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HOUSING IN EUROPE

A Camp is Not a Home

Topic of the Month Europe Must Act 2025

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An Introduction to Housing for People on the Move

Housing, at the very basic level, needs to be safe, secure and affordable.



Photo by Cecilia Sanfelici, Europe Must Act

These requirements should be met for all, whether it's asylum seekers waiting in limbo or refugees who require long-term security as they adapt to their new reality.

Going beyond this, housing enables us to build community, provides us with comfort and creates a sense of belonging. It's integral to our health, well-being and relationships and is, therefore, an undeniably critical element to welcoming people on the move to Europe.

When it comes to providing this vital need, the current Reception Conditions Directive (RCD) allows for each member state to determine their approach to material reception conditions to "ensure the protection of human dignity in accordance with the Charter of fundamental rights."

This was updated in May 2024, following the new EU Pact on Asylum and Migration, as the European Parliament published the recast RCD. The recast placed a greater emphasis on standardising and clarifying material reception conditions, for example, by stating that not only should clothing and housing be provided but also hygiene products.

On top of this, it also specifies that Member States should "ensure, as far as possible, the prevention of assault and violence, including violence committed with a sexual, gender, racist or religious motive, when providing housing."

There are also elements of the recast RCD that have been less welcomed. For example, an ECRE comments paper highlights that the new directive allows for some punitive measures, such as the withdrawal of an asylum applicant's right to reception conditions if they are outside of the responsible EU member state.

This criticism provides a useful insight into the attitudes towards housing asylum seekers and refugees. However, the descriptive power of legislation and directives only goes so far. As such, in this report, we have presented a more detailed view as we discuss the housing situation in Europe, barriers to accessing housing, examples of grassroots and NGO housing initiatives and, finally, we present our stance: that a camp is not a home.

Housing in Europe in 2025

What is the current situation?

There are several contributing factors which have led to the current Europe-wide housing crisis which is being felt by so many of us at present. Both renters and prospective buyers alike are being negatively affected.

What're the figures?

On average, in less than 10 years, between 2015 and 2023, house prices in the EU rose by 48%, as reported by the European Parliament. Meanwhile, the price of rent rose by 8% on average between 2010 and 2022.

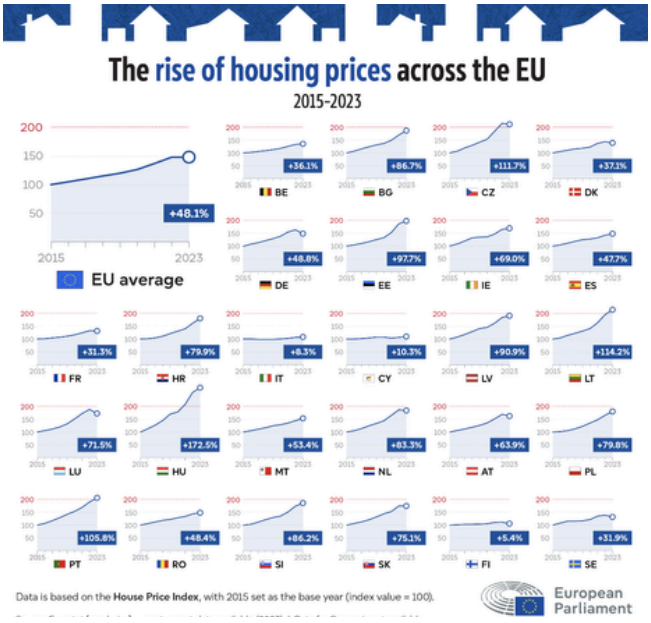
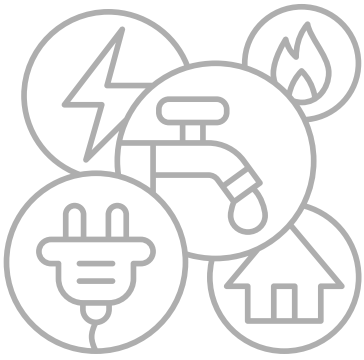


Image Sourced from European Parliament



Whereas, the Eurofound's Unaffordable and Inadequate Housing in Europe report shows the increase in housing costs, maintenance, services and utilities.

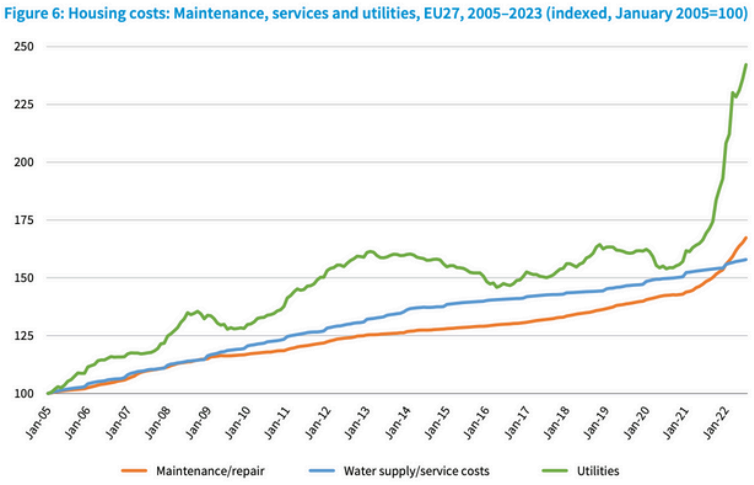


Image Sourced from Eurofound

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What has caused the shift in cost?

The European Parliament report states the main contributing factors to the rise in prices are higher building costs and mortgage rates, a decrease in construction that limited supply and the rise in the purchase of properties as an investment to generate additional income. The number of short-term property rentals has exponentially increased, as demonstrated in the graph below, limiting the supply for renters.

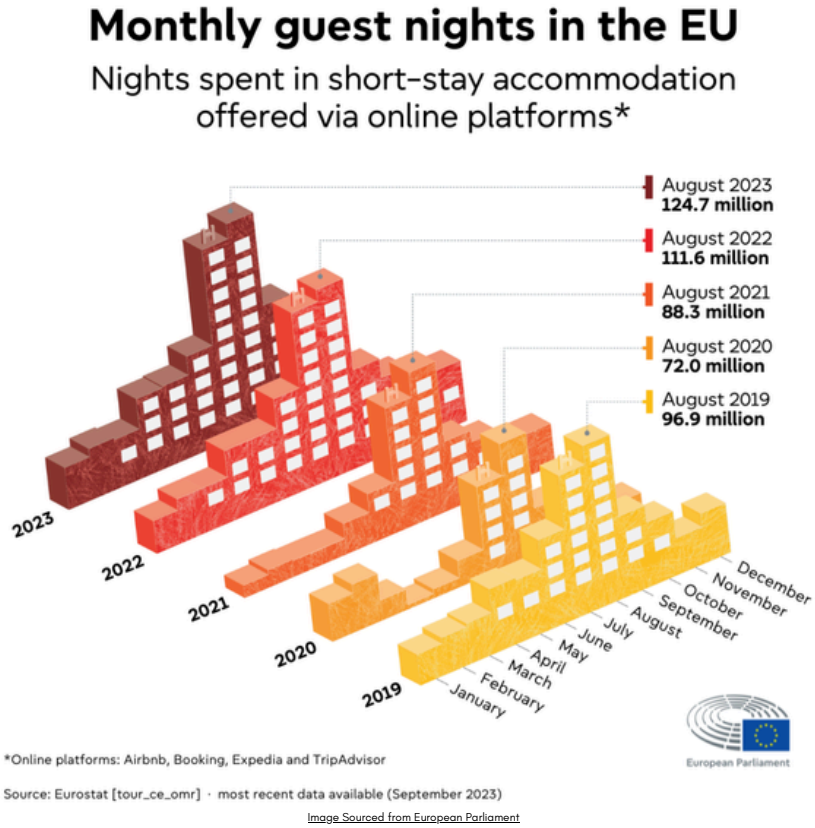

Image Sourced from European Parliament

On the topic of property being purchased and constructed for investment, many civil society organisations have spoken out about this and have noted that policy and tax relief in many European countries favour large real estate investments over individual buyers and renters.

Investigate Europe's 2022 report examined tax regimes of this kind in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. John Christensen, co-founder of the Tax Justice Network, has said:

"There is no question that house prices are inflated by these tax reliefs... Property developers benefit from tax reliefs which serve little or no economic purpose, and in many cases international investors hold property as an investment class to benefit from tax exemptions."

Housing Europe's general secretary, Sorcha Edwards, notes that housing policies have been neglected since the 90s, claiming that housing "was seen as a sector that would regulate itself". In The Left's study, "From Crisis to Cataclysm: Housing Financialisation and the EU", MEPs Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, with the authors Enikő Vincze and Eva Betavatzi, report that international landlords have driven up housing prices since 2014 by speculating on rising rental demand and benefiting from financial policies. The COVID-19 pandemic and energy price hikes further worsened affordability, leading to inflation. Central banks then raised interest rates, making conditions even harder for indebted individuals.

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Why is this important?

As a result, the housing stock is insufficient to meet the demand. Many people are struggling to find accommodation, particularly in urban areas, or end up with unaffordable living costs, with young people and low-income earners among those worst affected. Because this situation is felt right across Europe, the topic of housing has become a key issue in political debates across several European countries, playing a significant role in recent European elections.

How is it connected to people on the move?

Social Europe's article discusses the political consequences of the housing crisis, noting that polarised views are more widespread, as centre-left parties generally frame the discussion around inequality and social policies. In contrast, the radical right parties, rather than addressing structural housing issues, have turned migration into a scapegoat, linking it to housing shortages to fuel public resentment. Furthermore, difficult living circumstances push more people towards direct action like protests and strikes. This growing frustration can intensify social unrest, allowing extremist parties to gain traction.

On a more fundamental level, housing shortages make it much more difficult for newcomers to a country to find accommodation for themselves.



Photo by Cecilia Sanfelici, Europe Must Act

Trying to navigate a new system with no local connections makes it very difficult for outsiders, and displaced people are often left with no choice other than to rely on state-provided accommodation in various forms, such as camps, hotels or emergency homeless accommodation, or face homelessness, for very long periods of time as there are simply no other options.

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Barriers to Housing

As touched upon in the previous section, the European housing crisis is not only impacting native populations but also disproportionately affects asylum seekers, who face significant challenges in securing stable and safe accommodation.

Many refugees and asylum seekers continue to experience homelessness and live in overcrowded, substandard conditions. According to the Refugee Council (2023), **17% of asylum seekers are homeless,** a situation reflective of the broader, escalating housing crisis that is being felt worldwide.

Insufficient housing availability

A major barrier to housing in Europe is the shortage of affordable housing, particularly in rapidly growing urban areas. This scarcity is most acute for low- and middle-income populations, making it especially difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to secure accommodations, as they often struggle to find employment and achieve a stable income.

Newcomers also often **lack knowledge of local housing markets**, hindering their ability to find suitable options. Moreover, in countries with limited public housing or where public housing is primarily aimed at nationals with special needs, refugees and asylum seekers are left with fewer options for accessing housing.





High housing costs

In many cities, housing costs are prohibitively high for migrants, particularly for those who are unable to work while waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim. OECD/EC data reveals that one in five migrants in the EU **spends over 40% of their income on rent,** compared to just one in eight native-born residents. This financial strain is compounded for asylum seekers and refugees, who often have low incomes during the early stages of integration, making it even harder to afford housing. Moreover, **limited access to public housing** further exacerbates their struggle to secure stable accommodation.

Discrimination and xenophobia

Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants often encounter exclusion, stigmatisation, and xenophobia from host communities, which can either prevent them from accessing housing or force them to pay inflated rents. Many are **unaware of their housing rights** and **language barriers** or **missing documentation**, making it even harder to navigate the housing system. Discrimination in the housing market is a significant issue across Europe, where a lack of information on available housing support further hinders access.

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Legal and policy barriers: eligibility for housing support

Refugees also face legal and policy barriers in securing housing. The absence of a credit history, missing documentation, or reliance on financial assistance often makes it difficult to meet **standard tenancy requirements**, such as providing personal references or demonstrating stable employment. In some countries, **legal frameworks** exacerbate these challenges, as landlords may hesitate to rent to asylum seekers due to **perceived risks,** further limiting housing opportunities.

For example, in Spain, renting a flat often requires submitting documents to a "seguro de impago de alquiler" (rental insurance) to prove you're "trustworthy" enough to rent and that the rent does not exceed 40% of your income. This is particularly challenging for those relying on informal income as they cannot prove their total earnings, making it harder to meet these requirements and secure housing.

Additionally, asylum seekers with short-term residence permits are often ineligible for targeted housing support, forcing them to rely on mainstream housing options, which may be insufficient. **Bureaucratic hurdles,** such as long waiting lists and complex application processes, further hinder access to housing support.

Time Constraints

Compounding these barriers and time constraints creates further difficulties. In some countries, refugees are given as little as **28 days** to secure housing after being granted asylum, a widely considered inadequate timeframe. The shortage of resettlement housing, combined with rising accommodation costs, often leads refugees to temporary shelters or substandard living conditions. Alarmingly, between 2021 and 2023, there was a **239%** increase in refugees seeking homelessness assistance from local authorities after being evicted from asylum accommodation.

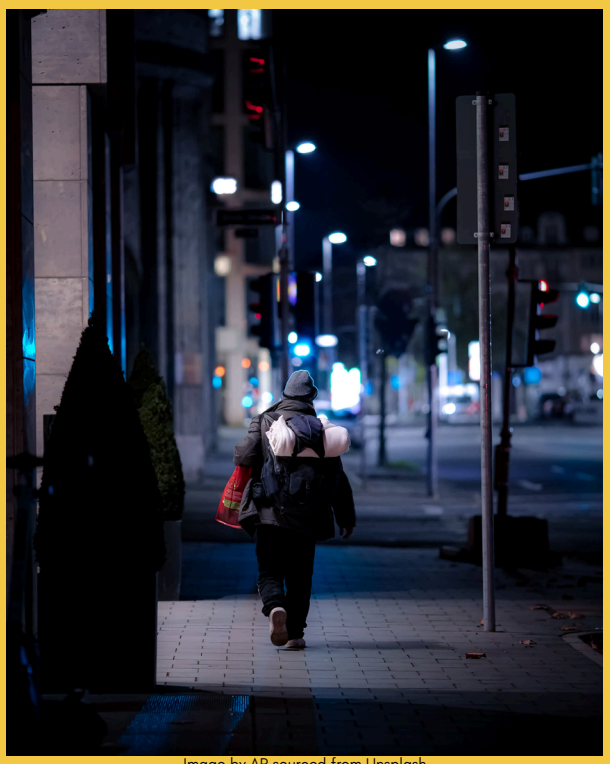


Image by AR sourced from Unsplash

Limited Support Systems

Inadequate funding for resettlement programs leaves many refugees without safe housing options. Many rely on digital platforms to access mainstream support, which is often difficult to navigate due to language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the local system. Additionally, resettled refugees frequently experience displacement due to the lack of long-term housing, which interrupts their efforts to integrate into society.

Family and special needs

Large families or individuals with special needs, such as refugees with disabilities, face additional challenges when seeking appropriate accommodation. The mismatch between available housing and the specific needs of these families often leads to overcrowded living conditions or homelessness.

Addressing these barriers requires a comprehensive approach, which includes better coordination between governments, NGOs, and host communities. More inclusive housing policies, improved support systems, and anti-discrimination measures are crucial to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees can access safe and stable housing, thereby enhancing their ability to integrate into society.

Specific housing services should be tailored to address language barriers and offer comprehensive housing advice supporting other integration aspects, such as income, employment, and social support. By prioritising these measures, we can improve housing access for refugees, ultimately enabling them to integrate more successfully into society.

Housing Initiatives for Asylum seekers and Refugees in Europe

The challenge of providing adequate housing for migrants in Europe has led to the emergence of both grassroots initiatives and government-led efforts.

While there is no uniform strategy at the European level - and often not even at the national level - there is a general trend toward delegating the creation and implementation of these strategies to local authorities, with regional or national governments responsible for funding. Local and city governments increasingly utilise network-based approaches, collaborating with NGOs, civil society, and private entities, blurring the distinction between bottom-up and top-down approaches to the issue [1].

Local authorities work with third-sector actors in different ways, for example, directly providing accommodation or rental support, using mediation to help secure housing, supporting the transition to longer-term housing or providing longer-term housing support for vulnerable groups.

Grassroots initiatives across Europe often share similar goals of creating spaces and systems where people can collectively share and manage resources. An example of this is housing squats. Organising such initiatives can empower people on the move to reclaim their rights and autonomy, enabling them to resist state control strategies, which may include subtle techniques like restricting movement within state- or NGO-run shelters that can hinder the flow of solidarity among migrants[2].

However, these grassroots efforts frequently face challenges related to sustainability, scalability, and limited resources. Relying on volunteer efforts and donations can lead to instability, and without formal recognition or support, these initiatives may struggle to provide long-term solutions. Additionally, there is a risk that these models might unintentionally impose specific political ideologies on migrants, potentially compromising their autonomy[3].

[1] Meer, N., Dimaio, C., Hill, E., Angeli, M., Oberg, K., & Emilsson, H. (2021). Governing displaced migration in Europe: Housing and the role of the "local". Comparative Migration Studies, 9(1), 2. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00209-x
[2] De Angelis, M. (2019). Migrants' inhabiting through commoning and state enclosures. A postface. Citizenship Studies, 23(6), 627-636. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1634379
[3] Scott-Smith, T. (2024). Fragments of Home: Refugee Housing and the Politics of Shelter. Stanford University Press.

Of course, government-led initiatives also pose risks to migrants' autonomy, as they may limit migrants' agency in making decisions about their living conditions. Nevertheless, many housing initiatives, often carried out by NGOs in collaboration with the government or independently, aim to focus on broader integration by helping beneficiaries build skills for self-reliance.

Examples of grassroots housing initiatives:

Spin Time Labs - Rome
A nine-storey building in central Rome, occupied since 2013, housing approximately 400 people from 26 nationalities, including locals. It is also a vibrant cultural and social hub, featuring an auditorium, osteria, library, theatre, recording studio, and more. This model of urban regeneration emphasises the use of abandoned public and private properties for the common good, fostering community integration and cultural exchange.

The PIKPA Camp - Lesvos
In 2014, Local groups, non-governmental organisations and independent volunteers in Mitilini (Lesvos) founded 'The Village of All Together' collective to coordinate solidarity and address the backlash caused by the socio-economic crisis in Greece. The «Village of All Together» opened the abandoned 'PIKPA' site, which became the first self-organized reception camp for refugees in Greece.

In 2015, PIKPA was hosting 600 vulnerable refugees, including survivors of shipwrecks, violence and torture, elderly people, single women and children. Volunteers organised food distributions at the camp, at the port and in other locations of Lesvos, providing more than 3.000 meals per day. In 2020, at the request of the authorities and following extensive clashes that took place in the government-run reception facility of Moria, 600 refugees were transferred to PIKPA.

In 2022, after 8 years of operation, PIKPA was forced to close and its residents were forcibly evacuated by the Greek authorities. All residents were transferred to the Mavrovouni 'temporary' reception camp, where dignified reception conditions are severely lacking. Around that time, Lesvos Solidarity started to rent and renovate abandoned apartments to accommodate vulnerable refugees. Lesvos Solidarity keeps working to provide sustainable, dignified and safe housing for asylum seekers and refugees on the island.

Other community-based housing experiences:

- City Plaza was an autonomously run, self-organised squat for refugees in Athens, Greece, based in the former City Plaza Hotel. The occupation ran from 2016 to 2019[4].
- Orfanotrofio, an abandoned orphanage in the Toumpa district of Thessaloniki, Greece, was squatted to house migrants and activists from December 2015 to July 2016.
- The Association Sulle Orme OdV, founded in 2005 in Northern Italy, manages four houses hosting people who have been hit by poverty, including immigrants.

[4] See Squire, V. (2018).Mobile Solidarities and Precariousness at City Plaza. Studies in Social Justice, 12(1): 111-32.

Examples of NGOs or government-led initiatives:

The *"Fundão: An Embracing Land" - Portugal*
This initiative exemplifies how repurposing old buildings can foster community integration. By converting a former Catholic seminary into a vibrant migrant centre, Fundão provides affordable housing and creates spaces where migrants and locals collaborate, share cultures, and build a cohesive community.

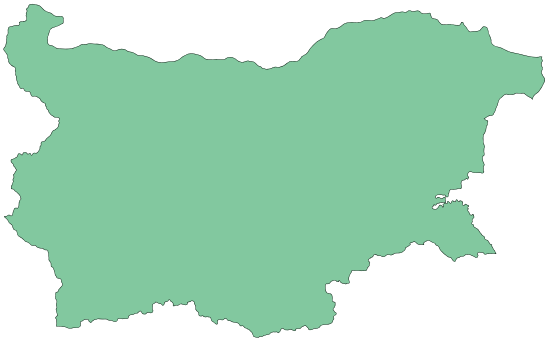
The "Welcoming Spaces" - EU
This initiative seeks to revitalise shrinking areas in the EU by creating environments where non-EU migrants can pursue their life projects. This approach aims to address demographic decline while fostering integration and sustainable development.

An example of this in practice is Eurocoop Servizi's project in Camini, Italy. Since 2011, this social cooperative has repurposed vacant buildings to provide housing for migrants and locals. By adopting a self-managed housing approach, the initiative enhances the autonomy of its beneficiaries, encouraging active participation in community development. This model offers shelter and promotes social and economic growth within the village.

A Camp Is Not A Home

Since its foundation and recurrently, EMA has been supporting people living in camps, reporting on their living conditions, and sustaining the claim that refugee camps are not decent or defensible places of residence – whether temporary or permanent. Camps are incompatible with dignified housing. In this final section, we present evidence supporting this consideration, focusing on Bulgaria and Greece.

Bulgaria



In Bulgaria, asylum seekers do not get a stipend. Through 2024, the State Agency for Refugees was managing a budget for their essential nourishment of merely 3.08 euros per day, per p and person, which goes to the provision of food in camps. The net amount provided has remained unchanged since 2015 despite ongoing inflation and the number of refugees in the reception centres increasing since 2017 [5].

As a result, and according to a recent AIDA report, asylum seekers residing in camps were on the verge of severe malnutrition due to the scarce provision of food. At the Harmanli camp, a physician reported that the water was not suitable for consumption or for sanitary hygiene. Yet the residents in this reception centre continue to rely on tap water for drinking, as no other water is accessible.

[5] Matteo - kirche und Asyl (2025). Deported from Germany to Bulgaria. Research report.

According to a recent report from the German church organisation Matteo [6], the supply of hot water and the maintenance of utilities and equipment in bathrooms, rooms, and common areas continue to pose significant challenges to refugee camps in Bulgaria. For years, the bedrooms and beds in reception centres have been notably dirty and severely infested with vermin, including bed bugs, lice, cockroaches, and rats. As a direct consequence of plagues of insects, persistent skin inflammations and allergic reactions are common.

Most informants interviewed for the Matteo report recount instances of violence in camps. In fact, according to the AIDA report mentioned above, the primary concern for asylum seekers continues to be safety at the reception centres, which is significantly jeopardised as smugglers and drug dealers have access to the centres during the night. On top of this, violence is also frequently employed by law enforcement personnel within the reception centres when they intervene in response to rule violations.

Greece



Over the last four years, the Greek government has moved to a policy of concentrating asylum seekers in camps isolated from local communities. This policy started to take form in 2021 by opening "state-of-the-art closed controlled centres" and restricting reception conditions only to people residing in government-managed centres (see RSA, 2024).

Then, in 2022, all mainland camps were renamed into "Controlled Reception Centres for asylum seekers", and the ESTIA program was closed. ESTIA was the only program for dignified housing in Greece, facilitating access for families or small groups of people to apartments in cities.



Photo by Cecilia Sanfelici, Europe Must Act

Camps in Greece are built in different sheltering designs, ranging from the institutional building (e.g., former orphanages or military quarters) to containers —also known as 'boxes'— to the more rudimentary rubhalls (large plastic tents, which may house dozens or hundreds of people) and refugee housing units (RHUs), which are modular rooms accommodating fewer people. However, they are also often extremely overcrowded.

Paul and Masood [7] describe accommodation in the latter facilities. Electricity is frequently cut off throughout the day, sometimes for multiple hours, which creates unbearable, even fatal, consequences during the cold winters and hot summers. Moreover, rubhalls and RHUs may be completely packed, and on such occasions, new arrivals will be expected to live in single-person tents on the ground or will simply be given a blanket and sleep in the open air within the camp premises.

[6] Matteo – kirche und Asyl (2025). Deported from Germany to Bulgaria. Research report.
[7] Paul, Oska & Masood, Mena (2024). Gendered Vulnerability in Necropolitical Bordering. Gender & Society, 38 (4): 493-522.

People live in these conditions for periods of up to several years as they wait in a state of limbo for their asylum decisions or their deportation. This has been repeatedly researched, reported and denounced by refugee support organisations as they document the realities of life in the camps, how they constrain access to services and violate human rights (see, e.g., recent reports on refugee camps in mainland Greece by RSA, by Mobile Info Team on reception camps and also by MIT on Pre-removal detention centres).

Some of these limitations and excesses are the practical outcome of the logistical and architectonic properties of camps, which are by design unfit for dignified residence. On top of that, recent developments across Europe suggest that the deterioration of quality of life and the infringement of human rights in camps are part of a policy of deterrence aimed at making people desist from their basic right to asylum and a dignified life.



Photo by Cecilia Sanfelici, Europe Must Act

[6] Matteo - kirche und Asyl (2025). Deported from Germany to Bulgaria. Research report.

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Final Thoughts

Throughout this report, we've tried to take an overarching approach to European housing. As our first section explores, many in our European community struggle to access housing and accommodation. We also demonstrate how refugees and asylum seekers are at the keen end of this crisis.

However, and most importantly, what this report also makes clear is the existing capability there is to fund and develop initiatives that work to provide **housing**, and **not camps**, for people on the move. This is what we should continue to concentrate on, work towards and support.



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*We're volunteers and asylum and migration is a complex topic. This means we try to include a variety of opinions and approaches to a topic. We do our best to research and use our expertise accurately however, we also believe it's vital to encourage healthy discussion and stop misinformation. Therefore we encourage any feedback or constructive criticism of our work.

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Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.

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2025