

**H**ow has the pandemic impacted the European Commissions approach to issues of homelessness and how does the Commission plan to support Member States to tackle this issue? FEANTSA's Communications Assistant, Rocio Urías Martínez, speaks to the European Commissioner for jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, to find out the answers to both of these questions and more.

# INTERVIEW WITH COMMISSIONER FOR JOBS & SOCIAL RIGHTS, NICOLAS SCHMIT



By **Rocio Urías Martínez**, Communications Assistant, FEANTSA

## INTRODUCTION

The pandemic offers us a unique opportunity to change the way we address homelessness. Moreover, the European Platform for Combating Homelessness, which is currently under construction, provides the structure with which to implement this new approach. FEANTSA's Communications Assistant, Rocío Urías Martínez, speaks to the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, about the impact the pandemic has had on EU intervention on issues of homelessness, what happens next, and if we can really end homelessness by 2030.

**FEANTSA:** Homelessness was one of a few topics you added to those set out in your mission letter from President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen. Why did you make it a priority as Commissioner?

**Commissioner Schmit:** First, I must say, before becoming a Commissioner, I had a meeting with FEANTSA. They came to me to see me to talk about homelessness. So I was made aware of the problem which is increasing: 10% of households in the EU already spend an important portion of their income, 40% and sometimes even more, on housing costs; More than 15% live in overcrowded conditions; And the number of homeless people is increasing – nobody knows exactly [how many people are currently homeless], and that's one of the issues – to have better data – but we estimate that about 700,000 or even perhaps more people are sleeping on the streets. So, I was made really aware of the scale of the issue by FEANTSA who came to my office when I was a member of the European Parliament.

The second element was that we had a debate in the European Parliament on [homelessness]. And so I really said that we cannot

stay inactive. We have to do something about it. Certainly, it was not in my mission letter, but well, the letter is not everything. In the mission letter there is a clear provision that other issues can be dealt with and I thought that it was very important to do something about homelessness because this is also part of our strategy on fighting poverty. It is the most extreme form of poverty – once people end up experiencing homelessness, it is very difficult for them to come out. And that's why I was quite motivated to [work on] it. And I am especially happy that the Portuguese presidency immediately took this issue up and we could do something together.



**FEANTSA:** In June, the Commission, along with representatives from other European Union institutions, national ministers from all 27 member states, civil society organisations and social partners came together to launch the European Platform on Combating Homelessness. What happens next?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Well, first, together with the Portuguese Presidency [of the European Council] and especially Minister [for Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, Ana Mendes] Godinho, we reflected, “What can we do? How can we approach the problem?” because there is no explicit competence for the Commission on this particular issue, and there is no particular tool also to address this issue. So we came to the conclusion that this idea of a platform could

be a good instrument to deal with homelessness. And therefore, we launched this idea alongside the Lisbon Declaration on Homelessness.<sup>1</sup> I must say, I enjoyed very much the large support from Member States, but not only Member States, all kinds of stakeholders; the European Parliament was certainly a very important partner in that, but also the Committee of Regions, and I recently had an interesting debate with them on this issue. So our idea was to develop, in a European framework, an integrated approach with very concrete proposals and actions. Then, I was lucky to get the support from Yves Leterme who was ready to work with us, to chair the Platform and to be extremely involved in working on the work programme, which soon will be adopted. He is still working on it and we had the first meeting of the platform recently, two weeks ago. So this is a work in progress. Now we are working with a lot of stakeholders. I mentioned regions, cities, Committee of the Regions, but also the Economic and Social Committee, the European Parliament. And obviously, we need strong support from Member States. Now the process has been launched and we have to identify the right approaches in our work.

**FEANTSA:** Following up on my previous question, we have seen a huge political support for the Platform. How do you plan to capitalize on this support?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Well first, there is a momentum and we have to keep this momentum, which is awareness, because people suddenly started to say yes, there is a big problem in cities all over Europe. It might be a national problem in all the Member States, but it is has grown to be a European problem. We are now aware of the scale of this problem and it is now in the framework of our ambition to fight

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.feantsa.org/en/press-release/2021/06/21/press-release?bcParent=27>

poverty. We are now looking at what kind of concrete actions can be launched together with cities, what kind of actions are already operating. And how can we how can we scale them up? How can we also learn from them? And this is the dynamic now which we want to develop, and we want to use the Platform precisely for this political action with a European dimension.

**FEANTSA:** Your mandate ends in 2024. What would you like the Platform to have achieved by then?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Firstly, I would like the Platform to have grown, to have become stronger, to have made obvious progress in fighting homelessness. I want to see that tens of thousands of homeless people have been led back to a normal life, that we managed to stop the increase in homelessness. I would say that now all European citizens, not just cities and regions and Member States but citizens, are aware of the problem and that they support actions to reduce and to combat homelessness. So homelessness is on our political agenda.

**FEANTSA:** That is true, thank you. How do you think FEANTSA can be useful as a partner of the Commission on the European Platform on Combating Homelessness?

**Commissioner Schmit:** FEANTSA has been a strong lobbyist - and here I use the word lobbyist, not in a negative sense - for people who normally have no lobbyist, who are forgotten in our society because they are on the streets and nobody cares about them so much. FEANTSA has become their defendant, their lobbyist, and I must say, quite successfully. The Commission already had a very good relationship with FEANTSA even before the Platform and I'm sure that FEANTSA, by developing its own actions, and actions on the basis of the Lisbon Declaration, will play a central role in the Platform and on developing the Platform (because the Platform is work in progress.)

**FEANTSA:** In your 2020 joint op-ed with Ana Mendes Godinho and Yves Leterme, you wrote, “COVID has demonstrated beyond all possible doubt how essential a decent home is to health and well-being.” Has the pandemic made the intervention of European Union institutions even more important?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Yes, absolutely. COVID-19 has given to the issue of homelessness a much broader dimension because somebody said, “Well, if during the lockdown we told people stay at home, what could we tell those who have no home? Because they cannot go home and cannot stay at home.” So, I think it has become a health issue. How can we vaccinate those who are living in the streets, who sometimes have no identity cards or have lost their papers? The COVID crisis has amplified the problem and the necessity for action.

**FEANTSA:** Yes, that is true. Likewise, the fallout from the pandemic could lead to a massive rise in homelessness over the years to come. How does the Commission plan to support Member States to safeguard against this?

**Commissioner Schmit:** This is about how we want our society to function. We have gone through decades where social issues have not been so much at the core of our policies, where we thought that markets would solve all of our problems. We have forgotten that markets do not solve all the problems, but they also create problems. They can also be the cause of exclusions, of failures, of people being left behind. And therefore, we have to, first, reconstruct an economy that works

for people, that gives opportunities to everyone. We have to make sure that our social policies are designed in a way that does not exclude some people and let them fall into a black hole like homelessness. Because homelessness is in a way a social black hole. So, there is a need for redesigning our social policies, employment policies, and housing policies, [which are] fundamental.

Housing has become not any more what it should be, on the basis of our own human rights or citizens’ rights, and on the basis of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Every human should have a right to decent housing, but housing has now become an object of financial speculation. And more and more people, 10% of households in the EU, already spend 40% of their income on housing costs. This is something which is not acceptable. There has to be a very active policy on housing. Not just on housing, but to give people who have difficulties in their life some help. Therefore, minimum incomes plus social integration policies are key. That’s what we are working on for next year, especially minimum income, which should precisely prevent people from becoming homeless. This is an overall approach in social policy, employment policy, housing policy, and finally the idea we have of the future of our society.

**FEANTSA:** The Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery and Resilience Facility present an unprecedented financial opportunity to tackle homelessness over the years to come. How does the Commission plan to support Member States to cease this potential to finance and fund efforts to address homelessness?



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**Commissioner Schmit:** Well, we certainly discuss with Member States how they use their funds and, through the country specific recommendations, whether they have particular difficulties. Housing has become a real issue in many Member States, and we can only address housing through investing more in housing, but not *just* housing. It's about affordable housing. It's about what we call social housing. I noticed that, for instance, in Germany now, the new government has announced that they will make a very special effort to invest in affordable housing. They even announced a quite ambitious figure. They have appointed a minister in charge of that. That's a very good signal. But we have to convince Member States, especially those who have more financial problems, to take European resources to invest in housing, but also to invest into social programs, for instance, to promote inclusion, to combat exclusion and especially also to prevent homelessness.

**FEANTSA:** In signing the Lisbon declaration, the Commission pledged to end homelessness by 2030. Do you believe this is possible?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Well, I have to bring in a slight nuance. We did not say we would end homelessness by 2030. We said we will work towards ending homelessness. In any case, we want to drastically

reduce the numbers of homeless people in Europe. If we can achieve there being no homeless people in Europe by 2030, I would be the first to be very happy about that, but I am always a bit cautious to announce very ambitious objectives which are difficult to reach. And then [if we didn't meet the target] we would say it's not possible to end homelessness and our drive to work on this would be weakened or stopped. So I think now we have to be very active: to invest money, to increase awareness, to mobilise all the stakeholders with the objective of having a real turning point, where numbers decrease, which will already be a success, and then really try to come to the lowest possible number by 2030. If it's zero, fine, but the important objective is it should be much lower than the current number.

**FEANTSA:** Onto our last question: our *Homeless in Europe* magazine is widely read by organisations providing services on the ground. Do you have any message that you would like to share with them?

**Commissioner Schmit:** Well, I would say you are not forgotten. We have understood your difficulties and we are at your side. We stand by you and we will try to help. We are committed to this.