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Remigration

by GWYNNE DYER

?Remigration': the word had a harmless origin, as a term academics used to describe the phenomenon of migrants who failed to thrive in their new home and decided to go back to their birth country.

Then, about 10 years ago, French nationalists and racists started using it to mean forcible repatriation of legal immigrants. However, it didn't catch on beyond the narrow circle of conspiracy theorists who subscribed to the ?great replacement' myth (the paranoid belief that there is a systematic plot to replace white people with non-white immigrants).

This year the term achieved lift-off, especially in the German-speaking parts of Europe. First the far-right ?Alternative for Germany' party (AfD) openly debated the policy of ?remigration' at a conference in Potsdam last winter. And last month the Freedom Party, which bluntly calls for the expulsion of immigrants, won the Austrian election.

The AfD ranks second in popularity in German opinion polls, but if there were an election today none of the many other parties in the fragmented German political scene would make a coalition with it.

Moreover, its support comes mainly from former east Germans who effectively lived under Russian rule for 45 years after the Second World War and have no tradition of living with immigrants. Before that they voted for Adolf Hitler in the fateful 1933 election ? but western Germany has more than three times as many people, and very few of them vote AfD.

Austria has only a tenth of Germany's population, but it was Hitler's birthplace and what eventually became the Freedom Party was founded in 1956 by ex-Nazis including former SS officers. It is Austria's biggest party after this election, but with only 29 per cent of the seats in Parliament it needs to find coalition partners.

That may not be easy, especially if the Freedom Party insists that its leader, Herbert Kickl, becomes the prime minister. (Party members call him ?Volkskanzler,' Hitler's old title.)

Under Kickl, the Freedom Party wants to add a clause to the constitution saying that Austria must protect itself against the European Union, the World Health Organization and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Freedom's key offer is to withdraw citizenship from refugees who fail to integrate and simply to abolish the right to asylum. This may be extreme enough to force the other parties into a clumsy anti-Kickl coalition, but even if he becomes prime minister the heavens will not fall.

The Freedom Party has already served in two previous coalition governments, and no drastic changes ensued. Most Austrians still think EU membership is too valuable to give up, and EU rules forbid the anti-democratic measures Kickl seeks. For the moment, at least, Austria remains a law-abiding country.

Indeed, this equation still restrains all the hard-right parties in the EU. Even Viktor Orbán's explicitly anti-EU regime in post-democratic Hungary does not quit the EU, although it regularly condemns it. The notion of enforced ?remigration' has become common currency in right-wing discourse in Europe, but it is still just talk.

The real threat to this status quo is global warming. The far right may not believe in climate change, but it may deliver them to power nevertheless. As the floods, landslides, heatwaves and droughts get more extreme in Africa and the Middle East, a human wave of climate refugees will start moving towards the EU's southern and eastern borders.

At least one billion people live within reach of those borders by road or by sea. That's twice as many as live within the EU, and

almost all of them will be experiencing more brutal weather than the relatively fortunate Europeans. If only one in a 100 of those people decide to seek refuge in the European Union, that's 10 million people banging on the door.

But it's not a door. Even now, long tracts of the EU's external borders are fenced and guarded, while the sea frontiers are patrolled by ships whose unwritten task is to stop would-be migrants in boats even if some of them die as a result.

It is not widely understood that Europe's borders with North Africa and Western Asia are already policed much more ruthlessly than the southern borders of the United States or the even the northern sea frontiers of Australia. This will only get more severe as the climate gets more extreme.

?Remigration' is just a symptom. One day, probably within a decade or so, Herbert Kickl's loose talk about ?Festung Europa' (Fortress Europe) will become a reality.

The only way to avert that is by huge and rapid cuts in emissions plus geoengineering measures to hold the heat down. And how likely is that?