Populist Economic Narratives and Institutional Trust in Transitional Democracies: The Case of Albania

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Abstract

Economic insecurity has become a defining feature of political life in many transitional democracies, yet its relationship with institutional trust remains insufficiently explained. Existing scholarships often assume a direct link between economic performance and political legitimacy, treating trust as a rational response to material outcomes. This article challenges that assumption by arguing that economic conditions acquire political meaning primarily through narrative mediation, particularly in contexts marked by weak institutions and prolonged transition. Drawing on a concept-driven qualitative approach and secondary data sources, the study examines how populist economic narratives shape public perceptions of insecurity and institutional trust in Albania. By integrating theoretical perspectives on populism, political communication, and institutional legitimacy with survey evidence and policy documents, the article demonstrates that populist actors do not merely respond to economic hardship but actively construct it through interpretive

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frames of blame, protection, and sacrifice. These narratives reorganize expectations toward institutions, allowing political authority to be sustained despite persistent economic uncertainty. Rather than viewing trust as a simple outcome of governance performance, the analysis conceptualizes institutional trust as a relational and discursively mediated phenomenon. The findings show that economic insecurity functions less as a destabilizing force than as a resource for narrative alignment, enabling leaders to redirect legitimacy toward personalized authority while representative institutions remain weakly trusted. The article contributes to debates on populism and democratic resilience in three ways: by conceptualizing economic insecurity as a politically constructed experience, by reframing institutional trust as dependent on narrative coherence rather than outcomes alone, and by situating these dynamics within the structural conditions of transitional democracies. Albania is treated not as an exceptional case, but as illustrative of broader patterns shaping contemporary democratic governance.

Introduction

Economic insecurity has become one of the most persistent experiences shaping political attitudes in contemporary democracies. Beyond objective indicators such as income, employment, or inflation, citizens increasingly evaluate political systems through their perceived capacity to provide stability, protection, and predictability in everyday life. In transitional democracies, where institutional consolidation remains fragile, this perception often diverges sharply from measurable economic performance. Periods of macroeconomic stability may coexist with deep public distrust, while modest economic improvements fail to translate into renewed institutional legitimacy.

This paradox raises an important analytical problem: why does economic performance so often fail to generate institutional trust in transitional contexts? Conventional political economy approaches tend to explain trust as a rational response to policy outcomes, assuming a relatively direct link between economic governance and public confidence (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). However, such explanations underestimate the role of political interpretation, symbolic framing, and narrative construction in shaping how economic realities are understood by citizens.

Populist politics provides a particularly revealing lens through which to examine this disjunction. Rather than offering detailed economic programs, populist actors frequently mobilize simplified narratives that translate complex structural conditions into morally charged stories of blame, protection, and collective sacrifice (Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016). In doing so, they redefine economic insecurity not merely as a material condition, but as a political experience that demands loyalty, patience, or confrontation with perceived elites. Economic governance, under populist framing, becomes less about measurable outcomes and more about managing expectations and emotions.

Despite a growing literature on populism and economic voting, the narrative mechanisms linking economic insecurity to institutional trust remain underexplored, particularly in transitional democracies. Much of the existing research focuses either on redistributive policies or on macroeconomic performance, leaving aside the discursive processes through which economic meaning is produced (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). As a result, trust is often treated as a dependent variable without sufficient attention to the interpretive frameworks that shape it. This article addresses that gap by examining how populist economic narratives mediate the relationship between perceived economic insecurity and institutional trust in Albania. Albania represents a particularly instructive case due to its prolonged transition, persistent governance challenges, and recurring use of populist discourse across political cycles. Rather than approaching Albania as an exceptional or deviant case, the study treats it as illustrative of broader dynamics present across many transitional democracies.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: How do populist economic narratives shape public trust in institutions in transitional democracies?

To answer this question, the article adopts a concept-driven qualitative design, combining theoretical analysis with secondary data sources, including international survey evidence, policy documents, and institutional reports. The aim is not to test causal hypotheses, but to identify interpretive patterns through which economic insecurity is politically framed and institutional trust is reconfigured.

By focusing on narratives rather than policy outputs alone, this study contributes to debates on economic governance, populism, and democratic legitimacy in three ways. First, it conceptualizes economic insecurity as a politically constructed condition, not merely an objective constraint. Second, it reframes institutional trust as a product of narrative alignment rather than performance alone. Third, it offers a theoretically grounded account of how populist governance can sustain legitimacy even in contexts of enduring economic uncertainty.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework linking populist narratives, economic insecurity, and institutional trust. This is followed by a discussion of the methodological approach and data sources. The empirical sections examine patterns of perceived economic insecurity and trust in Albania before analyzing the dominant populist economic narratives shaping these perceptions. The final sections discuss the implications of these findings for democratic governance in transitional contexts.

Theoretical framework

This article builds on three interconnected strands of literature: (1) populism as a narrative and discursive phenomenon, (2) institutional trust as a socially mediated expectation rather than a direct reflection of performance, and (3) transitional democracies as contexts characterized by heightened interpretive volatility. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical lens through which economic insecurity and trust are examined not as fixed conditions, but as politically constructed relationships.

Populist Economic Narratives

Populism is commonly defined as a "thin-centered ideology" that juxtaposes a morally pure people against a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). While this definition captures the normative structure of populist discourse, it remains insufficient for understanding how populism operates in everyday governance—particularly in the economic domain. More recent scholarship emphasizes populism less as a coherent ideological project and more as a mode of political narration, capable of translating complex structural conditions into accessible moral stories (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017). These dynamics align with Rodrik's (2018) argument that globalization-induced economic dislocation creates fertile ground for populist mobilization by weakening traditional mechanisms of social protection. Where compensatory redistribution remains limited, economic grievances become especially susceptible to moralized political narration. Recent evidence further suggests that targeted regional development policies can mitigate populist support by reducing perceived distributive injustice (Gold & Lehr, 2024). Such findings reinforce this article's claim that material conditions matter politically insofar as they are interpreted through narratives of fairness, protection, and abandonment.

Narratives play a crucial role in this process. As political communication scholars argue, narratives structure causal understanding by linking events, actors, and outcomes into coherent sequences (Polletta, 2006). In populist contexts, economic narratives often simplify causality while intensifying moral clarity. Responsibility is personalized, complexity is reduced, and uncertainty is normalized as the unavoidable cost of reclaiming popular sovereignty. Through this narrative logic, economic insecurity becomes not merely tolerable but meaningful.

Importantly, populist economic narratives do not deny economic hardship. On the contrary, they frequently amplify perceptions of insecurity while simultaneously offering interpretive reassurance. Citizens are encouraged to endure uncertainty in exchange for symbolic recognition, moral vindication, or promises of long-term redemption. This dynamic allows populist actors to maintain legitimacy even when material conditions fail to improve, a phenomenon insufficiently explained by performance-based theories of political support.

Institutional Trust Beyond Performance

Institutional trust has long been treated as a key indicator of democratic stability and governance quality. Classical accounts link trust to institutional effectiveness, procedural fairness, and policy outcomes (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Within this framework, citizens are assumed to evaluate institutions primarily through observable performance, rewarding success and sanctioning failure. While such models offer valuable insights, they struggle to account for persistent trust deficits in contexts where economic indicators improve or remain stable. An alternative perspective conceptualizes trust as a relational and interpretive phenomenon, shaped by expectations, narratives, and shared meanings rather than outcomes alone (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979). Trust, in this sense, functions as a mechanism for coping with uncertainty. Citizens trust institutions not because they guarantee favourable outcomes, but because they provide a sense of predictability and moral orientation in an otherwise uncertain environment. This distinction is particularly relevant in economic governance. Economic processes are inherently complex, opaque, and temporally delayed. Most citizens lack both the information and the capacity to directly evaluate macroeconomic management. As a result, trust becomes less a matter of rational calculation and more a product of interpretive shortcuts, often supplied through political discourse. Narratives that successfully explain why hardship exists, who is responsible, and what it signifies for the collective future can stabilize trust even in the absence of tangible improvement.

Empirical research supports this view. Studies have shown that perceptions of fairness, responsiveness, and moral intent often outweigh objective economic indicators in shaping institutional trust (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In populist settings, where leaders position themselves as authentic representatives of the people, trust may be redirected away from impersonal institutions toward personalized authority, without necessarily collapsing entirely. Institutions are not rejected wholesale; they are reinterpreted through populist lenses.

Transitional Democracies as Discursive Arenas

The dynamics described above are intensified in transitional democracies. Such contexts are characterized by incomplete institutional consolidation, contested political norms, and lingering uncertainty about the rules of the game (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). In these settings, institutions often lack deep-rooted legitimacy, and citizens' expectations remain fluid and negotiable. Albania exemplifies what has been described as a condition of "prolonged transition," where formal democratic structures coexist with weak institutional trust and persistent governance challenges (Elbasani, 2013). Economic reforms, often driven by external conditionality, have produced mixed outcomes, reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability rather than stability. In this environment, economic insecurity becomes a permanent background condition rather than a temporary disruption. Transitional democracies can therefore be understood as discursive arenas, where political meaning is continuously renegotiated. Because institutional narratives are not firmly entrenched, populist actors enjoy greater flexibility in redefining economic realities. Frames of blame, protection, and sacrifice resonate more strongly where alternative interpretive frameworks are weak or fragmented.

This does not imply that citizens are passive recipients of political narratives. Rather, it suggests that narrative competition plays a heightened role in shaping political trust. In the absence of consolidated institutional identities, trust is more easily reconfigured through discourse. Economic insecurity becomes a key resource in this process, offering populist actors a shared experiential reference point around which legitimacy can be reconstructed. By situating populist economic narratives within the broader context of transitional democracies, this article moves beyond country-specific explanations and highlights structural conditions that make narrative mediation particularly powerful. Albania is thus treated not as an anomaly, but as a revealing case through which broader patterns can be observed.

Materials & Methods

This paper employs a qualitative, concept-driven research design aimed at understanding how economic insecurity is politically interpreted and how such interpretations shape institutional trust in transitional democracies. Rather than approaching economic conditions as objective determinants of political attitudes, the analysis treats them as socially mediated experiences whose meaning is constructed through discourse. This interpretive orientation is particularly appropriate for examining populist governance, where political legitimacy is often sustained through symbolic framing rather than measurable policy outcomes.

The research design combines theoretical analysis with the systematic use of secondary data sources. The theoretical framework provides the analytical lens through which economic narratives are identified and interpreted, while empirical materials are used to contextualize and illustrate these narratives. This approach allows for analytical depth without relying on original data collection, while maintaining transparency regarding the scope and limitations of the study. The aim is not to test hypotheses or establish causal relationships, but to trace recurring patterns of meaning through which economic insecurity and trust are connected in political discourse.

The empirical material draws on three types of secondary sources. International survey data, including the World Values Survey, the European Social Survey, and the Balkan Barometer, are used to identify broad trends in perceived economic insecurity and institutional trust in Albania. These datasets provide comparative and longitudinal insights that situate Albania within wider regional and European patterns. The survey evidence is used descriptively rather than analytically, serving to support interpretive claims rather than to generate statistical inference. In addition, reports produced by international organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations Development Programme are employed to contextualize economic governance and reform trajectories. These documents are treated both as sources of empirical assessment and as expressions of dominant technocratic narratives that interact with domestic political discourse.

Publicly available political documents, including government strategies, policy declarations, and official statements, constitute a further source of empirical material. These texts are analyzed as discursive artifacts through which economic conditions are framed, justified, and normalized. The selection of documents is guided by their relevance to economic governance and their prominence in public debate, rather than by exhaustive coverage. Together, these sources enable a triangulated reading of economic insecurity as both a lived perception and a politically narrated condition.

The analytical strategy follows a qualitative frame analysis, focusing on the identification of recurring narrative patterns through which economic insecurity is interpreted and communicated. Particular attention is paid to narratives of blame, protection, and sacrifice, which are examined for their role in shaping expectations toward institutions and political authority. By tracing how these frames recur across different sources, the analysis seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which trust is reconfigured in contexts of persistent uncertainty.

Several limitations of this approach should be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary data restricts the ability to capture individual-level processes of meaning-making, and the qualitative nature of the analysis limits claims of generalizability. However, these constraints are consistent with the study's objectives, which prioritize interpretive depth and conceptual clarity over empirical breadth. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically illustrative, offering insights into how populist economic narratives operate within transitional democracies rather than definitive assessments of their causal impact.

Economic Insecurity and Institutional Trust in Albania

Economic insecurity in Albania cannot be understood solely through conventional macroeconomic indicators. While periods of relative fiscal stability and economic growth have been documented in recent years, public perceptions of vulnerability, uncertainty, and fragility remain widespread.

Secondary survey evidence consistently indicates that large segments of the Albanian population perceive their economic situation as precarious, even in the absence of acute economic crisis. Data from cross-national surveys such as the World Values Survey and the Balkan Barometer point to persistently high levels of concern related to employment security, cost of living, and future economic prospects. While this article emphasizes narrative mediation, material inequalities constitute an essential structural background to these dynamics. EU-SILC data document persistent regional disparities, limited redistributive capacity, and elevated risks of material deprivation in Albania (INSTAT, 2025). When economic adjustment is perceived as unevenly distributed, insecurity becomes morally charged, reinforcing populist frames of unfairness and institutional capture. In this sense, inequality does not replace narrative mediation but supplies its raw material: distributive asymmetries intensify receptivity to blame narratives and deepen perceptions that institutions serve particular interests rather than collective welfare.

Evidence from nationally collected survey data further reinforces this interpretation. Analyses of public attitudes toward political rhetoric and institutional performance indicate that individuals who are more receptive to populist framing tend to express significantly lower levels of trust in representative institutions, even when controlling for socio-demographic factors. Perceptions of corruption emerge as a particularly salient dimension in this relationship, functioning as a key channel through which economic and political dissatisfaction is translated into distrust. At the same time, higher educational attainment appears to mitigate susceptibility to populist narratives, suggesting that interpretive capacity plays an important role in shaping how economic insecurity is politically understood. These findings underscore the extent to which trust is mediated by narrative interpretation rather than determined by material conditions alone.

At the institutional level, trust in Albania remains comparatively low and unevenly distributed across different branches of governance. Repeated survey findings show limited confidence in political parties and parliament, while trust in executive authority fluctuates more strongly in response to leadership styles, crisis framing, and claims of responsiveness.

TABLE 1. Trust in Institutions in Albania (Opinion Poll 2023)

Institution	% Expressing Trust
European Union (EU)	74.7%
United Nations (UN)	74.3%
Religious Institutions	67%
Special Prosecution Against Organized Crime (SPAK)	60.3%
Civil Society Organizations	55.7%
Courts	33.4%
Prosecution	33.7%
Parliament	29.1%
Political Parties	25.5%

Source: Trust in Governance 2023 (UNDP/IDM, Opinion Poll)

Table 1 illustrates the uneven distribution of institutional trust in Albania, with supranational actors and anti-corruption bodies enjoying higher confidence than core representative institutions such as parliament and political parties. Figure 1 complements this picture by showing widespread distrust of domestic political institutions. Together, these patterns support the article's central claim that economic insecurity does not uniformly erode trust but redistributes legitimacy across institutional forms, reinforcing personalized authority while representative bodies remain weakly trusted.

FIGURE 1. Distrust/Lack of Trust in Domestic Institutions

Institution	% Saying "little or no trust"
Government	53%
Parliament	70%
Political Parties	76%

Source: Balkan Barometer 2025, RCC

Complementary evidence from the Balkan Barometer Public Opinion Survey reinforces this pattern. According to the 2025 wave, approximately 70% of Albanian respondents report little or no trust in parliament, while nearly 76% express low confidence in political parties. These findings confirm that distrust is concentrated in representative institutions rather than uniformly distributed across governance domains, supporting the article's argument that institutional legitimacy is fragmented and selectively reallocated rather than simply eroded.

International institutional reports further illuminate this paradox. Assessments produced by organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme frequently emphasize progress in regulatory reform, fiscal discipline, and macroeconomic coordination. At the same time, these reports acknowledge persistent challenges related to informality, inequality, and limited state capacity. The coexistence of reform-oriented technocratic discourse and enduring everyday insecurity creates a fertile environment for political reinterpretation. Economic governance is thus experienced not as a coherent institutional project, but as a fragmented and often opaque process, reinforcing perceptions that formal improvements fail to translate into lived security.

Within this environment, economic insecurity becomes normalized rather than exceptional. It is perceived as a permanent condition to be managed rather than a temporary disruption to be resolved. This normalization has important implications for institutional trust. When uncertainty is treated as endemic, citizens are less likely to evaluate institutions based on outcomes and more likely to judge them based on perceived intent, alignment, and symbolic responsiveness. Trust becomes increasingly detached from policy effectiveness and more closely tied to narrative coherence and moral framing.

Albania's prolonged transition amplifies these dynamics. Decades of reform, frequently driven by external conditionality and framed as technical necessity, have contributed to a depoliticized understanding of economic decision-making. While such framing may facilitate short-term policy compliance, it also weakens institutional identification. Economic reforms are often perceived as externally imposed or morally abstract, limiting their capacity to generate durable trust. Institutional fragility, in this sense, is not merely inherited from the past but continuously reproduced through modes of economic governance that prioritize technical rationality over social meaning.

It is within this context that populist economic narratives acquire particular resonance. By translating diffuse insecurity into morally intelligible stories, political actors are able to re-anchor trust in personalized authority and symbolic commitment rather than institutional consistency. Economic insecurity, far from automatically undermining legitimacy, becomes a shared reference point through which political alignment is reconstructed. Understanding this background is therefore essential for analysing how populist economic narratives operate not simply as reactions to objective crisis, but as interpretive responses to a structurally uncertain environment.

Populist Economic Narratives in Albania

A striking feature of contemporary Albanian political economy is the coexistence of two truths that do not easily reconcile. On the one hand, international macro-assessments depict an economy that has displayed resilience and comparatively strong performance in the post-pandemic period, supported by prudent fiscal management, declining public debt, disinflationary dynamics, and tourism-led growth (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2025). On the other hand, domestic public opinion registers persistent scepticism toward core representative institutions, with political parties and parliament consistently located near the bottom of the trust hierarchy, and with trust distributed unevenly across institutions rather than "restored" by macro-stability (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). This divergence is not a mere empirical curiosity; it constitutes the precise space in which populist economic narratives operate. These narratives are not simply commentary on economic outcomes, but interpretive devices that transform economic experience into political meaning, reorganizing the moral and cognitive map through which citizens evaluate institutional legitimacy.

Secondary evidence helps clarify the terrain on which these narratives take shape. Living conditions data produced by INSTAT through the EU-SILC framework document persistent poverty risks, material deprivation, and the structural constraints that shape everyday economic vulnerability (INSTAT, 2025). While such indicators provide important descriptive insight, they rarely "speak for themselves" politically. A similar dynamic is visible in central bank reporting, which frames macro-financial stability, inflation targeting, and institutional transparency as key achievements of economic governance (Bank of Albania, 2025). Yet public trust patterns do not mechanically follow these institutional narratives. The UNDP "Trust in Governance 2023" survey reports markedly higher confidence in international organizations than in domestic representative institutions, while political parties and parliament remain among the least trusted (UNDP, 2024). Regional public opinion data from the Balkan Barometer confirm that trust is differentiated and volatile, with certain institutions experiencing relative gains while others remain structurally distrusted (Regional Cooperation Council [RCC], 2024). Together, these sources support a central theoretical claim: in transitional contexts, the political meaning of economic performance is negotiated through interpretive frames that render uncertainty intelligible. Populist discourse is one of the most efficient suppliers of such frames.

The first recurring narrative can be described as the narrative of blame. Its logic is moral rather than technical, attributing economic hardship to identifiable agents such as corrupt elites, captured institutions, or external constraints framed as unjust impositions. In Albania, where international reports often combine assessments of reform progress with acknowledgements of governance weaknesses, blame narratives gain plausibility because they resonate with entrenched perceptions that formal institutions fail to protect ordinary citizens (IMF, 2025; UNDP, 2024). Instead of engaging in debates over fiscal multipliers or productivity growth, blame narratives offer a simplified causal chain in which economic difficulty is the result of betrayal and mismanagement. The promise embedded in this frame is not merely prosperity, but moral purification. Trust, under this logic, is not rebuilt through institutional performance but redirected toward political actors who claim to expose hidden structures of injustice. This helps explain why distrust in representative institutions can persist even during periods of favourable macroeconomic reporting, as institutions themselves are narratively positioned as the problem rather than the solution (UNDP, 2024).

Survey-based evidence further reinforces the relevance of this narrative logic. Analyses of nationally collected survey data indicate that individuals who strongly endorse populist claims centred on elite corruption and institutional capture are significantly more likely to express low levels of trust in representative institutions, even when controlling for socio-demographic factors. Importantly, this association is not confined to respondents experiencing acute material deprivation, suggesting that distrust is driven less by objective economic hardship than by interpretive framing. Perceptions of corruption function as a narrative hinge through which diffuse economic insecurity is translated into personalized and morally charged explanations of political failure, reinforcing the centrality of blame narratives in structuring distrust.

The second narrative is the narrative of protection. If blame identifies villains, protection constructs an imagined shelter. In this frame, the state is portrayed not as a neutral administrator, but as a guardian standing between "the people" and destabilizing forces such as price shocks, external volatility, or predatory interests. This narrative is particularly potent in contexts where every day economic experience is shaped by uncertainty that cannot be reduced to annual GDP growth. Even when international institutions report disinflation and improved fiscal buffers, households may remain sensitive to cost-of-living pressures and future insecurity, especially where informality and uneven access to services undermine the felt reliability of economic life (INSTAT, 2025; Bank of Albania, 2025). Protection narratives bridge this gap by shifting the evaluative criteria of governance. The key question becomes less whether macro indicators are improving and more whether political authority is perceived as responsive and aligned with popular needs.

Empirical patterns in public opinion support this interpretation. Survey data indicate that distrust in Albania is not uniformly distributed across institutions. While confidence in political parties and parliament remains consistently low, trust in executive authority displays greater volatility and responsiveness to leadership narratives and crisis framing (UNDP, 2024). This selective allocation of trust is consistent with a populist logic of protection, in which legitimacy is personalized and anchored in perceived decisiveness rather than institutional accountability. The Balkan Barometer's longitudinal data, showing fluctuations in institutional trust across sectors, further support this differentiated and politically malleable trust landscape (RCC, 2024).

The third narrative is the narrative of sacrifice. This frame normalizes economic hardship by embedding it in a story of necessity, transition, and deferred reward. Sacrifice narratives are particularly prevalent in transitional democracies, where reform has long been framed as an inevitable and technically unavoidable path toward modernization and European integration. The discursive mechanism transforms insecurity into a moral test, asking citizens to tolerate present discomfort in the name of future stability. International policy reporting can inadvertently reinforce this narrative by emphasizing structural reform, fiscal discipline, and long-term sustainability, even when distributional consequences remain socially salient (IMF, 2025). In the Albanian context, technocratic reform discourse coexists with persistent scepticism toward domestic political representation, creating conditions in which sacrifice can be framed either as responsible patriotism or as coerced endurance (UNDP, 2024). In both cases, the effect is to shift the temporal horizon of legitimacy, judging institutions less by immediate outcomes than by their claimed direction of travel.

Across these three narrative forms, a common mechanism becomes visible. Economic insecurity becomes politically usable not because it is resolved, but because it is narratively organized. What matters is not only whether poverty rates rise or fall, or whether inflation converges toward central bank targets, but how these realities are embedded in moral causality and collective expectation. Albania's secondary data environment—combining official statistics on living conditions (INSTAT, 2025), central bank accounts of macro-financial governance (Bank of Albania, 2025), IMF assessments of growth and fiscal buffers (IMF, 2025), and public opinion data documenting low trust in representative institutions (UNDP, 2024; RCC, 2024)—makes visible the very gap that populist narratives exploit. By translating complexity into recognition, blame, and justification, these narratives enable political authority to govern through insecurity rather than eliminate it.

The analytical consequence is that institutional trust should not be treated as a simple dependent variable of economic performance. Instead, it emerges as a distribution of confidence across institutional forms, mediated by narrative frames that selectively redirect legitimacy toward leaders while leaving representative structures distrusted. This interpretation is empirically consistent with Albanian trust patterns documented in UNDP polling and regional evidence from the Balkan Barometer, where confidence shifts across institutional domains rather than rising uniformly with macroeconomic recovery (UNDP, 2024; RCC, 2024). Populist economic narratives thus thrive not by solving insecurity, but by rendering it meaningful in ways that secure compliance, loyalty, or, at minimum, resignation.

Conclusions

This article set out to examine how populist economic narratives mediate the relationship between perceived economic insecurity and institutional trust in transitional democracies, using Albania as an illustrative case. Challenging performance-based accounts of political trust, the analysis has shown that economic conditions do not translate mechanically into institutional legitimacy. Instead, they acquire political significance through narratives that interpret insecurity, assign responsibility, and normalize uncertainty.

By combining a concept-driven qualitative framework with secondary survey evidence, institutional reports, and policy documents, the study demonstrated how populist actors transform economic insecurity into a resource of political meaning. Narratives of blame personalize responsibility and reframe distrust as rational vigilance; narratives of protection recast governance as moral guardianship rather than institutional reliability; and narratives of sacrifice normalize hardship by embedding it in a temporal story of necessity and deferred reward. Together, these frames enable political authority to persist even in contexts where trust in representative institutions remains low and unevenly distributed.

The Albanian case highlights a broader pattern relevant to many transitional democracies. Persistent insecurity, weak institutional consolidation, and technocratic reform discourses create fertile ground for narrative mediation. In such contexts, trust is not rebuilt through improved indicators alone but reconfigured through symbolic alignment and interpretive coherence. Institutional trust thus emerges as a relational and contingent phenomenon, shaped as much by political storytelling as by governance outcomes.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it conceptualizes economic insecurity as a politically constructed experience rather than a purely material condition. Second, it reframes institutional trust as dependent on narrative alignment, not merely institutional performance. Third, it situates populist economic governance within the structural features of transitional democracies, where discursive flexibility amplifies the power of interpretive frames.

From a governance perspective, restoring institutional trust requires more than macroeconomic stabilization. Development policies and regional investment may alleviate material insecurity, but their political effectiveness depends on accompanying narrative re-anchoring. Without credible institutional storytelling that reconnects reform with lived experience, technical improvements risk remaining symbolically inert. Countering polarized and misinformative narratives therefore becomes part of economic governance itself, as legitimacy increasingly hinges on whether institutions can translate policy into socially meaningful horizons of security.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary data constrains the ability to trace individual-level meaning-making processes, and the qualitative scope of the analysis limits generalizability. Future research could extend this framework through comparative designs or primary discourse analysis to assess how similar narratives operate across different political and economic contexts. Nonetheless, the findings underscore a central implication for democratic governance: addressing economic insecurity requires not only effective policy but also credible narratives that reconnect institutions with lived experience. Where such narratives are monopolized by populist actors, institutional trust may be sustained in form while remaining fragile in substance.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used AI for limited language refinement, proofreading, and stylistic editing. The tool was not used to generate the research design, analysis, findings, or conclusions. The author reviewed and edited the manuscript and takes full responsibility for the final content of the publication.

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