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The Power of the Powerless: Constructions of Self-Employment in Czechia

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Abstract

This article examines the construction of self-employment in public policy debates, focusing on how political actors define self-employment and on the moral implications of these categorisations. Employing critical discourse analysis and the social construction of a target population, the authors examine verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates in the Czech parliament between 2021 and 2023. These debates reveal how legislators perceive the value of self-employment as a part of the economy. The study explores the underpinnings of such public policy debates, as well as the moral consequences of categorising self-employment. We argue that by foregrounding some morally loaded argumentations and, in particular, discursive constructions, politicians (as both discursive and policy actors) make some parts of the experience of self-employment invisible and neglected by policy; as a result, this contributes to the precarity of the self-employed.

Keywords

critical discourse analysis; neoliberal entrepreneurship ideal; self-employment; social construction of target population

1. Introduction

This study explores the social construction of self-employment in public policy debates, including moral strategies utilised for these constructions. These debates are necessarily embedded in the neoliberal discourse on work which foregrounds the entrepreneurial self and hails its independence, pro-activity, and risk-taking (Musílek et al., 2020; Sennett, 2000). Such individual activity takes place in the markets which are presented as the most efficient means for the allocation of resources and organisation of the economy, in

which the role of the state is to remove as many constraints on market processes as possible (Crowley & Hodson, 2014, p. 91). Within the theory of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), the neoliberal ethos has been theorised in its effects on individual identities. Subsequent developments of du Gay's theory dynamically capture discourse about entrepreneurial identities (McCabe, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). We seek to continue this line of scholarship and argue for incorporating more material and institutional components of discourses into analyses (Kenny & Scriver, 2012). This goal led us to study discourses on entrepreneurship in close relation to policy measures and regulation and their material devices, such as the electronic cash register (known as EET in the Czech context and also referred to as EET later in this article). By analysing the tangible outcomes of policy debates and justifications, this article emphasises the material manifestations of discourses.

Between 2021 and 2023 Czechia, like other countries in Central Europe, had a relatively stable labour market with low unemployment rates (European Commission, 2022). However, part-time employment and lower wages are subject to a higher tax burden than above-average wages (European Commission, 2022), which may influence workers' choices to be self-employed instead. There has been a continuous slow growth in the number of self-employed people, reaching 691,700 people in 2022, around 16% of the economically active population (AMSP, 2023). The continuous and slow growth of the number of self-employed resembles trends in other countries, such as the UK (Henley, 2023). Self-employment in Czechia has many shades—it ranges from full-time entrepreneurial activity to part-time exploration of alternative career paths, and the work can be conducted for one or two clients or a wider clientele.

This article analyses verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates in Czechia (2021 to September 2023) to unpack discursive constructions of entrepreneurship in the Czech political discourse and what effects these constructions have on public policy and regulation. In analysing these debates, we also pay attention to moralities mobilised to justify different policy measures directed at the self-employed. We argue that by foregrounding some morally loaded argumentations and, in particular, discursive constructions, politicians (as both discursive and policy actors) render parts of the self-employment experience invisible.

In this article, we are interested in how the changes in the role of entrepreneurship and self-employment described in the literature (Calás et al., 2009; Marsh & Thomas, 2017) have been reflected in the Czech policy discourse. Research questions guiding this article are as follows: What discursive constructions of entrepreneurship can be found in the Czech policy discourse? To what extent does the rising number of precarious and non-standard working conditions affect these discursive constructions? To what extent is the Czech policy discourse ready to react to changes in the labour market—primarily, the proliferation of non-standard work (e.g., the gig economy, zero-hour contracts, and declining wages)?

This article follows up on the rich discussions of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), discursive constructions of entrepreneurship (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), and the precarity and insecurity experienced in self-employment (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Marková Volejníčková et al., 2024). Our approach to entrepreneurship is grounded in the premise that it is differently constructed in various political and social contexts and often takes on the form of an empty signifier (Jones & Spicer, 2005).

After sketching the theoretical landscapes in which our inquiry unfolds, we proceed to a short elaboration of the Czech context and the situation of the self-employed there. This is followed by a description of the data

and decisions involved in the corpus composition. The analytical framework is then explicated, drawing on the social construction of the target population (Schneider & Ingram, 1993) and emphasising the relevance of the study of precarity and self-employment. Three identified topoi of self-employment are discussed then, featuring excerpts from the data. Our discussion section summarises the moral categories and their relation to self-employment.

2. Theoretical Framework

Precarity and insecurity have become central motives in analyses of late modernity (Beck, 1992; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018). The ongoing digital transformation, the gig economy, and automatisisation destabilise work structures. As a result, employment relationships have become more precarious and flexible (Beck, 2000; Weil, 2014). More people are working on a contingent, temporary, freelance, and contract basis, comprising a considerable non-standard, irregularly employed workforce, while the proliferation of irregular schedules is strengthening the temporal fragmentation of work (Fernández-Macías, 2018).

Individual workers adopt various practices to adjust to these changes, such as cultivating a personal brand (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), engaging in “everwork”—a combination of overwork, unpredictability, and constant availability (Wynn et al., 2018) while expressing passion for the work (Gershon, 2017), coping with the role disjointedness (Damarin, 2006), and building networks (Musílek et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2012). All these practices are manifestations of what the theory of enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996) and its subsequent developments (McCabe, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) analyse as regulation of identities in the neoliberal economy. Workers’ reactions to the pressures of insecure job markets often require identity shifts or at least superficial acceptance of the norms of the enterprise culture (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Some bricolages of practices have even prompted researchers to create new concepts to capture the experiences, such as “portfolio workers” (Neely, 2020), who perform different work roles for various clients at the same time, or “entreploees” (Pongratz & Voß, 2003), who are employees with a higher level of self-control and self-commercialisation.

Discursive constructions of entrepreneurship are the subject of numerous studies. As Kenny and Scriver (2012, pp. 616–617) conclude in their extensive literature review, the entrepreneur can be discursively conceptualised as a quasi-religious figure (Sørensen, 2008), an agent of change (Calás et al., 2009), a saviour of a threatened economy (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), a “passive agent of omnipotent capital” (Taymans, 1951, p. 88), or a modern prince challenging hegemonic practices (Levy & Scully, 2007). These constructions can vary in different economic, political, and social contexts. For example, using a Polish case, Marsh and Thomas (2017) describe entrepreneurial discourse as a cornerstone of the Polish transition from communism to the neoliberal free market. Different discursive constructions imply distinct social positions. For instance, in the Polish case, entrepreneurship is articulated as an elite project, while Kenny and Scriver (2012) show that the Irish government stressed that “anyone can be an entrepreneur.”

The results of discursive analyses often contrast with the results of studies dealing with the lived reality of entrepreneurs and self-employed people, which emphasise the precariousness and uncertainty of their living conditions. For example, neoliberal austerity policies and project work have led to the increasing number of precarious employments in civil society organisations (CSOs; Mikołajczak, 2021). As a result, insecurity and precarity—with differences in severity and urgency—are experienced by young workers with low cultural

and economic capital (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019), along with workers with high cultural capital, such as academics (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021) and the ICT industry and game development sub-sector (Keogh & Abraham, 2022; Ruffino, 2021). Keogh and Abraham (2022) assert that the composition of workers in game development (with one-third self-employed, one-third employed, and one-third working for free) actively reflects their precarious status and self-exploitation. Precarity is often complemented by the sense of autonomy which the dependent self-employed workers exercise in many instances—undertaking self-directed learning, choosing projects, and negotiating pay (Frisk, 2020). Similar arguments can be found in the biographical research into precarity at work and the topic of dependent self-employment (Carreri, 2022; Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2021).

3. Methods

3.1. Context of the Study

Data show that self-employment in Czechia represents around 16% of the economically active population (AMSP, 2023). This number indicates the prevalence of self-employment, even though granular data about the exact structure and number of self-employed in Czechia are hard to obtain, as described by Dvouletý (2019, p. 3). In the period between 2005 and 2017, roughly 15% (ranging from 13.9% in 2005 to the maximum of 16.3% in 2012) of Czech's economically active population were engaged in self-employment, slightly above 13%, the average of the European Union for the same period (Dvouletý, 2019, p. 7).

The recent research on self-employment in Czechia studies the precarity of the low-income self-employed and microentrepreneurs (Marková Volejníčková et al., 2024) or evaluates social policies targeted at shifting people from unemployment to self-employment (Dvouletý, 2023).

Similar to the Polish context (see Marsh & Thomas, 2017), entrepreneurial activities and identities are also strongly articulated in the Czech political discourse. In the last decade, the Czech political discourse has been marked by the hegemony of entrepreneurial populism (Naxera & Stulík, 2021). This period started with Andrej Babiš's political success in the 2013 election. Babiš is a Czech politician and businessman, known for being the leader of the ANO 2011 party and serving as prime minister between 2018 and 2021. Entrepreneurial populism can be described as “political formations competing for public office that are led by charismatic business leaders, who claim that their ability to run businesses successfully means they will also be able to run government well” (Saxonberg & Heinisch, 2022, p. 209). This also echoes the “centrality of the entrepreneur, enterprise and competition to everyday life” (Littler, 2017, p. 193). Entrepreneurial populism represents an important context for our case since it puts discursive constructions of entrepreneurship at the centre of political debates and argumentations. Although this context is useful in understanding the political situation in Czechia, however, it is not the central focus of our arguments. We rather offer a more abstract insight into the ongoing debates around precarity and neoliberal work.

3.2. Data

The corpus has been constructed using a full-text search in verbatim transcripts from both chambers of Czech parliament in the current election period (for Senate 2020–2022 and Chamber of Deputies 2021–2023), using the keywords OSVČ (a shorthand legal and tax term for self-employed), *švarcsystém**

(colloquial for “dependent self-employment”), and *živnostn** (a common expression for self-employed). The broad keyword selection was chosen for the exploration of contexts in which the self-employed are mentioned. The subsequent manual selection of excerpts for in-depth analysis was conducted by the authors together. An excerpt was selected if the topic or policy measure debated in the excerpt has a material effect on the self-employed’s lives and practices and their place in the social and economic system. During the selection process, we also wrote notes on the context of the debate (e.g., reaction to whom; what the previous session was about; the associated legislative proposals in the proceedings; and vote results—if it came to a vote). We included notes about the position of the speaker (i.e., leadership position in a party). The number of searched entries and those selected as relevant for the analysis are summarized in Table 1. Genres of entries varied from interpellations and disputes about a proposal (sometimes including interactions between ministers, prime ministers, or deputies) to filibuster speeches.

The selected excerpts were gathered in a spreadsheet format which also detailed records about the date, session number, and excerpt identification number. Apart from identification data, the file with corpus data included written notes on context, association with policy documents, and, if possible, the policy outcomes (e.g., voting results and final document number).

3.3. Analytical Approach

The analytical framework employed in this article is the social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This framework enables the dissection of how the self-employed and dependent self-employed are constructed by members of the Czech parliament. This analytical approach classifies the self-employed as a target population of policy concerning two categories—power and morality. These categories stem from our main theoretical interest. The first axis answers the question of whether entrepreneurs are constructed as powerful actors or as a precarious social group. Measures of political power include the size of the group’s degree of mobilization, access to governing institutions, material resources, and propensity to vote. The second axis then classifies these constructions according to the morality they are associated with. Positive moral characteristics include for example contributions to the economy, loyalty, generosity, discipline, respectfulness, intelligence, or creativity. This analytical framework then enables us to relate the multiplicity of identified discursive constructs to key research questions and theoretical dilemmas.

Advantaged groups are perceived as powerful and positively constructed in moral terms. On the other hand, the contenders are also powerful but negatively constructed because they have a reputation for gaining their power unfairly or abusing it. Dependents are regarded as politically weak but with a positive moral construction and, as a result, they deserve to be protected by public policies. Deviants (e.g., criminals) are constructed as politically weak with negative moral connotations since they are supposed to be punished and controlled (Ingram & Schneider, 2015; Schneider & Ingram, 2008).

Table 1. Number of search entries found and selected for analysis.

Parliament of the Czech Republic	Search entries found	Entries selected for in-depth analysis
Senate (2020–2022)	16	5
Chamber of Deputies (2021–2023)	389	194
Total number of entries	405	201

Employing critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the authors examined verbatim transcripts of parliamentary debates. To reveal mechanisms behind the social construction of target populations, we combined Schneider and Ingram's (2008) approach with Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, pp. 63–94). That is, the task of the analyst is to identify the topoi—parts of argumentation that belong to the obligatory (either explicit or inferable) premises. The topoi are the content-related warrants or conclusion rules that connect arguments with the overarching claim of the discourse studied.

The analytical process consisted of two phases. First, open coding of the material fostered familiarisation with the material and uncovered topics present in the corpus. Second, the data were approached with a question (“How are the self-employed constructed in the excerpts?”) to describe the characteristics and/or behaviours of the self-employed implied and described in the excerpt. The last step involved coding these descriptions with four major categories of the analytical framework as described above: advantaged, dependents, and deviants. The following presentation of the results is organised along these categories.

4. Findings

The self-employed as a target population of public policies was constructed on the axis of power (weak to strong) and the moral charge (positive to negative). Policy issues and events that were mostly debated by MPs included the skyrocketing energy prices (mostly 2022) and the question of whom and how the state should help in this situation and why the self-employed should also be eligible for some social security schemes. A recurring theme was the EET and its abolishment.

The findings are presented in three sub-sections, shedding light on the social constructions of the self-employed as advantaged (4.1), dependent (4.2), and deviants (4.3). Contenders were not present in the analysed material. Quotes from the empirical material are accompanied by information about the opposition/coalition positioning, the party (far-right populist SPD; populist ANO; right-wing ODS; Pirate) the parliamentary session number, the date of the quote, and excerpt ID. For detailed information about the party orientation see Havlík and Lysek (2022, p. 233). Each section ends with a paragraph outlining the conclusion rules present regarding social constructions (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

4.1. Self-Employed as Advantaged

On some occasions, the self-employed are constructed in a positive way and with strong power; thus, they deserve the attention of policymakers, along with advantageous policies. At the heart of this topos in our empirical material is the idea of the self-employed as business entrepreneurs. This construction foregrounds the characteristics or imaginaries of *small entrepreneurship*, *hard work*, *tight budgets*, and *honesty*—values that are similar to the modest aspirations of the young self-employed in northeast England (MacDonald & Gazitzoglu, 2019, p. 4). This social construction evokes traditional tradesmen and service providers, epitomised by actors referring to restaurant owners and hair salons. The entrepreneur, in the Czech political discourse as present in our data, is an ordinary citizen doing daily business independently, not relying on the state and creating economic value—which the state cannot create, as per the former Minister of Economic Affairs (11 July 2023, session 71, excerpt 71–31, from our research data). Similar to the Irish case (Kenny & Scriver, 2012), these tradesmen are considered to be the “backbone of the economy” because their

economic activity creates value, and part of this value is transferred to the state in the form of taxes. The tradesmen may even employ other people and thus multiply their value creation.

The construction of the self-employed as advantaged echoes the Weberian construction of entrepreneurship. This construction describes responsible rational entrepreneurship, in contrast to adventurous capitalism (see Weber, 2002). Like Weber, Czech politicians argue that the entrepreneurs' work ethic, characterised by hard work, discipline, and frugality, has contributed to the growth of capitalism. Thus, there is no need for risk-taking capitalism, where entrepreneurs are willing to take significant risks in pursuit of innovative ideas or unconventional business ventures. Instead of passion and drive, members of parliament emphasise daily and cyclical hard work. In contrast to neoliberal values of risk-taking, innovation, and openness to change, parliamentary discussions stress stability, activity, and independence:

Perhaps we should appreciate the success: We should appreciate everyone who does not extend his hand to the state, who is active, who works to support himself. Let's appreciate that and make it easier for them so that there are as many people like that as possible, so that more people are interested in working independently, rather than us undermining their efforts and then boasting that we are paying out more and more on various benefits and so on. (14 July 2023, session 71, Opposition MP, SPD, excerpt 71-222)

This quote also illustrates that with their independence, the self-employed may even be seen as more positive actors than the state apparatus. This rhetoric was developed further in the discussion about the role of entrepreneurs and the role of the state in reconstruction after the Covid-19 pandemic. As an opposition MP and the former Minister of Economic Affairs noted:

But no state or government will do an economic reboot; only the private sector will always do it: that is, companies, entrepreneurs, tradesmen and their high-performing employees. (11 July 2023, session 71, ANO, excerpt 71-31)

In this quote above, independence is closely associated with performance, whereas in other instances, it is referred to as hard work. The individual entrepreneurial activities are productive, while the state apparatus only sustains the environment in which these acts can freely happen. This productivity does not rest on making capital work; it is also fuelled by individual sacrifice. Politicians hailing and paying verbal respect to the sacrifices of the self-employed have already been called out as hypocritical (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 13). This verbal acknowledgement is contradicted by the policy decisions by which self-employed people in Czechia are not entitled to or have limited access to several social security measures that employees can enjoy (e.g., financial support due to caring responsibilities). What politicians construct as a sacrifice serves as proof of the skills and capabilities of the self-employed in adapting to the insecure environment created not only by market forces but also by policy measures. Politicians emphasise the sacrifices while glossing over the impact of policy on the precarious conditions of the self-employed. This foregrounding of the moral value of suffering contributes positively to the social construction of the self-employed as worthy, good citizens:

Compared with employees, for example, self-employed are not entitled to sick leave, maternity leave; they do not get food stamps; they cannot get sick pay for a family member; they are not entitled to paid holidays and so on. They therefore bear considerably more risk than employees. For example,

when tradespeople want to take holidays, it is only unpaid, and the holiday is at the expense of their salary. Self-employed therefore do not benefit from, or are not entitled to benefit from, the benefits that are due to employees, and despite all this, the government is throwing sticks under their feet and digging trenches between them and employees. (17 June 2023, session 65, Opposition MP, SPD, excerpt 65–57)

Using the comparison with employees enables the above speaker to point out their major difference from the self-employed who live independently and accept risk. Therefore, the topos of the self-employed as privileged can be summarised in the following statements:

1. Entrepreneurs work for the good of society.
2. When they are well off, the whole community thrives.
3. They are defined by daily honest work, independence, and activity, not by a desire for risk-taking and collecting high rewards.

Implicitly, it is acknowledged that the goal of their entrepreneurship is to provide means for their families, not to create excessive profit. In their small ways, these “little Czechs” (Holy, 1996) contribute to the prosperity of their society by making services available to citizens and saving the state and large employers a burden by being independent and self-sufficient actors.

4.2. Self-Employed as Dependents

The power of the hard-working self-employed, whose individual activity creates the backbone of Czech society, is nevertheless not unassailable. For example, small businesses were affected by restrictions and lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. Most businesses faced temporary closures, supply chain disruptions, and reduced consumer demand due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. However, a positive social construction of the self-employed is sustained even when they need some help from the state:

It is indisputable that after two years of harsh measures that are restricting and destroying their businesses, our tradesmen and small Czech companies clearly deserve significant and, above all, really effective help from the state. Help which will prevent the disappearance of [the] self-employed and which will also support honestly working small entrepreneurs in the future and enable them to restart their businesses. (17 February 2022, session 10, Opposition MP SPD, excerpt 10–11)

The self-employed in this social construction suffer more than expected in the market economy (in the topos of “advantaged”), due to unpredictable external factors and state measures. Even under harsh conditions they survived, but the above speaker estimates that recovery to full economic output needs state intervention. This quote assumes that there is some acceptable level of sacrifice and insecurity in self-employment and when this is exceeded, the state should offer effective help. Being able to sustain oneself (and one’s family) independently in the past builds up the moral credit for help in the future. In the quote above, the state was considerably responsible for policies harmful to the self-employed and is called to make up for its mistakes. On other occasions, this picture is painted in a different light and extends to market forces and the macroeconomic situation:

In many ways they [the self-employed] are surviving; in many ways, they are barely standing to make a living running that business, that trade, especially somewhere in the countryside. Moreover, let us remember that they have it much more complicated today. We all know that demand is falling, demand is falling due to the fact that prices are rising....At the same time, their costs are rising. Perhaps we will see that too. Let us look at how much was paid for energy. (19 May 2023, session 66, Opposition MP, former Minister of Economic Affairs, ANO, excerpt 66–3)

With the skyrocketing energy prices, politicians have grown more concerned with the insecurity of self-employment. Apart from the external factors, some other instances also brought to attention the fragility of self-employment. These were often situations when “little Czech” entrepreneurs faced regulations alone:

Administrators collect these [copyright] fees in these hardware stores, hairdressers and other establishments, where the legal conditions for this are not met, and they simply rely on the low level of defence or legal literacy of entrepreneurs [and] tradesmen who, of course, in the face of a huge organisation collecting [copyright] fees with many, many lawyers, are not prepared to face such an unequal fight. (27 September 2023, session 35, Opposition MP, Pirate, excerpt 35–177)

The state, according to this quote, colonises the entrepreneurial sphere and creates barriers that inhibit the activity of the self-employed (among other economic players). The regulation of the purchase of used vehicles for entrepreneurs or the necessity to pay fees to copyright unions in public establishments are mentioned as other inconveniences. Implicitly, the MPs speak about the self-employed in Czechia as people who do not stand up to the entrepreneurship ideal (Down & Warren, 2008). That is, they lack financial resources (buying secondhand cars from Germany that do not fulfil ecological norms to save money) and knowledge (they might fail to choose the most rational option for taxing their income), and they cannot defend themselves from the pressures of state bureaucracy or the copyright collecting agency. These examples justify further intervention in the entrepreneurial sphere while staying true to the entrepreneurial ideal.

Parliamentary speakers pointed out that in critical periods, the independence and stability of the entrepreneur population might be weaker, so the state should consider their vulnerability when preparing new policies. These, however, should be restricted only to the most effective and urgent matters, as excessive state interventions also make the self-employed vulnerable and less active:

Entrepreneurs and tradesmen need to be supported [and] relieved of the absolutely senseless obligations you have imposed on them under your government. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–41)

This red tape rhetoric criticises bureaucratic regulations and administrative procedures as a burden that distracts the self-employed from the core of their economic activity. In the Czech context, such burdensome procedures are emblematised by the EET. EET represents an emblematic issue of policy conflict between the government and opposition in entrepreneurial policy.

This system, in which EETs were connected to an online tax authority, was initiated in 2016 by the government, led by the social democratic party ČSSD with support from the populist ANO. In the first phase,

the EET was obligatory to record sales for accommodation and catering services. In the second step, the obligation to also record sales for retail and wholesale trade was added. Initially, registration was intended as compulsory for other sectors, except for certain crafts. However, these third and fourth waves were postponed. The system was heavily criticised by right-wing opposition, which proposed its complete abolition. After the election, right-wing parties formed the government and pushed for the abolition of the EET by the end of 2022. Discussions surrounding this legislative decision brought to the foreground the topos of self-employment as dependent on the Czech state.

The EET system embodies the barriers that the government erects for the idealised development of the business environment which enables the advantaged self-employed to thrive, as described in the previous section of this article. From the perspective of the system's critics, these barriers have established a culture of mistrust that has contaminated the relationship between entrepreneurs and the state:

And the obligations that come with that—posting signs, as I said here, checks on nonsensical obligations, undercover controls, fines for absurdities, and those fines—I'm not going to repeat them here. All these things that came with the EET system itself created a hostile environment towards tradesmen and entrepreneurs. It was really an attitude of pre-emptive mistrust towards economically active people. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–43)

The topos of the dependent self-employed can be summarised in the following statements:

1. Moments of crisis represent deviations from the normal situation.
2. In these moments, self-employed people cannot operate independently, and they depend on the state to protect their interests or even provide financial support. The self-employed are defined as weak agents who are positive for society as a whole and thus deserve to be supported with no ramifications for their moral standing. Besides the temporality of this position, there is an important aspect to how this construction is related to other actors in the same field, particularly the state administration.
3. The state bureaucracy is a strong actor which colonises the entrepreneurial sphere. The bureaucratic system is discussed as being unresponsive to the needs and values of individuals and represents a barrier to the development of the entrepreneurial sphere.

4.3. Self-Employed as Deviants

Up to this point, this article has discussed social constructions of the self-employed in Czechia which positively feature this group. However, the dark sides of self-employment are depicted in the topos of deviants. Deviants are differentiated also by their weak political position which makes them an ideal target for regulations and scapegoating and to utilise their ostracisation for the legitimisation of various policies. The construction of the self-employed as deviants is underpinned by the assumption that the deviant self-employed pose a threat to the independent, rule-abiding self-employed.

In this context, parliamentary speakers recalled the period in the 1990s which was a phase of economic transformation and adaptation of Czechia to the capitalist system. In the collective memory, this period symbolises the unpredictability of the economic environment, the growth of the informal economy, and the lack of protection for entrepreneurs:

Today, even experts from professional organisations, entrepreneurs and trade unionists consider the current government's plan to be a senseless return to the so-called 1990s. They point out that some businesses have once again shifted part of their income to the grey economy. (11 October 2022, session 41, Opposition MP, ANO, excerpt 41–42)

The construction of the self-employed as deviants appeared in the EET debate when it was used by the advocates of EETs. They argued that the EET cash register system clears the economy of dishonest and tax-avoiding self-employed and entrepreneurs. According to this view, the danger for honest entrepreneurs does not lurk in state expansion and colonisation but rather in the lack of control over other entrepreneurs whose behaviour deviates from the norms. Deviation from the norms (e.g., tax evasion or dependent self-employment) may create a surplus of capital resources which gives the deviants an advantage over the ideal, the honest self-employed. Growing deviance in the economic sphere makes it hard for the state to know what is happening in the economy and forces it to rely on inaccurate data as material for decision-making:

Strangely, however, many catering businesses today have payment terminals that have broken down. Why? But you certainly haven't noticed that, have you? For the restaurant or craft shop owner, this mapped outflow of funds can provide additional, secondary indicators that can help guide the future direction or expansion of the business. We actually educated them; we helped them [with EET]. But this data [is] also important for government decision-making, and you know that. But you probably do not need the data or the money, my dear government. (25 November 2022, session 46, Opposition MP, ANO, excerpt 46–16)

The construction of the self-employed as deviants allowed the opposition to legitimize EET enforcement as a mechanism of control over the entrepreneurial sector. Metaphorically, its purpose was to separate the wheat from the chaff. The scope of control has been debated as illustrated by the following quote:

All of these [obligations] that came with the EET system itself created a hostile environment towards tradesmen and entrepreneurs....[T]he dissent opinions [of the constitutional judges] also contained a very important sentence for me: that the introduction of EET was something like keeping an entire classroom after school just because one pupil was disturbing the class. But it is exactly the opposite, ladies and gentlemen. We do not need to erect barriers to business and control everyone permanently online. (23 June 2022, session 27, Coalition MP, ODS, excerpt 27–43)

The lack of clarity about how many dishonest self-employed there are opens up the floor for discussion about the extent of deviant entrepreneurship. Lack of data and research create space for anecdotal evidence (e.g., card payment terminals that have broken down).

Deviant construction of self-employment derives from the following conclusion rules:

1. If there are some dishonest entrepreneurs, we need to protect honest entrepreneurs from dishonest ones.
2. Measures against deviants must not endanger the population of those who are to be protected from deviants.

5. Discussion

Recent discussions of precarity as part of self-employment present a somewhat ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, the literature on the neoliberal entrepreneurial self (Neely, 2020; Wynn et al., 2018) shows that the self-employed internalise the neoliberal discourse and defend it at all costs (Gershon, 2017; Musílek et al., 2020). On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature documenting that self-employment does not lead to material prosperity (Henley, 2023), and thus, it is somewhat misleading to understand all experiences of self-employment as being subjugated to the neoliberal logic of competition, self-reliance, and individualism. Some self-employed people just do not have another option to make their living. In sum, the issue is whether the self-employed are the backbone of late capitalism or are a precarious class.

This article attempts to bridge these two positions by pointing out that the discursive elements of enterprise culture play a vital role in shaping and justifying the policies that have concrete and material impacts on the self-employed. Also, MacDonald and Giazitzoglu (2019) point to politicians and their attempts to shape the labour market—often promoting and pushing people into self-employment. Nevertheless, when looking at the details of the Czech parliamentary debate, it is clear that the self-employed are not fully complicit in and embodying these neoliberal ideals. Indeed, they may lack assertiveness, risk-taking and capital resources. These findings complement the literature on self-employment that still mainly relies on the ideal of the heroic entrepreneurial individual and that masks a whole spectrum of other experiences and material realities.

Across the topoi of self-employment in Czechia (see Table 2) there are two cross-cutting moral themes. The first is concerned with legitimacy and resulting deservingness, and the second stretches between trust and control. Standing up to the ideal of the hard-working, frugal, and independent self-employed who co-create the backbone of Czech society provides legitimacy to the provision of benefit schemes when crises hit the country. Former contributions to the state budget in the form of taxes or to the pension schemes are expressions of commitment that may elicit state action addressing the specific needs of the self-employed: for example, when they are omitted from the initial responses to the spiking electricity prices. This moral dimension is apparent in the frequent usage of the rhetoric sequence “citizens, families, self-employed” by several MPs regardless of the policy issue.

In crises, however, the self-employed cannot count on a safety net provided by the state. Yet they need to trust that the state will reciprocate their contribution to the country’s economic development. Thus, the second moral issue stretches between control and trust. Various MPs acknowledge that the self-employed are fully capable of conducting their businesses (following the moral ideal mentioned above) and that the state should trust them to know what is in their best interest. However, trust from the state is necessarily cautious because of the danger of the tax-avoiding self-employed moving part of their prosperous economic activity to the informal economy. The deliberation between parties is not about whether the self-employed should be controlled. It is limited to debating the degree and specific practices of control. The state oversight is positioned as protecting consumers (fellow citizens) and the self-employed from deviant entrepreneurship. When the trust is broken and all the self-employed are taken for deviants, the economic system is overburdened with inefficiency and a crisis of legitimacy undermines the solidarity between those with different employment statuses. When the trust is mutual and the majority of the self-employed play their part according to the moral ideal, they deserve the right not to be controlled excessively.

Table 2. Topoi of the social construction of the self-employed in Czech parliamentary debates (2020–2023).

		Constructions	
		Positive	Negative
Power	Strong	<p>Advantaged</p> <p>Referred to as the backbone of the economy, independent creators of employment opportunities, and taxpayers who are no burden to the state.</p> <p>Conclusion rules: Entrepreneurs work for the good of society; When they are well off, the whole community thrives; They are defined by daily honest work, independence, and activity, not by a desire for risk-taking and collecting high rewards.</p>	<p>Contenders</p> <p>Not present in the analysed material.</p>
	Weak	<p>Dependents</p> <p>Referred to as on a tight budget, often lacking information when facing legal claims and as recipients in compensation schemes.</p> <p>Conclusion rules: Moments of crisis represent deviations from the normal situation; Self-employed depend on the state to protect their interests or even provide financial support; The state bureaucracy is a strong actor which colonises the entrepreneurial sphere when needed.</p>	<p>Deviants</p> <p>Referred to as tax-avoiding, shifting to cash-only payments, and not having solidarity with society.</p> <p>Conclusion rules: If there are some dishonest entrepreneurs, we need to protect honest entrepreneurs from dishonest ones; Measures against deviants must not destroy the population of those who are to be protected from deviants.</p>

Both these moral disputes consider the self-employed to be a coherent group and overlook the differences that may affect the self-employed's choices and practices (e.g., moving part of their income to the grey economy may be an expression of a lack of resources and scarcity of consumer demand in times of high inflation rather than an expression of a lack of solidarity). The discursive battle about the extent of control and bureaucracy obfuscated the differences in the socio-economic conditions of the self-employed and ultimately their precarity.

6. Conclusion

In our article, we have examined how politicians, operating in their dual capacities as discursive and policy actors, construct moral expectations of the self-employed, which are used for the justification of policy measures. Thus, we have analysed which aspects of entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996) permeated the public policy discourses. The hegemony of entrepreneurial culture, together with the neoliberal notion of freedom and independence (Crowley & Hodson, 2014), is apparent in the delegitimisation of some regulatory measures (in our case the EET system).

Our study of the Czech parliamentary debates contributes to the theory of enterprise culture with the description of discursive strategies involved in making the precarious self-employed invisible. Also, it points to the cultural anchoring of enterprise culture. The Czech case, for example, differs from the hegemony of the risk-taking ideal of an entrepreneurial culture with the emphasis on the rhetorical figure of the traditional, hard-working, and frugal entrepreneur. This figure is reinforced by recurrent reference to the post-communist transition to capitalism in Central Europe to which the current situation in the entrepreneurial sphere is compared.

Our analysis shows that the discourse of self-employment tends to obscure the socio-economic conditions of dependents, masking the presence of precarity within the self-employment sector, and the vulnerability is acknowledged only in reference to major crises. The moral issues of deservingness and control conceal socio-economic aspects of the self-employment experience and, foremost, its precarity. This obfuscation raises critical questions about the friction between the morally laden depictions of self-employed lives and their precarity. Issues related to this friction have been addressed by research on the gig economy (Caza et al., 2022; Gandini, 2019; Purcell & Brook, 2020)—an increasingly prevalent working experience in Europe, although peculiarly absent from the Czech data analysed in this article. Disjointedness between discourses and material reality presents an urgent need for further research aimed at a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted self-employment reality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Verbatim transcripts from both chambers of the Czech parliament in the original language can be found on the respective institutions' websites.

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