Pretty much all European countries need immigration because of falling fertility rates. Immigration brings with it a range of positive and negative effects in a range of spheres of economic and social life in both the short and the long term. In terms of demographics, because the median age of an international migrant tends to be in their early to mid-twenties, the short term effect of immigration tends to be to reduce a country’s dependency ratio; this could be considered the primary effect of migration, and because of the ‘healthy migrant effect’ caused by migrants tending to be healthier on average than the population as a whole from which they hail, they tend to add more to the economy than they take out. There are also secondary effects of large scale migrations, with new migrants often bringing with them higher fertility rates, and so more children into a country, than the native population. For the first few years, this creates an additional strain on public resource in terms of schooling, but in the longer term this is essential for a stable demographic profile, because within two decades the new babies of migrants will become new workers. This is only the case, however, if the host country provides long-term stability and opportunity for migrants, including reasonable prospects to remain in the country and become full citizens with equal rights to native populations. Without this possibility or probability of a long-term future in a host country, migrants may be more inclined to think of their stay in the host country only as temporary, to be less interested in cultural integration and to support the local areas in which they reside and work, and more inclined to funnel much of their income back to their country of origin. For a country to gain the greatest benefits of economic migration, they have to be willing to support and encourage migrants to think of the host country as their country, somewhere where they will continue to be accepted and appreciated, somewhere where their children will receive a good quality of education while enjoying a good quality of life, and where it is reasonable for them to think about and plan to remain in the host country for generations rather than years.

In order to do this, political will is generally required to meet the short-term costs caused by increased demand on particular public services and facilities, and in particular to respond quickly and flexibly to geographical variations in migration rates and demands for services. It is important that accurate and up-to-date records of population inflows and demographic profiles are maintained, and these are used to make intelligent and responsive resource allocation decisions to local areas. If and when there are wholesale reductions in funding for local services, inefficient allocations to local areas and low long-term infrastructure investment, greater precarity of employment, and these coincide with large-scale migration inflows which in the short-term place additional demands on particular services, then the conditions are laid for a reactionary politics of xenophobia and recrimination.

In already under-invested and impoverished areas, poor and worsening conditions of life and work combine with a visible change in local demographic composition, and for many native populations it becomes all to reasonable to link the worsening conditions with immigration, and so to blame the latter on the former. When people experience scarcity, meaning conditions whereby the amount of a resource (money, time, etc) available to someone is substantially less than required to carry out daily activities without attending continually on management of that resource, then a particular way of thinking, a ‘scarcity mindset’, is induced. The scarcity mindset forces people to focus their thoughts and attention on that which they lack most, and to think and plan tactically about ‘making ends meet’ from day to day, rather than think and plan strategically to as to better their conditions in the long term. By forcing focus on what is lacking, the scarcity mindset is said to ‘hog mental bandwidth’, giving less attention and capacity to focus on other domains of existence: like quality of long-term planning, quality of work suffers too, as scarcity forces continual rumination on lack of time, lack of money, lack of adequate housing and so on, and in doing so less energy and attention is available for other issues. In order to preserve ‘mental bandwidth’, heuristics become relied upon increasingly, gut instincts and intuitions drive ever more of our decisions, and simple-but-wrong arguments prevail over complex-but-correct arguments. Conditions of scarcity harm health in a number of ways: for example, foreshortened time horizons preference the pleasure of fast food and junk food now over the cost savings and subtler pleasures of healthier home cooked food later. For similar reasons, conditions of scarcity can also exacerbate poverty traps and worsen already poor material conditions: the predatory payday lender becomes the go-to solution for today’s problem of not being able to pay this particular bill or afford something to eat tonight, even though the cost for avoiding today’s small disaster is next month’s or next year’s big disaster. And in politics, conditions of scarcity provide fertile soil for demagogues to prevail.