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STUDYING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CRISES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HOUSING SYSTEMS – EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM AUSTRIA

The paper aims at contributing to ongoing debates on the patterns of continuity and change of contemporary housing systems. Particular emphasis is placed on the impact of crises on policy reforms, with a particular focus on the housing realm. Some scholars perceive crises as leading to fundamental policy reforms breaking with long established country-specific paths. Still others emphasise that the effects of crises are less dramatic so that the established country-specific policy trajectories are largely maintained. The first part of the paper hence develops a theoretical framework identifying the main driving forces of housing system change over time, building on theories of path-dependence and change. Besides the impact of crises, the role of the historical heritage and the preferences of key actors are identified as crucial explanatory factors.

These theoretical assumptions are tested empirically, using the case study of the conservative housing system of Austria, which is seldom dealt with by the comparative social policy literature. The paper traces the long-term development of the Austrian housing policy since the 1990s in order to assess continuity and change, with a focus on retrenchment. Empirical research builds on a mix of sources, including secondary data sets and policy documents that provide insights into how policy-makers respond to housing problems.

The main empirical findings indicate that (since about 2013) Austria has experienced a housing crisis. Our main assumption is that this crisis was an impetus for housing reforms that reversed the tendency towards retrenchment that had prevailed since the 1990s. The new rightist government places emphasis on a demand-side approach focused on housing allowances, on transforming social housing into a “safety net” for low-income (native) citizens, and on promoting low-cost home-ownership (via improving the “buy option”). Economic pressures to reduce public funding for new housing construction and political pressures to promote market-oriented housing solutions and to tighten eligibility are identified as the key driving forces of housing system change in Austria. Overall, Austria still markedly differs from countries such as England where retrenchment especially of social

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housing has been more radical. Finally, the paper draws some conclusions for prospective cross-national research on housing issues.