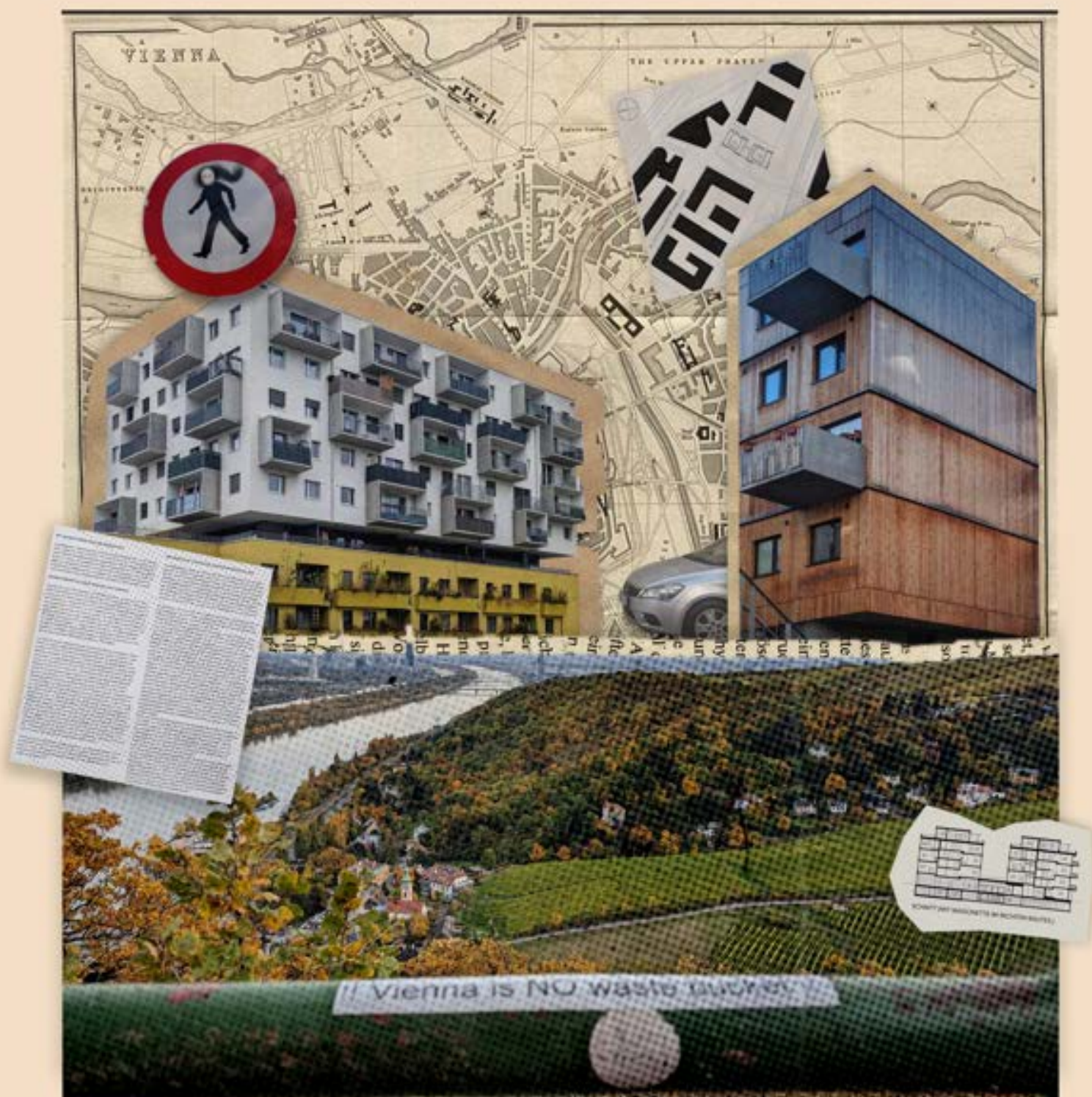


— VIRTUAL ISSUE —

VIENNA AT THE CROSSROADS: A "JUST CITY" UNDER PRESSURE



Virtual Issue - Vienna at the Crossroads

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Vienna at the Crossroads: A “Just City” Under Pressure

By Michael Friesenecker, Yuri Kazepov & Tatjana Boczy

“Never let a crisis go to waste” is an adage that emerges in every crisis, aiming not only to foster a consoling attitude in times of discomfort and need, but also to seize opportunities for broader, more transformative societal change. Rarely has this been truer than in Vienna at the end of 1918, when the First World War ended, and the Habsburg Empire dissolved. At that time, Vienna experienced one of the deepest crises in its history. Previously at the centre of a vast empire, the city was stranded on the eastern fringe of a small, geopolitically rather irrelevant republic. It was severely affected by economic and social devastation. From a rich and glittering metropolis, it transformed into a dirty, disease-ridden city facing starvation (Cockett, 2024: 73-75). In this context, in May 1919, the Social Democratic Workers’ Party won with the absolute majority of votes in the municipal elections, and Jakob Reumann became the first socialist mayor of Vienna.

This political change kicked off a period of deep transformation in which Vienna’s Social Democratic city government pursued an ambitious program of municipal socialism. “Red Vienna” (1918-1934) became the label for the development of large-scale housing (Gemeindebauten) projects, extensive welfare services, and cultural and educational initiatives aimed

at improving the living conditions of the working class.

This process was also propelled by the fact that in 1922, Vienna became an autonomous province of the Austrian federation, leaving Lower Austria, the Bundesland it had belonged to. The political contrast between the (progressive) city and the rural part of (conservative) Lower Austria had led to conflict over taxes and infrastructure, hindering development and proper administration, bringing about the separation as the best solution.

Vienna’s new legal status as a city-state with jurisdictional power provided the city with greater degrees of freedom and allowed, for instance, social-democratic reformers to introduce new local taxes, develop new policies, and provide new services, turning Vienna into a model city for social and inclusive policies: “a just city”. The significance of Red Vienna can hardly be overestimated (Cockett, 2024:71) as it was at this critical juncture that some of the most innovative and resilient policy solutions were formulated, establishing a legacy that continues to permeate contemporary everyday life.

Vienna as a Just City

The concept of the “just city” – developed to capture these aspects, in part – has deep roots in critical urban theory, drawing on multiple intellectual traditions that link spatial justice

to broader questions of equity, democracy, and social rights. David Harvey’s Marxist-inspired framework (1989) emphasizes the right to the city as a collective right to reshape urban processes and to claim urban space, arguing that capitalist urbanization inherently produces spatial inequalities through accumulation by dispossession. Henri Lefebvre’s foundational work (1968) similarly conceptualizes the right to the city as encompassing both the right to inhabit urban space and the right to participate in its production, emphasizing use value over exchange value and collective appropriation over commodification.

Given Vienna’s strong institutional and policy-embeddedness of the idea of justice, we will ground our analysis more prosaically on Susan Fainstein’s concept of the “just city” (2010), which provides a more policy-oriented framework for linking critiques of global neoliberal developments with local policies and their redistributive consequences. Fainstein’s approach assumes that local and national policy retains meaningful room for manoeuvre in defining urban development trajectories and living conditions despite rising global interconnectedness.

This approach can be complemented by emphasising the role of policy instruments in the overall governance of urban change (Kassim and Le Galès, 2010) as principles of justice do translate into policy measures, which not only define the regulatory framework within which actors unfold their struggles, but also provide them with resources, rights and duties, opportunities and constraints (Kazepov and Verwiebe, 2022:6).

This Contribution

This contribution provides IJURR readers and RC21 conference participants with

an overview not only of how Vienna addresses inequalities across different domains today. It also traces the historical roots of the model and addresses the challenges it is facing. Given the complex and rich legacy, as well as the multiple domains in which inequality is structured, this contribution is necessarily a synthesis of many fragmented contributions on a limited, selected set of fields. We will focus on three of them that have emerged as particularly crucial for understanding new fault lines in the production of inequality: migration, demographics and political representation, housing and segregation, and environmental justice and climate change. Our choice doesn’t diminish the importance of other domains that contribute to the consolidation or production of inequalities; rather, it focuses on “relatively” new and complementary developments to more consolidated approaches.

Migration, Demographics, and Political Representation

Vienna’s demographic transformation – driven by sustained population growth and successive waves of migration since the 1960s – has produced a super-diverse metropolis and intensified demand for housing and public services. The city’s population rose markedly from 1.54 million in 1991 to over 2 million in 2025, with the number of foreign citizens more than quadrupling. Today, nearly half of residents now have a migration background, reflecting layered labour, family, EU, and refugee mobility. These shifts intersect with entrenched governance patterns: long-standing Social Democratic municipal control has shaped expansive social rights and city-specific

redistribution mechanisms, yet institutional arrangements and Austria's restrictive citizenship regime produce substantial political exclusion. Citizenship gaps, residency requirements such as the Wiener Wohn-Ticket rule, segmented integration outcomes, and barriers to qualification recognition, language acquisition, and stable employment reinforce labour market and housing inequalities. Newcomers disproportionately rely on a selective private rental sector and experience unequal access to welfare. Assessing Vienna's claim to urban justice, therefore, requires attention to how governance structures enable meaningful democratic participation, who controls living environments, and how institutional barriers perpetuate unequal political voice and resource distribution amid rapid socio demographic change.

Decommodified Housing under Pressure

Vienna's housing system – long celebrated as a cornerstone of urban justice – rests on an unusually large decommodified stock shaped by the legacy of Red Vienna. Its “housing for all” model blends extensive municipal and limited profit social rentals with private-sector rent regulation, generating affordability through competition between regulated and market segments. Yet this model now faces mounting pressures. Demographic shifts, immigration, rising inequality, escalating property prices, and liberalisation of tenant regulation at the federal level have begun to erode affordability.

Two policy changes are especially consequential and will be examined in detail in the paper: a) the transfer of most new social housing construction to limited-

profit associations, and b) the progressive deregulation of private rent controls.

Together, these shifts have contributed to a structural dualisation of the housing system, widening the divide between secure insiders who benefit from stable, low-cost units and more precarious outsiders, newcomers increasingly confined to high priced, low quality private rentals. These “arrival spaces,” disproportionately often inhabited by non EU migrants, raise critical questions about whether Vienna's model continues to deliver equitable outcomes across its increasingly diverse population.

Sustaining Urban Liveability under Climate Change

Vienna's high liveability reflects a century of planning that links environmental quality with social welfare, combining compact development, extensive public transport, and the long-term protection of major green assets such as the Wienerwald, the Green Belt, and the creation of the Danube Island. Over the past three decades, the city has maintained nearly 50% green space and has embedded climate mitigation across transport, housing, and land use policy, notably through reducing car dependence and decarbonising buildings. Yet accelerating climate impacts, especially extreme heat, have elevated adaptation as a second strategic pillar. Heat risks concentrate in dense working class districts with limited vegetation, where social vulnerability and environmental exposure intersect. Despite Vienna's emphasis on equitable access to green infrastructure, inequalities persist, particularly among low income residents, migrants, and elderly populations. This uneven cooling capacity has prompted a shift toward small scale interventions, such as street trees, de sealing, and shaded spaces,

often constrained by competing uses of scarce urban space. Research increasingly calls for prioritising measures where heat exposure, social vulnerability, and cooling potential align, an approach widely supported by residents. Vienna’s central challenge is to reconcile ambitious climate action with affordable housing, social inclusion, and balanced urban growth.

Can Vienna maintain its Reputation as a “Just City”?

The underlying question of this contribution is “Can Vienna maintain its longstanding reputation as a city characterised by social cohesion, quality of life, and robust state intervention amid profound contemporary pressures?” The central issue is whether

Vienna’s historical commitment to redistributive policies and social inclusion, stemming from the Red Vienna legacy (Kadi and Suitner, 2019; Cockett, 2024), can withstand the challenges posed by demographic shifts, post-industrial economic transformations, climate change, and the recalibration of the welfare state that have emerged over the past decades. Here we examine Vienna’s responses across these critical fields and policy domains to understand whether the city’s institutional arrangements continue to deliver urban justice or are eroding under the weight of globalisation, financialization, and demographic change.



Picture by Michael Friesenecker and Yuri Kazepov

MIGRATION, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Vienna has long been Austria's primary destination for international migration. While the city has historically attracted migrants from across the Habsburg Empire, its contemporary demographic structure has been largely shaped by successive waves of migration since the 1960s. Vienna's contemporary demography took shape during the labour-migration era of the 1960s and 1970s, when Austria recruited "guest workers" (Gastarbeiter) to fuel its postwar boom—a process formalised through bilateral agreements with Turkey (1964) and the former Yugoslavia (1966) as shown in Figure 1. Although the so-called guest worker (Gastarbeiter) programme was originally designed as a temporary rotation system, labour demand, family reunification and subsequent settlement transformed temporary labour migration into permanent immigration. The descendants of these early migration cohorts continue to constitute some of Vienna's largest migrant communities today (Kohlbacher & Reeger, 2020).

Towards a Growing and Diverse City

Since the early 1990s, migration has increasingly diversified. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995, successive EU enlargements, and more recent humanitarian migration from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine have

produced overlapping migration trajectories characterised by different legal statuses, educational backgrounds and labour-market opportunities (Kazepov & Verwiebe, 2022; Boczy et al., 2025). Between 1991 and 2025, Vienna's population increased from around 1.54 million to more than 2.03 million inhabitants, while the number of foreign citizens more than quadrupled. Today, almost every second resident has a migration background, making Vienna one of Europe's most diverse cities. The largest foreign-born groups reflect these cumulative migration histories, ranging from long-established communities originating from Serbia and Turkey to more recent arrivals from Syria, Romania, Poland and Ukraine.

Population growth accelerated further after 2015. Austria recorded one of the highest numbers of first-time asylum applications per capita within the European Union during both the 2015/16 refugee arrivals and following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Boczy et al., 2025). At the same time, Vienna continued attracting labour migrants from EU member states and neighbouring countries due to its strong labour market and extensive welfare infrastructure. Rather than constituting a single migration process, Vienna's demographic transformation therefore reflects the cumulative layering of labour migration, family reunification, intra-European mobility and humanitarian migration, each interacting differently with housing markets, labour-market integration and welfare institutions.

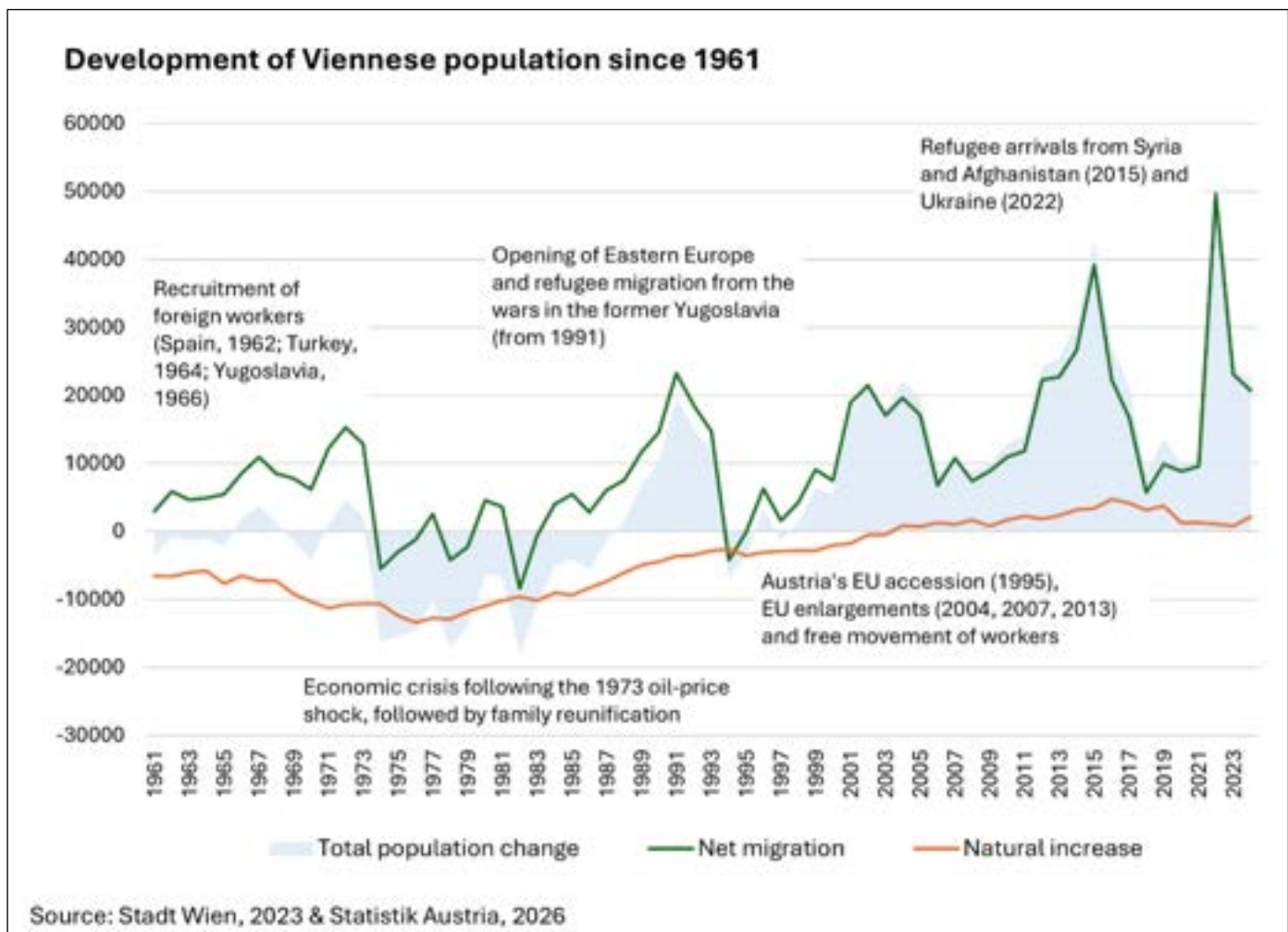


Figure 1: Development of Viennese population since 1961

Social Inequalities and Segmented Integration

Although Vienna is frequently portrayed as an inclusive immigration city, integration outcomes differ substantially across migrant groups. The Vienna Integration and Diversity Monitor shows persistent differences in educational attainment, labour-market participation, occupational status and household income across countries of birth and migration history (Stadt Wien, 2023). While highly qualified migrants from other EU countries often integrate rapidly into professional occupations, refugees and migrants from third countries remain disproportionately represented in lower-paid and insecure employment, face higher

unemployment risks and experience higher poverty rates. These inequalities are further reinforced by barriers to the recognition of foreign qualifications, language acquisition and unequal access to stable employment (Verwiebe et al., 2019; Haindorfer et al., 2024).

Housing conditions mirror these broader patterns of social inequality. Despite Vienna's extensive municipal and limited-profit housing sector, newcomers are initially dependent on the private rental market, where rents are generally higher, housing quality is more variable, and access frequently depends on financial resources, social networks and discrimination. Research has shown that

refugees and recently arrived migrants often encounter significant barriers when entering the housing market, relying heavily on informal networks and support organisations to secure accommodation (Kohlbacher & Reeger, 2020; Lakševics et al., 2024). Residential segregation, therefore, remains comparatively moderate by international standards but is nevertheless shaped by unequal access to affordable housing, labour-market opportunities and long-standing migration pathways (Kohlbacher & Reeger, 2020; Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021).

These differentiated integration trajectories illustrate that migration-related inequalities cannot simply be understood as a consequence of migration itself. Rather, they emerge through the interaction of legal status, labour-market opportunities, housing institutions and welfare arrangements. Vienna's comparatively strong redistributive institutions have moderated many forms of socio-spatial exclusion, yet they have not eliminated structural inequalities affecting particular migrant groups (Kazepov & Verwiebe, 2022).

Welfare Chauvinism and Unequal Citizenship

While labour and housing markets shape many integration outcomes, some of the most persistent inequalities in Vienna arise from the institutional architecture of citizenship and welfare. Rapid population growth, rising housing costs and the increasing diversification of Vienna's population have transformed the political context of the city's welfare institutions. As access to municipal housing and other public services became more contested, questions

of entitlement and belonging gained increasing political salience, particularly following the gradual opening of municipal housing to EU citizens and permanent third-country nationals after the 1990s (Essletzbichler & Forcher, 2022). While the City of Vienna has developed comparatively comprehensive integration policies and municipal support programmes, migration, asylum, citizenship and many welfare regulations remain federal competencies. This frequently produces tensions between Vienna's comparatively inclusive political agenda and more restrictive national migration and welfare policies (Schnelzer et al., 2023; Boczy et al., 2025).

Differentiated Access to Social Rights

These multilevel institutional arrangements translate into differentiated access to social rights and political participation. Austria's restrictive citizenship regime means that a substantial share of Vienna's adult population is excluded from municipal elections despite being permanent residents. Unlike in most European municipalities, non-Austrian EU citizens cannot vote in Vienna's municipal elections because the city also serves as a federal state. EU citizens can at least vote in district elections, whereas third-country citizens cannot. Consequently, as shown in Figure 2, nearly 40% of Vienna's residents are excluded from voting in municipal elections, raising growing and fundamental questions about democratic representation in one of Europe's most diverse cities. Earlier research has argued that these citizenship gaps increasingly challenge Vienna's historical model of redistribution and representation, producing a growing distinction between long-established residents and newcomers

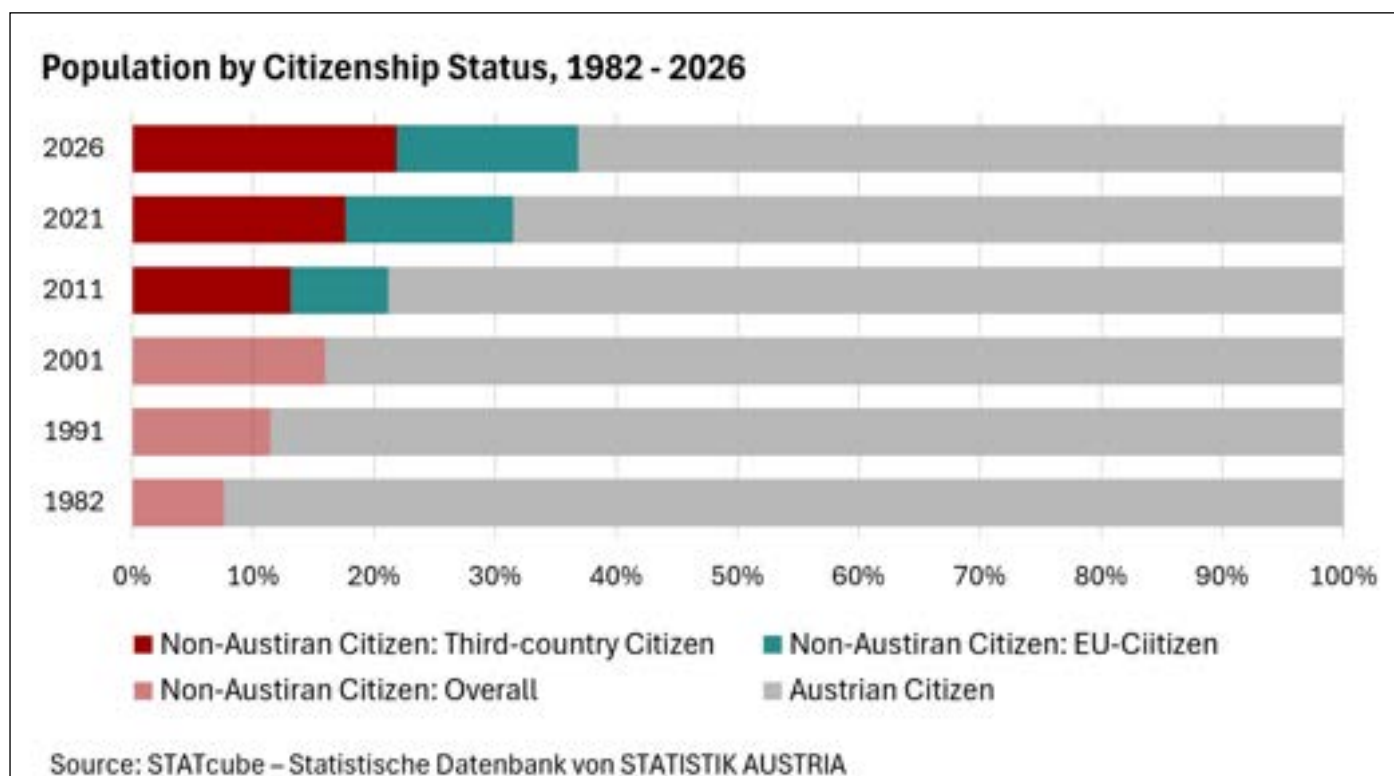


Figure 2: Population by Citizenship Status, 1981- 2026.

(Mocca & Friesenecker, 2022; Ahn & Mocca, 2022; Kazepov & Verwiebe, 2022).

Institutional barriers also extend to welfare and housing access. Although Vienna has repeatedly introduced innovative programmes such as the Bildungsdrehscheibe and follows an “Integration from Day One” approach to facilitate education and labour-market integration, access to key elements of the urban welfare system remains selective (Schnelzer et al., 2023). Eligibility criteria such as the two-year main residence requirement for municipal housing (Wohn-Ticket) illustrate how universal social policies coexist with forms of institutional exclusion that disproportionately affect newly arrived migrants (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021). As Essletzbichler and Forcher (2022) argue, the growing concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged households alongside increasing ethnic diversity within parts of the municipal housing sector has contributed to political narratives portraying

immigration as competition over scarce welfare resources, even though broader neighbourhood disadvantage and socio-economic conditions provide stronger explanations for these tensions. Taken together, these developments exemplify broader processes of welfare chauvinism, in which generous welfare provision increasingly becomes differentiated according to citizenship, residence status and legal entitlements rather than social need alone.

HOUSING: DECOMMODIFICATION, FINANCIALISATION, AND DUALISATION

The institutional foundations of Vienna's contemporary housing system were laid in response to the profound housing crisis accompanying rapid industrialisation and urbanisation at the end of the nineteenth century. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the First World War, Vienna's population grew from fewer than half a million to more than two million inhabitants, while housing provision remained largely dependent on speculative private investment (Hatz, 2008). As Eigner et al. (1999) argue, the housing system of that time failed to provide adequate housing for the rapidly expanding working-class population. Speculative investment focused on larger, more profitable dwellings, while overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, and an acute shortage of affordable housing became defining characteristics of working-class neighbourhoods. Kadi and Suitner (2019) argue that these conditions gradually transformed the housing question into a broader political and social issue, challenging the notion

that adequate housing could be secured solely through market provision. Therefore, housing was increasingly understood not merely as a private commodity but as a public responsibility, laying the foundation for the institutional innovations that would emerge during Red Vienna (Eigner et al., 1999; Kadi & Suitner, 2019).

Red Vienna and the Institutionalisation of Social Housing

The political response took shape during Red Vienna (1919–1934), marking a fundamental shift in the municipality's role in housing provision. Rather than treating housing shortages as a problem to be solved by market provision, the Social Democratic administration regarded access to adequate housing as a fundamental component of social justice and municipal welfare. Kadi and Suitner (2019) argue that Red Vienna should therefore be understood not merely as a housing programme but as a comprehensive project of social reform that sought to improve the living conditions of the working class through active municipal intervention.



Picture by Michael Friesenecker and Yuri Kazepov

Following Vienna’s separation from Lower Austria in 1922, the federal state status gave Vienna the fiscal autonomy and introduced a series of progressive municipal taxes on luxury goods, land speculation and high incomes to finance an ambitious programme of public investment (Hatz, 2008). The use of progressive municipal taxation reflected the broader political objective of redistributing wealth through collective investment in housing and social infrastructure (Kadi & Suitner, 2019; Hatz, 2008).

Between 1923 and 1934, around 65,000 municipal dwellings were constructed in 350 estates, along with schools, childcare facilities, health centres, libraries, laundries and generous communal open spaces (Hatz, 2008). As Blau (1999) observes, the *Gemeindebauten* (municipal housing estates) were conceived not simply as residential buildings but as social infrastructure, integrating housing with education, health, recreation and community life. Suitner (2021) similarly characterises this period as the emergence of “social planning”, in which housing became embedded within a broader institutional project aimed at shaping a more equitable city. In Red Vienna, housing was understood primarily central institutions through which the municipality sought to reduce urban inequalities and improve everyday living conditions.

The Legacy of Red Vienna

The lasting significance of Red Vienna, however, lies less in the number of municipal dwellings constructed during ‘Red Vienna’ than in the institutional trajectory it initiated. Matznetter (2002) argues that post-war housing policy transformed the municipal housing programme into a broader welfare-oriented housing system embedded within Austria’s conservative welfare state. During

the immediate post-war decades, the institutional architecture of Austrian housing policy was progressively expanded. Municipal housing construction resumed as part of large-scale reconstruction efforts after WWII, while the Housing Subsidy Act of 1954 established publicly subsidised housing production as a permanent pillar of Austrian housing policy. At the same time, tenancy regulation remained a central mechanism for safeguarding affordability and security, particularly through rent regulation and strong tenant protection in the pre-WWII private rental housing stock (Matznetter, 2002). Within this institutional framework, Eigner et al. (1999) add that limited-profit housing associations gradually emerged as an increasingly important second pillar of social housing, particularly during the large-scale housing programmes of the post-war decades. Their role was further consolidated through the Limited-Profit Housing Act (*Wohnungsgemeinnützigkeitsgesetz*) of 1979, which established the legal framework governing limited-profit housing associations. As Kössl (2022) explains, the Limited-Profit Housing Act requires housing associations to operate according to cost-rent principles, restricts profit distribution, obliges providers to reinvest surpluses into new housing construction, and subjects them to comprehensive public auditing. Together, these principles create revolving funds that preserve housing affordability across generations while ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of the sector.



A variety of Municipal Housing Estates from Red Vienna and the post-WWII period, highlighting different qualities and conditions and new-subsidized limited profit housing estates. © Michael Friesenecker

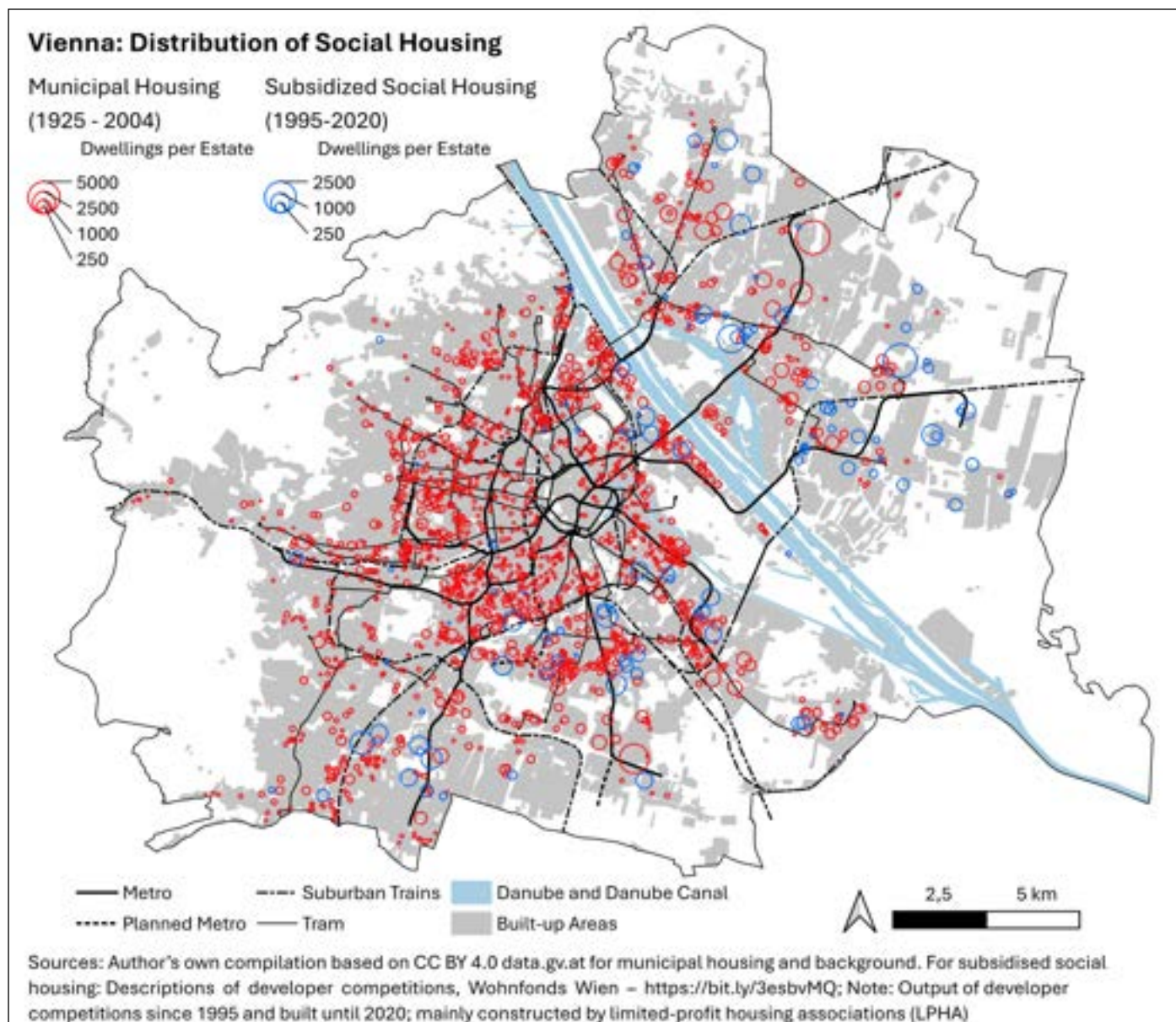


Figure 3: Distribution of Social Housing in Vienna

Institutional Adaptation: Defending Decommodified Housing

Beginning in the late 1980s, Vienna increasingly adapted rather than replaced its welfare-oriented housing model. The decentralisation of housing subsidies to the federal states in 1989 considerably strengthened the municipality's steering capacities, allowing Vienna to align subsidy schemes more closely with local housing and planning objectives (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021). Rather than relying primarily on direct municipal housing construction, housing policy shifted

towards a broader governance approach combining multiple policy instruments. As Friesenecker and Litschauer (2021) argue, this institutional evolution integrated active land banking through *wohnfonds_wien*, bricks-and-mortar housing subsidies, developer competitions, the strategic allocation of public land and planning instruments such as the subsidised housing zoning category introduced in 2019. Municipal housing construction gradually declined and, following the completion of the last municipal housing project in 2004, new subsidised housing

was predominantly delivered by limited-profit housing associations. At the same time, the City of Vienna reaffirmed its commitment to municipal housing by establishing Wiener Wohnen in 2001 as a municipally owned housing management company. Created in response to changes in European competition law, Wiener Wohnen enabled the city to retain ownership of its municipal housing stock. Today, it manages approximately 220,000 municipal dwellings distributed across the entire city (as shown in Figure 3), making it the largest municipal housing provider in Europe (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021). Direct municipal construction resumed on a smaller scale through the Gemeindebau Neu programme, with the first of 41 new estates opened in 2022 (Stadt Wien, 2026).

The cumulative outcome of this institutional evolution is a housing system that remains exceptional in the European context. Whereas many European countries experienced privatisation, residualisation and the retrenchment of social housing, Vienna maintained a comparatively large decommodified rental sector composed of municipal housing, limited-profit housing associations and a regulated private rental market (Matznetter, 2002; Litschauer & Friesenecker, 2021; Kadi & Lilius, 2024). This exceptional continuity can be attributed to the sector's sustained production, limited residualisation and continued commitment to a broadly universal "housing for all" approach (Kadi and Lilius, 2024; Friesenecker & Litschauer, 2021). Comparatively generous income ceilings keep around 80% of Vienna's population eligible in principle for municipal and subsidised limited-profit housing, while successive reforms of allocation and

eligibility rules have increasingly prioritised households with greater housing needs without abandoning broad accessibility (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021; Litschauer & Friesenecker, 2021). This institutional balancing seeks to reconcile universal access with more selective allocation in the municipal housing stock, thereby preserving affordability, promoting social mix and strengthening social protection simultaneously. This combination of universal eligibility and selective allocation distinguishes Vienna from many European housing systems, where social housing has increasingly become a residual tenure.

Figure 4 illustrates the tenure structures underpinning Vienna's redistributive housing outcomes, compared with those of selected European cities. While many Western and Southern European cities are characterised by high homeownership rates or predominantly market-based rental sectors, Vienna combines one of the lowest homeownership rates with an exceptionally large rental sector, almost half of which consists of municipal or limited-profit housing. Moreover, the overall tenure structure has remained remarkably stable over time, reflecting the continued importance of decommodified housing despite broader trends of privatisation and residualisation observed elsewhere in Europe. Together with tenancy regulation covering substantial parts of the historic private rental stock, this institutional configuration enables the decommodified rental sector to compete directly with private landlords, moderating rent formation across the wider housing market while reducing households' dependence on homeownership as the primary route to affordable housing. These structural differences are also reflected in housing affordability. Whereas between around one-fifth and more than three-fifths of households in several comparator cities

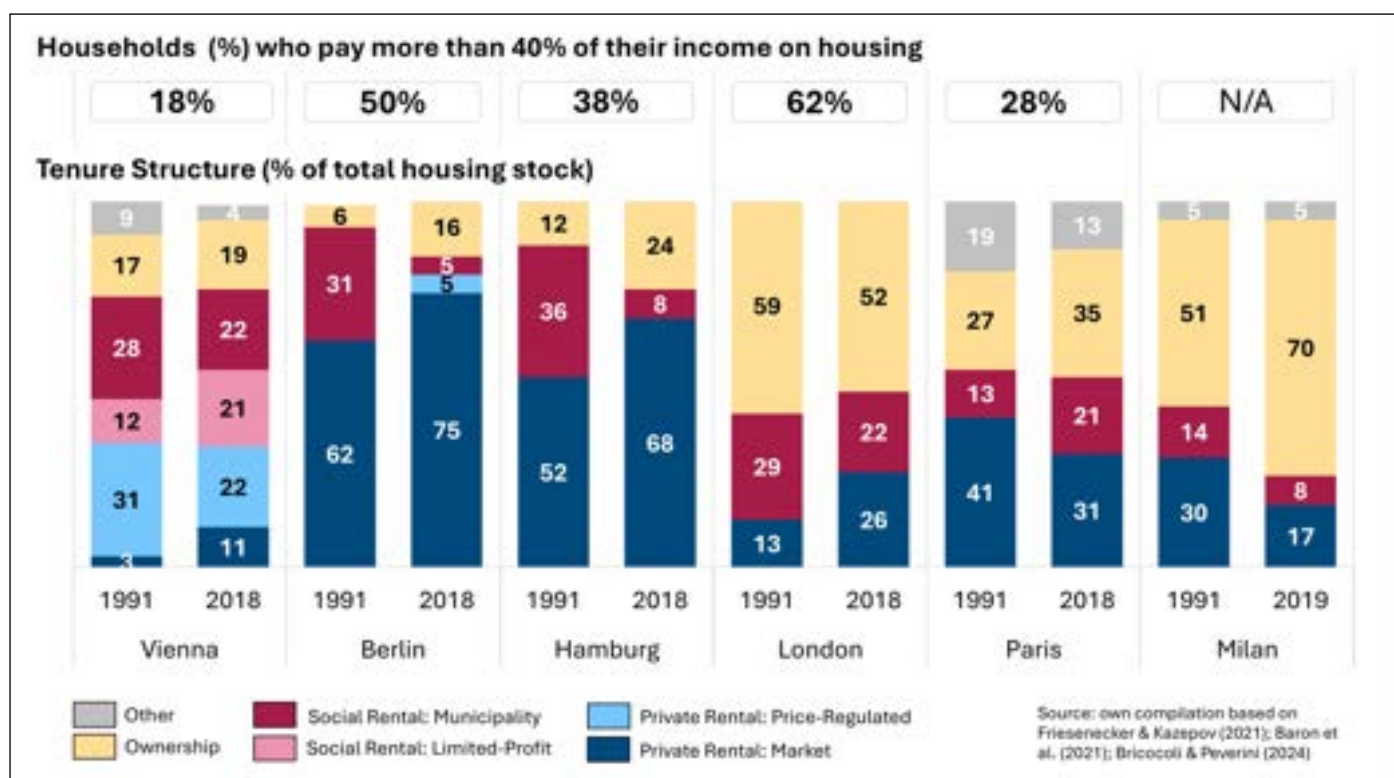


Figure 4. Vienna's housing affordability in comparison

spend over 40% of their disposable income on housing, the corresponding share in Vienna is only around 8%, indicating a comparatively low level of housing-cost overburden. Although these differences cannot be attributed solely to tenure structure, they strongly suggest that the interaction between a large decommodified rental sector, regulated private renting and continued public steering of housing production contributes to moderating housing costs well beyond the social housing sector itself.

The Impact of Market Moderating Effects

Recent studies provide evidence for these market-wide moderating effects. Klien et al. (2023) estimate that a ten percentage-point increase in the share of limited-profit housing would reduce unregulated private rents by approximately €0.30–0.40 per square metre, while Banabak (2023) identifies comparable neighbourhood-level price-dampening effects

within Vienna. These findings demonstrate that Vienna's decommodified housing sector benefits not only its own tenants but also moderates rents across the wider private rental market by increasing competitive pressures on private landlords. The benefits of this institutional configuration extend beyond moderating rents. Premrov and Schnetzer (2023) show that municipal housing contributes to greater neighbourhood income diversity rather than reinforcing socio-economic segregation, while Morawetz and Klaiber (2022) demonstrate that municipal housing and rent regulation reduce income sorting around valuable urban amenities, including public transport, green spaces, and central locations. Together, these studies indicate that Vienna's housing model redistributes not only affordable housing but also access to urban opportunities.

These outcomes, however, are not simply the product of Vienna's historical housing stock but depend on the continuous adaptation of its housing institutions. Maintaining affordability, accessibility, and social mix increasingly requires active policy responses, e.g., funding, zoning, and eligibility criteria, to population growth and demographic change, rising land values, and the growing financialisation of housing markets (Friesenecker & Kazepov, 2021; Litschauer & Friesenecker, 2021; Kadi & Lilius, 2024).

Housing under Pressure: Market Transformation and Dualisation

The redistributive achievements of Vienna's housing model should not obscure the fact that it has operated under increasingly difficult conditions over the past few decades. Strong population growth and socio-economic diversification, rising land prices, increasing construction and energy costs have substantially intensified pressure on both the social and private housing sectors. Rather than reflecting the dismantling of Vienna's welfare-oriented housing institutions, these developments are largely the result of broader macro-economic transformations and European housing market trends that have increased demand while simultaneously making affordable housing provision more difficult (Mundt, 2018; Angel & Mundt, 2024; Kumnig & Litschauer, 2025). Consequently, the central challenge facing Vienna is no longer the establishment of decommodified housing institutions but the maintenance of their redistributive capacity under increasingly commodified market conditions.

Institutionally, these pressures have not resulted in a wholesale neoliberal transformation of Vienna's housing system but rather in an increasing dualisation of housing provision. Here, dualisation refers to the growing differentiation of housing opportunities within the same housing system, resulting in unequal access to affordability, tenure security and urban opportunities despite the continued existence of a large decommodified sector. While municipal housing, limited-profit housing associations and large parts of the regulated rental sector continue to provide comparatively secure and affordable housing, market-oriented segments have expanded within the housing system itself. Friesenecker and Kazepov (2021) show that this differentiation has been driven less by reforms to the social housing sector than by the gradual liberalisation of tenancy regulation since the 1990s. Successive amendments to the Austrian Tenancy Act progressively expanded deregulated segments of the private rental market through exemptions from rent regulation, benchmark rents, location bonuses and the wider use of temporary contracts, thereby creating increasingly unequal conditions within private renting. Similarly, Kadi (2025) argues that these reforms did not replace Vienna's decommodified housing institutions but rather added new layers of commodification, producing an institutional hybrid in which decommodified and commodified housing forms increasingly coexist.

A Dualist Housing System

Litschauer and Friesenecker (2022) argue that the outcome of this institutional transformation is an increasingly dualised housing system. Rather than producing a simple divide between social and private

housing, dualisation unfolds across several dimensions: between regulated and deregulated rental markets, secure and insecure tenancy conditions, and established residents and newcomers. Consequently, inequalities in housing affordability, security and access are increasingly evident despite the continued strength of Vienna’s social housing sector. These developments are particularly pronounced for households entering the housing market. Angel and Mundt (2024) identify growing socio-tenorial polarisation, not because Vienna abandoned its universal approach to social housing, but because rising demand has intensified competition for affordable dwellings. Similarly, Aigner (2019) demonstrates that refugees and many recent migrants encounter substantial barriers to accessing Vienna’s protected housing sectors owing to eligibility requirements, waiting periods and limited housing availability, making them disproportionately dependent on the more expensive and less secure deregulated private rental market. The principal challenge facing Vienna is therefore ensuring equitable access for newcomers to decommodified housing segments under increasingly competitive housing-market conditions.

Reinforcing Dualisation

This dualisation is reinforced by broader processes of commodification and financialisation. Although Austria remains comparatively resistant to financialisation because of its extensive social housing sector, tenant protection, and corporatist housing institutions. Dowling et al. (2026) explain this apparent paradox as the outcome of a precarious interplay between institutional “bulwarks”, such as strong tenant protection, common-good obligations, and corporatist welfare institutions, and “conduits” that enable financial investment in market-

oriented segments. Rather than preventing financialisation altogether, these institutional arrangements produce a selective and uneven financialisation of housing markets. Focusing on Vienna’s historic private rental sector, Musil et al. (2024) show how these broader market dynamics translate into concrete processes of commodification. Rising property values, changing ownership structures and redevelopment strategies increasingly transform rent-regulated housing into investment assets, with landlords and investors employing a range of legal and market-based strategies to capture exchange value despite continued rent regulation. Kadi et al. (2026) further demonstrate that institutional investors have become important actors in Vienna’s housing market, albeit concentrated in particular tenures and neighbourhoods rather than across the housing system as a whole. Rather than signalling the replacement of Vienna’s welfare model, these developments indicate that commodified and financialised housing increasingly develops alongside its decommodified institutions.

Socio-Spatial Implications

Socio-spatially, these institutional transformations have begun to reshape patterns of neighbourhood change and displacement. Rather than experiencing the widespread gentrification observed in many liberal housing systems, Vienna exhibits more selective and uneven forms of urban restructuring. Friesenecker and Kazepov (2021) demonstrate that the city’s extensive social housing sector and comparatively low levels of socio-spatial segregation continue to moderate displacement and social homogenisation,

while exclusionary dynamics become increasingly visible within the liberalised private rental market. Musil et al. (2022) have shown how the commodification of Vienna's historic Zinshaus stock has redirected investment and upgrading towards formerly working-class neighbourhoods, contributing to new forms of residential upgrading and exclusionary displacement. Rather than representing a city-wide process, gentrification unfolds selectively where commodified housing segments intersect with redevelopment and rising property values. Recent research further suggests that these changes extend beyond observable residential mobility. Schnelzer

(2024) demonstrates that increasing rents and housing insecurity reshape tenants' everyday lives long before residential relocation occurs, conceptualising displacement as an ongoing process of economic pressure, adaptation and negotiation rather than a singular event of forced relocation.

Taken together, these developments do not suggest the erosion of Vienna's urban welfare model but its increasing internal differentiation. The institutions that historically moderated urban inequalities remain largely intact, yet they operate within housing markets characterised by rising land values, commodification and



Renovated pre-WWII housing, including attic conversion, disinvested private rental housing, investment and buy-to-let apartments and unregulated private rental housing, as examples of commodification trends © Michael Friesenecker

growing competition for affordable housing. Maintaining Vienna’s redistributive housing model, therefore, depends less on defending its existing institutions than on preserving their capacity to deliver affordable, secure and broadly accessible housing under changing market conditions. The resulting dualization, between regulated and deregulated sectors, established residents and newcomers, and secure and insecure housing careers, has become one of the defining challenges for sustaining urban justice in contemporary Vienna.



ECOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, CLIMATE CRISIS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Vienna has consistently ranked among the world's most liveable cities over the past two decades (Stadt Wien, 2026). This reputation is commonly attributed to the city's combination of affordable housing, high-quality public services, efficient public transport, extensive green space and comparatively favourable environmental conditions (Khomenko et al., 2020; Friesenecker, Riederer & Cucca, 2022). These qualities reflect a long tradition of public planning and investment that conceived environmental quality as an integral component of urban welfare. As Mocca et al. (2020) show, this planning approach became visible in successive strategies that combined compact urban development with investments in public transport, the protection of the Vienna Woods and Green Belt, urban renewal programmes, and environmental infrastructure such as flood protection and high-quality drinking water provision. Reflecting broader international climate agendas, Vienna has progressively integrated climate mitigation into urban policy since the 1990s, making it a cross-cutting objective that shapes transport, housing, land-use and infrastructure planning. Its mitigation strategy centres on expanding public transport and cycling infrastructure, maintaining compact urban development and decarbonising the existing building stock (Mocca et al., 2020).

Climate Change and the Rise of Adaptation

While mitigation became increasingly embedded within Vienna's urban development agenda, growing impacts of climate change elevated adaptation to a second pillar of climate policy. Among these impacts, urban heat has emerged as the city's most pressing environmental health challenge. Owing to its location in the Pannonian Basin, Vienna has experienced warming substantially above the global average, while the frequency and duration of heatwaves have increased markedly over recent decades (Orlik et al., 2025). The year 2024 was the warmest on record, with record numbers of hot days and tropical nights, while extreme rainfall in September caused severe flooding across parts of the city. Climate simulations have identified the densely built inner districts as Vienna's principal urban heat islands (Žuvela-Aloise et al., 2025), whereas the Vienna Woods in the western part of the city, the Danube corridor and larger green spaces provide important cooling functions as highlighted in Figure 5. In response to these developments,



Picture by Michael Friesenecker and Yuri Kazepov

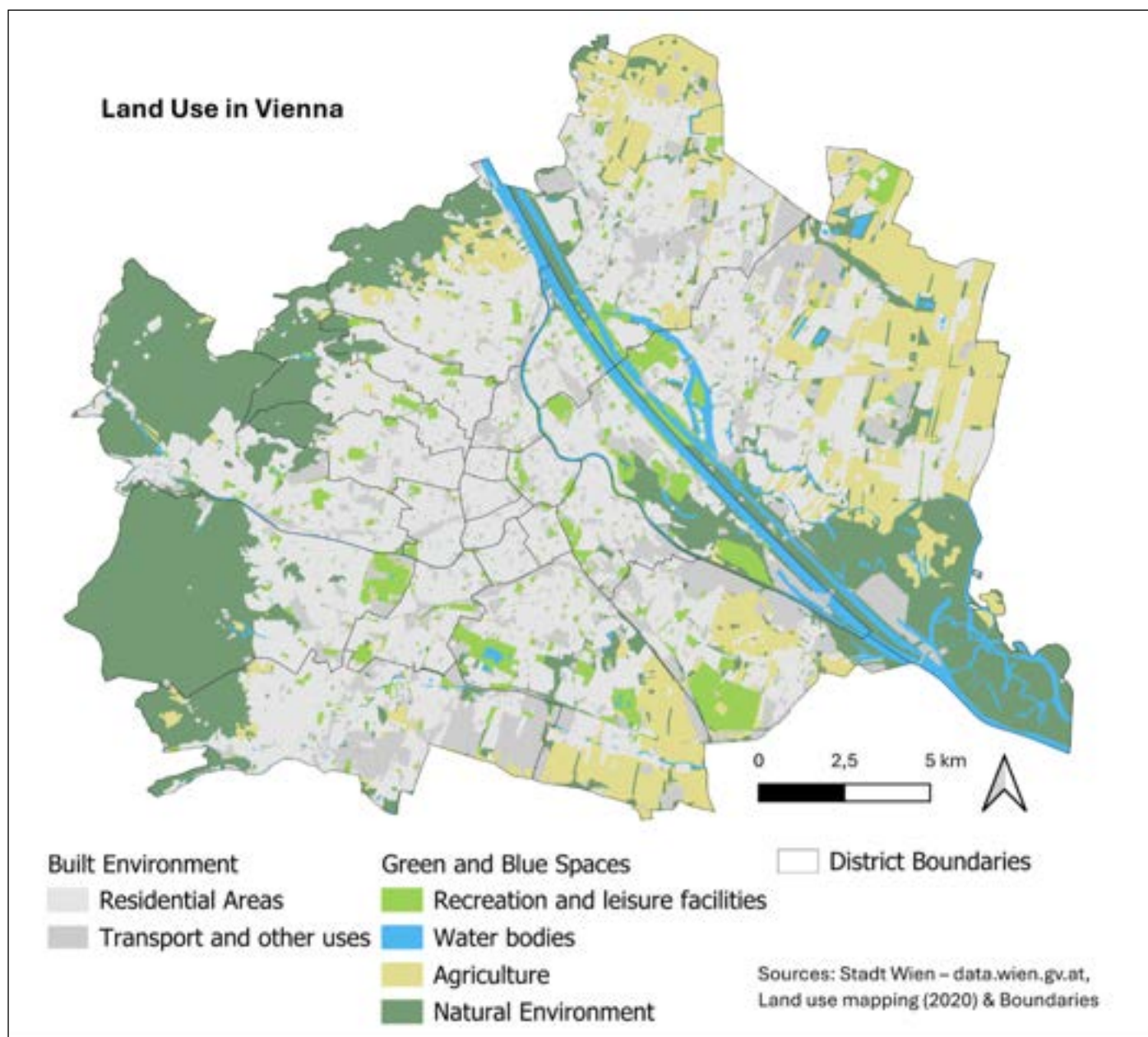


Figure 5: Land Use in Vienna

climate adaptation has become an increasingly important second pillar of Vienna’s climate policy since the adoption of the Urban Heat Island Strategy in 2015, placing greater emphasis on urban greening, heat mitigation and resilience to drought and heavy rainfall (Friesenecker et al., 2024). As mitigation and adaptation intersect more closely with housing, mobility and land-use planning, their implementation requires addressing unequal vulnerabilities while navigating new trade-offs across the city.

Emerging Climate Risks, Inequalities and Trade-offs

Unequal cooling capacities become socially significant climate risks only where they intersect with social vulnerability. Spatial analyses show that the highest heat risks emerge not simply in the hottest parts of the city, but where elevated temperatures coincide with concentrations of socially vulnerable populations. In Vienna, these intersections occur particularly in densely built working-class neighbourhoods characterised by

limited green infrastructure, extensive surface sealing and higher shares of low-income and migrant populations, whereas affluent inner-city neighbourhoods may experience similarly high temperatures but generally possess greater adaptive capacities (Friesenecker et al., 2025). More broadly, environmental inequalities in Vienna cannot be reduced to a simple divide between affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Different population groups experience distinct constellations of urban heat, air pollution, traffic noise and access to green space, while migrants and lower-income households generally face poorer environmental conditions and

lower access to urban vegetation (Khomenko et al., 2020; Friesenecker, Riederer & Cucca, 2022; Neier, 2023). Building on this, Gabor et al. (2026) show that climate vulnerability is inherently intersectional, as socio-economic disadvantage, migration background, age, gender and care responsibilities frequently overlap and reinforce one another. Finally, Seebauer et al. (2024) demonstrate that objectively measured neighbourhood temperatures correspond only weakly with residents' experienced heat stress, highlighting that housing quality, building characteristics and adaptive capacity are as important as neighbourhood conditions in shaping experienced heat stress.



Pictures by Michael Friesenecker and Yuri Kazepov



The growing prominence of climate adaptation has also made the governance of urban space increasingly contested. In densely built neighbourhoods, where the need for cooling measures is greatest, opportunities for additional greening are constrained by competing land uses and existing infrastructure. Measures such as street greening, tree planting, superblocks and traffic calming require the reallocation of scarce street space, bringing competing visions of urban mobility, public space and environmental quality into direct conflict (Brenner et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, recent research has increasingly argued that adaptation measures should be prioritised where the greatest reductions in climate risk can be achieved by simultaneously considering heat exposure, social vulnerability and the cooling potential of interventions (Friesenecker et al., 2025). Such redistributive approaches also appear to enjoy broad public legitimacy. Residents express widespread support for greening measures across the city, including investments targeted at less-green neighbourhoods and areas they rarely visit, suggesting that prioritising climate adaptation according to need commands substantial public backing despite socio-economic differences (Schneider et al., 2025). Vienna has further sought to strengthen the legitimacy of climate action through greater civic engagement in adaptation, including participatory planning formats, resident-led greening initiatives and increasing recognition of local social capital as an important resource for urban resilience (Ahn et al., 2023; Muhr et al., 2026).

Emerging Trade-Offs

At the same time, nature-based solutions may produce unintended social consequences if improvements in environmental quality are accompanied by rising property values and displacement pressures. Although Vienna’s

extensive social housing sector moderates these dynamics compared with many other European cities, research points to persistent policy silos between climate adaptation and housing policy, particularly within the deregulated private rental sector, where risks of green gentrification remain most pronounced (Friesenecker et al., 2024; Dorner et al., 2026). Ultimately, the challenge for Vienna is no longer simply to implement effective climate measures, but to reconcile climate resilience with continued population growth, affordable, high-quality housing provision and social inclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The Viennese urban model is currently undergoing a profound transition, moving from a century-long tradition of municipal socialism and decommodified housing toward a complex hybridity shaped by sustained population growth, demographic diversification, moderate financialization trends, and climate change. While Vienna is often cited as an archetype of a “Just City,” our analysis also reveals a landscape under significant pressure, where institutional resilience against global neoliberal trends is increasingly challenged by emerging patterns of social and spatial inequality.

The Challenges Ahead

As we have seen, Vienna faces a complex set of interlocking challenges as its historically path-dependent, redistributive welfare model encounters expanding market logics. Multilevel institutional layering has introduced nationally deregulated private rentals and financialised investment housing alongside a still-robust social housing stock, producing an Insider/Outsider divide that pushes newcomers, young adults, and migrants into precarious tenures. Socio-spatial inequalities are widening, albeit at a slower pace than in other European cities. However, high-status areas have upgraded faster since the financial crisis, while large municipal estates show signs of residualisation, thereby increasing the still-low risk of territorial stigmatisation. Gentrification does not work through abrupt evictions, but rather through insecure private-sector tenures and indirect displacement mechanisms. Political representation is

also strained: a substantial electoral gap excludes many residents from formal voice, undermining democratic legitimacy. Refugees and non EU migrants are confronted with acute barriers in qualification recognition, language acquisition, and access to stable employment, reinforcing labour market and housing exclusion. Climate adaptation poses additional risks of unequal exposure to heat and potential green gentrification. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated reforms in housing policy, citizenship and participation rights, labour market integration, and integrated climate social planning.

How Does the City Deal With the Challenges

The City of Vienna addresses these challenges through a mix of measures that reflect not only institutional resilience but also institutional innovation. For instance, the adoption of inclusionary selection criteria in developer competitions that combine high social and environmental standards and the creation of SMART apartments to maintain equity in new construction (Friesenecker and Kazepov, 2021). In recent years, the city has also restarted its municipal housing program to address the affordability crisis. However, many interventions remain fragmented. There is a notable deficit in citizen participation, with involvement often limited to small-scale urban planning rather than core policymaking. Furthermore, the city’s capacity to regulate the private market is restricted by the Federal Tenancy Law, which has favoured liberalisation.

In conclusion, Red Vienna’s legacy provides a robust starting point for a “Just City”, but

its future stability depends on its ability to reconcile its redistributive heritage with the requirements of a resilient, sustainable, and diverse 21st-century metropolis. The widening gaps in housing access, political representation, and environmental quality suggest that a new, innovative turn in policymaking is required to prevent the further entrenchment of social divisions.

As Gustav Mahler once quipped, in Vienna, everything happens fifty years later. The luxury of deliberate slowness, however, may no longer be available. The city’s future as a model of urban justice will depend not on preserving its institutions in their inherited form, but on the political courage to transform them in time.



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About this Virtual Issue

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