

THE MAINSTREAMING OF THE REMIGRATION FRAME IN EUROPE AND WHY IT MIGHT BE THERE TO STAY FOR A WHILE

Philip Dandolov

University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, philip.dandolov@unwe.bg

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-4263-4972

Abstract: Concerns regarding the changing face of Europe due to major cultural, ethnic, and/or racial shifts in the demographic features of the continent have been expressed by far right and nationalist-populist political parties since at least the 1980s. However, a relatively new term, remigration, associated with the reversal of migration trends (that could be accomplished courtesy of a combination of forceful measures and the provision of incentives for certain immigrant groups to leave on their own accord) has been gaining traction in the years following the 2015 European migrant crisis. The 2020s have seen the concept cross over into the political mainstream, especially in Western Europe, with the virtues of policies placing a premium on remigration no longer being extolled exclusively by parties considered to occupy the fringes of politics. The paper draws on a qualitative methodology, which entails the synthesis and analysis of selected primary and secondary sources falling within the scope of international relations, political science, sociology, and migration studies. Following a brief literature review, in which it attempts to shed proper light on some of the underlying assumptions pertaining to remigration, it advances a two-fold argument. Firstly, it contends that discussions surrounding remigration (in its softer version that does not explicitly target non-indigenous Europeans or properly assimilated immigrants on racial or ethnic grounds) are now very much in vogue in Western European politics. Secondly, it argues that these trends concerning the enhanced palatability of the concept for wider audiences and its ability to influence certain EU-wide policies are likely to persist, at least in the conceivable future. It illustrates this by drawing on the example of South Africa, where since 2026 the government has essentially come under pressure, to implement a sped-up and largely involuntary repatriation of immigrant groups, as well as the now scrapped Rwanda asylum plan, demonstrating how certain dynamics when it comes to migration to Europe may affect the calculations of European policy-makers, encouraging them to stay the course with regard to a strict approach to migration management, and why the normalization of policies on the European Union (EU) level revolving around remigration is unlikely to have a significant negative effect on the EU's ability to properly use its soft power tools. In essence, the article posits that a mild form of 'remigration', implying the deportation of problematic immigrant groups as well as the provision of incentives for unassimilated migrants to return to their countries of origin, is likely to continue to be viewed as par for the course within the political landscape in many Western European countries.

Keywords: remigration, nationalist-populist parties, European Union, Western Europe, South Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

In a general sense, migration can be distinguished in terms of its starting point (being referred to as "migration by origin") or its intended endpoint ("migration by destination"). (Mutava, 2023). In its original and rather innocuous meaning, remigration, within the field of migration studies, (Santos, 2025) involves the analysis, for instance of the factors behind the decision-making, of immigrant groups, frequently refugees or those holding temporary work permits, who voluntarily decide to return to their countries of origin. (Bush, 2025) However, since the 2020s this concept has started to be the most commonly associated with the use ascribed to it by individuals and parties on the far right of the political spectrum who equate it with a reversal of migration movements, viewing it as an important recipe (or perhaps even the only viable one) to stem the tide with regard to the rising ethnic diversity in their countries. Remigration, which is sometimes also referred to by its proponents as decolonization in order to attach a more positive connotation to it, (Semonsen, 2026) can be traced to the philosophy espoused by French novelist Renaud Camus, who together with other compatriots, such as Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye, have links with the Nouvelle Droite (New Right) and the Identitarian Movement (IM) in France. (Handler, 2019) Camus is the progenitor of the Great Replacement theory, expounded upon in his two books *L'Abécédaire de l'in-nocence* ('Abecedarium of no-harm') (2010) and *Le Grand Remplacement* ('The Great Replacement') (2011), according to which politicians with leftist views and members of a globalist elite are encouraging an increase in non-white and/or Muslim immigration to Western countries in order to, in the long-term, profoundly and presumably irreversibly change their demographic make-up. (Brockell, 2022) At their most extreme, proponents of remigration are thus likely to question the continued presence within Europe of all people who are not indigenous Europeans, thus non-white and/or of immigrant backgrounds, no matter whether they hold citizenship or are fully integrated. (CSOH, 2026) Accordingly, remigration, believed by University of Florida scholar José Ángel Maldonado to be equivalent to a "soft type of ethnic cleansing", (Maldonado, 2020) may entail the mass deportation of non-white immigrants, with the ultimate goal being the reestablishment of racially and/or ethnically homogeneous societies in Europe. (Langer

et al., 2026) In his 2024 book, *Remigration: Ein Vorschlag* ('Remigration: A Proposal'), Austrian political activist Martin Sellner expresses support for the forced or incentivized return of non-ethnically European immigrants, including their descendants born in Europe, to their countries of origin, irrespective of their legal status. (Ibid) Many proponents of remigration, including Sellner himself, may nonetheless avoid explicit references to immutable categories and deny that they are primarily motivated by considerations pertaining to race, instead claiming have an issue with three main groups: illegal immigrants, legal immigrants who are considered to be a burden on the state due to being on welfare or having been convicted for various crimes, and individuals regarded as "unassimilated", for instance because of their perceived disloyalty to the countries they reside in. (CSOH, 2026) Discussions revolving around this term have been occurring in Internet forums and message boards at least since the 2010s, but the last three years have seen a significant increase in the online activities surrounding remigration. (Ibid) In January 2024, it was selected in Germany by a panel of four linguists and a journalist, based on suggestions provided by citizens, as the un-word of the year for 2023, (Vollmer, 2024) and in 2024 there was a dramatic surge in the online content created that was dedicated to this concept, with 467,000 total mentions attributable to 133,000 unique authors. The largest amount of such posts was compiled in the autumn of 2024, which was temporally proximate with the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)'s victory in the Austrian legislative election, while the revelations by the investigative journalism organization Correctiv that politicians and activists, mostly belonging to far right parties – including Sellner and members of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party – had met in Potsdam on 25 November 2023 to discuss a master plan to facilitate the expulsion of "non-assimilated" immigrants and their descendants from Europe, were also likely to have been a contributing factor with regard to the greater prominence of the term over the course of that year as a whole. (Langer et al., 2026) In 2025, there was an even more noticeable rise in remigration-related comments, with the term assessed to have gained mainstream visibility. Throughout the year, it had received 952,000 mentions in total, courtesy of the posts of 303,000 unique authors. In particular, in the first week of September 2025, the number exceeded 71,000, mainly due to the posts of notable figures sympathetic to the idea of remigration, such as famous businessman and CEO of SpaceX Elon Musk, Dutch political activist Eva Vlaardingerbroek, and Belgian politician (affiliated with the Vlaams Belang party) Dries Van Langenhove, who had broached the subject of remigration in the context of the need for public safety from criminal immigrants to be guaranteed for native Europeans. (CSOH, 2026) In accordance with the notion of an Overton window, the salience of the increased exposure to and engagement with an idea in the public realm cannot be underestimated, as it can actually contribute to its "graduation" from the political fringes and serve to at least somewhat normalize it, making it more easily digestible from the standpoint of the general public. (Bland, 2025)

2.MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper employs qualitative research, striving to systematically integrate and interpret the relevant data that is collected by consulting multiple sources (mainly secondary ones, with the vast majority of them published in the past five years) across a number of interdisciplinary fields within the social sciences, such as migration and nationalism studies, and offering new insights that are pertinent to the topic that has been selected. In line with many other research endeavours of a similar nature, there was no attempt to start from a fixed or pre-existing hypothesis. (Aspers & Corte, 2019) The literature review largely overlaps with the introduction to the article and provides the necessary background information by touching upon the different meanings attached to the relatively novel and controversial concept of remigration, while maintaining an air of scientific detachment. In addition to analysing the current realities in Western Europe in terms of the situation on the ground, there is also an element of prognostication due to the explanations offered as to why certain trends are not likely to be reversed in the near future.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As established in the first section of the paper, the term remigration has made great strides in less than five years with regard to its general recognizability and its capacity to generate traffic across the virtual realm, though the mainstreaming of certain policy aspects pertaining to remigration has in certain instances even preceded the relevant upticks in online activities. Since the early 2020s the political environment in Western Europe (though certainly elsewhere as well) has become conducive to the normalization of at least milder forms of remigration on the individual citizen (micro), national (parties in opposition and in government), and EU levels (EU public officials). When it comes to gauging the attitudes of ordinary people, there are already strong indications that the public mood in many European countries is at least somewhat receptive to remigration. According to a 2025 YouGov poll, covering opinions in the United Kingdom, Poland, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, close to 50% of the citizens (45-53%) in all of these countries were in favor of a large number of the new immigrant arrivals returning to their homelands. (Smith, 2025) As also reported by YouGov, pluralities or majorities (between 44% and 60%) in the abovementioned countries tended to assume that most of their immigrants were residing illegally in their nation-states (a significant overestimation compared to the true

number of illegals), (Henley, 2025) which is another sign that immigrants and perceived sociocultural "outsiders" may often be tarred with the illegality brush, irrespective of whether their arrival has been through legal migration channels. If we are to extend the analysis to national parties, the nature of the campaigning and the rhetoric employed also provide ample grounds on which to argue that remigration (as long as it is not overtly stated to be motivated by ethnic or racial considerations) is no longer perceived as an overly taboo subject, for instance when it comes to calls for the revocation of the citizenship of dual citizens with criminal convictions, (Steinberg, 2025) which could facilitate their expulsions. The 2023 Potsdam meeting did not feature participants belonging solely to far-right parties, but actually saw representatives of the center-right German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in attendance. (Langer et al., 2026) In June 2024, the Austrian FPÖ, which had secured the victory in the country's European Parliament election, suggested its own candidate for a European commissioner, Susanne Fürst, who would don the mantle of a "remigration commissioner", (Die Presse, 2024) and the party's campaign for the 29 September 2024 national elections, which eventually saw it emerge as the winner as well, achieving the best result in its history, was punctuated by the widespread use of the term. (Kassam, 2024) In 2025 a number of proposals were floated by members of the Conservative Party in the UK to revoke the legal status and deport certain individuals who had already secured Indefinite Leave to Remain (which is essentially the UK's equivalent to permanent residency in other countries) as long as their income fell below £38,700 or they began claiming benefits, a position that has been characterized as potentially serving to entrench the perception that a legally settled status is no longer a guarantee against deportation from the country, (Bland, 2025) with some Tories emphasizing the need for such measures in order to help bring about cultural coherence. (Walker, 2025) In this regard, then Prime Minister Keir Starmer's speech on 12 May 2025, in which he justified the need for tough curbs on immigration as a way to prevent a scenario in which Britain could become an "island of strangers", drew criticism in the UK due to being viewed as serving to promulgate narratives traditionally associated with the far right. (Mason, 2025) The blurring of the lines between right-wing parties, on the one hand, and mainstream center-right and center-left ones, on the other, when it comes to topics related to remigration has perhaps been the most apparent in Denmark, where Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's center-left Social Democratic government has become a "pioneer in restrictive migration policies in Europe", including in the case of the regulations concerning deportations. (Adler, 2025) In addition to mandating that all stays of refugees on Danish soil are to be temporary, without actually differentiating on the basis of the specific individuals' needs for protection, the Social Democrats' "parallel societies" law from 2018, which permits the state to sell properties or even demolish blocks of flats in areas with negative socioeconomic indicators where at least 50% of residents have a "non-Western" background, (Bryant, 2025) has been described as alienating from the standpoint of children of immigrants who are holders of Danish passports. (Adler, 2025) The normalization of remigration-related frames has perhaps not surprisingly coincided, in part due to the far right parties' astute borrowing of vocabulary associated with more liberal groups, (Green, 2025) with certain changes in the unwritten rules governing formal or informal coalition-building, as a result of which in many countries, some notable exceptions such as France and Germany notwithstanding, the cordon sanitaire or political firewall, which previously essentially precluded mainstream parties from officially cooperating with nationalist-populist ones, has become inconsistent as to the degree of its application or even crumbled in its entirety. (Worth, 2024) The adoption of less compromising approaches when it comes to migration as well as a newly found willingness to see eye to eye with nationalist-populist parties with regard to this topic is being observed on the EU level as well. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was approved by the European Parliament in April 2024 and began to apply in all EU member states on 12 June 2026, encompasses a set of rules managing migration and asylum, highlights "securing external borders" as its first pillar, (Halikiopoulou, 2025) and has even been gauged to represent a shift towards the acceptance of systematic illiberal migration practices in the EU. (Wolff, 2024) In June 2026, an additional agreement to complement the EU Asylum and Migration Pact was reached by the Council and the European Parliament, (Sanderson, 2026) according to which those individuals who fail to qualify for asylum, who would have previously spent years on EU territory without being fully monitored, will now be expected to be confined to detention camps on the EU borders and might eventually find themselves in "return hubs" in third-party countries in Africa (as well as potentially on other continents), (Euractiv, 2026) possibly with questionable human rights records, while the EU takes the necessary measures for their eventual repatriation. (Starcevic and Stamouli, 2026) The EU's new externalization strategy towards migration has also been criticized due to the distinction between voluntary returns and forced deportations of migrants often becoming hazy in practice. (Yüksel & Bisong, 2026) In the 2024 European elections, support for parties on the far right rose in 22 of the 27 EU countries. (Becker et al., 2025) Though still by no means close to enjoying a majority, their relative weight on the EU level has increased, (Gros & Griera, 2025) the days of strict isolation strategies targeted at them appear to be over and they have in fact managed to position themselves as kingmakers when it comes to voting in the European Parliament, with their cooperation occasionally sought by the European People's Party (EPP) — the EU's largest political family. (Griera, 2025) Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has adopted pragmatism in her dealings with many nationalist parties, viewing their adherence to the rule of law and support for the Ukrainian

war effort as more important than other considerations, such as those pertaining to their nativist positions, for instance on the subject of remigration. (Nguyen & Jansen, 2025) Such parties have thus managed to wield influence on the EU's new approach that is premised on stronger external borders, third-country partnerships and stricter deportation rules, (Mahesh, 2026) with nationalist and far right parliamentarians applauding the plenary vote on 17 June 2026 in the European Parliament that gave the green light for the creation of detention centers outside the EU. (Euractiv, 2026) The realities and trends that have been identified so far are likely to endure, with no major policy shifts on the horizon, in part due to the securitization frames in relation to migration being quite durable and difficult to challenge. There is evidence that the legitimization of nationalist-populist parties by taking on board certain concerns and even entering coalitions with them has an effect on voters that is difficult to reverse – subsequent attempts to argue that such parties should be demoted to a pariah status, clamoring for a return to the previous status quo, are likely to be appraised as hypocritical and not especially convincing by the general public. (Bennink, 2025) Thus, these political groups' input on migration matters is likely to continue to be factored in. Restrictive policies that at least appear to pay lip service to remigration may also have a psychological effect on certain immigrant groups or visible minorities, even if they are not necessarily likely to be affected by them, as a result of which they may decide to return to their countries of origin, seemingly on their own volition. (Buch & Rossen, 2025) Furthermore, the EU's current approach to migration that prioritizes border management and strong cooperation with third countries appears to be bearing fruit in terms of stemming the issue of illegal arrivals and its general effectiveness aside, it has even garnered some praise due to avoiding some of the brash and performance theater tactics used to enforce immigration laws in the United States. (The Economist, 2026) Also, new developments in South Africa may inadvertently play a role in bolstering the position of the European proponents of remigration. In July 2026, it was reported that South Africa had deported or repatriated more than 50,000 African immigrants (mostly from neighboring countries in Southern Africa such as Malawi, but also from other parts of the continent) over the course of a month in a crackdown implemented by the government, largely in response to a series of sometimes violent protests against irregular migrants, culminating with a major demonstration on June 30, (PBS News/Associated Press, 2026) with the date in question proclaimed by the March and March movement, supported by former President Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe ('Spear of the Nation') Party, referred to in short as MK Party, (Schepers, 2026) as the deadline for all undocumented immigrants to leave South Africa. The developments of 2026 appear qualitatively different in comparison to previous outbreaks of xenophobic violence in the country because of to the degree of planning, the mobilization of the general public, and the concrete time horizons in which immigrants from other African countries, often without regard for their actual legal status, were expected to comply with the protesters' demands. Even though South African President Cyril Ramaphosa stated that he would not bow down to any ultimatums, he eventually announced a "Comprehensive Approach for Migration Management", which alongside a number of additional measures, included fast-track deportation courts. The South African situation can be instructive and have effects beyond the domestic level for at least three reasons. Even though the southernmost African country has had to contend with a multitude of economic, social, and political issues, it has so far been regarded as a bastion of stability and an attractive destination for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. However, with a pervasive climate of hostility directed at immigrants gripping the country, certain migration flows may be diverted towards Europe, which may encourage the EU and national governments to further tighten the screws when it comes to migration control. (King, 2026) Also, given that South Africa, especially when taking into account the legacy of apartheid, is frequently portrayed in liberal circles as a successful rainbow nation with a progressive constitution and inclusive citizenship laws, (Dash, 2026) while it is often cited by right-wing and conservative politicians as a cautionary tale of white minority decline, (Van der Westhuizen, 2018) in part due to race-based redress policies perceived to be disadvantageous to white South Africans and the high numbers of violent crimes (some of them with suspected racial overtones) committed against commercial farmers, many of whom are white, (Newham & Lancaster, 2025) the expedited and uncompromising implementation of what for all intents and purposes can be considered to be a form of repatriation, might provide additional legitimacy to the arguments advanced by right-wing politicians that European sovereign states are fully within their rights to look out for their own interests and are by no means outliers with regard to the ways in which they approach the matter of remigration. Moreover, the South African migration controversy is also another testament to the foreign policy pragmatism subscribed to by many African countries. Even though the anti-migrant protests have strained South Africa's relations with other African sovereign states, they are unlikely to result in any far-reaching repercussions, with countries like Nigeria not appearing to have seriously considered counter-measures such as the temporary severance of diplomatic ties. (Okafor, 2026) In a somewhat similar vein, the UK and Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership, announced in 2022 by then-prime minister of the UK Boris Johnson, which envisioned that illegal immigrants and asylum seekers arriving in the UK would be sent to Rwanda and have their claims processed there (the Labour government under Keir Starmer cancelled the scheme in July 2024, shortly after entering office), (Smith, 2026) was largely viewed in transactional terms by the East African country due to the possibilities for boosting Rwanda's economic development. Even the Rwandan critics of the plan preferred to

focus on their country's lack of suitability to process asylum requests due to the plethora of human rights issues under the Kagame presidency (Umuhoza, 2023) rather than looking at it through a neo-colonialist lens. (Mazumdar, 2026) However, the Rwanda asylum plan could be construed to have included some elements inherently worse (Atrey, 2024) than the typical type of remigration, as in addition to entailing the illegals being treated as moveable objects or chattels to be shipped offshore (Sparrow, 2022), having to face the risk of a secondary deportation (refoulement), (McDonnell, 2023) there was also the sheer randomness factor in terms of the destination they would have found themselves in because of their lack of any familial and cultural ties to Rwanda. Thus, given that the strategic importance of Africa from the standpoint of the EU is projected to grow in the next decades due to a combination of factors, such as the former's demographic dynamism and richness in critical resources, (Comini, 2026) the EU, by incorporating more remigration elements into its policies, is not necessarily treading on thin ice in terms of the likelihood of seriously compromising its international reputation and undermining its capacity to project soft power on the African continent.

4.CONCLUSION

In a political and social milieu in Western Europe that is characterized by the presence of a maelstrom of anxieties, such as those pertaining to the degree to which the current immigration trends are sustainable and whether the different models of multiculturalism are at loggerheads with guaranteeing sufficient levels of social cohesion, deliberations regarding the implementation of different aspects of remigration, which can be achieved courtesy of a carrot and stick approach, are likely to continue to be at the forefront of policy debates on the national as well as on the EU levels. While it is not likely that Western European countries will ever add an explicitly racial or ethnic dimension to their decisions concerning remigration initiatives, at least for the foreseeable future the "Fortress Europe" construct will continue to occupy a prominent place in the minds of the general public as well as policy-makers, with both philosophical and practical implications to be expected.

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