conference ‘Housing for all in Europe – What problems? What solutions?’, organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Portugal, the CICS.NOVA Research Center and the Collective Urbanólogo, in collaboration with the Goethe-Institut Portugal, was held on November 15, 2019 in Lisbon. The conference came at a time when housing has gained particular prominence in the European landscape. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the European Union has no competence to legislate on housing matters, however, it is undeniable that different measures of various European institutions have had and still have an influence on access to housing in the Member States.

The conference counted with the participation of a large spectre of speakers, both local and international, selected among policy experts, scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers. Along the day, the conversation was structured in five sessions, where, on the one hand, the impact of EU policies on housing access was debated and, on the other, different forms of contestation and cooperation in the European context were analysed.

This document reports from the conference diachronically. The conference started with two sessions dedicated to the ‘diagnosis’ of present problems and the status of housing policy: in the first session, Ana Cordeiro Santos, Georgia Alexandri and Gonçalo Antunes reported from their research on the intersection of housing, austerity and financialisation in Portugal and Greece; in the second session, Simone Tulumello, João Carvalhosa, Helena Roseta and João Ferrão discussed how European policies in several fields (including financial and competition regulations, Structural Funds and the European Investment Bank) are affecting national housing systems. The following two sessions were dedicated to possible and actual European ‘solutions’: in the third session, Karin Zauren-Lohmeyer, Barbara Steenbergen, Rui Franco, Antonio Gori and João Paulo Batalha presented the practices and experiences of cooperation of different players including tenants’ unions, local authorities and activist groups; in the fourth session, Irene Escorihuela Blasco, Wibke Werner, Luís Mendes and Maria Assunção Gato furthered the discussion on international cooperation with further experiences of responses to housing crises. In conclusion, Patrícia Pereira moderated a wrap up session with the presentation, by Ricardo Barranco, of a large research project on housing in Europe commissioned by the Commission and an open debate.

Program

**GOETHE-INSTITUT - LISBOA
CAMPO MÁRTIRES DA PÁTRIA 37**

**9H30-18H00
15/NOV 2019**

9:30

ABERTURA / OPENING

Luís Baptista *CICS.NOVA - Centro Interdisciplinar de Ciências Sociais, Lisboa*
 Maria João Gomes *Urbanólogo*
 Susanne Sporrer *Goethe-Institut Portugal*
 Christine Auer *Fundação Friedrich Ebert em Portugal*

10:00

**DIAGNÓSTICO I: POLÍTICAS DE HABITAÇÃO NA EUROPA DO SUL EM CONTEXTO DE AUSTERIDADE - OS CASOS DE PORTUGAL E GRÉCIA
 DIAGNOSIS I: HOUSING POLICIES IN SOUTHERN EUROPE IN THE CONTEXT OF AUSTERITY - THE CASES OF PORTUGAL AND GREECE**

Ana Cordeiro Santos *CES - Centro de Estudos Sociais, Coimbra*
 Georgia Alexandri *University of Leeds*

Abertura e moderação/Opening and chair:
 Gonçalo Antunes *CICS.NOVA, Lisboa*

11:15

COFFEE BREAK

11:30

**DIAGNÓSTICO II: AS POLÍTICAS EUROPEIAS E O SEU IMPACTO NA HABITAÇÃO
 DIAGNOSIS II: EUROPEAN POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON HOUSING**

Simone Tulumello *ICS - Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Lisboa*
 João Carvalhosa *CECODHAS.P - Comité Português de Coordenação da Habitação Social*
 Helena Roseta *Arquiteta e cidadã, Lisboa*

Moderação/Chair: João Ferrão *ICS*

12:45

ALMOÇO / LUNCH BREAK

14:15

**SOLUÇÕES EUROPEIAS I: ATIVISMO E COOPERAÇÃO EM REDE
 EUROPEAN SOLUTIONS I: ACTIVISM AND NETWORKING**

Karin Zauner-Lohmeyer *European Citizens' Initiative "Housing for All", Vienna*
 Barbara Steenbergen *International Union of Tenants, Brussels*
 Rui Franco *Representante pela Câmara Municipal de Lisboa na EU Urban Agenda Housing Partnership*
 António Gori *Associação Habita & European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City*

Moderação/Chair: João Paulo Batalha *Associação Transparência e Integridade, Lisboa*

15:45

COFFEE BREAK

16:00

**SOLUÇÕES EUROPEIAS II: RESISTÊNCIAS INTERNACIONAIS
 EUROPEAN SOLUTIONS II: INTERNATIONAL RESISTANCE**

Irene Escorihuela Blasco *Sindicat de Llogateres, Barcelona*
 Wibke Werner *Berlin Tenants' Association*
 Luís Mendes *Movimento Morar em Lisboa*

Moderação/Chair: Maria Assunção Gato *DINAMIA'CET - Centro de Estudos sobre a Mudança Socioeconómica e o Território, Lisboa*

17:15

**WRAP UP: DEBATE DE PROBLEMAS E SOLUÇÕES
 WRAP UP: DEBATE OF PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS**

Ricardo Barranco *Joint Research Centre - European Commission, Ispra*

Facilitação/Facilitation: Patrícia Pereira *CICS.NOVA, Lisboa*

*Com tradução simultânea em Inglês e Português
 Simultaneous translation in English and Portuguese*

**HOUSING
FOR ALL IN
EUROPE -
WHAT PROBLEMS?
WHAT SOLUTIONS?**

Panel Diagnosis I: Housing policies in Southern Europe in the context of austerity – the cases of Portugal and Greece

After the opening statements, by Luís Baptista (CICS-NOVA-UNL), Maria João Gomes (Urbanólogo), Beata Weber (Goethe-Institut Portugal) and Christine Auer (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Portugal), the first session was introduced and chaired by Gonçalo Antunes, researcher at CICS.NOVA-UNL. Antunes gave an overview of housing policies under austerity, and particularly of the transformations of the Portuguese case during the external bailout of the country (2011-2015). In historical perspective, the liberalisation of Portuguese housing predates the memorandum of understanding signed in 2011 with the external lenders, as a neoliberal orientation of housing policies is evident since the 1980s. Still, during the external bailout, a number of measures were requested to Portugal in the fields of spatial planning, territorial governance, housing and property taxation. For Antunes, the measure that has more directly affected the housing system was the 2012 reform of the New Urban Rental Regime (Novo Regime de Arrendamento Urbano; NRAU; originally approved in 2006). The reform, imposed by the memorandum of understanding, required the full liberalisation of the lease market, specifically aiming at getting rid of existing protected rent contracts. Additionally, several measures with impact on the commodification of real estate and housing were approved 'beyond' the requests of the external lenders – for instance, several schemes incentivising investment in real estate by foreign players.

In the first presentation, Ana Cordeiro Santos, researcher at the Centro de Estudos Sociais, Coimbra, focused on financialisation of housing¹ in Portugal. Santos distinguished among two broad stages of financialisation of housing in Portugal. The first stage, which started roughly during the 1980s, was centred on mortgages – supported by national policies for the stimulus of homeownership and eased by the low interest rates that characterised the period following the integration of Portugal in the European market. In this model, financialisation is mostly related to the production and management of debt, both on the side of mortgaged households, and of the construction and real estate industry, which took on significant debts in the same period – and to financial speculation allowed by the use of mortgages as assets. This stage of financialisation was deeply affected by the financial crisis of 2007, the hardships of several banks and the following credit crunch. A second stage of financialisation thus emerged, where financial operations moved toward other areas of real estate and housing: the acquisition of stocks of rental properties by investment funds, the flipping of rental units into short-term touristic ones, and brand new instruments like REITs, Real Estate Investment Trusts – created in Portugal in 2018 (Sociedade de Investimento e Gestão Imobiliária, SIGIs). Santos concluded on the links between the history of financialisation and the deep housing crisis that is cutting through the Portuguese society.

In her presentation, Georgia Alexandri, postdoctoral Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Leeds, discussed the Greek economic crisis, the deep austerity imposed over the country and its effects over the housing system. Similarly to the case of Portugal, reforms on housing policies

¹ The term financialisation refers to the growing relevance of financial operations and institutions in the economy. Financialisation of housing thus refers, at the same time, to the use of housing as an asset to be used in financial operations, and to the active participation of financial institutions in construction and real estate markets.

have eventually eliminated housing protection for indebted homeowners and tenants. Despite a crisis-induced fall of housing prices, the influx of external investments – itself eased by schemes like Golden Visas, potential for short-term rental investment and the restructuring of bank asset portfolios – has pushed housing prices up sharply, particularly in some neighbourhoods of the centre of Athens. Alexandri concluded by reflecting on the transformation of the urban space as a place for investment.

Panel Diagnosis II: European policies and their impact on housing

João Ferrão, researcher at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Lisbon, introduced the session with three general points useful to frame the role of the EU in the field of housing: first, reminding that housing is not a formal competence of the EU; second, cautioning on the fact that the EU is a complex institution with different branches and significant political and organisational differences among Parliament, Commission and Council, with different impacts over housing; and, third, arguing for a need to reflect not only on the vertical impacts of EU institutions over local contexts, but also on how bottom-up processes contribute to shaping multi-level governance.

In the first presentation, Simone Tulumello, researcher at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais, gave an overview of the various areas of EU policy that have had direct or indirect effects over housing, with special focus on the Portuguese case, including: the role of monetarism in constraining public expenditure, the way financial integration has pushed toward homeownership, European debates on urban regeneration, the way the subsidiarity principle has impeded the use of Structural Funds for housing, reforms actively pushed by European institutions in countries undergoing financial bailout after the crisis, and the emergence of a European debate on the need for new housing policies. For Tulumello, a growing involvement of the EU into housing in time can be observed, with significant contradictions and internal conflicts among different visions of the European project, and above all between attempts at fostering cohesion on the one hand, and the dominance of competition regulations and strict financial rules on the other.

Helena Roseta, former Portuguese MP, argued, from a different perspective than that of the previous presentation, that the approval of the Maastricht Treaty marked the dominance of monetarist values and neoliberal politics in the EU; and that following treaties (Lisbon and Amsterdam) deepened the trend. For Roseta, the European framework constitutes a ‘strait-jacket’ for national governments and institutions, with deep impacts over housing policies. Another concerning trend linked with the liberalisation of financial markets and the transformation of banking regulations pushed by the EU is the upscaling of housing markets, traditionally based on local investors and companies, and now increasingly shaped by transnational players (above all, investment funds), against which tenants and households have no negotiation power. For Roseta, then, the possibilities of change reside in different scales, and particularly civic action supported by national reforms like the recently approved Framework Law for Housing, of which she has been the main promoter.

In the last presentation of the session, João Carvalhosa, from the Portuguese Committee for the Coordination of Social Housing, started from the evidence of a generalised shortage of accessible

housing throughout Europe. For Carvalhosa, there is a wide space for the EU to push new, and more effective, social housing policies, evident for instance in the recent opening in the use of Structural Funds for energy refurbishment. Carvalhosa argued for the necessity of strengthening the role of housing in the European Urban Agenda, for creating a European fund for accessible housing, excluding housing investment from the Stability Pact, and more generally improving European regulations to ease national housing policies; in short, making housing a European competence.

Panel European Solutions I: Activism and networking

The first section of the afternoon was introduced by João Paulo Batalha, from the Portuguese chapter of Transparency International, who noticed the conflict between housing and other policy areas; and opened to the discussion of what can be done from the perspective of public policy and activism.

Karin Zauner-Lohmeyer presented the European Citizens' Initiative 'Housing for All',² launched by a large platform of associations and groups throughout Europe to request the Commission and other European institutions to act in response to the present housing crisis. In particular, the initiative requests: easing the creation of affordable, public and social housing, including by way of excluding investment in this area from Maastricht financial regulations; improving the possibility for non-profit housing providers to access EU funding; changing regulations of short-term rentals; and improving the collection of statistics on housing needs in Europe.

Barbara Steenbergen, from the International Union of Tenants, discussed the challenges of reforming housing policies from the perspective of a union active in Brussels in lobbying European institutions. Steenbergen focused in particular on European regulations on state-aid, which prevent national and local investment in social housing – with an investment gap in social and affordable housing estimated on some 57 billion per year. The EU Urban Agenda Partnership for Housing, with the International Union of Tenants as a member, identified the change of state aid rules for housing as one of the main issues we have to solve. If more EU member states like Germany, France, Spain and the Scandinavian ones are requesting a change in those EU regulations, there might be an opening for a possibility of reform. Countries can also contribute to reform through the European Semester, which is monitoring households' debt as macroeconomic imbalance. Debts are mainly caused by mortgages for homeownership. National investment in affordable and social rental housing would improve the national performance in the EU economic governance framework. Steenbergen reminded the possibility to negotiate with the Commission on exemptions of social housing investments from the 3% deficit/GDP rule. As another legal claim, she stressed the need to build a European transparency register for real estate transactions in order to have a clear picture of where investments – and speculations – are going, and to fight money laundering and tax evasion in housing markets by regulating financial investors at national level. In conclusion, Steenbergen advocated for robust regulation of rental markets, which will be necessary if the choice of tenancy is to be favoured. Security of tenure and a social rent law are necessary to prevent evictions, displacement of

² See www.housingforall.eu/.

residents by speculation, gentrification and touristification and the basis for fair, open and balanced housing markets.

Rui Franco, former councilmen at the Lisbon Municipality, shared his experience of participating, as a member of a local authority, in the Housing Partnership of the EU Urban Agenda. For Franco, the Urban Agenda is an occasion to accelerate and ease the connections between levels of government, and particularly between local and European players. The Housing Partnership worked on how to improve policies, regulations and knowledge, and produced some ideas that, according to Franco, are contributing to reshape the European discussion. For instance, the Partnership advocated the necessity to reduce the threshold of overburden with housing costs, now placed at 40% for all households, a value unbearable for low-income households. For Franco, the EU should be lobbied to increment its spending in housing through several channels, including non-refundable contributions (e.g. Structural Funds) and investments. Finally, Franco argued on the importance of forthcoming regulations on platforms – including those active in short-term rental.

Antonio Gori, member of Habita and of the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City, presented the activities of these two groups, thus focusing on the connections between local and international grassroots action; and on the multiple challenges for building popular power in a globalising world. Habita, based in Lisbon, has been supporting housing struggles of different nature since 2005 and since 2012 as an association. Habita is also member of the European Action Coalition, composed by around 30 members with very different nature. The Coalition was born out of the perception of the need to exchange experiences among movements in various European contexts and with the goal to build a common platform for different struggles. Gori advocated more public housing – made through public investment – and less incentives for real estate players; and stressed the importance of, on the one hand, including the struggle for housing within a wider understanding of social transformation and right to the city; and, on the other, building collective bonds in a societal context that tends to frame housing problems as individual failure.

Panel European Solutions II: International resistance

Maria Assunção Gato, researcher at DINAMIA´CET-IUL, introduced the last panel session of the day, dedicated to the international scale of housing struggles. In the first intervention, Irene Escorihuela Blasco, from Barcelona Tenants' Union, presented the birth and working of the recently founded movement, which, despite having been around for a short time (it was founded in 2017), has already become a powerful player at the city, regional and national level. The Union was founded out of the perception that pre-existing housing movements – many of whom were born during the years of the economic crisis – had been overly concerned with the mortgage crisis, despite the fact that in a city like Barcelona some 90% of evictions happen in the rental market. The Union counts with almost 2,000 members and is organised in eight branches across Catalunya and many others in Spain. The work of the Union is based on the concepts of empowerment and mutual support: the work is organised in assemblies, individual cases are always worked collectively and members are encouraged to become activists of the movement. After showing some of the many evictions stopped in Barcelona, Escorihuela concluded on the new challenges facing the movement, including the difficulty to fight corporate

landlords, and issues affecting above all immigrants, like housing racism and unregulated room subletting.

Wibke Werner, from Berlin Tenants' Association, reported from the housing crisis that is affecting Berlin, with rental prices skyrocketing despite some recent attempts at reform made by the national and local parliaments. Ultimately, the city of Berlin, as the result of a long process of conflict and negotiation, decided to implement a rent cap expected to come into force in March 2020. The rent cap is structured on a table of rental values that allows for some flexibility according to the age of the building and facilities in the apartment. With the rent cover, the rents are basically frozen for five years, small rent increases (1.3 % per year) are only possible from 2022. For new contracts, the upper rental values from the table apply. Excessive rents can be reduced nine months after the law comes into force. A rent is considered excessive if it exceeds the table upper values by more than 20 %. It is the first time that a rental cap has been introduced at a state level and not the federal level. Whether Berlin actually has the competence for the law is controversial and will be clarified by the courts. The landlords have already announced lawsuits.

Luís Mendes, from Morar em Lisboa, presented the work of this platform of various associations and collectives in Lisbon, which acts mainly as an instrument of pressure toward policymakers and institutions. The platform was founded in 2016 with the main goal of federating existing struggles and groups to work toward a unitary housing movement; and acts as a bridge between participatory and representative democracy. Mendes argued that the platform, and wider housing movements, were successful in pushing for the creation of a national Secretary of State for Housing in 2017 and in giving impulse to the action of politicians concerned with the housing crisis. The launch of an open letter on the right to housing addressed to the government in early 2017 contributed to put housing on the political and media agenda and bring housing back in the agenda of the national government (which designated a Secretary of State for Housing in 2017) and the parliament (which approved the country's first Framework Law for Housing in 2019). Mendes recalled that housing is a universal, unconditional and inalienable human right recognized by the Portuguese Constitution. Mendes also stressed the importance of the work with media and social media in building up knowledge of housing problems and generalised support to housing policies. Morar em Lisboa advocates more public investment in housing, the reversal of the liberalisation of rents approved in 2012, the end of fiscal exemptions for investment funds, the abolition of schemes such Golden Visas, and regulation of tourism and short-term rental.

Wrap up: Debate of problems and solutions

The last session of the day was moderated by Patrícia Pereira, researcher at CICS.NOVA-UNL, and opened by a presentation by Ricardo Barranco, researcher at the European Commission - Joint Research Centre EC-JRC, who reported the CiTOWN research project on the financialisation of housing in Amsterdam, Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Lisbon, Paris, Porto and Vilnius; and on the use of data science to study housing prices in Amsterdam. The project was the first on financialisation to be directly commissioned by the European Commission, with the goal of collecting evidence for improving public policy. The concluding discussion, open to the public, widened the focus from housing to wider issues, including: territorial cohesion and the political

impacts therein, for instance recent evidences of the correlation between deepening spatial inequalities and the rise of support for right-wing and populist politics; the link between labour, transnational mobility of workers and local housing markets; and the overarching question concerning the conflict between the understandings of housing as commodity and as basic human right.



Organisation of the conference

Christine Auer - Friedrich Ebert Foundation Portugal
 Gonçalo Antunes - NOVA FCSH | CICS.NOVA
 Madalena Corte-Real - Urbanólogo | CICS.NOVA
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