KEYNOTE SPEECH:

JAKUB WILCZEK ON THE POLISH PERSPECTIVE IN THE EUROPEAN DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF HOMELESSNESS POLICY

Here you can find the text of the keynote speech delivered during the FEANTSA Forum 2026 conference held in Warsaw on 19 May. The speech was delivered by the President of the Polish National Federation for Solving Homelessness, Jakub Wilczek and presented the Polish perspective in the European debate on the future of homelessness policy.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's close our eyes for a moment... Let's imagine a man – let's call him Andrzej. If he lived in Poland, that's probably what his name would be. But he might just as well be called Andrew, Andreas, Ondřej, Ander or Андрій. Because the issues I want to talk about today do not concern just one country – they concern the whole of Europe.

You all know Andrzej well. He is 52 years old and has been experiencing homelessness for over 10 years. During that time, he has stayed in shelters, received social assistance, been supported by outreach workers, and taken part in various projects funded by public resources, including European funds. He has gone through various forms of support, various programmes, and various institutions.

Andrzej knows this system very well, and yet, after all these years, he still does not have a home of his own. He continues to live within the support system, rather than moving out of it. He remains in a situation we describe as homelessness – even if it sometimes takes different forms and varies in terms of stability.

This is not the story of a single person. It is a situation which – in various forms – we see in all European countries. People moving between facilities, projects and services. People who receive support but do not experience lasting change.

The key question I want to ask today is: "Does the European agenda to combat homelessness really change the lives of such people?"

This is a question about whether the solutions we create can actually ensure that Andrzej ceases to be a client of the system, and simply has a flat of his own and a stable life.

If we look at the last decade or even two, the answer is not clear-cut. On the one hand, we see clear progress. The language has changed, the goals have changed, and new solutions have emerged.
On the other hand – if we look at the scale of the phenomenon and the sustainability of the effects – this progress has not yet translated into the breakthrough we would have expected.

And this tension – between change and the lack of a breakthrough – is the starting point for this talk. Because one could say that we are at a unique moment today. We know more than ever before. We have more tools than ever before. And we have greater consensus than before on the direction we should take. Yet at the same time, we still see people like Andrzej remaining in the system for years.

The European Union's agenda has genuinely changed the way we think about homelessness – and that is profoundly important. But it has not yet transformed national systems to the extent that would allow us to effectively end homelessness on a scale that would match the scale of the problem.

Not that long ago, thinking about homelessness was dominated by an approach focused on managing the problem. The system was primarily geared towards reacting – providing places in shelters and meeting basic needs in crisis situations.

Today, we speak of ending homelessness as a realistic goal of public policy. This shift – from managing the problem to ending it – is fundamental. It changes the way we design interventions, how we assess their effectiveness, and how we understand the role of the system.

This change did not happen by itself. It is largely the result of the efforts of European institutions and organisations such as FEANTSA, which over the years have built a common language, a shared understanding of the problem and a shared ambition to solve it.

The second significant change concerns the approach to solutions. Today, we know much more about what works in practice. We know that a lasting exit from homelessness begins with housing – with providing a stable foundation on which people can rebuild their lives.
Approaches such as Housing First are key here. Their significance lies not only in the fact that they are effective, but also in the fact that they challenge previous systemic assumptions. They show that the logic of the system can be reversed – and that this reversal yields better results.

The European level has also created a space for exchanging experiences, comparing solutions and transferring good practices between countries. European funding has enabled pilot projects to be carried out, partnerships to be built, and ideas previously drawn from other systems to be tested in practice.
And today, this change is entering a new phase.
The European Affordable Housing Plan states very clearly that housing is not a commodity or an investment. It is a fundamental right and a prerequisite for human dignity. This is a very important shift in language.

In the political debate, it is becoming increasingly clear that tackling homelessness should be based on a housing-led approach combined with social and health support – including the Housing First model.
In the new EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, homelessness is described as one of the most extreme forms of poverty and social exclusion.

The issue of prevention is also strongly emphasised – preventing evictions, supporting people in debt, and preventing housing exclusion before it turns into homelessness.
The Commission has also proposed a new Council Recommendation on combating housing exclusion, including homelessness, based on a person-centred approach, housing-based solutions and integrated public policies.

All this shows that the European political level is gaining a better understanding of the nature of the problem. But ambitions are growing faster today than the pace of implementing change, and this is clearly evident in the case of Poland.

Over the past twenty years, Poland has followed a path similar to that of many other European countries – drawing on European funding sources, taking inspiration from solutions previously developed in other countries, and facing similar challenges in implementation.

It is worth remembering, however, that in Poland, as in other countries in this part of Europe, many solutions only began to take shape alongside the process of European integration. Therefore, in the Polish context, European funds – particularly the European Social Fund – often played not only a supportive role, but a system-building one. They enabled not only the development of individual services, but also the establishment of a social policy framework and the first more comprehensive models for tackling homelessness.

The first major project in Poland funded by the ESF, which aimed to transform the system, was the "Municipal Standard for Exiting Homelessness", implemented between 2010 and 2014. This was the first attempt to describe the system for tackling homelessness as a whole – not individual services, but the entire architecture of interventions.
Service standards, legislative recommendations, community-based support models and housing-related components – including Housing First – were developed.

A collaborative environment for non-governmental organisations also emerged, the lasting effect of which was the creation of an umbrella organisation – the Polish National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness.

This was the moment when European funds began to have an impact not only at the level of individual support projects, but also at the level of thinking about the entire system.

Sadly, the model was never implemented centrally. It was (and still is) used locally – by organisations and local authorities – but it did not become the basis of state policy.
This is a very important lesson, as it shows that even well-prepared solutions do not automatically and immediately translate into systemic change.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the development of street outreach services. The outreach standard developed as part of the systemic project was not implemented centrally in 2014, but was widely adopted locally. Today, most street outreach services in Poland are based on those experiences.
Today, these solutions are finally beginning to find their way back into national legislation – through the ongoing amendment to the Social Assistance Act.

Practice moved ahead of policy by several lengths.

Perhaps the most significant example of the impact of European funding in Poland, however, is the launch of Housing First pilot programmes in 2020. These were introduced as a transfer of innovative solutions from Portugal and Finland. The programmes were launched at that time in Gdańsk, Warsaw and Wrocław.
Initially, these were two small pilot projects – involving a total of 50 flats – but very quickly, clear positive outcomes began to emerge. Participants in the programmes remained in their flats, and their health and social functioning improved.
And – crucially – after European funding ended in 2022, these programmes did not disappear. Their funding was taken over by local authorities, and the programmes are still developing today. This was the moment when this solution ceased to be merely an inspiration from abroad and began to function within the Polish context.

The problem is that in 2026, we are still talking about Housing First in Poland as a good practice, rather than a national standard.

Another milestone was the government's adoption of the Social Services Development Strategy in 2022, which created a framework for the future process of deinstitutionalisation in Poland.

This is a significant change, as the direction of deinstitutionalisation has been linked to the current European funding framework. As a result, it moved beyond the level of expert recommendation and began to take shape as a tangible element of public policy.

However, it must be said in all honesty that the process itself is only just beginning in Poland and continues to raise considerable concerns – both within the public support system and among non-governmental organisations.

As part of the implementation of the Strategy, in 2025, thanks to yet another European Social Fund project, we began work on a model of deinstitutionalisation in the area of homelessness.

This time, however, the situation is different from what it was a decade ago. Thanks to the link between deinstitutionalisation and access to EU funds, there are now much stronger grounds for expecting that the solutions developed will translate into public policy and systemic practice.

The fundamental problem is the fragmented and piecemeal nature of the system.

Under the current financial framework, there is an increasing number of regional funding calls relating to deinstitutionalisation or the Housing First approach. Yet an analysis of these calls reveals numerous barriers: short implementation periods, limited budgets, a lack of funds for housing investment, a lack of understanding of what Housing First actually is, issues with the sustainability of initiatives, and the bureaucracy that has become almost synonymous with EU-funded projects.

The system of projects does not automatically create a system of solutions, and the functioning of public policies and institutions within ministerial silos hinders the development of integrated responses.

Housing is the biggest gap today. The European Commission is increasingly emphasising the right to housing, a housing-led approach and Housing First. At the same time, in practice, housing policies still very often operate separately from policies to combat homelessness.

The same applies to homelessness prevention. The Commission is now speaking ever more clearly about preventing evictions, tackling rent arrears and addressing the loss of housing. Meanwhile, the system still too often reacts only once a crisis has already occurred.

And yet homelessness often begins much earlier – with housing instability, rent arrears, domestic violence, or transitions out of foster care, prison or psychiatric hospitals.

We are also seeing new risks associated with the situation of refugees from war-torn Ukraine – particularly in terms of housing instability and rising rental costs, as well as growing problems on the labour market and difficulties in accessing benefits linked to the gradual withdrawal of European states from supporting this group.

The second major gap is health. The healthcare system still has very little awareness of homelessness. Its logic is based on the assumption that people will seek help themselves, go through the necessary procedures, obtain their medication, and maintain continuity of treatment.

For years, the healthcare system has been telling us that people experiencing homelessness have the same right to healthcare as any other citizen. Yet many of these people are simply unable to access medical care in this way.

In many European countries, mobile medical teams are being developed to provide services such as street-based outpatient care and outreach-based screening. These solutions are based on the premise that the system must be able to reach out to people. In Poland, this approach remains very limited and extremely difficult to fund.

The third problem is data. We still largely measure homelessness only at a given point in time, yet we try to design long-term policy. We do not have a clear picture of the trajectories of entering and exiting homelessness, returns to the system, or the long-term effectiveness of interventions.
Worse still, we too often continue to explain homelessness through the lens of individual causes identified in these surveys – addiction, family conflict or time spent in prison – rather than examining its systemic causes, primarily linked to a shortage of available housing, weak prevention mechanisms and the limitations of the welfare state.

It is very important to note that most of these problems do not concern Poland alone. They also arise, to varying degrees, in other European countries. For although the European agenda is increasingly defining the direction of change, translating this vision into coherent and sustainable implementation mechanisms proves much more difficult.

This tension is also very clearly visible at the European level. The European Platform on Combating Homelessness was an important response to this challenge – and a very important step forward. It created a common space for dialogue, cooperation and the development of a shared political direction.

But looking back over the past few years, it is also clear that its impact – particularly on Member States – remains below expectations and below the scale of the needs.

Today, we need not only a platform for exchanging experiences, but also stronger mechanisms for monitoring progress, strengthening Member State accountability, and linking European funding to tangible systemic outcomes.

Today, it is clear that we no longer need more general concepts. We already know enough to move from defining the problem to solving it at a systemic level.

The first prerequisite is to recognise housing as a central element of policies addressing homelessness. Housing-led and Housing First approaches must not be an add-on or a pilot scheme. They must become the standard practice. Housing must simultaneously serve as a tool for both exiting homelessness and preventing it.

The second element is health. Without health, we cannot sustain housing. And without housing, we cannot stabilise health. We therefore need better integration of social, housing and health policies, as well as the development of community-based and mobile services.

The third element is shifting the focus from intervention to prevention and integration. Intervention should be as short as possible. Stays in intervention-based solutions lasting many years – sometimes even well over a decade – must become a thing of the past. Intervention-based solutions are and will continue to be necessary, but the system should, above all, prevent the loss of housing and support sustainable integration.

The fourth element is strategies, data and accountability. We need national strategies to end homelessness, grounded in reliable research and data.

Without targets, indicators and clearly defined responsibilities, we will have actions, but we will not know whether they are actually bringing us closer to ending homelessness.

And finally – we need a stronger role for the European Union.

The European Commission is today proposing a new model of action based on national and regional partnership plans within the EU budget for 2028–2034. This could be a very important change, as it involves a stronger link between reforms, funds and results.

But if homelessness and housing exclusion are not included in these plans as specific and measurable targets, there is a risk that they will once again be side lined in mainstream public policies.

The Commission is also announcing massive investment in social and affordable housing. This could be a game-changing opportunity – but only if we have a guarantee that a portion of these funds will be genuinely targeted at people experiencing homelessness and those at risk of homelessness.

It is worth bearing in mind that increasing the availability of housing and effectively tackling homelessness do not always automatically go hand in hand.

We can create very good housing programmes for people experiencing homelessness, but without a broader increase in housing availability that is visible and meaningful to the wider public, such programmes will struggle to gain social acceptance.
At the same time, we can invest billions in affordable housing for the general public and still make virtually no headway on homelessness if the most marginalised people remain excluded from the mainstream of these policies.

And this is one of the reasons why we need a strong European Platform – not only as a space for exchanging experiences, but also as a mechanism for monitoring progress and strengthening Member States' accountability for the implementation of common objectives.

The forthcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, the European Affordable Housing Plan and the future Multiannual Financial Framework are creating a new policy framework in which the European Platform on Combating Homelessness could become a driving force for change.
At the same time, there is a risk that the issue of homelessness will be lost among many other pressing priorities.

We therefore need a European Commission that not only sets the direction of change but also consistently strengthens the European Platform – rather than merely expecting Member States to deliver on the ambitions set out in the Lisbon Declaration on their own.

Agreeing on a common direction was an important first step, but we also need to monitor progress and sustain Member States' commitment, especially as we are still a long way from realising these ambitions.

The pace at which Member States implement change and scale up systemic responses to homelessness must finally match the ambitions expressed in the European agenda.

So let us return to the question posed at the beginning: “Does the European Union’s agenda make a difference?”

The answer is yes. It has changed the language, the goals, the way of thinking and the scope of knowledge about homelessness. But the greatest challenge today remains implementation – making sure that this difference is felt not only within systems and institutions, not only by all of us working in this field. But also by Andrzej. By Andreas, André, Anders and Andrew.

Because, at the end of the day, we are not just talking about projects, services, strategies and models of support. We are talking, above all, about human rights. About the right to housing. About human dignity.

And since the European Union itself now speaks of housing as a fundamental right and a prerequisite for human dignity, this language cannot remain merely a declaration.

It must be reflected in the way we design budgets, housing policies, healthcare systems and social services. This means responsibility at all levels of the system: European institutions, national governments, local authorities, civil society organisations, researchers and practitioners.

Europe today has the knowledge, experience and tools needed to effectively reduce homelessness. The question is no longer: “Do we know how?” The question today is: “Are we ready to do it at the scale required?”

If Member States take the right to housing seriously, the story of Andrzej – and of more than a million people across the European Union who go to sleep every night without a home – need not remain Europe’s norm. It could become the story of a system that has finally learnt to end homelessness rather than merely manage it.

This is how we will know whether Europe – including Poland – has truly recognised the right to housing as a human right: by the fact that stories like Andrzej’s will cease to be the norm. And that people like Andrzej will no longer have to die in homelessness while living in one of the richest regions in the world.

With the right to housing for all – ending homelessness is possible!”