PART 2

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF ECONOMIC SECURITY

2.1. ECONOMIC COMMUNICATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF THE FUTURE

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Abstract *This paper investigates how economic insecurity is discursively produced and affectively circulated in Lithuania's public sphere, with a particular focus on young people's epistemic and emotional exposure to these narratives. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of digital news media and expert-authored Facebook discourse, the study approaches economic discourse not merely as a reflection of macroeconomic facts but as an affective infrastructure that shapes the interpretive environment in which individuals assess risk and agency. The research design is inductive, allowing discursive patterns to emerge from the data without pre-imposed categories.*

The central research objective is to identify what types of public messages provoke the feeling of economic insecurity; how media and social media narratives reinforce or contradict each other; which broader discursive models emerge from these patterns; and how a more ethically grounded economic discourse could be articulated. The findings suggest that messages combining technocratic information with emotional or moralised framings are particularly potent in producing a sense of vulnerability. Although the genres differ, traditional media and social media tend to reinforce each other's affective load, generating a feedback loop of institutional delegitimation, systemic exposure, and fatalistic affect.

The study identifies four dominant discursive formations — structural delegitimation, systemic exposure, affective ambivalence, and conditional resilience — each shaping economic subjectivity in distinctive ways. These formations do not merely communicate uncertainty; they structure the limits of future-oriented thinking and constrain perceived economic agency, especially for younger audiences. The paper concludes by proposing a set of communicative principles for epistemically responsible and affectively sustainable public discourse, emphasising tonal proportionality, generational inclusiveness, and narrative pluralism.

Keywords*: economic insecurity, discourse analysis, affective public sphere, youth subjectivity, Lithuanian media, epistemic responsibility.*

Introduction

Over the past decade, the mediation of economic risk has undergone a paradigmatic shift — from technocratic communication targeting expert audiences to emotionally charged, narratively complex discourse permeating mass media and digital ecosystems. In Lithuania, a small and trade-exposed EU economy, this transformation has intensified in the wake of post-2022 geopolitical ruptures, most notably Russia's invasion of Ukraine, persistent inflation, and structural recalibrations in global trade regimes. Economic discourse no longer functions solely as an informational relay; it has become a performative and affective force, shaping not only public understanding but also behavioural repertoires and socio-psychological orientations toward the future.

This study examines how economic insecurity is discursively constructed and circulated in Lithuania's public sphere, with particular attention to the affective and epistemic implications for young people. The inquiry is premised on the recognition that insecurity is not solely material but semiotic and emotional: it is produced and naturalised through language, framing, and narrative repetition. While macroeconomic indicators such as unemployment rates, wage dynamics, and inflation trajectories provide essential metrics, they fail to capture the interpretive and emotional textures of economic life as experienced by individuals navigating periods of social and economic transition (Bossert and D'Ambrosio, 2013; Hacker, 2019).

Lithuania's economic structure magnifies the salience of this phenomenon. With over 80% of GDP derived from exports (Eurostat, 2024) and a rapidly declining population base, the country exemplifies both structural openness and demographic fragility. These conditions render it not only economically exposed, but communicatively saturated: the density of economic discourse in media and social media functions as a "discursive infrastructure" that does not merely reflect insecurity but co-produces it (Fairclough, 1995; Berlant, 2011). The speed and intensity with which risk-related messages circulate — through headlines, opinion columns, expert commentary, and algorithmic amplification — has created an interpretive environment where emotional tone often outweighs technical nuance. As a result, the perception of insecurity can become decoupled from macroeconomic fundamentals and instead anchored in symbolic tropes, moral metaphors, and repeated affective cues.

Young people represent a particularly sensitive demographic within this communicative ecology. Entering the labour market, forming households, and negotiating intergenerational mobility during a period of systemic volatility, they are disproportionately vulnerable to discursive framings of precarity. Yet, paradoxically, they are rarely addressed directly in institutional economic communication. This study contends that youth are not simply consumers of economic narratives — they are constituted through them. Their economic subjectivity is shaped by the emotional valence and moral framing of messages that articulate what is possible, desirable, or foreclosed in economic life (Butler, 1997; Ahmed, 2004). Pervasive tropes of instability, exhortations to adapt, and warnings about unsustainability may not only inform young audiences, but also inscribe normative expectations about risk tolerance, resilience, and moral responsibility for navigating uncertainty.

The research adopts an inductive qualitative content analysis approach to examine two central domains of public economic discourse in Lithuania: mainstream digital news media and expert-authored Facebook posts. These platforms represent distinct but interconnected sites of meaning-making within the Lithuanian communicative landscape. Rather than imposing a priori analytical categories, the study derives message types inductively, allowing the semantic, emotional, and rhetorical structures of economic insecurity to emerge from the material itself (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). This methodological stance is crucial in capturing the latent dimensions of discourse — its tonal modulation, narrative tempo, and affective instructions — which structure not only what is said, but how it is heard and internalised. In doing so, the study explores how particular types of messages provoke the feeling of economic vulnerability, how different media genres interact to sustain dominant insecurity narratives, and how these discursive regimes might be normatively re-evaluated.

Four central research questions guide the analysis:

- Which types of public messages in Lithuanian news media and elite Facebook discourse are most associated with the provocation of economic insecurity?
- How do media and social media messages complement, reinforce, or contradict each other in constructing dominant discursive patterns of insecurity?
- What discursive models emerge from these patterns, and how do they shape the affective climate and perceived economic agency of young people?
- Which communicative principles could underpin a public economic discourse that mitigates rather than exacerbates the sense of economic insecurity?

These questions are situated within a broader interdisciplinary framework that synthesises insights from narrative economics (Shiller, 2017), affect theory (Appadurai, 2013), and critical discourse analysis. The study posits that insecurity must be conceptualised not merely as a deficit of material stability but as a product of affective economies—semiotic regimes in which emotional tone, institutional authority, and symbolic capital coalesce to define the conditions of plausibility, actionability, and belief (Bourdieu, 1991; Ahmed, 2004). It also extends this framework toward normative inquiry: if discursive environments help produce insecurity, what would a more epistemically responsible and affectively sustainable public economic discourse look like?

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to reorient the analysis of economic communication in small open economies. Rather than treating public discourse as a passive reflection of macroeconomic conditions, it foregrounds the constitutive power of language in shaping the affective atmospheres and cognitive maps through which economic life is navigated. For Lithuanian youth in particular, discursive constructions of risk are not simply external commentaries — they are infrastructural forces that contour the temporal, emotional, and behavioural boundaries of the imaginable future.

Conceptual Framework: Discursive Economies of Economic Insecurity

Public debates about the economy are rarely neutral. Whether filtered through headlines or social media posts, economic information is always mediated by language — language that frames, amplifies, attenuates, or redirects the perception of risk. In the post-2022 European context, where war, inflation, and energy insecurity coalesce into a

prolonged sense of unpredictability, the role of discourse in shaping affective responses to economic developments is particularly pronounced. This chapter offers a conceptual framework for understanding economic insecurity not as a static set of material indicators, but as a dynamic and semiotically constructed phenomenon. Drawing from multiple disciplines — economic sociology, political psychology, discourse studies, and behavioural economics — the chapter outlines how public narratives about economic conditions generate not just knowledge but also emotional climates, behavioural expectations, and institutional (dis)trust.

To this end, the chapter proceeds through four analytical steps. First, it critiques the limitations of materialist definitions of economic insecurity and introduces discourse as a constitutive analytic category. Second, it clarifies what is meant by "discourse" in this context, highlighting its affective, relational, and infrastructural properties. Third, it introduces the concept of discursive economies — semantic systems in which emotional tone, message content, and institutional form co-produce the felt sense of economic (in)stability. Fourth, it discusses why young people, although rarely addressed explicitly in public communication, are disproportionately exposed to these discursive dynamics. The goal is to build a cross-disciplinary language capable of diagnosing how insecurity is produced, circulated, and internalised through mediated economic speech.

1.1. From Metrics to Meaning: Why Insecurity Must Be Read Discursively

Conventional analyses of economic insecurity rely heavily on statistical metrics: unemployment rates, income volatility, debt-to-income ratios, or housing cost overburden. While these indicators are essential for measuring material precarity, they are insufficient for capturing the experiential and symbolic dimensions of insecurity. Insecurity is not only what happens to individuals but also how they interpret what is happening — and those interpretations are deeply conditioned by discourse. As Shiller (2017) argues in his theory of narrative economics, economic events are often less influential than the stories we tell about them. These stories, when amplified through media, shape not only public perception but also macroeconomic outcomes, such as investment behaviour, consumption patterns, and savings rates.

This is particularly salient in post-2022 Lithuania. Despite resilient macroeconomic fundamentals — moderate public debt, sustained GDP growth, and EU fiscal safeguards — the public discourse continues to reflect heightened anxiety. Narratives of energy dependence, policy inconsistency, and geopolitical fragility persist even after key structural adjustments. For instance, although Lithuania successfully phased out Russian gas imports and expanded LNG infrastructure in 2022–2023, official reports still highlight the volatility of international energy prices and their inflationary impact (OECD, 2025). This asymmetry between macro-level performance and discursive affect is not incidental. It signals a shift in how economic meaning is mediated: less through technical indicators and more through narrative frames and emotional salience.

The inadequacy of purely quantitative approaches has long been noted in adjacent disciplines. Ulrich Beck's (1992) concept of "risk society" posits that contemporary threats are no longer defined by their probability or magnitude, but by their interpretability. In other words, risk becomes a social artefact, shaped by cultural frames, institutional trust, and media amplification. Similarly, Appadurai (2013) describes the modern condition as governed by a "fear of the future," where economic actors operate under conditions of uncertainty that are as much emotional as they are informational. These theoretical contributions underline a crucial point: insecurity is not merely about negative outcomes, but about the erosion of predictive capacity — the feeling that the future is unknowable, and thus unplannable.

Lithuania provides a telling case in this regard. Surveys conducted by the European Commission (2024) indicate that Lithuanian youth are among the least optimistic in the EU about their economic future, despite relatively strong labour market indicators. This pessimism cannot be fully explained by material hardship; it reflects an interpretive dissonance between official statistics and the ambient discourse surrounding economic life. In public commentary, it is not uncommon to encounter phrases such as "the state is improvising, not planning" or "every new reform increase risk," even when macroeconomic fundamentals remain steady. Such formulations suggest that insecurity is not always indexed to decline; it can emerge from discursive saturation with volatility, contradiction, or perceived incoherence (European Commission, 2024).

These patterns are consistent with recent research in behavioural economics. Akerlof and Shiller (2010) highlight the role of "animal spirits" — non-rational drivers like trust, fear, and fairness perceptions — in shaping economic outcomes. Their insight is that psychological states do not simply respond to economic structures; they co-produce them. When public narratives induce chronic anxiety or diminish trust in institutional foresight, they recalibrate individual risk preferences, often leading to more conservative financial behaviours, lower long-term investments, or delayed life decisions such as home ownership or family formation.

The implication is clear: if public economic discourse shapes expectations, affects, and agency, then it must be treated as an analytical object. This requires moving beyond content analysis as mere thematic tagging, and toward a semiotic approach that recognises how tone, metaphor, and narrative structure interact with social position and institutional trust. For young people especially, whose economic biographies are still forming, discursive environments serve as cognitive templates for imagining the future — not in abstract, but in psychologically actionable ways.

In sum, this section has argued that economic insecurity must be understood not only through objective indicators but also through discursive constructions. In contexts like Lithuania, where structural exposure is high and institutional trust is uneven, the emotional and semantic framing of economic messages acquires heightened significance. Discourse shapes the perception of risk, the scope of agency, and the plausibility of planning. It mediates the space between what is materially real and what is socially actionable. Recognising insecurity as a discursive phenomenon enables a more nuanced analysis of how public communication structures economic subjectivity, particularly among youth. The next section explores how discourse operates not merely as content but as infrastructure — a set of relational, emotional, and institutional mechanisms that shape the way economic meaning is constructed and absorbed.

1.2. Discourse as Infrastructure: Semantic Structures and Affective Economies

Public discourse does not merely contain economic information; it circulates through patterned forms that structure what can be said, how it can be said, and what emotional reactions are licensed. This section deepens the conceptual lens by focusing on discourse as infrastructure — not as a static repository of meanings, but as a dynamic and affective system that links semantic form, relational positioning, and institutional trust. Unlike content-focused models of communication, this approach recognises discourse as a distributed force: one that configures relations between speakers and audiences, regulates tone, and reproduces broader ideologies. Drawing from discourse theory, affect studies, and critical institutionalism, this section builds the scaffolding for a deeper understanding of how insecurity travels through public speech acts, not only as information but as atmosphere.

The concept of discourse as infrastructure implies that language operates beyond propositional content. Following Fairclough (1995), discourse embeds institutional authority, social hierarchies, and cultural assumptions. It shapes not only what is said but who can speak, who is heard, and under what conditions meaning becomes legitimate. Foucault (1972) advanced this idea by arguing that discourse delimits the "regimes of truth" that structure knowledge itself. In the economic domain, this means that how uncertainty is framed — by whom and in what tone — determines its social uptake.

This is particularly evident in how technocratic language intersects with moral commentary. In Lithuanian media, phrases such as "living beyond our means" or "spoiled by EU funds" exemplify how economic claims become moralised. These tropes operate less as data-driven assertions and more as evaluative speech acts that invoke responsibility, blame, and virtue. Such language aligns with Wetherell's (2012) concept of affective practice: recurrent discursive forms that pattern emotional response while naturalising specific worldviews.

Moreover, affect theory highlights that discourse is not simply cognitive; it is also embodied. As Berlant (2011) argues, public speech carries "affective payloads" — latent emotional instructions that condition how listeners feel, regardless of the factual content. When economic statements invoke urgency, shame, or pride, they do more than inform; they choreograph collective sentiment. In contexts of institutional distrust or perceived policy incoherence, these affective cues gain potency. Emotional infrastructure becomes a stabilising — or destabilising — force that precedes rational assessment.

The Lithuanian context offers several illustrations. Discursive framings around emigration, for instance, often adopt fatalistic tones: "nothing will change," "everyone is leaving," "there's no future here." While demographically based, these claims acquire affective momentum through repetition, insinuation, and institutional silence. A young person encountering such messages does not merely update their beliefs — they internalise a horizon of diminished expectations. This is the infrastructural effect: discourse creates not just content, but a psychic map of what is thinkable and liveable.

Habermas's (1984) notion of communicative rationality provides a counterpoint. Ideally, discourse should enable consensus through reasoned deliberation. Yet in practice, the public sphere is saturated with strategic communication aimed at persuasion or emotional mobilization. Economic discourse, when stripped of dialogic accountability, becomes performative rather than communicative — it signals alignment, manages perception, or hedges institutional credibility. This performativity becomes infrastructural when it is routinised, expected, and rarely interrogated.

Critically, viewing discourse as infrastructure allows for an analysis of its durability. Infrastructure, by definition, sustains and organises activity over time. Discursive infrastructure, similarly, stabilises interpretive patterns even as surface-level content changes. This explains why certain rhetorical tropes — such as associating economic stability with fiscal austerity, or equating youth mobility with national decline — persist across media cycles, political parties, and policy frameworks. These forms do not simply survive; they become default interpretive grammars.

Furthermore, the infrastructural lens reveals feedback effects. As discourse conditions emotional climates and public expectations, it alters institutional responses. For instance, if policy makers perceive that public sentiment is shaped by catastrophic framings, they may adopt overly cautious or symbolic measures. This generates a recursive loop: discourse anticipates crisis, institutions respond performatively, and the affective climate of insecurity deepens. These loops are not irrational — they follow the logic of institutional legitimation under discursive pressure.

This section has argued that discourse functions as a form of infrastructure — an underlying system that enables and constrains economic sense-making. Through recurring semantic patterns, relational authority, and emotional tone, public speech shapes how insecurity is experienced, communicated, and internalised. In Lithuania, where technocratic claims often blend with moral narratives and emotional cues, the infrastructural power of discourse is particularly salient. Young audiences, lacking institutional anchors, are especially susceptible to these dynamics. Understanding discourse as infrastructure allows us to examine not only the content of economic messaging, but the patterned logics that reproduce affective environments of insecurity — and their recursive influence on institutional behaviour.

1.3. Discursive Economies: How Meaning, Affect, and Authority Co-Produce Economic Insecurity

This section builds on the infrastructural perspective developed earlier to introduce the concept of discursive economies: patterned constellations of meaning, affect, and institutional authority that circulate in public discourse and shape how economic insecurity is understood and lived. Unlike isolated speech acts, discursive economies are semi-stable formations — ensembles of rhetorical tropes, emotional tones, and epistemic claims that structure social knowledge over time. They enable certain framings of economic reality to become dominant, while marginalising alternative narratives. In doing so, they mediate not only what people believe about the economy but how they feel, whom they trust, and what actions appear viable. In Lithuania's contemporary context — marked by geopolitical tension, rising prices, and institutional recalibration — these formations are especially influential in shaping young people's affective orientations toward economic life.

The term "discursive economy" denotes more than the discourse about the economy; it captures how discourse itself functions like an economy — with symbolic resources, value hierarchies, flows of credibility, and sites of exchange. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic capital, we can think of public discourse as a field in which actors (experts, journalists, politicians) compete for authority by deploying narrative grammars. The payoff is not monetary but reputational: the ability to define what counts as risk, prudence, growth, or stability. This symbolic power is asymmetrically distributed. Some actors shape the "authorized vocabulary" of economic talk, while others remain excluded. For example, central banks and finance ministries enjoy high epistemic privilege, even when their messaging is affectively charged or speculative.

These narrative formations exhibit internal coherence. For instance, a "scarcity discourse" tends to combine alarmist metaphors (e.g. "budget holes," "spending avalanche") with moral frames ("we must tighten our belts") and institutional critique ("reckless populism"). This is not merely a set of rhetorical flourishes — it constitutes a discursive economy in which austerity is naturalised as prudent governance. In Lithuania, such framings have appeared across election cycles, often resurfacing regardless of actual fiscal data. Similarly, "resilience discourse" links crisis vocabulary ("shocks," "disruptions") with appeals to national strength and adaptation. These discourses allocate value — what counts as responsible, what counts as naïve — and thereby regulate emotional legitimacy.

Discursive economies also rely on affective consistency. Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of the "affective economy" helps clarify how emotions are not merely responses to content but circulate and stick to particular signs and bodies. In the Lithuanian case, notions like "youth" or "future" often become saturated with worry, doubt, or irony — even when no direct accusation is made. This sticky effect limits the aspirational range of young people. For example, optimism can be discursively coded as unrealistic, while cautious realism is valorised. In this way, discourse does not simply reflect insecurity — it conditions which emotional orientations are socially viable.

The discursive construction of economic actors also merits scrutiny. Certain roles — such as the "prudent saver," the "responsible taxpayer," or the "entrepreneurial innovator" — are valorised, while others — such as the "dependent welfare recipient" or the "entitled youth" — are problematised. These figures serve as moral templates through which macroeconomic narratives are humanised and simplified. Importantly, they also provide affective cues: admiration, resentment, pity, or disdain. In Lithuania, the recurring tension between "productive citizens" and "passive dependents" maps not only onto economic debates but onto generational identities, shaping how young people imagine their own legitimacy within the economic system.

Moreover, discursive economies interact with media logics in ways that amplify affective asymmetries. Sensationalist headlines, algorithmic feedback loops, and fragmented attention cycles privilege emotionally charged content over deliberative nuance. This contributes to what some scholars describe as the "affective inflation" of economic discourse: the intensification of tone without proportional informational gain. Under such conditions, the discursive space for alternative or hopeful framings of economic life contracts. As empirical research on youth news consumption in Europe shows, many young audiences disengage from economic reporting not due to apathy, but as a response to cognitive fatigue and the perceived repetitiveness of negative framings (Newman et al., 2023; Duvekot et al., 2024). This withdrawal is not external to discourse; rather, it participates in shaping the discursive economy itself by altering the circulation of messages and reinforcing asymmetries of voice.

It is also necessary to situate discursive economies within broader geopolitical imaginaries. In post-2022 Lithuania, economic talk is often entangled with security discourse. Terms such as "resilience," "sovereignty," and "strategic autonomy" function dually — as economic and military signifiers. This convergence intensifies the stakes of public communication: economic pessimism may be coded as unpatriotic, while critical evaluation of state strategy may be dismissed as destabilising. Thus, discursive economies are not neutral semantic ecosystems; they are embedded in larger struggles over national narrative, legitimacy, and identity. For youth, this creates a paradoxical pressure: to be future-oriented and entrepreneurial, but within a tightly scripted horizon of national duty and economic restraint.

The implications for youth are especially stark. Young people, as developmental subjects and future-oriented agents, are structurally positioned to absorb these messages during key transitions (education, labour market entry, family formation). Yet they are rarely producers of dominant economic discourse. Their role is that of affective receptors, not epistemic agents. This asymmetry raises critical questions: Who gets to define economic futures? Who narrates what counts as viable? And what forms of economic citizenship are imaginable within these discursive regimes?

Discursive economies are not mere aggregates of economic talk, but structured formations that coordinate meaning, emotion, and authority. They shape how insecurity is communicated, felt, and institutionalised. In the Lithuanian context, such economies have proven resilient, moralising, and emotionally narrow — particularly in their portrayal of youth and the future. Understanding these formations enables us to see beyond surface volatility and examine the deeper semantic and affective infrastructures that pattern economic life. This perspective also invites a broader reflection on democratic discourse: whose voices count, which emotions are legitimate, and how alternative futures can be narrated into being.

1.4. Youth as a Discursive Subject: Exposure, Marginalisation, and Affective Incorporation

This section focuses on how youth are positioned within the discursive economies outlined earlier — not simply as a demographic group, but as a socially produced category shaped by language, representation, and power. It examines the ways in which young people are discursively constructed through public economic narratives: how they are described, addressed (or not), and implicated in broader affective and normative frameworks. While youth are often presented as "the future," they are rarely treated as authoritative narrators of that future. Instead, they appear as objects of concern, risk, or aspiration — discursive placeholders onto which institutions project anxieties, hopes, or blame. In Lithuania, this symbolic positioning has intensified in recent years, particularly as economic volatility and demographic challenges converge in national discourse.

The central thesis of this section is that youth are not simply exposed to economic insecurity — they are constituted through it. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1997) theory of subjectivation, one can argue that young people emerge as subjects precisely through the discursive demands placed upon them: to plan responsibly, to adapt flexibly, to contribute economically, and to remain affectively composed despite pervasive uncertainty. These injunctions are not distributed equally. Some youths are cast as strategic actors ("innovators," "returnees"), while others are framed as burdens ("unmotivated," "dependent," "lost generation"). Such differential inclusion reproduces socioeconomic hierarchies and normalises emotional asymmetries.

A key dynamic here is performative subjectivation — the process through which individuals are constituted as subjects through repeated discursive acts (Butler, 1997). Lithuanian economic discourse rarely addresses youth directly in budget reports, central bank forecasts, or fiscal strategy documents. Yet in the margins of commentary, metaphor, and media, youth appear pervasively: as those who "must learn to save," "should not expect cradle-to-grave support," or "will pay the price" for past policy decisions. These formulations are not merely descriptive; they do something — they iteratively position youth within a normative economic subjectivity marked by precarity, self-responsibility, and inherited burden. In this sense, subjectivation is not imposed from above, but enacted through diffuse citations of responsibility, shaping youth as intelligible economic actors within a discourse that precedes them.

Another form of marginalisation occurs through the genre of policy futurism. In this mode, youth are invoked not as current agents but as abstract future stakeholders. Economic strategies promise that "future generations will benefit," "we must ensure sustainability for our children," or "the next generation must not bear this debt." These framings, though ostensibly inclusive, displace youth from the present. They defer agency and flatten complexity. The lived, immediate concerns of young people — job precarity, unaffordable housing, inflation-driven lifestyle insecurity — are translated into long-term institutional rationales. This rhetorical manoeuvre suspends youth in a temporal elsewhere: always the subject of planning, never the agent of voice.

Moreover, youth are often implicated in affective economies that police emotional legitimacy. Expressions of anxiety, frustration, or political critique are frequently recoded as entitlement or immaturity. This emotional disqualification sustains the asymmetry between authoritative voices (older experts, institutional actors) and the perceived volatility of youth response. It also contributes to affective self-regulation. As empirical studies on youth mental health show (Eu-

rofund, 2023), economic uncertainty often manifests in internalised stress, guilt, and fatalism — emotional states that correlate with withdrawal from civic participation and institutional trust.

These representational dynamics are compounded by institutional design. Despite targeted youth policies, most economic governance frameworks remain generationally blind — rarely distinguishing between the structural exposures of young people and the assumptions embedded in aggregate indicators. For instance, headline employment statistics may obscure underemployment, precarious contracts, and mismatch between qualifications and available opportunities — phenomena disproportionately experienced by youth. Yet these distinctions seldom enter mainstream economic discourse, resulting in a double invisibility: young people are either folded into adult averages or invoked symbolically, without analytical specificity.

Such exclusions have normative consequences. They condition which types of economic citizenship are imaginable. If youth are discursively configured as vulnerable but politically marginal, then collective action, demand articulation, or institutional critique become difficult to legitimate. Instead, resilience becomes privatised — an individual moral obligation rather than a socially supported process. As Honwana (2012) observes in the context of post-crisis youth, what emerges is a paradoxical figure: the "waithood" subject — temporally stuck, structurally excluded, yet constantly tasked with aspirational labour. Lithuanian youth, navigating between optimistic national rhetoric and precarious lived realities, increasingly inhabit this in-between status.

Nonetheless, youth are not merely passive recipients of discourse. Digital media environments, while saturated with dominant narratives, also offer counterpublic spaces where alternative economic imaginaries circulate. Research on youth-led media and activism in Eastern Europe (Sloam & Henn, 2019) shows that young people creatively remix institutional language, subvert deficit framings, and generate new affective grammars of resilience, irony, or care. In Lithuania, while large-scale mobilisation is rare, there are emerging discursive micro-practices — memes, informal critiques, youth podcasts — that complicate the dominant representational regime. These counter-discourses may lack institutional power, but they constitute vital epistemic interventions.

Recognising youth as a discursive subject thus requires attention to both marginalisation and agency, to imposed scripts and emergent re-writings. The analytical challenge is to trace how language positions youth — emotionally and epistemically — within an economic order that often renders them peripheral yet responsible. This requires methodological attentiveness to implicit narratives, rhetorical omissions, and tonal asymmetries. It also demands a normative stance: that discourse about youth cannot be analytically separated from discourse with youth. Only then can the field of economic communication be democratised.

Youth, as a discursive subject, emerge through patterns of representation that oscillate between strategic invisibility and moral overexposure. While public economic narratives in Lithuania rarely centre young voices, they constantly interpolate them as both vulnerable and responsible. This discursive ambivalence shapes not only how young people are spoken about, but how they imagine themselves and their futures. Understanding youth as a discursive formation — produced through language, tone, and institutional framing — allows for a more critical engagement with the emotional and epistemic consequences of economic communication. It also opens space for recognising emerging counter-discourses that resist marginalisation and reconfigure the emotional terrain of economic life.

1.5. Methodological Justification: Discourse, Inference, and Inductive Design

To investigate how economic insecurity is constructed and circulated within Lithuanian public discourse, this study employs inductive qualitative content analysis — a method particularly apt for capturing latent patterns of meaning where theoretical scaffolding is underdeveloped or context-contingent (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). Unlike deductive approaches that impose predetermined categories onto data, inductive analysis enables the emergence of semantic structure directly from textual material. This is especially relevant when the object of study — discursive affect — operates at the intersection of language, social practice, and emotional valence.

Economic insecurity, as conceptualised here, is not reducible to statistical indicators or subjective impressions alone. It emerges through mediated articulation, rhetorical resonance, and symbolic circulation. Thus, any method capable of tracing its contours must attend to tone, framing, and narrative architecture — not merely to propositional content. Inductive content analysis, grounded in qualitative epistemology, allows for such interpretive sensitivity while retaining analytical rigour through systematic coding procedures (Mayring, 2014). Its bottom-up logic fits particularly well with the exploratory aim of uncovering how insecurity is affectively mobilised, moralised, or normalised in public discourse.

The choice of this method is further justified by the hybrid nature of the data — journalistic articles and Facebook posts —which differ in authorship, tone, and communicative function, yet participate in a shared discursive field. Applying a common inductive framework across these platforms enables the detection of cross-medium regularities and divergences in how insecurity is encoded. Rather than treating media and social media as analytically distinct, the study approaches them as interacting genres within a broader communicative ecosystem.

Additionally, inductive analysis foregrounds the contextual embeddedness of meaning. It allows for the identification of implicit scripts, recurring metaphors, evaluative modalities, and affective markers — discursive features that might be missed in purely semantic or frequency-based approaches. In the case of economic communication, where statements often carry layered implications (e.g., technical critique as moral judgment), such sensitivity is crucial.

The method also aligns with a constructivist epistemology: discourse does not merely reflect reality but plays a constitutive role in shaping how economic conditions are perceived, valued, and emotionally inhabited. The analysis thus attends to both manifest and latent content, tracing how linguistic forms produce epistemic positions (e.g., the expert, the layperson), emotional expectations (e.g., anxiety, resilience), and social alignments (e.g., generational distinctions, elite critique). Through open coding and constant comparison, the analytic categories were derived iteratively anchored in textual material rather than imposed from theoretical abstractions.

Furthermore, inductive qualitative analysis affords reflexive depth. Since meaning is not static but emergent through interpretation, this method requires ongoing dialogue between empirical material and theoretical insight. The researcher's analytical gaze is not positioned above the data but entangled with it — generating typologies through iterative acts of inference, contrast, and synthesis. In the present study, the process of reading and re-reading the corpus across different temporal and affective registers enabled the distillation of four coherent but distinct discursive formations, each with its own narrative tempo, tone, and implicit theory of the economy.

Finally, the methodological stance adopted here also serves a critical function. By interrogating the affective and epistemic structure of economic discourse, the study resists technocratic reductionism. Instead of accepting economic communication as a neutral relay of expertise, it foregrounds how symbolic power is exercised — what counts as knowledge, whose voice is amplified, which feelings are authorised or delegitimised. Inductive analysis, in this sense, is not just descriptive but diagnostic: it makes visible the architectures of sense-making that render insecurity legible and actionable in ways.

In short, inductive content analysis is not only methodologically sound for the study of economic discourse but is epistemologically congruent with the theoretical premise that language constructs, rather than merely communicates, economic experience. Its application in this research enables a fine-grained exploration of how insecurity becomes thinkable, feelable, and actionable through patterns of public narration.

2. Patterns of Economic Insecurity in Lithuanian Public Discourse: Findings from Media and Social Platforms

This chapter presents the empirical core of the study, outlining how economic insecurity is discursively constructed across two major channels of public communication in Lithuania: mainstream media and Facebook commentary authored by elite economic actors. Building upon the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 1, the goal here is to trace how specific linguistic patterns, rhetorical moves, and affective cues shape public understandings of economic instability. In doing so, the chapter identifies distinct formations of meaning that go beyond factual reporting or ideological bias: it uncovers discursive logics that structure how insecurity is made thinkable and felt. Attention is paid to message categories and their distribution across media genres, culminating in a typology of four discursive formations. These are interpreted as both reflections and producers of the communicative environment in which economic subjectivities — particularly those of youth — are constituted.

2.1. Research Methodology

Research Design. This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in inductive content analysis to explore how economic insecurity is constructed across different public communication platforms in Lithuania. The analytical focus lies on the identification and interpretation of message types that potentially evoke, reflect, or normalize perceptions of economic instability, particularly in ways relevant to younger audiences. Given the multifaceted nature of public discourse, the study integrates two data sources: (1) mainstream online news articles; and (2) public Facebook posts authored by prominent economic actors. These sources are not analysed in isolation, but as complementary dimensions of a broader discursive ecosystem.

Inductive content analysis is particularly suitable for investigating domains where theoretical models are insufficiently developed or where meaning must be derived directly from empirical material (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). It allows for the bottom-up construction of analytical categories and is well suited for identifying latent semantic structures in both institutional and personalised communication settings. By applying the same inductive coding framework across different content types, the study seeks to reveal common patterns as well as medium-specific articulations of economic insecurity.

This method is also especially well-suited to the emotional valence of economic discourse. Economic communication is rarely neutral; it is often infused with anxiety, reassurance, blame, and speculation. Inductive coding allows

the analyst to attend to how these affective undercurrents operate — whether through metaphor, tonal modulation, narrative pacing, or strategic omission. Such cues are critical to understanding how economic insecurity is not just represented, but felt and inhabited.

Epistemological Orientation. The research is situated within a naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which assumes that social phenomena are constructed and interpreted within authentic communicative environments. Accordingly, both media and social media texts were analysed in their original, publicly accessible formats. This naturalistic orientation enhances the ecological validity of the findings, especially in the context of studying how public messages shape affective responses and perceptions of economic risk. The analysis proceeds from the premise that discourse is not a neutral transmission of information, but an active site where social and emotional realities are constituted.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria. The empirical material for this study comprises two distinct, yet methodologically compatible datasets: (1) online news articles published in April 2025 in two of Lithuania's most prominent digital news platforms (Delfi and Lrytas); and (2) public Facebook posts published by five influential Lithuanian economic actors during the same period. These data sources were selected to reflect both institutional media discourse and individually authored public commentary, capturing different communicative registers within the same socio-economic timeframe.

A total of 78 news articles were included. Articles were selected using the following criteria: (1) publication date between April 1 and April 30, 2025; (2) relevance to economic themes, including macroeconomic conditions, taxation, public policy, employment, or international trade; (3) presence in economics, business, politics, or opinion sections; and (4) sufficient textual length to allow semantic analysis. All articles were collected manually, preserved in their original layout, and analysed in full.

The social media dataset consists of 54 Facebook posts authored by five individuals selected based on their ranking in elite and public influence indices as published by Lithuanian opinion research (e.g., Delfi). All selected individuals — economists, business leaders, and policy influencers — are active participants in national economic debate. The posts included in the analysis met the following criteria: (1) original content authored by the account owner; (2) minimum length of 50 words; (3) focus on Lithuanian economic issues, such as structural reforms, fiscal developments, competitiveness, or socio-economic risks.

Importantly, the study excluded corporate press releases, reposted third-party content, and comment threads to maintain analytical consistency. The dual-source design enables an exploration of how similar themes are articulated in both institutionalised journalistic formats and personalised social media discourse, thereby enhancing the depth and contextual breadth of the analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure. The analysis followed the principles of inductive qualitative content analysis, which is designed to enable the systematic extraction of meaning units from textual data without the application of predetermined coding categories (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). The process was identical for both datasets, allowing for methodological consistency while remaining sensitive to contextual differences in communicative form.

In the first phase, all texts — news articles and Facebook posts — were read in full to identify preliminary themes. Using open coding, segments of text were extracted based on semantic relevance to the concept of economic insecurity. These units included not only explicit references to economic threats (e.g., inflation, taxation, instability) but also latent messages pertaining to structural fragility, institutional distrust, or affective unease.

In the second phase, the emerging codes were compared, refined, and grouped into broader message categories. The constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) was applied throughout: newly identified codes were tested against previously coded segments, and category boundaries were adjusted iteratively. Once thematic saturation was reached — defined as the point at which no new categories emerged from the data — a final coding framework of 22 inductively derived categories was established. This framework was then uniformly applied across both datasets.

Each coded message was recorded with contextual metadata, including author/source, date, and publication type (media article or social media post). Coding was carried out manually using tabular matrices to preserve traceability and facilitate later cross-case comparison. Although media articles were typically longer and more structurally coherent, Facebook posts offered denser rhetorical framing and greater emotive intensity, requiring additional attention to language tone and authorial intent.

Notably, while most Facebook messages could be coded using the existing framework, some thematic emphases — such as institutional blame, strategic pessimism, or elite reflexivity — were more prominent in social media discourse than in journalism. These variations were interpreted as differences in discursive intensity rather than evidence of separate message types and were retained within the same inductive structure for purposes of comparability.

Validity and Reliability. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study followed established criteria for qualitative research validity: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria were applied consistently across both datasets, despite their differing media formats.

Credibility was addressed through a transparent inductive procedure, in which coding decisions were grounded in the manifest and latent meanings of the text. All coded segments were retained with traceable references to their original location and author. The use of naturally occurring, public discourse — rather than simulated or elicited data — further contributes to the ecological validity of the study (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

Dependability was ensured through iterative cross-comparison of codes and continuous refinement of category definitions. Throughout the process, the same 22-category inductive coding framework was applied to both traditional and social media texts. This methodological coherence across data sources enhances analytical consistency and permits cross-platform comparison without compromising conceptual clarity.

Confirmability was supported through the creation of an analytic audit trail, which documented decisions concerning code creation, revision, and category consolidation. The coding framework was developed exclusively from the empirical material, without reliance on existing theoretical taxonomies or normative assumptions. Where differences in rhetorical tone or authorial positioning were observed — particularly in social media posts — they were noted as discursive variations rather than epistemological deviations.

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the datasets, coding procedures, and category structure, allowing other researchers to judge the relevance of the findings in comparable contexts. While the results are context-specific, the analytical categories developed may be applicable to other media systems, particularly those operating under similar socio-political and economic conditions.

Analytical Contribution. The combination of inductive methodological discipline, cross-source consistency, and analytic transparency provides a strong foundation for the interpretation of how economic insecurity is constructed and communicated in Lithuanian public discourse. The method is conceptually generative, allowing the reconstruction of implicit affective grammars and discursive asymmetries that shape how insecurity is felt, circulated, and legitimised. It reveals not only what is said about the economy, but how economic experience is rendered actionable through patterned language and mediated emotion.

2.2. Results

Overview of Categories and Message Distribution. The qualitative content analysis of 132 textual units — 78 news articles and 54 Facebook posts — revealed a consistent presence of economic insecurity narratives across both institutional and personal communication channels. Using an inductively constructed 22-category coding scheme, messages were identified, grouped, and quantified based on their thematic characteristics and discursive function. Each unit of analysis (article or post) could contain multiple categories, depending on the complexity and semantic layering of the text.

Table 1 presents the aggregated distribution of message categories across all data sources. The most frequently occurring categories were *criticism of political or institutional decisions* (47 instances), *economic policy threats* (31), *global conflicts and economic consequences* (43), and *systemic rupture or epochal transformation messages* (37). Together, these categories accounted for more than 50% of all coded messages, suggesting a dominant discursive environment shaped by structural scepticism, perceived fragility, and geopolitical volatility.

While both media and Facebook content shared major themes, differences in rhetorical intensity and discursive framing were observed. Media articles tended to embed insecurity messages within journalistic or expert-driven frames, often tempered by technical explanation or institutional references. By contrast, Facebook posts more frequently exhibited emotive tone, direct critique, and normative positioning. However, the underlying message types remained stable across both sources, affirming the robustness and transferability of the inductive coding framework.

Table 1. Frequency of Economic Insecurity Message Categories across Media and Facebook Sources (Ranked by Total Frequency, N = 132)

Rank	Category	Total	Media (n=78)	Facebook (n=54)
1	Criticism of political or institutional decisions	47	26	21
2	Global conflicts and economic consequences	43	28	15
3	Economic policy threats	31	31	0
4	Systemic rupture or epochal transformation messages	37	24	13
5	Macroeconomic instability messages	35	21	14
6	Threats to individual economic well-being	27	18	9
7	Unpredictability of international decisions	20	20	0
8	State intervention narratives	21	15	6
9	Vulnerabilities of globalised interdependence	15	8	7
10	Consumer-level psychological uncertainty	9	4	5
11	Extreme economic scenario discourse	9	9	0
12	Optimistic resilience discourse	17	13	4
13	Geopolitical powerlessness	6	6	0
14	Compound threats (e.g., tax + tariff combinations)	6	6	0
15	Impact on vulnerable population groups	5	5	0
16	Structural support for small enterprises	5	5	0
17	Fragile growth messages	4	4	0
18	Conditional optimism about growth	4	4	0
19	Public sector adaptation and planning efforts	4	4	0
20	Precarity within positive performance contexts	3	3	0
21	Dual narratives: insecurity and opportunity	3	3	0
22	Institutional stabilisation efforts	3	3	0

The table shows that while certain categories — such as *economic policy threats* and *extreme scenario discourse* — are more prominent in news media, others — particularly *criticism of institutional decisions* and *consumer-level uncertainty* — gain greater salience in social media posts. Notably, *systemic rupture messages* appear prominently in both domains, suggesting a shared perception of long-term instability across elite commentary and institutional communication alike.

Description of Categories and Illustrative Messages. The most frequently observed category across both media and Facebook content was criticism of political or institutional decisions. This category encompassed explicit statements questioning the competence, coherence, or accountability of public institutions and decision-makers. While media sources typically conveyed such criticism through expert quotation or indirect framing, Facebook posts often contained direct, emotionally charged language, reflecting personal frustration or normative condemnation. In both contexts, the central theme was institutional inadequacy in addressing complex economic challenges. One Facebook author noted that "*the state is reacting with improvisation, not strategy*," warning that election cycles were eclipsing long-term economic thinking (V.J., Facebook). A media article similarly described recent reforms as "*conceptually fragmented, technically ungrounded, and socially tone-deaf*," drawing on business leaders' responses to policy drafts (R.D., media). Several texts raised concerns about government priorities, suggesting that industrial development and structural investment were being neglected in favour of short-term political optics. For example, one commentary lamented that "*budgetary allocations reflect narrative control rather than structural needs*" (D.A., Facebook), reinforcing the broader sentiment that political agendas may be destabilising rather than safeguarding economic fundamentals.

The second most frequent category – *global conflicts and economic consequences* – captured messages that positioned Lithuania within a volatile international environment shaped by power asymmetries, disrupted trade regimes, and contested geopolitical alignments. In this category, threats were predominantly external and systemic. Media articles often referenced international news sources or expert assessments, as in one report that quoted a German economist stating that *"the EU is increasingly vulnerable to price-setting by non-democratic exporters"* (anonymous, media). Facebook dis-

course similarly reflected global concern but was often infused with interpretive commentary. One author warned that "*geopolitical fragmentation is no longer a risk – it is the current baseline*," arguing that policy inertia in response to shifting alliances was "*economically suicidal*" (N.M., Facebook). Several posts drew attention to supply chain dependency and energy insecurity, suggesting that "*economic sovereignty has become a geopolitical concept*" (R.V., Facebook). Across both sources, this category revealed a discourse of constrained agency, wherein national economic health appeared contingent on decisions and forces beyond domestic influence.

The third category – *economic policy threats* – comprised messages identifying domestic fiscal, monetary, or regulatory decisions as direct contributors to economic instability. These messages framed government action not as a neutral technical response, but as an endogenous risk factor. Predominantly found in media texts, this category often included institutional or sectoral stakeholder criticism. One piece noted that "*the proposed tax restructuring would introduce volatility into SME planning cycles*," echoing concerns expressed by business associations (A.P., media). Other articles discussed potential investor retreat and labour market distortion, citing fears that "*a punitive redistribution model will disincentivise productive capital*" (M.D., media). Although rare in Facebook posts, the discourse was echoed in several business leaders' comments, indirectly referencing "*policy noise that undercuts long-term competitiveness*" (V.A.B., Facebook). These messages were often couched in systemic language, with terms such as "*reform failure*," "*regulatory drift*," and "*fiscal incoherence*" appearing across both platforms. The unifying element in this category was the portrayal of national economic policy not as a stabilising force but as a possible destabiliser.

The fourth category – *systemic rupture or epochal transformation messages* – referred to statements depicting the current economic context as indicative of deep structural shifts, irreversible transitions, or the end of a particular development paradigm. These messages did not focus on specific events or decisions but portrayed the present moment as part of a longer arc of decline or transformation. One Facebook post declared that "*we are not in a crisis – we are in a transition without a defined model*," asserting that Lithuania's economic path had reached a historical fork (V.J., Facebook). Similarly, a media opinion piece referred to "*the exhaustion of the export-led growth model*" and warned that "*without strategic reinvention, stagnation will become the norm*" (R.D., media). Many such messages used language associated with thresholds and tipping points — e.g., "*irreversible*," "*critical juncture*," "*new world order*." While some posts speculated on alternative economic models or policy paradigms, the overarching narrative was one of rupture: a recognition that the post-2004 trajectory of convergence and integration was no longer sustainable under current geopolitical and demographic pressures.

The fifth category – *macroeconomic instability messages* – encompassed discourse pointing to structural economic fragility, such as persistent inflation, low productivity, stagnating GDP growth, or high inequality. Unlike short-term turbulence, these messages presented instability as a chronic condition rather than a temporary fluctuation. Media texts frequently drew on economic data or institutional reports, with one analysis noting that "*wage increases in nominal terms are offset by a simultaneous decline in purchasing power*," particularly in lower-income brackets (N.M., media). Facebook authors echoed these concerns, often adopting a more interpretive tone. One post observed that "*growth exists only on paper – people feel the strain in supermarkets and utility bills*," capturing the disconnect between official indicators and lived experiences (D.A., Facebook). The discourse in this category was not overtly alarmist but conveyed a sense of slow erosion: messages stressed that while no acute crisis was occurring, the long-term trajectory was unsustainable without systemic intervention.

The sixth category – *threats to individual economic well-being* – focused on personal or household-level insecurity, such as income stagnation, employment volatility, reduced consumer confidence, or the inaccessibility of housing. These messages frequently served to link abstract economic dynamics to tangible everyday consequences. One Facebook author pointedly asked, "*How is it possible that our GDP has grown, but young families cannot afford even a basic apartment*?" (A.A., Facebook). In the media, similar narratives were woven through interviews and expert commentary, such as a report indicating that "growing energy costs have reversed progress in reducing material deprivation" (anonymous, media). A recurring theme in this category was intergenerational inequity: younger individuals were implicitly portrayed as particularly exposed to long-term economic risk, even when not directly addressed. Several messages referred to migration, postponed family planning, and financial exhaustion as indirect outcomes of macroeconomic dysfunction, thereby linking personal stressors to structural economic conditions.

The seventh category – *state intervention narratives* – included both affirmations and critiques of governmental efforts to mitigate economic risk. While the presence of state-led responses was acknowledged across both media and Facebook content, the interpretation of their effectiveness varied widely. Some messages framed intervention positively, such as the remark that "*targeted investment in export-supporting sectors can act as an economic buffer*" (R.V., Facebook). Others were more sceptical, describing such measures as "*reactionary instruments that address symptoms but not causes*" (M.D., Facebook). In several cases, particularly in media reporting, state measures were portrayed as necessary but insufficient. One article reported that "*emergency subsidies temporarily slowed layoffs in the manufacturing sector, but structural com-*

petitiveness remains unresolved" (anonymous, media). This category revealed a layered discourse: intervention was often demanded and simultaneously doubted, producing a narrative oscillating between expectation and disappointment. Importantly, this ambivalence differed in tone: media retained analytic detachment, while social media often expressed direct frustration or scepticism.

The eighth category – *unpredictability of international decisions* – was exclusive to media content and referred to perceived volatility in the global political and economic landscape, particularly among dominant states and supranational actors. These messages emphasised the challenges faced by small economies in responding to inconsistent or rapidly changing foreign policy stances, trade regimes, or regulatory frameworks. One news report described how "*the sudden imposition of sector-specific tariffs by a major trade partner created a climate of strategic paralysis among exporters*" (anonymous, media). Another article cited diplomatic sources warning that "*uncertainty in EU regulatory alignment may disrupt capital flows and investor confidence*" (anonymous, media). The tone in this category was cautious yet fatalistic, suggesting that external developments were both opaque and beyond domestic control. This construction of unpredictability served to reinforce the perception of limited national agency, positioning Lithuania as a recipient of external shocks rather than an autonomous economic actor.

The ninth category – *vulnerabilities of globalised interdependence* – referred to messages that framed Lithuania's economic position as precariously tied to international systems, especially global value chains, export markets, and external investment flows. Unlike the broader geopolitical category, this discourse emphasised economic over political dependencies. Authors often warned that "our integration into global supply systems brings efficiency, but also exposure," with one Facebook post stressing that "*a disruption in foreign demand instantly translates into local contraction*" (V.J., Facebook). In the media, these concerns appeared in commentary describing how "*overreliance on low-value-added exports and geographically narrow markets renders our economy highly sensitive to global sentiment shifts*" (anonymous, media). The underlying argument in this category was not anti-globalist but rather diagnostic: economic openness was portrayed as double-edged — beneficial in periods of growth, but risk-enhancing in times of instability.

The tenth category – *consumer-level psychological uncertainty* – included messages describing the affective or behavioural consequences of perceived economic risk, such as consumer pessimism, delayed purchases, or generalised anxiety. These messages often relied on survey data or anecdotal indicators, for instance citing "*a marked decline in durable goods purchases as households anticipate further price rises*" (anonymous, media). On Facebook, one author remarked that "*people have stopped believing in macro forecasts – they believe their grocery receipts*" (N.M., Facebook), encapsulating the emotional dissonance between institutional communication and lived experience. Another post observed that "y*oung adults today assume instability as a norm – it shapes how they study, work, and save*" (M.D., Facebook). These narratives linked macroeconomic signalling with micro-level behavioural change, suggesting that insecurity functions not only materially but also cognitively, influencing perception and long-term planning capacity.

The eleventh category – *optimistic resilience discourse* – captured messages that resisted dominant insecurity narratives by emphasising adaptive capacity, institutional competence, or strategic opportunity. These messages were comparatively rare, especially on social media, but served as discursive counterpoints. One Facebook post argued that "*crisis cycles are not a pathology – they are a precondition for intelligent economic reform*," positioning volatility as a potential stimulus for innovation (R.V., Facebook). Media texts more often embedded such messages in expert commentary, noting that "*EU structural instruments and long-term export orientation provide Lithuania with a macro-buffer unavailable to many emerging economies*" (anonymous, media). While the tone in this category was more neutral or hopeful, such messages often came with caveats, acknowledging uncertainty but emphasising agency. They also tended to invoke external validation — such as international rankings, investor sentiment, or comparative performance — to frame resilience as credible and not merely rhetorical.

The twelfth category – *extreme economic scenario discourse* – involved high-stakes projections or warnings about future collapse, systemic breakdown, or radical disruption. These messages employed a heightened rhetorical register, often invoking irreversible consequences. Media articles sometimes quoted dramatic estimates from think tanks or international institutions, such as "*by 2050, climate-driven economic losses could displace one-third of Europe's labour force*" (anonymous, media). One editorial warned that "*the convergence model is dying, and the alternatives are either managed decline or failed-state drift*" (anonymous, media). Although such messages were infrequent, they were discursively powerful: their language shifted from probability to inevitability, from risk to threat. Importantly, these narratives did not always offer concrete solutions—instead, they functioned as alarms, markers of epistemic rupture that signalled a boundary beyond which normal politics or economics might not apply.

The thirteenth category – *impact on vulnerable population groups* – included references to the differentiated consequences of economic change, particularly on socially or demographically disadvantaged groups. While this category was less frequently invoked across the dataset, its significance lay in its normative framing. Messages emphasised that macro-level reforms or global shocks were not equally distributed in their impact. One media commentary noted that

"*price hikes in utilities and food disproportionately affect pensioners and low-income households, who allocate a greater share of their budget to essentials*" (anonymous, media). Another article raised concerns that rural areas were "*structurally marginalised in both economic opportunity and state attention*," compounding existing inequalities (anonymous, media). Although explicit age-based segmentation was rare, several messages implicitly connected these vulnerabilities to young people, particularly in the context of housing affordability and labour market precarity. By foregrounding distributional effects, this category added a layer of social critique to otherwise structural or institutional narratives.

The fourteenth category – *state intervention narratives* – comprised messages describing governmental responses to economic instability, ranging from direct fiscal support to regulatory reform. Unlike broader institutional criticism, this category specifically assessed the logic, design, or sufficiency of intervention mechanisms. In some instances, the tone was cautiously optimistic. One media source stated that "*targeted grant mechanisms helped buffer SME contraction during the first quarter*" (anonymous, media), while a Facebook post described subsidy schemes as "*timely and technically appropriate, though limited in scope*" (R.V., Facebook). However, more frequently, authors expressed scepticism. A recurring argument was that interventions were reactive rather than anticipatory, addressing symptoms rather than causes. One post remarked that "*every fiscal patch shows we lack an economic architecture that anticipates shock*" (M.D., Facebook). This framing suggested not that intervention was unwelcome, but that its episodic nature exposed deeper weaknesses in economic governance.

The fifteenth category – *compound threats (e.g., tax + tariff combinations)* – referred to messages in which multiple stressors were described as converging simultaneously, creating non-linear or magnified risks. Though not frequent, these narratives were conceptually powerful in their depiction of intersecting vulnerabilities. One article detailed how "*tax reform coincided with reduced export demand, compounding fiscal stress across the logistics sector*" (anonymous, media). Another commentary warned that "*concurrent regulatory tightening and monetary contraction could trigger liquidity collapse among second-tier manufacturers*" (anonymous, media). The rhetorical structure of these messages was cumulative: each individual factor may have been manageable, but their combination was framed as overwhelming. The implicit message was one of cascading risk — a condition where systems under strain become progressively less resilient as shocks accumulate.

The sixteenth category – *optimistic resilience discourse* – although already discussed earlier (as 11th most frequent), deserves further unpacking here in relation to selective economic optimism. A small subset of posts and articles framed adversity as an opportunity for strategic repositioning. These messages often invoked national or sectoral advantages, such as digital infrastructure, biotech capacity, or geopolitical positioning. One Facebook post stated that "*if we align policy and capital, Lithuania can become a regional leader in automation and AI*" (V.A.B., Facebook). Another media opinion claimed that "*while Europe is bracing for stagflation, Lithuania retains unique flexibility due to its compact economy and institutional agility*" (anonymous, media). Importantly, even these optimistic narratives were typically conditional, hedging their tone with references to policy coherence, global stability, or leadership quality. Rather than refuting insecurity, they reframed it as a crucible for transformation.

The seventeenth category – *compound threats* – overlaps conceptually with systemic and policy-focused messages, but is distinguished by its emphasis on interaction effects. These messages framed economic risks as non-isolated: taxes, inflation, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical tension were depicted as interacting variables rather than discrete phenomena. One media article described how "*increased excise taxes coincided with European sanctions on Chinese components, leaving local producers exposed from both ends*" (anonymous, media). In social media, similar arguments were condensed into phrases such as "*double pressure points*" or "*fiscal one-two punches*" (A.P., Facebook). The rhetorical strategy in this category was accumulative and sequential, reinforcing the perception that even manageable shocks could become destabilising when layered.

The eighteenth category – *public sector adaptation and planning efforts* – included statements highlighting strategic foresight, reform blueprints, or institutional learning. These were typically found in policy-oriented media reporting and focused on planned responses rather than reactive measures. One article noted that "*the Ministry of Economy has initiated sectoral scenario modelling for three macro-risk trajectories through 2030*" (anonymous, media), positioning planning as an asset in uncertainty. Unlike the state intervention category, which often conveyed dissatisfaction, this category presented institutions as capable of complexity-sensitive thinking. However, such messages were infrequent and often buried in specialist coverage, which may have limited their visibility and discursive influence.

The nineteenth category – *consumer-level psychological uncertainty* – dealt not with objective hardship but with subjective perceptions of insecurity. This form of uncertainty was often captured through survey references or anecdotal evidence suggesting deteriorating trust. For instance, a Facebook post remarked that "*consumer surveys are no longer just economic metrics—they're proxies for confidence in institutions*" (N.M., Facebook). Another observed that "*households are adjusting not only spending but also expectations — resilience becomes resignation*" (M.D., Facebook). Unlike material insecurity, which could be measured via inflation or income, these messages described ambient unease and its influence on behavioural patterns, including saving, borrowing, or mobility.

The twentieth category – *institutional stabilisation efforts* – included depictions of supranational or macroeconomic actors — such as the EU, ECB, or IMF — undertaking actions intended to preserve economic stability. These messages were typically embedded in media reporting on regulatory or monetary policy and framed as buffers against uncertainty. One article explained that "*the ECB's forward guidance policy is designed to anchor inflation expectations and restore interbank trust*" (anonymous, media). Such messages carried a tone of technocratic confidence, often contrasted with domestic political ambiguity. Notably, these narratives positioned institutions as rational actors acting in accordance with long-term modelling and policy tools.

The twenty-first category – *dual narratives: insecurity and opportunity* – captured the tension between threat and strategic repositioning. These messages did not resolve insecurity but framed it as a transitional moment. For example, one media piece observed that "*Lithuania's energy import dependence is a vulnerability, but it may accelerate investment into renewables*" (anonymous, media). A Facebook post noted that "*our export decline is painful, but it creates pressure to diversify away from low-margin sectors*" (V.J., Facebook). Such statements functioned as hybrid narratives: acknowledging instability while embedding it in a logic of transformation. They offered neither optimism nor fatalism, but a conditional possibility of renewal.

The final category – *precarity within positive performance contexts* – included messages that acknowledged favourable macroeconomic indicators, while simultaneously highlighting latent risks. These were nuanced critiques of overly celebratory narratives. For instance, one article stated that "*while GDP grew by 2.4%, household debt and labour attrition also increased*" (anonymous, media), implicitly challenging the sufficiency of aggregate metrics. Another message warned that "*headline growth masks sectoral contraction and wage compression*," inviting a more layered interpretation of success (anonymous, media). These narratives served as correctives, tempering linear progress stories with cautionary detail.

Dominant Message Types and Discursive Patterns. The analysis of message categories across both media articles and Facebook posts revealed not only recurrent thematic content, but also deeper discursive patterns — persistent rhetorical structures that organize how economic insecurity is represented, contextualized, and morally evaluated. These patterns do not emerge from isolated categories, but rather from their semantic co-occurrence and the narrative logic that binds them. Below, we elaborate on four principal discursive formations, each comprising multiple categories and communicative strategies. These patterns operate not only descriptively (what is happening), but also prescriptively (what should be feared, accepted, resisted, or hoped for), thus contributing to the affective construction of economic meaning.

Structural Delegitimation and Political Blame. This pattern brings together categories such as *criticism of political or institutional decisions*, *economic policy threats*, *compound threats*, and *precarity within positive performance contexts*. It is defined by a logic of delegitimation, in which the state is not merely described as ineffective, but as an active contributor to insecurity. Unlike technocratic critique, these messages ascribe agency and responsibility to decision-makers, often accusing them of short-sightedness, political opportunism, or ideological rigidity.

This pattern was most visible in Facebook posts, where authors employed evaluative language and positional framing. For example, one commentator wrote: "*While other countries plan, we improvise between elections*," presenting a causal link between democratic processes and economic instability (V.J., Facebook). Similarly, business-sector commentary in media framed fiscal reform as a destabilising factor: "*Redistributive reforms are being advanced without any evidence of productive return*" (A.P., media). The rhetorical form often took the shape of contrast or contradiction—juxtaposing policy intent with adverse consequences, as in: "*This reform was meant to reduce inequality; it is producing labour market distortion*" (D.A., Facebook).

Importantly, this discourse did not merely convey dissatisfaction but produced a narrative of institutional fragility. Political actors were not seen as neutral managers of complexity, but as misaligned with economic rationality. This delegitimation did not extend to all institutions uniformly — central banks and international bodies were often spared — but national political elites were repeatedly positioned as destabilising agents within an already precarious system.

Systemic Exposure and Contingent Sovereignty. A second pattern, found across categories such as *global conflicts and economic consequences*, *vulnerabilities of globalised interdependence*, *unpredictability of international decisions*, and *systemic rupture messages*, revolves around a logic of exposure. It portrays Lithuania — and small economies more generally — as structurally vulnerable due to their embeddedness in volatile global networks. Here, insecurity arises not from internal mismanagement but from asymmetric power relations and cascading global risks.

This discourse was prevalent in both datasets, though framed differently: media tended to describe such exposure analytically, while Facebook posts expressed it with strategic fatalism. For example, one author stated: "*Lithuania does not participate in rule-making — it absorbs consequences*," evoking the country's peripheral position in global governance (R.V., Facebook). Media texts echoed this with statements such as: "*The collapse of German industrial orders could ripple into the Baltics within weeks*," establishing a causality chain beyond national control (anonymous, media).

The emotional texture of this pattern was one of constrained agency: threats were recognised as real, urgent, and often unavoidable. Key rhetorical motifs included "*ripple effects*," "*external shocks*," and "*geopolitical fragmentation*." The

language moved between metaphor (waves, cracks, tremors) and strategic vocabulary (dependencies, spillovers, exposure). The discursive outcome was an implicit normalisation of national fragility: the more systemic the threat, the less responsibility was ascribed to domestic actors.

Yet, this pattern also contained latent political functions. By emphasising external causality, these messages reframed responsibility — not to deny risk, but to shift blame. In doing so, they tacitly demanded new forms of national preparedness, diversification, or alliance-building, without directly stating political prescriptions.

Affective Ambivalence and Unresolved Uncertainty. The third dominant discursive pattern integrates categories such as *macroeconomic instability*, *threats to individual well-being*, *consumer-level psychological uncertainty*, and *dual narratives*. It is marked by a tonal ambivalence — neither outright crisis nor optimism, but a persistent emotional oscillation between warning and accommodation. These messages frequently describe uncertainty not just as a macroeconomic condition, but as a pervasive effect that shapes everyday behaviour and long-term planning.

In Facebook posts, this uncertainty was often framed experientially. One post read: "*Planning for more than six months ahead feels naïve — stability has become a memory*" (N.M., Facebook). In media, the language was more analytical, citing surveys or reports that showed "*consumer expectations remain below pre-pandemic levels despite nominal growth*" (anonymous, media). The structure of these messages oscillated between acknowledging positive indicators (e.g., real wage growth, export performance) and warning of hidden or future risks (e.g., inflation volatility, productivity decline).

The function of this discourse was not merely to inform, but to describe a subjective orientation toward the future. Uncertainty was not framed as a temporary deficit in information, but as a durable condition of post-crisis economies. It conditioned how individuals made decisions about consumption, mobility, family, or employment. Notably, this affective discourse was often age-neutral in language but youth-relevant in implication — suggesting, for instance, that property acquisition or career formation were postponed not for lack of resources, but for lack of confidence.

This discursive pattern also challenged the epistemic authority of official economic language. Multiple messages suggested that macro indicators failed to capture felt reality: "*Inflation may be falling, but the price of coffee and rent hasn't changed*," remarked one Facebook user (D.A., Facebook). In doing so, the pattern contributed to an erosion of communicative trust, especially among those less equipped to interpret economic abstractions.

Strategic Adaptation and Conditional Resilience. The final pattern encompassed categories such as *state intervention*, *institutional stabilisation*, *optimistic resilience*, and *public sector planning*. Unlike the previous three, this discourse framed insecurity as manageable under specific conditions, invoking policy competence, institutional foresight, or strategic alignment as counterweights to volatility.

These messages were far less frequent and typically embedded within longer commentaries. One example read: "*We cannot control global cycles, but we can prepare buffers through better fiscal targeting and export diversification*" (R.V., Facebook). Media articles echoed this view by stating that "*Lithuania's EU integration provides stability channels unavailable to non-member states*" (anonymous, media). Rather than denying insecurity, these messages repositioned it — from a threat to be feared to a challenge to be addressed.

Importantly, this discourse did not idealise the present but situated hope in institutions, strategy, or innovation. When successful, it served as a rhetorical pivot: transitioning from problem diagnosis to solution framing. However, such messages were often cautious in tone, hedged with conditions or temporal delays. Words like "*if*," "*with sufficient alignment*," or "*provided structural reform continues*" were common qualifiers.

While rarer, this discursive pattern is analytically significant because it preserves agency. In a communicative environment saturated with critique, exposure, and pessimism, these messages kept open the possibility of intentional intervention, however fragile. They also offered a language for forward-looking discourse that did not rely on denial, but on deliberation.

Summary of Findings. The analysis of 132 publicly available texts — 78 from online news outlets and 54 from public Facebook posts — revealed a dense and thematically consistent discourse of economic insecurity, marked by a convergence of structural, institutional, and affective dimensions. Using an inductive coding framework consisting of 22 message categories, the study identified four dominant discursive patterns that structure how economic instability is framed and made meaningful in public communication. These patterns — *structural delegitimation and political blame*, *systemic exposure and contingent sovereignty*, *affective ambivalence and unresolved uncertainty*, and *strategic adaptation and conditional resilience* — function not merely as thematic clusters, but as rhetorical architectures that shape how insecurity is perceived, distributed, and politicised.

The findings demonstrate that insecurity is rarely articulated as a singular crisis but is instead constructed through a layered vocabulary of uncertainty, imbalance, dependency, and blame. Across both media and Facebook content, insecurity is naturalised through repeated references to institutional inadequacy, geopolitical volatility, economic mismatch, and behavioural withdrawal. Structural critique (e.g., of fiscal reform or industrial policy) frequently coexists with macro-level threat narratives, producing a hybrid discourse in which internal and external causes of instability are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing.

While media articles tended to frame insecurity within institutional registers — quoting experts, referencing statistics, and embedding critique within analytic scaffolding — Facebook posts more often engaged in reflexive, value-laden commentary. These posts frequently attributed responsibility, questioned official narratives, or proposed alternative framings. Nevertheless, the message categories themselves remained largely stable across both platforms, confirming the robustness of the inductively derived typology and highlighting the cross-platform durability of key insecurity themes.

Notably, while the research was informed by concerns about young people's experience of economic risk, explicit age-based framing was rare. However, many messages — particularly those relating to housing, employment precarity, migration, or consumer uncertainty — implicitly addressed youth-relevant dimensions of insecurity. This suggests that even in the absence of explicit generational targeting, public discourse conveys affective and material signals likely to resonate with younger audiences navigating formative life transitions.

Finally, although pockets of strategic optimism and institutional resilience were present, they were structurally subordinated to dominant patterns of disruption, criticism, and fatalism. This asymmetry raises important questions about the communicative ecology of economic debate and its potential to not only reflect but also reproduce public perceptions of fragility, distrust, and constrained futures.

3. Evaluating the Validity of Discursive Patterns on Youth Economic Insecurity

Understanding economic insecurity requires more than statistical measurement — it demands attentiveness to the narratives through which such insecurity is framed, felt, and forecasted. Media discourse is not merely descriptive; it is constitutive. For youth in particular — who are simultaneously entering labour markets, forming households, and shaping political outlooks — discursive environments profoundly influence economic orientation and behavioural horizons. This section analyses four dominant discursive patterns that shape perceptions of economic risk among young people in Lithuania. Each of these patterns — structural delegitimation, systemic exposure, affective ambivalence, and conditional resilience—mobilises specific rhetorical logics and emotional registers, producing divergent effects on agency, trust, and long-term planning. By juxtaposing these discourses with empirical macroeconomic and institutional data, we assess not only the representational accuracy of the messages but their psychological and economic traction. The aim is not to judge media accuracy in a binary fashion, but to examine how discursive constructions of risk interface with institutional reality — and what this means for youth economic security.

Structural Delegitimation and Political Blame. This discourse architecture — rhetorically charged and dominant in frequency — interweaves four narrative strands: criticism of political or institutional decisions, economic policy threats, compound threats, and precarity within ostensibly successful macroeconomic contexts. At its core lies a mechanism of delegitimation: not merely stating institutional inefficiency but attributing agency and culpability to political elites. In this framing, the state is not failing by accident — it is actively mismanaging, improvising, or cynically exploiting economic policy for short-term political aims.

This framing is saturated with evaluative and affective language. In Facebook posts: "*While other countries plan, we improvise between elections*" (V.J., Facebook); "*The tax system changes with emotions, not analysis*" (D.A., Facebook); "*Institutions became political weapons*" (R.K., Facebook). Media discourse mirrors this tone, albeit more cautiously: "*Redistributive reforms are being advanced without any evidence of productive return*" (Lrytas); "*There is no strategy, just reaction*" (Lrytas).

These messages cultivate a sense of strategic myopia: reforms appear driven less by rational deliberation and more by electoral calculus. Such temporal volatility does not merely signal dysfunction — it reshapes how young people imagine their own economic futures. A political system perceived as improvisational destabilizes not just budgets or markets, but the very horizon of personal planning. Evidence from the European Youth Forum (2023) and Eurofound (2022) shows that perceived policy inconsistency correlates with lower youth trust in democratic institutions and reduced willingness to invest in local futures (e.g., housing, entrepreneurship).

Is this rhetoric empirically justified? Lithuania does exhibit signs of institutional instability in fiscal policy. The IMF (2023) Country Report notes that Lithuania has among the highest rates of year-on-year tax code amendments in the EU, complicating long-term planning. While the OECD (2024) does not report direct weaknesses in regulatory assessment, it does note that Lithuania's long-term growth prospects are hindered by low productivity gains and limited structural reform momentum. Such volatility generates real economic costs: World Bank (2022) estimates that policy uncertainty can reduce private investment by up to 12% over a 3-year horizon in middle-income economies.

Yet beneath the turbulence of discourse, Lithuania's macroeconomic chassis appears resilient. The country has maintained prudent fiscal discipline: public debt remains below 40% of GDP (European Commission, 2025), and structural deficit levels remain aligned with Stability and Growth Pact thresholds — suggesting that institutional capacity has not eroded to the extent portrayed in the discursive foreground. Moreover, Lithuania ranks above the EU median on the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index (2024), and the Bank of Lithuania continues to enjoy high institutional credibility among market participants (European Investment Bank, 2024).

Therefore, while the media narrative reflects real risks associated with procedural and regulatory volatility, it also tends to conflate policy communication breakdowns with macro-level dysfunction. This distinction is crucial for scientific objectivity: the primary threats identified are short-term and sector-specific, not system-wide collapses.

The emotional traction of these narratives arises not from their empirical precision, but from how they compress temporal risk into an immediate psychological landscape. When reforms are portrayed as erratic, unmoored from analysis, or driven by narrow interests, young people receive a deeper message: the future is not merely uncertain — it is structurally inaccessible. This sentiment resonates with Eurobarometer (2024) findings, where Lithuania ranks among the most pessimistic EU countries regarding the Union's future, with only a small fraction expressing strong optimism.

The "compound threat" motif — where national policy unpredictability is overlaid with exogenous shocks (inflation, energy, war) — intensifies this insecurity. Nonetheless, Lithuanian SMEs and labour markets have shown moderate resilience, partly due to EU stabilization mechanisms and targeted transfers (European Commission, 2025).

Based on the empirical evidence reviewed above, this discursive pattern can be considered partially valid. It is analytically sound in identifying procedural unpredictability as a threat to youth economic agency. However, it overstates systemic fragility and under-recognizes stabilizing mechanisms embedded in EU membership and institutional independence. The discourse is not incorrect, but selectively amplifies indicators of weakness while omitting institutional buffers and macroprudential strengths.

Systemic Exposure and Contingent Sovereignty. This discursive pattern operates under the grammar of global asymmetry. Unlike the domestically oriented logics of institutional critique, here insecurity is cast as an imported condition — an inevitable consequence of Lithuania's structural entanglement in global interdependencies. Messages collected under this pattern cluster around four subcategories: global conflict spillovers, the fragility of interdependence, unpredictability in international decision-making, and the narrative of systemic rupture.

In this discursive frame, Lithuania is not a policymaker but a policy-taker. Its position within the global system is not merely peripheral in terms of influence, but ontologically exposed. This reframes sovereignty itself: not as a capacity to decide, but as a capacity to absorb and adapt. The message is less about agency than about asymmetry — where the consequences of global decisions, over which Lithuania has little said, reverberate with full force domestically. A Facebook user encapsulates this logic with bitter brevity: "*Lithuania does not participate in rule-making — it absorbs consequences*" (R.V., Facebook). This is not a call to nationalism or withdrawal; rather, it expresses a political-economic fatalism: vulnerability is endogenous to globalization when viewed from the periphery.

Media texts mirror this logic, albeit through more structured causal chains. One report observed: "*The collapse of German industrial orders could ripple into the Baltics within weeks*" (Lrytas), suggesting a macroeconomic domino effect. Terms like "*external shock*," "*geopolitical tremors*," and "*fragmented supply chains*" circulate as linguistic proxies for deeper structural dependencies. This is the language not of alarmism, but of exposure — an affective orientation that blends analytical realism with strategic resignation.

From a youth perspective, this discourse does more than communicate structural risk — it subtly reorganizes economic subjectivity. Traditional assumptions about the state as a risk-mitigating actor dissolve under this lens. If volatility is transnational and systemic, then resilience is not about planning but about improvisation. Young people, socialized into market democracies that promise merit-based advancement, are instead confronted with a moral economy of permanent readiness: adapt quickly, remain mobile, expect rupture. This reframing weakens the normative force of long-term planning — savings, mortgages, career ladders — rendering such commitments fragile or even naïve.

Is this exposure narrative empirically justified? On some levels, yes. Lithuania's economic openness is among the highest in the EU: exports accounted for over 80% of GDP in 2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Energy dependency remains a strategic vulnerability, especially in the context of regional instability. While Lithuania successfully diversified away from Russian gas after 2022, new supply chains remain price-sensitive and geopolitically brittle (IEA, 2023).

Moreover, the post-2022 global context is one of compound volatility: climate disruptions, war in Ukraine, monetary tightening cycles in core economies. Lithuania's susceptibility to external inflationary pressures is well-documented (ECB, 2024), and the Baltic States have among the highest passthrough rates from import prices to domestic CPI in the euro area (IMF, 2024).

Yet, the exposure narrative often obscures countervailing forces. EU-level stabilization mechanisms — NextGenerationEU, SURE, REPowerEU — have provided buffers that mitigate external risks, especially for youth-facing sectors (education, employment, mobility). The European Commission (2025) notes that Lithuania has among the highest youth participation rates in cross-border education and training programmes, which enhance labour market adaptability.

The exposure discourse also risks normalizing inaction — not just among policymakers, but within the broader cultural imaginary. If systemic fragility is presumed, then mitigation becomes a matter of adaptation rather than structural reform. However, this overlooks the active institutional strategies Lithuania has undertaken. Its sovereign risk premium remains low, suggesting confidence among international investors. Fiscal parameters are not only stable but strategically

managed to preserve shock absorption capacity. Labour market institutions, too, have demonstrated agility — particularly in upskilling and youth employment initiatives — comparing favourably to other small open economies (EIB, 2024).

In sum, this discourse of systemic exposure is partially valid but structurally selective. It captures real dependencies and macro-volatility yet underemphasizes institutional buffers and the strategic latitude available to a small EU state. The fatalism embedded in such messages may erode youth confidence not because risks are fabricated, but because resilience is narratively excluded.

Affective Ambivalence and Unresolved Uncertainty. If structural blame and systemic exposure frame insecurity as externally imposed, this third discursive pattern turns inward — toward the affective landscape of the individual. Ambivalence, not alarm, is its dominant register. Rather than assert crisis or resolution, it narrates instability as an *emotional habitus*: a learned disposition of navigating the future without reliable coordinates.

Discursive data cluster around four thematic zones: macroeconomic volatility, subjective risk perception, dissonance between indicators and lived experience, and temporal short-circuiting. Together, these form a mood of strategic hesitation — where long-term planning is perpetually deferred, not necessarily due to resource scarcity, but due to anticipatory doubt.

A Facebook user distils this sensibility with striking clarity: "*Planning for more than six months ahead feels naive stability has become a memory*" (N.M., Facebook). Here, temporal scope is not just shortened; it is emotionally recalibrated. The past is remembered as stable, the present as unstable, and the future as unknowable. This structure of feeling pervades how individuals engage with markets, work, and family. Risk is no longer an exceptional event, but a quotidian companion.

Media discourse reflects this mood in a more technocratic idiom. *Reports observe, for instance, that "consumer expectations remain below pre-pandemic levels despite nominal growth"* (Delfi, media). This gap — between indicator recovery and behavioural restraint — marks the core of affective ambivalence. It is not that individuals reject statistics; rather, they experience statistics as *insufficient* to explain their reality.

This gap has epistemic implications that extend beyond technical misalignment. It erodes what Jürgen Habermas might call communicative rationality — the shared interpretive frameworks that allow public meaning-making through institutional language. When macro indicators repeatedly fail to resonate with lived experience, they lose their capacity to organize consensus or inform rational expectations. Particularly for youth, whose economic imaginaries are still information, this can produce more than just scepticism — it can engender a semi-permanent state of cognitive dissonance. Over time, this breeds a quiet but corrosive disengagement from official discourse: not outright rejection, but hermeneutic fatigue — a learned mistrust in the promise that the future will resemble the curve of a trendline.

Empirically, there is support for these sentiments. While headline inflation declined across 2023–2024 (ECB, 2024), core goods and services in urban areas — particularly housing, food, and transport — remained elevated. Eurostat data (2024) show that Lithuania's housing cost overburden rate for youth (aged 15–29) remains among the highest in the EU. Simultaneously, surveys conducted by Eurofound (2023) indicate that Lithuanian youth report one of the lowest levels of financial confidence in the euro area, despite above-average employment rates.

This creates an epistemic tension: official macro-narratives suggest stabilization, yet experiential metrics signal something closer to stasis. Wage growth without purchasing power, employment without security, investment without trust — these juxtapositions form the cognitive dissonance at the heart of this pattern. It is not a crisis in outcomes, but in *interpretability* — the ability to translate technical signals into existential bearings. In this sense, economic governance faces a legitimacy challenge not due to error, but due to disconnection. What is needed is not merely better data, but a richer hermeneutics of policy — one that accounts for perception, memory, and temporal disposition as real economic forces.

Importantly, the discursive tone is not oppositional, but unresolved. It does not demand structural change nor deny improvements. It wavers — between accommodation and anxiety. Such ambivalence is not apathy; it is a rational effect in a system whose signals are multivocal. For youth navigating post-pandemic, post-inflation economies, this oscillation is not a weakness of will, but a form of resilience — a conditional readiness calibrated to unstable horizons.

In conclusion, the discourse of affective ambivalence reflects a real and theoretically legible disjunction between macroeconomic metrics and subjective economic agency. It is neither false consciousness nor misinformation. Rather, it reveals the interpretive gap that opens when data recovery outpaces emotional recovery. The instability is not only in the system — it is in the ability to narrate the system in terms that matter.

Strategic Adaptation and Conditional Resilience. In contrast to discourses of blame, exposure, or ambivalence, this final pattern repositions economic insecurity not as a deterministic fate but as a contingent challenge. Its epistemic logic is pragmatic rather than fatalistic: volatility is real, but it can be mitigated. This mode of discourse is defined by the invocation of institutional capacity, policy foresight, and adaptive governance. It does not dismiss risks but rather insists that they are navigable given adequate tools.

Empirically, this pattern is the least frequent across the dataset, but conceptually, it carries disproportionate weight. In an affective environment dominated by pessimism and mistrust, even infrequent expressions of resilience carry outsize symbolic function. A Facebook user writes: "*We cannot control global cycles, but we can prepare buffers through better fiscal targeting and export diversification*" (R.V., Facebook). The tone here is not naively optimistic but conditionally hopeful — anchored in strategy.

Media texts occasionally mirror this framing, though often subsumed within broader narratives. One article note: "*Lithuania's EU integration provides stability channels unavailable to non-member states*" (Delfi). The message is clear: embeddedness in institutional architectures — European governance, fiscal compacts, regional markets — can buffer domestic economies against external tremors. Here, integration is not merely symbolic but functional; sovereignty is rearticulated through alliances.

This discourse introduces a performative shift — from problem description to action orientation. It does not merely inform; it configures a mindset. In an era where algorithmic governance and media cycles often favour immediacy over deliberation, the capacity to articulate future-facing strategies is itself a discursive intervention. Strategic discourse, even when speculative or provisional, sustains the infrastructure of democratic hope. Unlike prior patterns that linger in diagnosis, this model proposes mechanisms: structural reform, fiscal buffers, export diversification, or industrial upgrading. It does so with hedged language — frequent use of qualifiers such as "*if*," "*with alignment*," or "*assuming continuity*" — but this linguistic caution enhances rather than weakens credibility. These modalities of restraint signal maturity: the understanding that effective agency is not heroic spontaneity, but cumulative competence. The message is not that success is guaranteed, but that agency remains viable — and that viability, though conditional, is itself politically generative.

Analytically, this discourse realigns the temporal axis. Rather than compressing future imaginaries into fear or detachment, it expands the horizon of plausibility. Planning regains semantic legitimacy. If earlier discourses suggested that long-term planning had become irrational, this pattern reclaims temporality as a strategic terrain. What matters is not certainty, but conditional orientation.

Empirical evidence supports this cautiously resilient framing. But it also invites a deeper interpretive claim: resilience is not merely a macroeconomic aggregate, but a temporally structured form of governance. It implies state capacity not only to react, but to anticipate — to convert uncertain futures into governable domains. Lithuania's fiscal rules remain well within Stability and Growth Pact thresholds (EC, 2025). National strategic documents, such as the 2023 Innovation and Industrial Transformation Plan, articulate clear frameworks for long-term upgrading. The Lithuanian labour market has shown notable agility in absorbing shocks, with youth unemployment rates falling below the EU average in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). Furthermore, investments from NextGenerationEU funds have targeted youth-oriented sectors — digital upskilling, green employment, and educational mobility — providing infrastructure not just for recovery, but for renewal.

However, the conditional nature of this resilience cannot be overstated. These strategies require consistency, coordination, and public trust — each vulnerable to political cycles, external disruptions, or institutional fatigue. The rhetorical caution embedded in this discourse is itself diagnostic: resilience is not just an outcome but a fragile political project.

Ultimately, this pattern reintroduces deliberative agency into a discursive landscape often clouded by affect and asymmetry. Its rarity makes it no less vital. By naming contingency rather than determinism, it offers not a guarantee, but a grammar of response. For youth navigating late-modern uncertainty, such language matters: not because it denies volatility, but because it furnishes a syntax for engaging it.

Taken together, the four discursive patterns form a layered economy of meaning in which youth insecurity is not only named but shaped. Structural delegitimation corrodes institutional trust and replaces rational expectation with political scepticism. Systemic exposure displaces agency onto exogenous structures, reinforcing passivity under the guise of realism. Affective ambivalence generates a temporal flattening in which planning loses normative weight, while conditional resilience — though rare — offers a grammar of future-oriented agency. Crucially, these patterns are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist and interact, often within the same media environment, producing an unstable semiotic terrain. When discourse outpaces or distorts empirical fundamentals, it can magnify volatility perception and weaken socio-economic coordination. Conversely, when narrative aligns with adaptive strategy, it can restore a sense of deliberative control. The stakes, then, are not just semantic — they are structural. For a generation navigating high uncertainty, how insecurity is told becomes part of how it is lived.

4. Discursive Economies of Emotion: Psychological Mechanisms and Economic Behavioural Outcomes

While much attention is paid to what media say about economic insecurity, equal weight must be given to how such messages shape economic subjectivity. Discourses are not inert descriptions; they are affective devices that condition per-

ception, judgement, and action. For youth — whose economic roles and expectations are still under formation — these discursive patterns function not only as information but as ambient norms: what to fear, what to postpone, what to hope for.

This section explores how the four dominant discursive models identified earlier — delegitimation, exposure, ambivalence, and conditional resilience — activate specific psychological mechanisms. Drawing on behavioural economics and political psychology, we assess how each narrative registers in cognition and emotion, and how these affect downstream economic behaviours such as saving, investing, consumption, and long-term planning.

Rather than treating discourse as epiphenomenal, we approach it as structurally formative. Emotional economies are not separate from market economies — they are embedded within them. Understanding how discourse configures affective orientation is thus essential for interpreting the full economic consequences of informational environments.

Structural Delegitimation and Political Blame. Among the discursive patterns shaping perceptions of economic insecurity, structural delegitimation is arguably the most corrosive in its psychological effects. By portraying domestic institutions not merely as ineffective but as actively misaligned with public interest, this discourse generates a durable emotional architecture that reorganises how young individuals relate to the economy. What is at stake is not just the credibility of individual policies, but the intelligibility of the institutional order itself.

The primary psychological mechanism here is institutional distrust, a phenomenon widely acknowledged as corrosive to democratic and economic functioning (Tabellini, 2010; OECD, 2017). When economic governance is framed as politically motivated improvisation, rather than as a rule-based system, young people begin to internalise the idea that rational planning is structurally futile. This generates what Seligman (1975) termed learned helplessness — a condition in which individuals cease proactive adaptation because systemic response seems arbitrary or adversarial. The result is disengagement: not only political, but economic. If the state is not a reliable partner, then long-term economic behaviours — saving, investing, risk-taking — lose normative legitimacy.

Such effects are not theoretical. According to Eurobarometer (2024), trust in Lithuanian national institutions among youth is among the lowest in the EU. This is not simply an attitudinal variable; it translates into observable behaviours. Public uptake of state-sponsored pension and savings schemes among the under-30 population remains low, and informal employment continues to be more prevalent among youth than among older cohorts (Eurofound, 2023). Delegitimation thus produces a behavioural ecosystem marked by precaution, avoidance, and short-termism.

Another mechanism is the erosion of collective efficacy, or the belief that shared problems can be addressed through collective instruments (Sampson et al., 1997). This is especially critical in contexts where economic security is, in fact, partially mediated by shared infrastructures — education systems, labour market regulation, social insurance. Delegitimation undermines the social grammar that makes those instruments function. Where trust fails, so does coordination.

Moreover, sustained exposure to delegitimising narratives induces cognitive fatigue. When public discourse becomes saturated with contradictory, accusatory, or nihilistic frames, the interpretive labour required to navigate economic decisions increases. This can lead to decision inertia, where individuals avoid economically consequential commitments not because they lack options, but because they lack interpretive confidence. In this sense, the discursive environment becomes a constraint on rational agency.

These effects are particularly acute for youth, who are not only more sensitive to institutional signals but are also entering the economy at a moment when the stakes of long-term decision-making — education, housing, family — are front-loaded. If the institutional environment is cast as hostile or incoherent, then retreat into individualised, defensive economic postures becomes not just rational, but inevitable.

What makes this discursive pattern especially potent is its recursive nature. The younger people disengage from state structures, the more those structures appear ineffective — creating a feedback loop that reinforces institutional fragility. In this sense, structural delegitimation is not merely a discourse about insecurity; it is a generator of insecurity itself.

Affective Ambivalence and Unresolved Uncertainty. The third discursive pattern — affective ambivalence — differs from overt blame or exogenous fatalism in that it sustains uncertainty as a lived, psychological atmosphere. It is not built on categorical crisis or denial, but on oscillation: a semiotic rhythm of cautious optimism followed by implicit warning. Youth, situated developmentally at a threshold of planning and risk-taking, are especially attuned to these tonal shifts. The affective texture of this discourse is not incidental. It generates specific psychological mechanisms that filter economic meaning and condition action — or, crucially, inaction.

The primary mechanism here is anticipatory anxiety, a future-oriented unease rooted in the unpredictability of long-term outcomes. While moderate uncertainty can incentivise prudent behaviour, chronic uncertainty impairs planning and produces what Kahneman and Tversky (1979) called loss aversion under ambiguity. Faced with fluctuating signals — reports of wage growth alongside persistent inflation, or positive export trends amid global instability — young people may forgo economically rational decisions (e.g., investing, switching jobs, buying property) in favour of perceived security, even when the latter carries opportunity cost. This explains the rise in precautionary saving and short-term employment contracts among the under-30 population (IMF, 2024).

A second mechanism is emotional incoherence — a difficulty in sustaining narrative coherence amid contradictory economic cues. This resembles what psychological research terms cognitive-emotional dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Carleton et al., 2012). When individuals are repeatedly told that "the economy is growing" but experience persistent personal financial strain, the emotional result is confusion, not confidence. This weakens the link between macroeconomic indicators and behavioural activation. In other words, if nominal wages rise but rent and food prices remain high, the individual may reject macro-data as irrelevant. This rejection is not irrational — it is contextually adaptive. However, it leads to informational disengagement, where youth stop consulting economic forecasts or disregard financial education campaigns (OECD, 2021).

Affective ambivalence also cultivates what social psychologists term delay discounting — the tendency to devalue future rewards under conditions of uncertainty (Frederick et al., 2002). Empirically, this is associated with impulsive spending, job-hopping, or avoidance of pension participation — all prevalent among younger cohorts in uncertain economies. Here, uncertainty does not just reduce confidence; it reconfigures temporal preferences. The long-term becomes cognitively inaccessible.

Crucially, this discursive pattern also affects how youth evaluate the epistemic authority of economic institutions. When the tone of economic messaging is ambivalent or internally contradictory, institutional credibility erodes not due to ideological hostility, but due to semantic exhaustion. Youth may stop believing not because they disagree, but because they no longer understand. This opens space for alternative epistemologies — social media finance influencers, peer narratives, crypto-utopianism — which often offer clarity at the cost of accuracy.

In summary, affective ambivalence generates a multi-layered psychological response: anticipatory anxiety, emotional incoherence, discounting of delayed outcomes, and epistemic drift. These shape consumption, investment, and employment behaviour in subtle but measurable ways. Critically, this pattern does not require misinformation or pessimism to exert its effects. The very *structure* of ambivalence — its tonal instability — undermines interpretive confidence. For youth, this may be the most insidious form of insecurity: not dramatic rupture, but ambient irresolution.

Strategic Adaptation and Conditional Resilience. The final discursive pattern — strategic adaptation — offers a rare counterpoint to narratives of blame, exposure, or affective disarray. It reframes economic insecurity not as an irreversible consequence of either institutional failure or systemic exposure, but as a manageable condition. In this sense, it invokes a distinct epistemology: neither denialist nor alarmist, but pragmatic-rationalist. The dominant effect here is not confidence, but conditional resolve — an emotional stance that depends on institutional foresight and the perceived availability of credible tools.

The key psychological mechanism produced by this discourse is perceived collective efficacy — the belief that institutions can act coherently in the face of uncertainty (Bandura, 2000). For youth, this belief does not eliminate anxiety but recalibrates it. Economic risk is not denied; it is rendered legible through policy language. This has a measurable impact on behaviour. According to OECD (2023), youth in countries with high institutional trust and strategic signalling are more likely to participate in formal saving, education planning, and long-horizon job mobility. These are not merely individual strategies — they are embedded acts of macro-trust.

Another mechanism is the activation of future-oriented agency. When discourse presents institutions as capable of buffering shocks or guiding transitions — via EU funds, digitalisation policies, or industrial strategies — youth are more likely to engage in goal-directed behaviour (Heckhausen et al., 2010). This includes not only economic participation but also affective alignment: a willingness to invest identity and aspiration in societal trajectories. Strategic discourse thus links behavioural motivation with what Giddens (1991) might call ontological security — the sense that the future is not chaotic, but conditionally intelligible.

What makes this pattern psychologically distinct is that it reclaims time as a space for agency. Whereas prior discourses collapsed the future into a site of anxiety or ambiguity, strategic discourse reopens temporality to planning. The long term becomes thinkable again — not as a promise, but as a conditional project. Youth respond by reinvesting in projects with deferred returns: education, housing, pension participation (IMF, 2024). In turn, these behaviours are not only economically productive; they are symbolically integrative — they embed individuals into institutional time.

Critically, strategic adaptation provides a semantic infrastructure for trust. It does not assume that institutions are perfect, but that they are improvable, navigable, and responsive to foresight. This shifts the emotional valence from fear to vigilance, from retreat to recalibration. In this view, youth economic agency is not framed as heroic self-reliance, but as co-authored action: enabled by public foresight, conditional on procedural credibility.

However, this discursive mode is inherently fragile. Its efficacy depends on discursive consistency and performative credibility. If institutional language shifts erratically or implementation lags behind rhetoric, the perceived gap can induce backlash effects — what public policy theorists term credibility decay (Drazen and Masson, 1994). Worse, failed strategic messaging can induce cynicism deeper than that generated by silence, since disillusionment emerges not from absence but from perceived betrayal of competence.

In sum, strategic adaptation does not simply offer emotional reassurance — it operates as a cognitive affordance structure. It furnishes interpretive clarity, anchors future orientation, and sustains institutional trust under volatility. By modelling a discourse that acknowledges risk while preserving agency, it defines a rare space of rational optimism in a political economy increasingly defined by uncertainty.

Discursive Constructions and Economic Action: A Critical Synthesis. The four discursive models analysed — Structural Delegitimation, Systemic Exposure, Affective Ambivalence, and Strategic Adaptation — do more than merely describe states of economic uncertainty. They configure emotional grammars, behavioural predispositions, and institutional expectations. As such, these are not simply media tropes, but socio-cognitive infrastructures that shape and constrain youth economic agency. In the context of Lithuania's post-pandemic and geopolitical exposure, these patterns help construct what Bourdieu (1990) might term a "habitus of insecurity": a structured way of feeling, thinking, and acting that is deeply inflected by discourse.

Crucially, the models are not symmetrical in their prevalence or influence. Structural delegitimation and systemic exposure dominate both quantitatively and affectively. They articulate high emotional valence — anger, distrust, fear — and mobilise language that frames risk as externally imposed or internally mismanaged. These patterns engender what Hirschman (1970) described as the logic of exit over voice: individuals withdraw emotionally or behaviourally from institutions rather than contesting or reforming them. Youth, perceiving democratic inefficacy or global helplessness, may opt for inward-facing strategies: emigration, informal employment, or political apathy (Eurofound, 2022).

Affective ambivalence, though less overtly dramatic, may be even more insidious. By sustaining a rhetorical tension between growth and fragility, it induces what psychologists call *learned uncertainty*—the chronic inability to anchor expectations (Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). Behaviourally, this translates into planning paralysis, deferral of key life milestones (e.g. home ownership, childbearing), and susceptibility to alternative epistemologies (e.g. populist or conspiratorial economic narratives). The economic consequences are non-trivial: compressed consumption cycles, under-investment in skills, and lower financial system participation (OECD, 2021).

Strategic adaptation, by contrast, functions as a discursive minority — but one of disproportionate value. It does not deny risk but reconstructs it as knowable and manageable through institutional foresight. Unlike the other models, it invokes agency under constraint (Sen, 1999): the capacity to act meaningfully despite structural limitations. This has implications for youth economic behaviour that are both motivational and relational. Motivationally, it fosters long-horizon decisions such as educational commitment, pension participation, or entrepreneurial exploration. Relationally, it repairs the affective contract between citizens and institutions. To visualise these divergent effects, we can summarise the models in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Discursive Patterns and their Effects on Youth Economic Behaviour

Discursive Pattern	Dominant Affect	Temporal Orientation	Institutional Relationship	Economic Behaviour Induced
Structural Delegitimation	Cynicism, alienation	Compressed	Distrust, disengagement	Exit strategies, informal economy
Systemic Exposure	Fatalism, anxiety	Collapsed	Externalisation of agency	Savings hoarding, emigration, avoidance
Affective Ambivalence	Confusion, paralysis	Oscillating	Semantic erosion	Planning deferral, risk aversion
Strategic Adaptation	Conditional resolve	Reclaimed	Trust contingent on foresight	Long-term investment, institutional return

These findings suggest two critical trajectories:

1. Individualized economic adaptation. The dominant discourses — delegitimation, exposure, ambivalence — reorient youth towards strategies that minimise vulnerability at the cost of systemic integration. These include delayed household formation, increased reliance on familial support networks, or migration to perceived "stable" economies. These strategies are rational within a horizon of risk minimisation but economically suboptimal at scale: they reduce domestic aggregate demand, distort labour supply, and underutilise human capital.

2. Systemic institutional recalibration. Discursive saturation in pessimism erodes the communicative authority of economic institutions. When central banks, ministries, or statistical agencies fail to convey plausible futures, they risk becoming irrelevant to affectively disengaged publics. As Giddens (1991) argues, modern institutions rely not merely on coercion or efficiency, but on the routine reproduction of trust. A discourse regime dominated by exposure and ambivalence undermines this process. Conversely, even modest insertions of strategic discourse can repair the epistemic link between individuals and systems.

The implications are normative as well as analytical. Youth are not just passive recipients of economic policy — they are interpretive actors navigating emotionally charged environments. If discourses frame the future as inaccessible, then even optimal policy will fail to mobilise action. This underscores the importance of narrative alignment: between macroeconomic signals and lived experience, between institutional design and public affect. Strategic discourse, though rare, offers a model for this alignment. It integrates emotional plausibility with institutional accountability.

To conclude, economic discourse is not merely representational — it is constitutive. It shapes not just what people know, but what they feel they can do. In the case of youth economic insecurity, discursive form is inseparable from economic function. If institutions wish to restore agency, they must also restore intelligibility. The capacity to narrate uncertainty as manageable may well be the most powerful policy tool in the present conjuncture.

This section has demonstrated that discursive framings of economic insecurity are not neutral descriptors but active mediators of psychological orientation and behavioural choice. Structural delegitimation and systemic exposure dominate in prevalence and impact, displacing agency and compressing future imaginaries. Affective ambivalence, though more subtle, erodes temporal coherence and epistemic trust, creating latent deterrents to long-term planning. By contrast, strategic adaptation — while rarer — reintroduces intelligibility and agency, offering a discursive infrastructure for proactive economic engagement.

Critically, these discursive patterns are not merely interpretive — they are performative. They shape how youth internalise economic risk, calibrate trust, and enact participation. As shown in Table 2, each model channels distinct emotional valences into corresponding economic behaviours. These behaviours, in turn, produce divergent macroeconomic effects: fragmentation versus integration, consumption compression versus investment mobilisation, exit versus civic embeddedness. Understanding the affective architectures of discourse is thus indispensable for any policy aiming to restore not only growth, but trust and social cohesion.

5. Constructive Counter-discourses and Institutional Futures

Prevailing economic discourses, as demonstrated, often function not merely as reflections of instability but as amplifiers of affective precarity and behavioural withdrawal. Yet discourse is not a deterministic force — it is also a site of possibility. This section explores whether alternative narrative configurations can mitigate perceived insecurity and activate forward-looking agency among youth. Rather than proposing a naïve optimism, we ask whether it is possible to craft narratives that remain empirically grounded while restoring interpretive coherence and institutional trust. Drawing on psychological theory, economic communication, and governance studies, we identify conditions under which discursive interventions may be not only plausible but necessary. If fear erodes action, then clarity — even conditional — may restore it. The goal is not discursive engineering, but reflexive recalibration: to reimagine economic language as a public good. In doing so, this section confronts a paradox—can realism coexist with hope, and if so, on what terms?

5.1. Discursive Reversibility: Can Economic Language Empower?

The premise that discourse shapes economic behaviour invites a more provocative question: if language can disempower, can it also empower? This reversibility is not merely rhetorical. It goes to the heart of how individuals and collectives construct economic futures. Youth, in particular, inhabit discursive ecologies that shape what is thinkable and doable. If dominant patterns of delegitimation, exposure, and affective ambivalence compress expectations and degrade trust, then counter-discourses — structured around coherence, intelligibility, and conditional optimism — may function as a kind of socio-cognitive infrastructure for resilience.

The notion of discursive empowerment draws from both sociolinguistics and behavioural economics. From the former, it inherits the insight that language performs it not only describes, but enacts social realities (Austin, 1962; Fairclough, 2003). From the latter, it draws on the concept of expectations anchoring (Gennaioli et al., 2015), suggesting that individuals make decisions not only based on hard data but on how future conditions are linguistically framed. Research shows that communication style — especially framing and affective tone — can significantly alter consumption, investment, and savings behaviour (Shiller, 2017).

To empower through discourse, three conditions are essential: semantic coherence, temporal re-integration, and institutional referentiality. Semantic coherence: economic communication must form a recognisable structure of meaning. Fragmented or contradictory messaging erodes trust. For example, a government cannot simultaneously celebrate wage growth while ignoring inflation's erosion of purchasing power. Coherence enables individuals to reconcile macro and micro realities and to locate themselves within plausible economic trajectories. Studies in policy communication suggest that consistent framing increases the salience and credibility of policy messages (OECD, 2019). Temporal Re-integration: empowering discourse must restore the future as a space of rational planning. Current dominant narratives often collapse the temporal horizon, portraying long-term action as futile. Yet hope, as a cognitive function, is inherently temporal

(Mische, 2009). When young people perceive no stable trajectory, they are less likely to invest in education, pensions, or family formation. Conversely, narratives that acknowledge volatility but reaffirm directionality — e.g. transition pathways, structural reforms — can cognitively re-enable planning (Van Loon and Aaltonen, 2020). Institutional Referentiality: trustworthy discourses must be grounded in institutional capacity. Optimism untethered from credible governance risks degenerating into propaganda. Effective empowering narratives therefore function dialogically: they build on what institutions can plausibly deliver and invite reciprocal engagement. This is what Giddens (1991) terms the "reflexive project of modernity": the capacity of institutions to narrate change while remaining responsive to public perception.

Empirical examples reinforce the viability of empowering discourse. For instance, Finland's youth-targeted economic education programmes, which combine narrative clarity with structural realism, have been shown to improve not only financial literacy but future-oriented behaviour (OECD, 2020). Similarly, the European Commission's strategic narrative around *NextGenerationEU* linked investment funding to clearly articulated goals (green transition, digitalisation) with measurable milestones — thereby enhancing narrative credibility and activating engagement.

Yet discursive reversibility is not guaranteed. It requires institutional commitment to communicative rationality and narrative discipline. Mixed messages — whether due to political fragmentation or bureaucratic opacity — can sabotage even well-intended discourse. Moreover, excessive technocratic language may alienate audiences, particularly youth, who often seek affective resonance alongside analytic clarity.

Thus, empowerment through discourse entails more than strategic messaging. It requires a conceptual shift in how economic communication is understood — not as a transmission of facts, but as a co-construction of futures. This implies a dual responsibility: institutions must speak in ways that are semantically and affectively legible, while publics must remain reflexive interlocutors rather than passive recipients.

To conclude, economic language can empower when it constructs not only plausible accounts of risk, but also credible grammars of response. In a context where many young people experience a dissonance between economic data and lived precarity, the task is not to deny difficulty but to narrate it in ways that sustain agency. Discursive reversibility is thus both an empirical possibility and a normative imperative.

5.2. Data Reframed: When Optimism is Statistically Defensible

If discourse shapes expectations, then data — its presumed substrate — cannot be viewed as neutral either. Numbers do not speak for themselves; they are interpreted, contextualised, and often instrumentalised. The framing of economic indicators plays a critical role in determining whether they produce anxiety or assurance, withdrawal or mobilisation. This section asks: when, and how, can economic data be legitimately used to construct a forward-looking, empowering narrative?

At the heart of this question lies a paradox. Lithuania's economic fundamentals — fiscal discipline, labour market adaptability, EU integration — have often outperformed peer countries. Public debt remains below 40% of GDP (European Commission, 2025), youth unemployment dropped to 8.9% in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), and wage growth, despite inflationary pressures, has been real and persistent. Yet public discourse, particularly among youth, remains marked by pessimism and distrust. Why?

Part of the answer lies in the rhetorical asymmetry of data usage. Negative indicators — such as inflation or housing costs — are affectively immediate and frequently personalised. In contrast, positive indicators are abstract, delayed in impact, and often communicated in technocratic registers. As Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory suggests, losses loom larger than gains. Without narrative contextualisation, even robust data fail to counterbalance perceived instability.

One way to reframe data constructively is through comparative benchmarking. For instance, presenting Lithuania's inflation trajectory not in isolation but in relation to regional peers reveals a convergence to EU norms by mid-2024 (ECB, 2024). Likewise, EU structural fund absorption rates — often ignored in mainstream discourse — highlight targeted resilience investments in education, healthcare, and youth employment (European Commission, 2024b).

Another technique involves embedding data within temporal storylines. Instead of announcing wage increases as isolated events, communicators could frame them within medium-term trajectories: "Over the past five years, real net wages for under-30s have increased by 17%, outpacing inflation by 4 percentage points" (Statistics Lithuania, 2024). Such longitudinal framing enables individuals to map themselves within broader economic processes, reinforcing a sense of progress.

Finally, statistical framing should acknowledge vulnerability without capitulating to it. Communicating uncertainty with probabilistic nuance — e.g. confidence intervals, scenario planning—can increase credibility rather than diminish it (Gigerenzer et al., 2007). Strategic transparency, rather than mere reassurance, fosters trust.

Importantly, reframing is not cosmetic. It constitutes a cognitive and moral act. It challenges the deficit model of communication — wherein publics are seen as lacking knowledge—and instead recognises them as capable of interpretive reasoning. Youth in particular respond to authenticity, not to paternalism. Thus, optimism becomes defensible not when it denies hardship, but when it situates hardship within a horizon of intelligible recovery.

5.3. Institutions as Narrative Actors

Discourse does not emerge in a vacuum — it is curated, mediated, and legitimated by institutions. From central banks and statistical offices to educational systems and political parties, institutional actors do more than administer policy: they construct the epistemic frameworks through which the public interprets economic conditions. This section explores institutions not as neutral intermediaries, but as active narrative agents whose communicative strategies shape the architecture of collective expectations.

Institutional narrative capacity involves more than message clarity or PR proficiency. It reflects an institution's ability to translate structural conditions into intelligible, affectively resonant, and normatively acceptable accounts. This is particularly vital in times of volatility, when publics seek not just data but sense-making. As Mörth and Sahlin-Andersson (2006) argue, governance today increasingly operates through soft instruments — standards, benchmarking, discourse — rather than coercive mandates.

Three dimensions are critical to institutional narrative function: narrative continuity, relational reflexivity, and credibility through embedded practice. Narrative Continuity: institutions gain legitimacy by sustaining coherent storylines across policy cycles. Sudden reversals or unanchored optimism damage credibility. This is evident in monetary policy communication: the European Central Bank's success in guiding expectations has hinged on its narrative consistency, even amid complex shocks (Fraccaroli, Giovannini and Jamet, 2022). Relational Reflexivity: institutions must attune their discourse to public sentiment without capitulating to populist simplification. This requires dialogical reflexivity — listening, iterating, and re-articulating narratives based on evolving public feedback (Fung, 2015). Youth trust is shaped by perceived responsiveness rather than just information supply. Credibility Through Embedded Practice: communicative trust is grounded not just in words but in demonstrable institutional performance. The credibility of a message about inclusive growth depends on visible efforts to reduce inequality, fund education, or support youth employment. Words and budgets must align.

These criteria suggest that discursive empowerment is inseparable from institutional reform. It is insufficient to simply "communicate better"; institutions must inhabit the narratives they promote. The European Union's *NextGenerationEU* initiative offers a partial example: its communications strategy explicitly linked investment goals with shared European futures and youth inclusion, lending symbolic and material coherence to the message (European Commission, 2021).

Conversely, when institutions fail to maintain discursive integrity — by over-promising, obscuring trade-offs, or engaging in crisis-driven rebranding — they contribute to narrative erosion. The long-term risk is not only cynicism but democratic disengagement. When discourse fails, publics turn elsewhere: to affective bubbles, conspiratorial subcultures, or passive resignation (Arendt, 1972).

In sum, institutions are not merely transmitters of economic data. They are meaning-making actors whose narratives shape the temporal and moral coordinates of civic life. Recognising them as such reframes communicative failure not as a media issue, but as a governance challenge. Rebuilding economic confidence thus requires not only factual accuracy but narrative authority rooted in institutional coherence.

5.4. Towards a Generative Lexicon of Youth Economic Futures

Discourses do not merely describe the economy; they delimit what futures can be imagined. Language shapes plausibility structures — sets of what is deemed thinkable, desirable, or achievable (Appadurai, 2013). If dominant economic discourses often constrain these structures through narratives of risk and retreat, then a generative lexicon becomes essential. This final analytical step examines the contours of a vocabulary that could underwrite youth-inclusive, future-oriented economic narratives without sacrificing empirical rigor.

A generative lexicon is not about replacing complexity with positivity. Rather, it seeks to redefine core economic signifiers — such as growth, resilience, risk, or investment — in ways that are intelligible to young publics and attuned to their lived conditions. The challenge is not terminological but epistemological: to develop a vocabulary that facilitates not only comprehension, but participation and projection.

Take, for instance, the notion of resilience. As currently used, it often functions as a euphemism for austerity or passive endurance. A generative redefinition would frame resilience as adaptive capacity — collective preparedness through investment in skills, infrastructure, and institutional innovation (Walker and Salt, 2006). This reframing aligns with OECD definitions that link resilience to anticipatory governance and distributed agency (OECD, 2023).

Similarly, investment should be decoupled from narrow fiscal connotations and reimagined as intergenerational resource allocation. This includes not only capital formation but human development: education, mental health, and social cohesion. Such a reframing resonates with the capabilities approach, which sees investment as enabling functionings, not just returns (Sen, 1999).

Uncertainty, too, must be rearticulated. Rather than framing it as a cognitive deficit or emotional burden, a generative lexicon would position uncertainty as an inherent feature of complex systems — manageable through scenario

planning, participatory governance, and adaptive learning (Kay and King, 2020). This linguistic shift moves from paralysis to preparation.

Equally critical is the vocabulary of value. Market-centric discourses often marginalise unpaid or long-term value creation — care work, environmental stewardship, civic innovation. Reintegrating these domains into economic discourse would broaden both analytical scope and normative commitments, especially relevant to younger cohorts whose economic identities are increasingly hybrid.

The practical implication is that economic education, policy communication, and media framing must converge on a shared semantic horizon. This is not about scripting youth optimism but enabling youth authorship. Without access to a generative lexicon, young people cannot meaningfully participate in shaping the economic imaginaries that govern their lives.

A constructive precedent can be found in New Zealand's *Living Standards Framework*, which explicitly integrates well-being metrics into national economic planning and frames fiscal decisions through long-term human development goals (New Zealand Treasury, 2021). Its success lies not in rhetorical novelty, but in institutionalising a vocabulary that makes non-monetary values visible and actionable.

In conclusion, a generative lexicon is neither decorative nor peripheral. It is central to economic agency. Words are infrastructures of possibility. Redefining them with empirical integrity and affective sensitivity is a precondition for reimagining youth economic futures in the twenty-first century.

5.5. Risks of Constructive Narratives

While constructive discourses promise psychological relief and behavioural activation, they are not free from epistemic and political hazards. Optimistic framing — if insufficiently grounded or overly strategic — can risk replicating the very disempowerment it seeks to counteract. This final subsection considers three interrelated risks: credibility erosion, discursive asymmetry, and normative capture.

Credibility Erosion through Overreach: constructive narratives, when untethered from structural realities, can backfire. If young audiences perceive strategic optimism as institutional gloss, their trust in public communication diminishes. As O'Neill (2002) argues, trust is not the product of reassurance, but of justified confidence. Youth tend to detect discursive incongruities — between communicated intent and material experience — with heightened sensitivity. The long-term damage of such misalignment is not merely discursive but institutional: it fosters cynicism and withdrawal.

Discursive Asymmetry and Silenced Vulnerability: a further risk lies in the selective amplification of positive trajectories at the expense of critical voices. When economic discourse becomes disproportionately future-oriented, structural inequalities or marginalised experiences may be rhetorically erased. This mirrors the risk of what Foucault termed "pastoral power" — a mode of governance that pacifies dissent through soft optimism. In empirical terms, youth segments outside dominant urban, educated, or digitally connected strata may find their insecurity unacknowledged by these narratives.

Normative Capture by Technocratic Logic: constructive discourse can become a vehicle for technocratic containment. If hope is always conditional on compliance — "provided reforms continue," "if alignment is maintained" — it risks becoming disciplinary rather than emancipatory. Such logics reproduce a neoliberal grammar where responsibility is individualised and structural reform becomes moralised. This critique resonates with Fraser's (2013) warning against the depoliticisation of economic discourse through managerial vocabulary.

To mitigate these risks, constructive narratives must be reflexive, pluralistic, and open to contestation. Empowerment is not produced by language alone, but by the capacity of language to accommodate dissent, ambiguity, and redefinition. Rather than scripting consensus, strategic discourse should invite co-authorship.

Thus, the task is not to abandon constructive narratives, but to design them with institutional humility and dialogical awareness. In the words of Habermas (1984), communicative action becomes emancipatory only when it recognises its own fallibility. It is this ethic of discursive accountability that can sustain hope — not as an affective surplus, but as a condition of collective reasoning.

This section has argued that economic discourse can be more than diagnostic — it can be generative. In contexts of chronic uncertainty, especially among youth, language becomes a form of governance: not merely conveying data but shaping the scope of imaginable futures. Constructive counter-discourses offer a necessary intervention, capable of restoring interpretive trust and civic agency. Yet their success is not guaranteed by tone alone. Empirical anchoring is essential; without it, optimism risks devolving into abstraction or manipulation. The reframing of data must go beyond surface recalibration — it must trace plausible trajectories that individuals can locate themselves within. Institutions, in turn, must become narrative actors, not just data providers. Their legitimacy hinges on coherence between rhetoric and demonstrable action. If language outpaces policy, trust erodes; if it lags, relevance vanishes.

A generative lexicon can expand economic participation by rendering concepts like resilience, investment, and uncertainty intelligible and actionable. This requires epistemic pluralism and attentiveness to lived realities, particularly

among youth. The task is not to simplify complexity, but to scaffold understanding. Narratives must be designed for dialogue, not decree. Strategic optimism should mobilise agency, not mask vulnerability. As this section has shown, discourses that empower are those that anticipate contestation and welcome co-authorship. But even empowering narratives have limits: they risk exclusion, overreach, and normative closure. The final analysis suggests that humility must accompany hope. The role of discourse is not to predict the future, but to make space for its construction. In this sense, constructive narratives are not only communicative strategies but ethical commitments. They point not toward certainty, but toward the shared capacity to navigate uncertainty — together.

Conclusions

This study has examined how economic insecurity is discursively produced in Lithuania's public sphere, drawing on qualitative content analysis of digital media articles and expert-authored Facebook posts. By approaching discourse not merely as a container of economic information but as an infrastructure of emotional and epistemic orientation, the analysis has identified core message types and discursive models that shape the affective experience of risk, particularly for younger audiences. The findings invite both an interpretive diagnosis and a normative reflection: how public economic discourse constructs vulnerability, and how it might instead foster navigability, trust, and coherence in an era marked by systemic uncertainty.

The messages most strongly associated with the provocation of economic insecurity were those that combined technically accurate information with emotionally charged or morally inflected language. These included recurring themes such as critiques of institutional improvisation, warnings of geopolitical exposure, systemic rupture framings, and expressions of policy volatility. Such statements were especially impactful when they departed from neutral analysis and adopted evaluative tones — of cynicism, urgency, or resignation. These messages functioned affectively rather than informatively, especially for youth navigating early life-course decisions. They undermined the conditions for anticipatory planning and recalibrated individual perceptions of economic agency toward a horizon of constant adaptation.

Media and social media messages, though divergent in tone and rhetorical style, tended to reinforce rather than contradict each other. The interaction between genres formed a dynamic of intensification: traditional media anchored insecurity in expert discourse, while social media re-circulated these framings with heightened emotionality. This interplay created a feedback structure in which narratives of fragility were affirmed across communicative spaces, producing a discursive climate where economic uncertainty came to appear ambient and enduring. The convergence of analytic pessimism and moral critique further blurred the boundary between structural risk and subjective affect, embedding insecurity within both cognition and mood.

From this inter-discursive landscape emerged four dominant models that structured how economic insecurity was articulated and absorbed: structural delegitimation, systemic exposure, affective ambivalence, and conditional resilience. Each of these discursive formations encoded not only a theory of the economy but an implicit moral psychology. The delegitimation of institutions cast the state as a destabilising actor, while systemic exposure narratives diminished perceived national agency. Affective ambivalence, oscillating between optimism and fatalism, sustained uncertainty without resolution. Only conditional resilience offered the semblance of constructive agency, yet it was rare and often heavily hedged. For youth, these models collectively defined a space of limited futurity, where the possibilities for long-term investment, social trust, or economic optimism were bracketed by competing logics of caution, irony, or detachment.

The cumulative effect of these findings points to the need for a more ethically grounded economic discourse. If discourse functions not merely to describe but to shape felt realities, then communicative responsibility entails more than factual precision. It includes tonal calibration, temporal coherence, and generational inclusiveness. A responsible economic discourse should resist affective inflation, recognise the differentiated exposures of younger cohorts, and create discursive space for plausible optimism. Such a shift does not require the evacuation of critique but a recalibration of its form: from alarmism to analysis, from resignation to reflexivity. Only through such recalibration can economically discourse function as a stabilising, rather than corrosive, feature of democratic life.

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