

## Housing research in Central and Eastern European countries

The **East European Housing and Urban Policy** working group is one of the oldest working groups within the ENHR. Initially called **East European Housing Policy**, it was among the first working groups created in 1989, a year after the very first ENHR congress that took place in Amsterdam in 1988. Of the 11 initial working groups, only 3 are still active today, among them the East European Housing and Urban Policy (hereinafter the WG), the other two being the Comparative Housing Policy and Housing Finance working groups. Initially co-coordinated by Iván Tosics and József Hegedüs, the coordination team was later joined by Raymond Struyk (1996-2005), Sasha Tsenkova in 2003 and Richard Sendi in 2015.

Upon its creation, the founders defined the main objectives of the WG as *“to produce within two or three years a research document on the history and development of the East European policies”*. To achieve this, the principal activities of the WG during the first two years would include: a) the organisation of three or four workshops in different East European countries and b) preparation and organization of seminar programmes on East European Housing Policies for the 1990 (Paris) and 1991 (Oslo) international housing conferences. It was anticipated that the WG would become *“an information centre for the region, being able to provide a database and inventory on [research] projects”*. It is also important to note that the founders had an ambitious aim *“to have a group roughly equally divided among Eastern and Western researchers who are interested in the topic”*. The WG did indeed attract, in addition to researchers from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, the participation of several housing researchers from Western European countries.

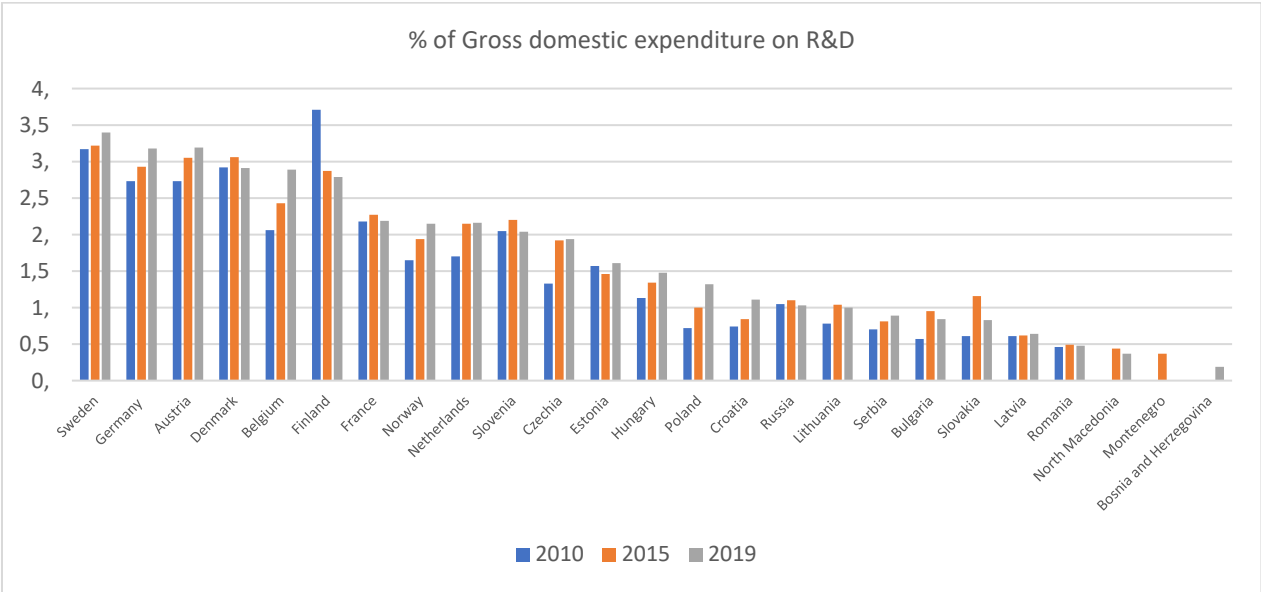
On this foundation, the WG created a very diverse multidisciplinary network of established and emerging researchers that regularly and actively participated in its workshops organised during ENHR conferences. Various scholars also collaborated within the WG on a series of edited volumes on comparative housing change, peer reviewed articles, smaller country specific thematic workshop on topical issues such as social housing, housing finance, housing management, energy efficiency retrofits, informal housing. The technical assistance programs of multilateral agencies (World Bank, Council of Europe Development Bank and the United Nations, coupled with bilateral projects) provided a significant boost to the development of research capacity in the region and facilitated comparative research and diffusion of knowledge. Since the mid-2000s, the expansion of the European Union to include ten new member states created opportunities for joint research on a variety of issues where housing was incorporated into large scale research on urban regeneration, housing estates, social exclusion and urban energy poverty. Researchers from CEE countries added their voice to such studies and explorations. However, these might have been more opportunistic choices in housing research as opposed to authentic impetus from the region to address issues that matter most.

Notwithstanding the previous achievements of the WG, its activities have gradually declined over the recent period. While the WG did previously attract larger numbers of participants, there has been a significant decrease in the level of attendance at the workshops organised during the recent ENHR conferences. This decline was noted also by Hugo Priemus: *»In Budapest [1993], one third of the participants came from east-central European countries, a share unimaginable earlier – and also difficult to reach since then, as sponsorship (and, unfortunately, interest in housing research) has decreased in eastern Europe«* (ENHR Newsletter, May 2013). The initial objective to maintain a platform for the active exchange of knowledge and information on housing issues in CEE countries seems to have lost ground.

Recent discussions with WG members indicate that the original aims and the regional focus might not be as relevant today as it previously used to be during the transition to markets and democracy in the 1990s. While the transitional narrative is still important, the people in CEE feel that they are part of a wider Europe and look forward to a new and different future. It is true, indeed, that there were initially

issues in the field of housing research, which were common to all countries in the region. Housing researchers were eager to discuss and exchange ideas with colleagues from other CEE countries at ENHR conferences on strategies to reform the socialist housing legacy. One such common topic was, for example, the housing policy changes introduced during the 'transition period', which included the highly topical examination of the effects of the privatisation of the public housing stock and restitution of previously nationalised properties. Researchers also had a common interest in investigating whether housing policies were converging or diverging in the region. The management and maintenance of the newly emerged condominium housing systems was another of the kind. The WG thus provided an excellent platform for the useful exchange of experiences and knowledge on these and other important issues of common interest. And while there may be housing problems that continue to be commonly experienced by many of the countries in the region (such as the excessively high levels of homeownership versus a critical shortage or rented housing, coupled with an unregulated private rental sector), there does not seem to be much interest to maintain a focus on CEE countries. In general, participation of researchers from the region in the WG is small and declining in ENHR conferences. Recent discussions indicate that participants from the region are comfortable presenting and discussing their papers in thematic workshops as opposed to maintaining area-based focus on housing issues.

In connection with the observed WG changes and low level of participation of researchers from CEE countries in ENHR conferences, it is important to note that housing research capacity has dwindled and there does not seem to be a succession of emerging leaders in the field. ENHR records (for the last ten years) show that only 5 CEE countries have research organisations registered as institutional members of the network (4 of them with one institutional member each and one with 2 institutional members). There is an absence of institutional support in the majority of CEE countries to enable researchers' participation in ENHR conferences and a general lack of institutional anchors funding multidisciplinary housing research. It may be fair to note here, though, that this may not be a problem affecting housing researchers. As the figure below shows, all Eastern European countries allocate a lower (in the majority of them much lower) percentage of their GDP to research and development, generally, as compared to the level of budget funding in Western European countries.



Source: Eurostat, June 2021

This state of affairs was recognised in 2015 by the European Commission as a problem that may potentially constrain efforts to achieve a more streamlined and homogenous economic growth and competitiveness of the EU, driven by research and innovation. Reacting to what was described as

'significant internal disparities in terms of research and innovation performance' (European Commission Decision C (2015)), the Commission introduced a framework programme entitled "Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation – TWINNING", intended for funding research projects that specifically provide and promote research and innovation knowhow to the countries that were defined as "Low Research and Innovation performing countries". The list of "Low R&I performing countries" includes all CEE EU member states.

The key proposition here is that the lack of adequate funding for research may have a direct link to the lack of engagement of academic institutions and low level of participation of researchers from CEE countries in international research networks in general, and in housing in particular. While some of the academic institutions may have the occasional course on housing in their urban planning, sociology, economics or urban geography degrees, the lack of specialist housing studies in the educational systems contributes to the limited pool of multidisciplinary housing scholars.

In addition, the deficit in housing research funding and education is the direct consequence of a lack of a serious concern on the part of CEE states for housing. Housing policy has taken a back seat, leading to housing deterioration, segregation, and inequality. Housing privatization applied in almost universal manner across the region has transferred significant national assets in private ownership. While this has boosted private investment in the sector, multi-apartment housing in urban areas has deteriorated due to lack of effective legal, organizational, and financial measures for its management. A recent comparative assessment of housing policies in the European Union (Institut Wohnen und Umwelt GmbH, 2020) identified significant housing market distortions in the new member states manifested in high vacancy rates (over 20% even in growth areas), massive shortage of affordable housing, overcrowding and informality.

While recognising the differences among the CEE countries, the lack of consistent housing policy has long-term consequences for a highly urbanised region and its people. First, housing policy reforms need to be monitored on a regular basis and home-grown research capacity provides important information for policy makers on programmes and strategies addressing significant constraints and facilitates learning from the experience of the most successful countries. Second, a much stronger commitment to comprehensive housing reforms leads to better housing system performance. Despite the differences and dependency on socialist legacy, housing research in individual countries can inform urban housing policies and develop much-needed specific "reform pathways" that improve market performance. Third, accelerating the housing sector depends on the commitment of governments to improve fiscal, financial and real estate policies. On the financial side, priority needs to be given to policies that ensure a more efficient use of public resources in the housing sector, such as support for social housing and demand-based assistance to low-income households replacing short-lived incentives to homeowners. Housing research in CEE needs to address these issues of fundamental importance for the social and economic well-being of urban residents to be able to influence policy design and intervention.

Though not as strong as it initially was, it must, nonetheless, be acknowledged that the East European Housing and Urban Policy WG has importantly contributed to evidence-based studies on housing transformation in CEE countries and has played a role in knowledge mobilization and dissemination for decades through ENHR conferences and networks. Also, some East European research institutions have undertaken the huge task of organising an ENHR conference (Noszvaj-Hungary, 1989; Budapest-Hungary, 1993; Piran-Slovenia, 1997; Balatonfüred-Hungary, 1997; Pultusk-Poland, 2001; Tirana-Albania, 2003; Ljubljana-Slovenia, 2006; Prague-Czech Republic, 2009, Tirana-Albania, 2017 and Łódź-Poland, forthcoming in 2023). The WG has, without doubt, an important legacy and has established its imprint on comparative housing research in the region. However, it looks like time may have come to move away from area specific studies and to integrate the contributions of its members into a much wider milieu of housing researchers, designers and policy-makers. The working programme for the

2021 ENHR conference in Cyprus indicates that several researchers from CEE countries are planning to present papers in thematic workshops. That seems to be the future orientation of the participation of CEE researchers in ENHR conferences. Knowledge has no boundaries.

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