



**HUM465**  
Understanding Modern Switzerland II

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*Housing Crisis in Switzerland*

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# 1 Introduction

The housing crisis refers to a situation where demand exceeds supply, leading to rising prices, unaffordable rents, and shortages or even broader financial instability in the market. Switzerland currently faces these challenges to varying degrees [16].

To understand the crisis, we first examine its historical context by tracing key developments that have shaped the housing market and policy landscape, including immigration trends and changes in social, housing, and spatial planning policies. Since the early 2000s, international agreements such as Bilateral I and II and various migration partnerships have driven a sharp increase in immigration, contributing significantly to population growth. In addition, Switzerland's strong economic environment and record-low mortgage rates have boosted condominium ownership, resulting in low vacancy rates and rising rents [43].

We then outline the main challenges facing Switzerland today, including rising housing costs, displacement due to densification, and the growing difficulty for low- and middle-income households to secure affordable housing. The acute shortage of affordable housing has increased financial stress on low-income households, the elderly, students, and immigrants. Therefore, as a country committed to social balance, Switzerland faces challenges in preventing further separation and exclusion due to this aspect of the crisis [43]. In addition to social inequality, the crisis significantly influences several economic aspects. With high rents, many households may require governmental support to finance their everyday costs.

This paper will look for answers to how Switzerland can design and implement policy measures that effectively address the housing crisis while balancing economic growth, social equity, and environmental sustainability.

To provide context for potential solutions, we briefly review measures implemented by neighboring countries to address similar housing challenges and compare different policy approaches that could inform Swiss policy decisions. We then examine the actions already taken by the Swiss government, including legislative changes, public investment in affordable housing, and policy shifts toward densification.

Based on this analysis, we present our main argument and policy recommendations, proposing solutions that balance economic, social, and environmental sustainability to ensure long-term housing stability for all income groups.

**Methodology** We use a qualitative, comparative case study approach. We explain our case selection by briefly outlining housing situation and tenure system. Our analysis is supported by historical events and statistical evidence to complement our ideas and provide a comprehensive understanding of the housing crisis. We also utilize an institutionalist approach to analyze how certain policies have evolved and affected the crisis until now.

## 2 Causes – (3-5 pages)

### 2.1 Background: the 21th Century

- **Population growth analysis.**

Immigration patterns(EU/efta bilateral agreements), Switzerland's high immigration rates (averaging 1.1 population growth annually since 2000) have significantly impacted housing demand, particularly in employment centers. Maybe, also about the increased life expectancy

- **Spatial planning laws**, resistance against urban growth

Swiss government's general policy and opinion about spatial planning

The Federal Law on Spatial Planning (RPG) was first introduced in 1979 in Switzerland as a response to growing concerns over uncoordinated development, urban sprawl, and the loss of valuable agricultural and natural land due to rapid economic expansion that happened during 1960s and 1970s. Before 1979, land-use decisions were mostly made at the cantonal and communal level, leading to inconsistent planning.

It established a three-zone model distinguishing building zones, agricultural zones, and protected zones. The law also defined a multi-level planning system, where the Confederation sets the legal framework, while cantons and municipalities are responsible for implementation. Additionally, it made spatial planning mandatory at both cantonal and municipal levels to ensure coordinated and sustainable development across the country.

RPG I: Major changes were done in 2013 and the aim of the amendment is to halt urban sprawl and curb the loss of agricultural land and natural landscapes. Instead of claiming undeveloped land, settlements should be developed inward. As a result, building zones transformed to agricultural lands and with this in addition to strict zoning system, it worsens the circumstances considerably.

RPG II: In September 2023, selected changes and clarifications were done on construction outside of building zones.

Its goal is to slow construction outside of building zones and stabilize it at a certain level. In the consultation draft, the Federal Council proposes that the number of buildings and the total area of sealed surfaces outside of building zones may only increase to 101 percent compared to the level on September 29, 2023.

Upzoning effects

Extensive literature shows that restrictive land-use regulations and the resulting inability of housing supply to react to demand increases are crucial reasons for cities' current housing affordability problems. Therefore, relaxing land-use regulations by increasing the allowed floor-to-area ratio (FAR), i.e., "upzoning" has become popular. Half of the ten largest US cities and many cities worldwide have implemented this policy in the past decade, highlighting the importance of understanding the effects of upzoning. The paper investigates the effects of upzoning on housing supply and rents

A recent study by SPUR on upzoning in Zurich reveals that allowing denser development through zoning reforms led to a notable increase—around 9% more housing units—within five to ten years of implementation. Interestingly, rents in upzoned areas did not rise significantly compared to non upzoned ones, indicating that upzoning can boost supply without worsening affordability. However, the study also highlights that the effects of upzoning are not immediate and the benefits are most evident in high-demand, high-rent districts where the zoning potential was previously maxed out.

- **Resistance against urban growth due to ecological reasons, densification**

In [16], it is also stated that densification actually might be solution, if implemented correctly. So, the argument could be that one of the main remedies of the crisis is densification, but because its social dimension is not implemented well, it is not sustainable.

- **Lack of construction** It is related with RPG II

- **Lack of cantonal, federal tenancy laws, social housing policies.** e.g. 2020 rejected proposal

- **Economic excellence**, low mortgage rates

## 2.2 Current State and Its Problems

- **Housing shortage and Increasing demand**

According to the latest figures from the Federal Statistical Office (FSO), as of June 1, there were 51,974 vacant homes, which represents just 1.08% of the country's apartment and single-family housing stock, a rate that has fallen by 0.07 percentage points in one year. To make the matters worse, in some of the most economically significant cantons such as Zurich and Geneva, this rate is around 0.5%. [78]. However, a 2017 study from ETH claims that a functioning housing market presupposes a vacancy rate of not less than 1 percent, highlighting the shortage in housing [43].

- **Social Inequality**

One of the most important consequences of the crisis is social inequality. Switzerland is one of the countries in Europe with one of the lowest homeownership rates of around 42% [24], meaning that most of the residents are tenants. Therefore, high rental costs disproportionately affect groups, such as low-income households, the elderly, students, and immigrants. As a country committed to social balance, Switzerland faces challenges in preventing further separation and exclusion due to this aspect of the crisis. [43].

- Power of profit-based housing, market taking the average demand into account [43], not affordability for vulnerable groups. Impact of company investors

- **economic consequences**

The housing crisis in Switzerland has serious economic effects, specially for lower-income families, students and immigrants. When a substantial part of household income is devoted to high rent costs, disposable income decreases. This decreasing trend in spending power can weaken domestic consumption, which is a driving factor of economic growth. Moreover, high housing costs may restrict labour mobility, making it harder for workers to relocate for better job opportunities. This mismatch can lead to skill shortages in certain regions and sectors, ultimately affecting productivity and the efficient functioning of the economy. A persistent housing crisis can undermine the country's reputation as an attractive place to live and work, potentially affecting its competitiveness on the global stage. Additionally, the housing crisis may cause income inequality. As housing costs are rising faster than salaries, lower-income households require more financial assistance from the government. Another key concern may be the risks caused by financial stability. A sharp correction in property prices could lead to financial instability, as banks are providing more and more real-estate loans.

- **Impact of foreign buyers**

(Swiss fed stats has data for last 25 years ! Data to show how historical events from intro affected housing situation ?)

## 3 Consequences

### 3.1 Ideas:

- **social policies**

- lack of cantonal, federal act upon affordable housing

- non-profit housing implementation in Zurich e.g., problems with it

- tenant-landlord relationships. The evolution of tenant protection laws Switzerland developed distinctive tenant protection measures throughout the 20th century. Analyzing their implementation and effectiveness would provide valuable context for current debates

- **spatial planning, densification**

- Densification from the author of the article (Debrunner, ETH Spatial Development and Urban Policy – SPUR). The social consequences, advantages which big real estate companies have over regular tenants and people

- Impact of spatial planning laws The 1979 Spatial Planning Act (Raumplanungsgesetz) established Switzerland's strict zoning system that significantly constrains development. Examining its long-term consequences would illuminate current supply constraints

## **4 Swiss governmental/political propositions/solutions – 2 pages**

Info from swissinfo and from swiss political parties which propose solutions to rent increase and so on...

- affordable housing regulations, rejected popular initiative in 2020.
- densification as a project imposed by the SPA in 2013
- Active regulations: [51]
- On 03.03.2025 the mortgage reference interest rate in Switzerland was lowered to 1.5 percent [66]
- BASEL - III reforms [82] were introduced to strengthen financial stability and prevent banking crises like the 2008 economic crash. By requiring banks to hold more capital and liquidity, regulators aim to reduce the risk of excessive lending, mortgage defaults, and financial collapses. The goal is to make banks more resilient to economic downturns and ensure they can absorb losses without triggering a wider crisis...

## **5 Our solution - 2 pages**

### **5.1 Similar countries and their same 1-2 historical problems and their Solution - 3-4 pages**

- Austria, Vienna Similar topography, federalist structure, and strong cooperative housing tradition. Vienna's social housing model (where 60% of residents live in subsidized housing) provides an instructive contrast to Swiss approaches. Still, Austria's new rental completions fell 25
- Germany's rental market dominance Share similar problems (high rent, housing shortage and so on) Failed to implement social housing! (over 50% of households rent) and recent Berlin rent control experiments offer valuable policy lessons and outcomes for Swiss consideration
- Netherlands Tried Rent control and Private Investment restrictions (!) Ofc this had both good and bad consequences. need to take a look at! Land banking: The Netherlands uses municipal land banks to ensure housing development serves public needs—an approach worth examining for Swiss cantons

## **6 Conclusion - max 1 page**

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