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Whose Existential (In)security? Access to Housing for Migrants and Refugees amidst the Securitization of Migration and the Housing Crisis

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Executive Summary

This policy paper examines the intersection between the securitization of migration and the housing crisis in the European Union (EU), with a focus on the challenges faced by migrants and refugees in accessing adequate housing. It emphasizes the urgent need for interventions to counter structural barriers to housing access, benefiting not only migrants but also various mid to low-income groups.

The housing crisis in the EU is exacerbating competition between natives and newcomers for the scarce commodity of housing. In this context, the securitization of migration supports and legitimise discriminatory restrictions against migrants, limiting their access to rents and social protection.

Using the Italian case as a reference, the paper highlights how features of the housing system on the one hand, and reception and integration policies on the other, impact migrants' housing pathways. In this context, the housing rights of migrants in Italy are affected from the earliest stages of their arrival, with consequences for the subsequent stages of their housing journey. This is further exacerbated by direct discrimination in access to social and private rental housing based on nationality or immigration status.

Policy recommendations targeting local authorities and addressing both housing supply and demand are proposed. The suggestions include involving municipalities in small-scale reception projects, mainstreaming the housing dimension in integration strategies, implementing tax policies to increase housing availability, and defining social housing access based on need rather than discriminatory criteria.

Convergences between the securitization of migration and the housing crisis

In the context of the growing housing crisis in the EU, migrants and refugees face significantly more challenges in accessing adequate housing than the local population. These difficulties are influenced by the housing and welfare systems of destination countries and the legal status of migrants. However, a significant part of these challenges stem from the securitization of migration and nativist discourses.

Securitization, or the framing of migration as a threat to political, economic, cultural and welfare systems (Düvell 2011), leads to restrictive policies fuelled by anxieties about protecting the idea of *home*. The latter is to be understood as linked "to primordial sentiments of who 'belongs' where: in one's house, neighbourhood, city or country" (Duyvendak 2011: 41), with deriving entitlements.

This framing legitimises discrimination in the private rental market and restrictions in accessing social protection measures including social housing; thus, exacerbating the risk of homelessness for migrants and refugees (Duyvendak 2011; Laine 2020; Serpa 2023). This approach is based on an overtly discriminatory logic, which leads to a growing and increasingly unproblematic tendency to make access to social services - only for migrants - conditional on the absence of crime or even investigation. For instance, in the context of the widespread rhetoric claiming that immigrants are the main cause of degradation and crime in social housing, proposals have been made in various regional councils in Italy that immigrants who commit crimes should automatically lose their right to live in social housing.

While the EU recognises the right to housing assistance for those who lack sufficient resources (Article 34.3 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights) and the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-27 highlights housing as a crucial dimension, little is done at the local level, which, in line with the 'local turn' in migration studies (Glick Schiller and Caglar 2011), plays a central role in the implementation of integration policies and migrants' housing rights.

Using the Italian case as a reference, the policy paper proposes recommendations to improve housing policies. It highlights the need for local authorities to urgently and decidedly implement more effective integration policies and ensure migrants' housing rights, in order to contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive response to the housing challenges faced by migrants and refugees in the EU.

Housing discrimination against migrants and its consequences

In the EU, third-country nationals (TCNs) are twice as likely to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion and three to four times more likely to be overburdened by housing costs (Eurostat 2023).

Looking at the structural characteristics of the housing market, Italy has a low share of social renting in the total number of dwellings (4.2% compared to the EU average of 7.5%). As a result, low-income tenants are more affected by overcrowding (23% compared to the EU average of 17%) and housing cost overburden (35% compared to the EU average of 28%) (OECD 2023). In addition, more than a third (38%) of homeless people in Italy are of foreign nationality (Istat 2023).

While these data quantify the challenges at the national level, a look at the local level makes it possible to qualify the process of housing exclusion by tracing the housing trajectories of migrants to identify the bottlenecks that prevent their housing autonomy.

Observations in the Italian province of South Tyrol have been collected through a one-year monitoring of a European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) project aimed at improving the housing situation of migrants at local level. They show that despite having achieved a stable legal status and sufficient income, and despite targeted support for housing autonomy (training, assistance with housing applications, etc.), migrants tend to remain trapped in the same category of housing exclusion: temporary housing communities managed by local NGOs. After one year of intervention, less than a third (29%) of participants had improved their housing situation and only 10% had achieved adequate accommodation. Thus, shelters designed for short-term accommodation become long-term solutions in the absence of alternatives. The resulting housing insecurity and exclusion affects basic daily needs (rest, privacy, stability) and long-term settlement efforts (family plans, work, education, sense of belonging and place attachment).

In addition to the obvious negative impact on migrants and refugees, other target groups are also affected. These include people in housing need, who face a shortage of emergency accommodation and are therefore forced to sleep rough. The shortage, which is unfortunately structural and deliberate on the part of local decision-makers, is exacerbated by the fact that migrants and refugees tend to stay in 'shelters' for long periods of time, limiting their availability for other groups in need. Moreover, the fact that immigrants remain 'trapped' in temporary housing communities or are pushed into homelessness leads to additional costs for social assistance and results in an inefficient use of resources.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the housing crisis, which particularly affects migrants and refugees, has an increasingly visible impact on the local population. Young people, low- and middle-income families, people with disabilities and the elderly are increasingly affected by the lack of effective measures to alleviate the housing crisis.

The causes lie in the convergence between structural features of the Italian housing system - which make housing scarce, hard to access and too expensive - and the securitization of migration - which legitimises or tolerates discrimination and makes people with a migrant background particularly vulnerable to housing exclusion. There is therefore an urgent need to address this issue by addressing relevant aspects of both housing and migration policies.

Housing rights under threat from the first stages of arrival

Since its inception in the 1990s and despite changes in government policy, Italian migration policy has been characterised by an emergency approach, an insufficiently structured reception system,

criminalisation and securitization (Dal Lago 2004; Procacci and Marchetti 2013). Recent reforms have strengthened the hotspot model, the outsourcing of border and asylum procedures and the increased use of administrative detention, and have reduced funding for reception services, favouring their concentration in large structures managed by multinational and for-profit organisations. The increasing securitization of migration policies leads to a deterioration of the relationship between the reception system and the territories (ActionAid and Openpolis 2023). In this context, the housing rights of migrants in Italy are affected from the earliest stages of their arrival, with consequences for the subsequent stages of their housing journey.

Exclusion and precariousness mark the first stages of the reception process for asylum seekers and refugees. According to Legislative Decree 142/2015 ('Decreto Accoglienza'), the Italian reception system shall be centred on the *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione* (SAI), structured in small projects spread across the country. In reality, this model has never been fully implemented due to structural and political problems: As the participation of municipalities in the SAI is voluntary, reception takes place mainly in extraordinary centres (CAS), which accommodate more than 60 per cent of asylum seekers in Italy. CAS only provide accommodation, which reduces the chances of social, labour and housing integration. Recent reforms have further weakened the reception system by restricting access to the SAI to status holders and reducing the fees for the provision of reception services. Throughout the reception phase, support for initiating autonomous housing pathways is almost non-existent: in 2018, less than 5 per cent of people received a housing subsidy at the end of their stay in the system, and less than 1 per cent were supported with rental procedures upon leaving reception facilities (Bove et al. 2023).

With regard to migrants' access to housing, while integration policies are largely defined and implemented at local level, resulting in large disparities between the different Italian regions and provinces, some features of the Italian housing system provide a common background to the different situations found in the Italian regions. The Italian housing system is dual: the rental market is divided between the private and social sectors, with decoupled prices and significant differences between the accessibility of the two systems. The result is a polarised housing market which, together with the shortage of social housing, limits the availability and affordability of the rental market.

Access to social housing is regulated at local level (regional, provincial or municipal). Its social function - to provide access to housing for those who do not have the economic strength to pay a market rent - is called into question when considering the conditions of access applied to migrants. In fact, the majority of Italian regions require certificates proving the absence of property in the country of origin and a minimum period of residence and work in the area (up to 5 years, with recent proposals to extend this to 10 years). The Constitutional Court (judgement no. 9/2021) recently ruled against the legality of this criterion, as it does not establish a condition of greater need: the requirement to document the absence of real estate in the country of origin is therefore a discriminatory provision. Nevertheless, the provision remains in force in most Italian regions.

In the private rental market migrants and refugees face discrimination from landlords and housing agencies who are much more likely to rent to locals and non-racial profiles (Asgi 2023). Although reluctance to rent is often justified by the economic vulnerability of immigrants, discrimination against racialised profiles remains widespread even after stable employment and sufficient income have been achieved. Additional legal and bureaucratic barriers to access to housing include restrictions on renting or leasing property without legal documentation, the precariousness of legal status due to temporary permits, and the discretionary enforcement of administrative rules at the local level, such as obstacles to registration in the municipal registry, which is a prerequisite for access to many social and support services (Asgi 2023; Bolzoni 2015).

To address these structural discriminations, the following section articulates targeted policy recommendations.

Recommendations

Recognising the multi-level nature of housing and integration governance, these policy recommendations are addressed to local authorities. They are structured according to a two-pronged approach, focusing on both the supply and the demand sides.

1. Improving the quality of the reception system by involving municipalities

To support the development of autonomous housing pathways, the strengthening of the SAI system in relation to the CAS model would improve reception conditions and promote integration support, including in the field of housing. To this end, the participation of all municipalities in small-scale reception projects would lead to "the gradual absorption of specific reception services within the social services guaranteed at territorial level, as part of the related welfare system" (ASGI 2018). This would improve the overall quality of services provided and facilitate due consideration of the right to adequate housing from the outset of the reception project.

Funding is already available through national funds for SAI projects. Reports from the SAI system indicate positive experiences from municipalities that have so far been involved in small-scale reception projects. Exchange and visibility of the experiences of these municipalities would support policy change.

The advantages of this approach are a more even territorial distribution, avoiding concentration in large reception centres. This makes it easier to comply with common reception standards, to improve the services offered and thus to make use of local resources. Finally, the centrality of municipalities facilitates the coordination of policies and services at local level.

2. Mainstreaming housing in integration strategies

Migrants and refugees need to compensate for limited access to local social networks, which is a prerequisite for access to local resources, including housing. Accordingly, a policy shift is needed to address the temporality of housing trajectories, i.e., the importance of addressing the development of autonomous housing trajectories in a timely manner, starting during the reception process. Housing information and assistance therefore needs to be provided early in the arrival process.

To prevent destitution once protection is granted, the time spent in reception facilities should be used to provide asylum seekers and refugees with information and preparation for their autonomous housing pathway, to improve the transition processes between reception and independent living. To this end, training programmes for social workers can be set up, focusing on knowledge of the housing market and local housing support services. Acknowledgement should also be given to the need to guarantee consistent standards of interventions across the services provided by third sector organizations: minimum standards shall be identified, and monitoring systems incorporated into tenders.

For migrant workers, who do not transit through the reception system, increased coordination between municipalities, employment services and (social) housing providers would be crucial to reduce housing exclusion and discrimination. To discourage discriminatory property advertisements and behaviour by real estate agents and landlords, local monitoring, and referral of cases of discrimination

to the competent institutions should be set up. Funding for these measures is to be found through ESF+ and Asylum and Migration Fund (AMIF).

3. *Increasing housing availability in the private rental market through taxation and anti-discrimination policies*

To target the shortage of rental housing, fiscal policies can help to bring currently empty properties back into the rental market, thereby increasing the availability and affordability of housing. To this end, it is useful to distinguish between different types of property.

First, small landlords often cite the risk of non-payment of the rent to justify their reluctance to rent to people with a precarious employment profile. To mitigate this risk, protecting both tenants in economically fragile conditions and property owners, there must be a stable and consistent funding of the 'Fund for insolvent tenants', established in 2013 but only partially and occasionally financed by public allocations (Gazzetta Ufficiale 2013). Another type of fiscal intervention concerns incentive schemes such as a 'social rental agency' providing economic incentives to landlords who rent to economically vulnerable or disadvantaged people (currently under discussion in several Italian cities and towns).

On the other hand, the exponential growth of the short-term tourist rental market is one of the main causes of the shortage of accommodation in the private rental market and its exorbitant costs. The negative externalities generated can be offset by a strong fiscal intervention to limit and discourage short-term tourist rentals by increasing taxation on their income. A proposal for such a law has been drawn up by a network of associations, based on the situation in the city of Venice (Alta Tensione Abitativa 2023).

Finally, to combat discriminatory behaviour by gatekeepers in the private rental market (landlords and real estate agents), it is necessary to adopt monitoring practices at local level and to report cases of discrimination to the competent institutions.

4. *Increasing the availability of social housing and defining access to it according to needs*

In a dual housing system like Italy's, social housing is meant to guarantee access to housing for those who lack the economic means for market-priced housing. Consequently, and in line with the Italian jurisprudence, access to social housing must primarily respond to the criterion of need, assessed on the basis of the household's economic resources. Other access criteria and requirements, such as the length of residence, are therefore unlawful. They also risk creating further exclusion to the detriment of those who are already in a state of economic and social vulnerability.

Clearly, to meet the demand for social housing, it is necessary to increase the available stock, which has been greatly reduced in recent decades due to the privatisation of social housing and public disinvestment in the sector. While this cannot be achieved in the short term, social innovation could support the implementation of housing solutions in the short term. Models such as interim use of empty buildings, co-housing and intergenerational housing are examples of this.

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