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Housing in the ideology and policy of the radical right

An European perspective

Abstract:

Are radical right parties pursuing ideologically consistent or merely erratic socio-economic policies? Are they promoting economically left- or right-wing ideas? We address these questions through the lens of housing. Based on party manifestos of five European radical right parties, and housing policies under Hungarian and Austrian radical right (coalition) governments, we show that there is an ultraconservative housing ideology that is specific to these parties. These parties are redefining housing not as a social right, but as a question of national identity, family values, stability, and private ownership. Their housing policies target middle classes and select deserving poor, the nuclear family, and often the rural population.

Introduction

European countries are facing a severe shortage of affordable housing. In the last decades, the share of public or social housing has decreased, housing construction has stalled, and house prices have massively increased. The crisis has dire consequences for labor markets, as it impedes people's mobility, and for family formation, with young people being priced out of housing markets. It also fuels inequalities between renters and homeowners, among generations and across territories. Addressing the housing crisis calls for policies associated with the political left, centered on principles of social justice, affordability and public responsibility. Yet, more recently, the populist radical right has begun to appropriate the topic. The policy brief asks whether the radical right pursues a coherent ideological approach to the question of housing, both in their programs and when in power. We analyze the question of ideology through the literature on housing policy paradigms – the dominant ideas that shape housing policies. Housing paradigms are a powerful lens, as they combine a focus on the core ideas that shape

policies, the narrative of how these policies are being framed, and the policy instruments themselves.

Changing housing paradigms: From housing as a social right to housing as an asset

In post WWI and WWII Europe, ambitious efforts at addressing housing crises have traditionally been associated with the political left. To ease access to decent housing for (mostly urban) workers, reform socialist and social democratic parties developed comprehensive policies of housing provision of the state or municipalities rentals and tenant protection. These policies were guided by a “housing as a social right” paradigm (Bengtsson 2001) and originate from the egalitarian impetus of social democracy. Here, access to acceptable housing is seen as an obligation of the state to the society as a whole. To enforce housing as social right, the state intervenes in housing markets through tenure legislation, rent controls, housing allowances, public or cooperative housing provision, or the management of housing by public or non-profit organizations. This ideology also penetrated many post-World War II housing programs.

Since the 1980s, however, a new paradigm has asserted itself, which sees housing mostly as an asset. Under this ideology, policies have fostered market-based private homeownership and opportunities to generate income from homes. Famously enacted under the neoliberal government of Margaret Thatcher in the UK, promoting private homeownership has been a political strategy both to gain the working-class vote, and a means to allow individuals to accumulate wealth. The latter is also seen as a privatized alternative to public welfare programs (Doling and Ronald 2010). Policies that foster housing as asset range from the privatization of housing, including the large-scale sale-off of social and public housing, deregulation of mortgage markets, and fiscal and tax policies geared towards home ownership. Increasingly, policies have also turned rental housing into an attractive asset class through rental deregulation, weakened tenant protection or financial incentives for rental housing investors (Hoechstebach et al. 2025). To illustrate these changes, in England, before Thatcher came to power and introduced her signature “Right to buy” scheme, allowing people living in social housing to buy their homes, the share of owner occupation was about 50 percent, while 35 percent of households lived in social housing. In the early 2000s, the share of households in social housing is 17 percent, and that of owner-occupiers is 64 percent, while 19 percent of household rent from private landlords (Housing Europe 2021). During the same period, average nominal house prices rose roughly 6–7 percent per year, and real (inflation adjusted) growth is around 2–3 percentage point per year (Gov.Uk 2026; Cladco 2026). Another example of rapid privatization of housing is that of East European countries, where during state socialism homeownership was officially not existing. As a consequence of massive housing privatization after the breakdown of socialism, these countries now have super-high homeownership regimes, with homeownership rates between

80–95 percent. The only two European countries in which homeowners are still a (big) minority are Germany (47 percent owner-occupied housing) and Switzerland (42 percent) (Statista). Ironically, a paradigm that was framed as democratizing housing property, empowering individuals and embourgeoisement of the working class, has turned into empowering institutional investors instead. Private equity firms, pension funds, insurance companies, hedge funds, and banks are heavily invested in European residential assets (Gabor and Kohl 2022). The main purpose of these investors is not to produce houses, but rather to generate profits. As such, they are interested in rising house prices and limited housing supply. While the assetization of housing has spread unevenly across Europe, being most pronounced in liberal housing regimes and in some of Europe’s periphery, no country has remained entirely immune to this trend. Thus, for instance, countries such as Ireland, the UK, and Spain are strongly affected by institutional ownership of housing. This is partly a consequence of the policies after the financial crisis of 2008–2010. In order to manage the costs for cleaning up the balance sheets of commercial banks that were strongly affected by the financial- and housing crises, distressed private properties were passed through bad banks to institutional investors (Gabor and Kohl 2022).

But even in countries that did not have a housing crisis in the 2000s, or that do not exhibit high homeownership rates, institutional investors play an increasingly important role, through penetrating the rental market. Thus, they have benefited from the growing trend of build-to-rent and become major players in the German speaking countries where rental markets prevail. Thus even in Vienna, with its large publicly subsidized housing sector, institutional investors hold a significant share of the rental housing stock (Kadi et al. 2025). According to data discussed by Gabor and Kohl (2022: 37), the Berlin region has been the prime target of investment flows in rental housing. Berlin housing assets accounted for 42 bn Euro in institutional portfolios in 2021, followed by London with almost 28 bn, and Amsterdam by 23 bn. The respective number for Vienna is 11.2 bn Euro. The only European countries not yet strongly affected by a growing involvement of institutional investors in their housing markets are East European countries.

Housing and the rise of the (radical) right

It is this shift towards privatization of homeownership and the assetization of housing that is responsible for the current housing crisis. In many European countries, the state has significantly reduced its involvement in housing supply, roping in market actors and financial investors instead. As argued above, for investors what matters is the income generated from housing, and a shortage of housing increases their profits. Individual homeowners are first and foremost interested in the development of their property wealth. This is for instance well described by the “NIMBY” (not in my backyard) syndrome, where local residents resist

adding affordable housing near their neighborhoods for fear that this negatively impacts property values

The shift towards privatization and assetization of housing has also led to changing political preferences. Homeowners – who now form a majority in most European countries (see above) – mostly want to protect the value of their housing, and are therefore supportive of less redistributive policies, more right-wing voting, and more antipathetic to government intervention in housing markets (Ansell 2014). More recently, the housing crisis and rise of homeownership has also fueled support for the far right. For instance, the unequal territorial distribution of house price increases also leads to the rise in support of populist radical right parties. For instance, Ansell et al. (2022) show on the Danish example, that in the 10 percent of precincts where house prices decreased the most between 1998–2005 (an average decrease of 15 percent), voters are more likely to support the radical right Danish People Party (DPP) than in those 10 percent of precincts where house prices increased the most (an average of 100 percent) (Ansell et al. 2022). These authors estimate that an increase in prices per square meter of 10.000 DK decreases support for the DPP by 3 percentage points. The broader picture emerging from this example, namely that while homeowners in those regions where house prices are rising are more likely to support the (center-right) status quo, in communities with declining house prices citizens turn to the populist right seems to hold across the different housing regimes in Europe (Ansell et al. 2022).

There is also ample evidence that the lack of affordable housing in urban centers fuels support for the radical right. While Ansell and his collaborators focus on the political behavior of homeowners, and show the housing market-induced mechanisms of support for radical right parties in declining regions, Abou-Chadi et al. (2024) instead look at the political consequences of rent price developments in urban areas. They find that in urban areas, “rising local rent levels increase support for radical right parties among long-term residents with lower household incomes” (Abou Chadi et al. 2024: 1).

Paradoxically, then, rather than increasing the support for left-wing – redistributive – policies, increasing homeownership, rising house prices, and the inequalities generated by it have led to a growing support for the political right, and increasingly the radical right. Can the radical right make use of the opportunity structures offered by the housing crisis? These parties are often seen to focus on issues like immigration, crime and gender while being ideologically inconsistent on substantive socio-economic issues such as housing. As we will argue below, however, there is evidence that radical right parties have promoted distinct ideas about housing that can be characterized as housing-as-patrimony, or an ultraconservative housing ideology. Put briefly, this ideology makes a virtue of the housing generated inequalities by tying them to the ideas of nativism and family values.

The ideology of housing-as-patrimony

Building on the work of Bohle and Seabrooke (2020), and further conceptualization by Bence Kováts (2023), the notion of housing-as-patrimony describes a conservative housing ideology that frames homeownership not primarily as an economic asset but as a moral and intergenerational resource. In contrast to the neoliberal housing-as-asset paradigm, housing is structured around immobile, inherited property, passed on through kinship lines and embedded in a broader project of social reproduction, demographic renewal, and cultural continuity. Kováts (2023) identifies four core features of this paradigm:

- Familialism: Housing policies target the nuclear, heteronormative family as both a beneficiary and guarantor of social order.
- Status-based differentiation: Access to housing benefits is stratified along moral, national, or cultural lines—e.g., native families vs. migrants.
- Rural or community anchoring: Emphasis is placed on non-urban, “rooted” forms of living that prioritize local identity and continuity.
- Promotion of non-commodified, de-financialized homeownership: Policies focus on stable, family-owned homes, resisting speculative markets.

These elements are not just technical preferences—they reflect a thick ideological orientation, opposing both liberal individualism and socialist egalitarianism. An analysis of recent party manifestos of European far-right parties – the Hungarian Fidesz, Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Danish People’s Party (DF), German Alternative for Germany (AFD) and the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) – reveals that while there are differences between the frames and policy proposals, core elements of an ultraconservative housing paradigm are discernible across all cases. The differences are easily explained by the different contexts in which far-right parties operate. Put simply, fostering ultraconservative housing policies in countries where outright homeownership already prevails differs from the challenges that far right parties encounter in societies where most households rent their homes, or where cooperative and public housing still play an important role. In a similar vein, housing chauvinism – restricting public housing to natives only – resonates in immigration, but not emigration countries.

Thus, all party manifestos have a strong focus on the nuclear national family. Housing policies are embedded in this frame but differ how salient it is. For the Austrian FPÖ, the Polish PiS and the Hungarian Fidesz, families with children are the core unit to benefit from housing policies. Concrete proposed measures include direct subsidies for families with multiple children, tax exemptions on home savings accounts, and fiscal incentives for intergenerational homeownership transfers. These proposals are embedded

in a broader demographic narrative, positioning the family as both a moral subject and a policy target to counter demographic decline. For the Danish DF the family is one important beneficiary of housing policies, but the elderly, mentally ill and the homeless are also mentioned.

In terms of status-based differentiation, four of the five parties focus on supporting the middle classes. In contrast, these parties either gloss over or only minimally deal with the needs of housing for lower classes. If they do so, lower classes are not framed in class term, but as groups of “deserving poor”. In immigration countries, these are typically the native families. In the DF manifesto there is a strong association of economically poor strata and immigrants with ghettoization and dilapidation in the cities, and to remedy this, it suggests relocating the poor and migrants, sell public housing and demolish the ghettos. The Austrian FPÖ deplores the fact that migrants occupy a high share of public housing especially in (red) Vienna and suggests limiting access to natives only. This narrative frames immigration not only as a cultural or economic threat, but as a direct material burden that allegedly displaces Austrians from the public goods to which they are morally entitled. The AFD similarly blames unbridled and unlawful migration for the housing shortage. It also thinks that public social housing has entirely failed and suggests housing benefits for low-income tenants instead. PiS seeks to subsidize lower income families’ access to homeownership but leaves the financing of social housing to municipalities. The middle-class bias and redefinition of lower classes in terms other than income suggest that these parties are not pursuing a left-wing agenda.

All parties finally converge in their emphasis for promoting little commodified homeownership and accord moral value to homeownership. For instance, according to the AFD; apart from providing financial security and material safety in old age, homeownership is seen to foster social stability, responsible behavior, and a stable social environment. For these reasons, the AFD explicitly seeks to overcome the German housing mix and turn it into a native homeowner society entirely, through measures such as the right to buy for sitting tenants in public housing, or subsidies and tax benefits for homeownership. The FPÖ advocates improved access to homeownership and explicitly favors traditional financial instruments such as *Bausparverträge* (building loan contracts), interest rate caps, and tax-free savings models. PiS promises credit lines for apartments for rent with the prospect of ownership for tenants, cheap land for construction, and subsidized mortgage and interest payments for homeownership.

Implementing housing as patrimony

Party manifestos only reflect visions of public policies, but tell less about what parties do when in office. To see whether they really implement policies in line with their ideology, we briefly discuss two cases: the Hungarian Fidesz Party and the Austrian FPÖ. The former operates

within a super-homeownership regime and has ruled the country with absolute majority since 2010 and faces therefore few constraints in its policy choices. The latter in contrast operates under stronger constraints, in a renting society with a strong social democratic tradition of housing policies, and as junior party in several coalition governments.

The deliberate implementation of paradigmatic patrimonial policies is arguably strongest associated with the Hungarian case. Here, the far right Fidesz party has devised a series of policies that align with this paradigm after it came to power in 2010. The outstanding features of Fidesz housing policies have been their strong familialism, upper middle class and rural bias, and priority of little financialized homeownership. Flagship policies have been, first, measures to cope with the overindebtedness of homeowners after the Great Financial Crisis. Fidesz introduced a series of measures promoting less financialized homeownership and forced banks to take over significant costs. These policies had a strong upper middle-class bias, whereas policies targeting lower income households are inconsistent, ad-hoc, and with little effect (Hegedüs 2017). Second, the government has tied housing explicitly with a pro-natalist agenda. One of the flagship measures was the launch of the Family Housing Support Program (CSOK) in 2015, which provides non-refundable grants for Hungarian families who promise to have children. The support is conditional on families indeed producing these babies, on applicants being married and not having a criminal record. At least one of them needs to demonstrate 180 consecutive days of social security payment in Hungary before the request. The racist subtext of these measures is to exclude Roma families from receiving state support. The pro-middle-class bias also shows in the fact that applicants must contribute with a down payment to be eligible. In 2019, Rural CSOK was introduced to extend the program to smaller rural areas.

In Austria, the ideological foundations of the FPÖ’s housing agenda were translated into concrete policy strategies during two coalition governments between the conservative ÖVP and the far-right FPÖ between 2000–2005 and 2017–2019. The first ÖVP-FPÖ government performed an important shift away from housing-as-social right, most importantly with the privatization of BUWOG (Bauen und Wohnen GmbH), Austria’s largest portfolio of federally owned rental housing. The sale which occurred under the leadership of then finance minister Heinz Grasser (FPÖ), transferred the ownership to a consortium led by Immofinanz, Raiffeisen Landesbank Oberösterreich, and Wiener Städtische, for approximately €961 million. During the second ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government, housing policy became explicitly tied to the ideological narratives of national preference and anti-statist intervention. The governing program emphasized homeownership, opposed rental protections, and rejected redistributive or regulatory instruments in the rental market. At the federal level, subsidized housing construction stagnated, and budgetary allocations favored fiscal instruments promoting individual ownership rather than investment in rental or social housing. Parallel develop-

ments in FPÖ-governed states (notably Lower Austria and Upper Austria) followed this pattern: public funds for housing were either reduced or reallocated toward opaque subsidy models, with minimal output in new affordable units. Shortly after the fall of the second ÖVP-FPÖ government, the two parties together with the liberal NEOS passed a reform restricting the access to cooperative housing of third country nationals. Only those who can document five years of permanent residence and have passed a language and value test now qualify for access (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2020).

In both countries then, radical right-wing parties follow the ideas that they preach. What can we say about the implications of these policies in the medium and long run? First, these parties are unlikely to solve the housing crisis. Their policies consistently prioritize ownership over tenancy, restricted – to ethnic, national or family status – over universal access, and market over welfare. It is also interesting that housing construction has not taken off under these parties. This increases housing inequalities and makes access to affordable housing more difficult, especially for the poor and minority groups. Second, while we have no evidence from Austria or Hungary that voters support the radical right for their housing policies, the housing crisis, rapid socio-economic and demographic change continue to fuel increasing support for these parties. The fact that this is the case even in the municipal housing areas of red Vienna indicates that the left does not own the topic of housing any more (Essletzbichler and Forcher 2022). While we have no evidence of increasing support for the far right for their housing policies, a study by Szábo and Reiff (2025) reveals that Rural CSOK (together with a second policy instrument that aims to fund essential infrastructures and public services) has increased Fidesz vote share in the eligible settlements. It has done so through the mobilization of core supporters and previous non-voters, as well as the demobilization of opposition voters, and not by vote switching. Finally, given that the literature has established a weakening support for redistributive politics among homeowners, it can be assumed that the radical right's housing policies can contribute to further weakening the appeal of redistributive policies, while also infusing the housing-as-patrimony paradigm with moral and cultural values linked to family values and nativism.

Conclusions and implications

European housing markets are in crisis. Far from benefiting the political left, the current housing crisis seems to empower the mainstream right, and increasingly also the radical right. A variety of mechanisms account for this, from pocketbook voting, where wealthy homeowners want their wealth secured, to fear of status decline, for instance where rising rents become a source of anxiety especially for lower income groups. Existing literature mostly focuses on the voter's side in explaining the attractiveness of the (radical) right. Our policy brief instead looks at the supply side: the frames and policies offered by the radical right. Through the lens of housing paradigms, we show that in a context marked by economic uncertainty, demographic change, and

housing inequality, radical right-wing parties are redefining housing not as a social right, but as a question of national identity, stability, and private ownership. We have argued that – independently of the housing regimes – far right parties do offer coherent housing ideas and implement them when in power. Put briefly, the housing-as patrimony-paradigm makes a virtue of the housing generated inequalities.

Indeed, one important advantage of the housing paradigm lens is that it focusses on ideas and framing. It thus highlights that housing politics and policies are not simply about property or tenure – they are about who belongs and how the political community is defined and lived. The far right offers a restrictive answer: the “deserving” citizen is imagined as a nuclear family homeowner, embedded in ethnic continuity, spatial separation, and moral hierarchy. In this worldview, community is reduced to homogeneity, rooted in ownership and exclusion, rather than mutual care and participation.

A progressive housing policy must therefore confront the radical right not only with redistributive instruments or technical reforms, but by articulating an alternative vision of community—one that is inclusive and democratically constituted. This means rethinking housing policy as a platform for collective life, where forms of cohabitation, use, and participation become the basis for a more egalitarian society. Historically, projects such as “Red Vienna” offer powerful precedents. The communal housing blocks of the 1920s and 1930s were not simply affordable dwellings—they were social infrastructures designed to foster a new urban political subject. Shared laundry, libraries, courtyards, kindergartens, and theaters created spaces of daily interaction and mutual responsibility. Residents were not just recipients of housing, but participants in a collective project of working-class emancipation and civic formation (Blau 1999).

Contemporary left housing movements can draw on this legacy—not to replicate it, but to re-actualize its political core under new social conditions. This involves actively supporting cooperative housing models, intentional communities, and non-market forms of tenure, which reframe housing as a relational good, embedded in shared governance, rather than private hereditary wealth. It also means designing housing not just for individual households, but for multiple forms of co-living, caregiving constellations, and communal practices—especially for those structurally excluded from the nuclear family norm (e.g., queer, migrant, elderly, or precarious communities).

Moreover, a left housing agenda must reassert democratic control over space. This includes institutionalizing participatory budgeting, neighborhood councils, and tenant assemblies—not as mere consultation tools, but as constitutive forms of democratic citizenship. In opposition to right-wing calls for depoliticization and “homeowner sovereignty,” progressive housing policy must foreground political community beyond property, anchored in shared rights, responsibilities, and solidarity.

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