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Private Security Companies in the Czech Republic: Rearticulating the Security Field and Transforming Politics

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Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the impact of private security companies’ (PSCs) practices upon the fields of security and politics in the Czech Republic. It focuses on the scandalous case of the biggest Czech private security company ABL/M2.C, whose founder attempted to create a business-firm-party by performing a hostile take-over of an existing minor political party. By applying the global security assemblages model and by drawing on the recent literature on commodification of security, the ABL/M2.C case is situated in the larger socio-political-legal-economic context of the booming private security business, whose extensive linkages with Czech politics are best characterized as reverse revolving door phenomenon. This phenomenon in turn suggests a possibility that the continuing absence of specific law for regulation of PSCs’ activities is due to too much, rather than too little, political interest in PSCs’ activities. This is problematic because the practices of PSCs have already contributed to a significant rearticulation of the Czech security field by enhancing the commodification of security, while ABL’s use of security methods for political purposes has rearticulated the field of politics in a number of profoundly negative ways.

Key words: Private security companies, security practices, security field, public good, commodification, business-firm-party, Czech Republic.

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**Introduction**

In a closed meeting of top management of the biggest Czech private security company (PSC) Agency of the White Lion (ABL) in October 2008, the company’s founder Vít Bárta presented a novel Strategic Plan for 2009-2014. According to the transcript of this plan, published by a leading Czech daily in April 2011, the company aimed at achieving a dominant market share via “uniform building of stable economic and political power.” To achieve the former, ABL was to develop “new categories of customers in the field of public administration (health, education, government agencies, local government, social services)” as well as “a comprehensive security service for the [Czech] business elites.” To achieve the latter, ABL was to acquire its “own political power base” in the form of the previously little known political party called Věci veřejné (Public Affairs). (Idnes.cz, 2011) In June 2010, Public Affairs competed for the first time in the general parliamentary elections. Running on an anti-corruption platform (accusing the representatives of the established Czech political parties of being “dinosaurs” of political-economic power-games), the party won 10.88% of votes. This translated in 23 members of parliament (MPs, out of 200) and an invitation to join the new coalition government, where the formal party leader was allocated the post of Minister of Interior (in charge of drafting the long-overdue law for regulating the activities of PSCs in the Czech Republic); the informal party leader (or the “superguru” as the founder of ABL called himself) the post of Minister of Transport (in charge of the biggest public infrastructure spending programs); while his wife was duly elected as the Vice-President of the lower (but in terms of legislative powers more important) chamber of the Czech Parliament.

As such, mere two years after its formulation, ABL’s Strategic Plan appeared to be on the track of being accomplished. But as with most master plans, real world developments took a radically different course since the end of 2010. The extensive personal, as well as alleged financial, linkages between the biggest Czech-owned PSC and the newly governmental political party Public Affairs attracted unprecedented media attention. Concerns “that the process of privatization of security will be managed by one man, both as a representative of the state and the founder of one of largest and financially strongest PSCs” (Šmíd, 2010)\(^1\) were reinforced by a number of widely publicized scandals concerning past contracts of ABL, which allegedly included spying on several local politicians and their family members.\(^2\) In April 2011, the founder of ABL was accused of bribery by several of the MPs from Public Affairs, for which he was conditionally sentenced to 18 months of imprisonment a year later. This prompted him to resign from the government and the party split right in the middle, with
Bárta’s faction ultimately going into opposition. The sentence was subsequently suspended by a higher court ruling, according to which the acts of corruption cannot be investigated due to their falling under the broad immunity privileges enjoyed by all Czech MPs. In February 2013, Bárta was elected as the formal chairman of Public Affairs, but the party’s popularity in the public opinion polls is close to zero. ABL, meanwhile, changed its name to Mark2 Corporation (M2.C), claiming that an English name is more suitable for a planned expansion abroad.

Due to the aforementioned developments, for the first time in the modern history of the Czech Republic, Czech journalists as well as the security experts of political parties engaged in a general debate about PSCs’ activities. This debate was long overdue because ABL/M2.C merely represents the visible top of a large iceberg of 7000+ PSCs registered in the Czech Republic. Moreover, as of early 2013, the Czech Republic is the only EU member state where the provision of private security services is not regulated by a special legal act. Czech PSCs therefore still operate under the general 1991 Trade Licensing Act (455/1991 Coll.) as any other type of private business, according to which the same basic minimum rules apply to opening an ice-cream stand and a multi-million private security company. As a consequence, not only was the start of the political debate about security privatization belated, but many of its key protagonists still lack the appreciation of the complexity of this phenomenon. This in particular concerns the possible political, economic, social, legal and security impacts on the functioning of the Czech state and the lives of all people living within its borders.

Building on the recent literature that points out the need to focus on the many subtle ways in which the micro-level practices of private security companies affect security governance as well as the very perception of security as a public good, the primary goal of this article is to analyze the broader impact of PSCs’ activities upon the fields of security and politics in the Czech Republic. The first section of this article therefore applies the global security assemblages model developed by Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams (2009, 2011) to the Czech experience with PSCs since the end of the cold war. Overall, it confirms the key conclusions of the previous case study applications of the model regarding the partial disassembly of the Czech state’s security functions and the corresponding rearticulation of relations among public and private, as well as global and local, actors in the provision of security in the Czech Republic. The second section assesses the plausible explanations for the continuing lack of specific legal regulation of PSCs’ activities and concludes that it is due to too much, rather than too little, political interest. Finally, drawing on Elke Krahmann’s (2008)
argument that the conceptualization of security as a commodity rather than a collective good affects the meaning and implementation of security in Western democracies, the third section of this article shows that in the case of the Czech Republic, the practices of PSCs are not only changing the perception of safety as a public good, but also the context of the political decision-making on, and implementation of, specific security measures.

Methodologically speaking, the focus on micro-practices of PSCs and their relations to the practices of other (in particular public) security actors in the Czech Republic represents a conscious attempt to respond to Anna Leander’s (2010) call to break away with formalism and atomism in the study of contemporary security governance. The former can be achieved by placing the analysis of daily practices of PSCs squarely in the study of (re-)production of security orders (or “governance” understood as “rules of the game”). The latter can be minimized by acknowledging both that a) practices are always contextual because “the context profoundly shapes and influences the practice” by defining “a large share of what is natural, acceptable and doable;” and that b) contexts are themselves made up of practices that (re)produce them. Moreover, in stressing the importance of both 1st and 2nd order reflexivity, the practice approach uniquely captures the importance of including the discourses of security practitioners (1st order, which includes the representatives of PSCs) in addition to the views of various security experts and academicians “observing, analyzing, describing and depicting the world” (2nd order, which includes the author of this article). (Leander, 2010: 70-71) Although the Czech PSCs have received relatively little attention both internationally and, until recently, domestically, an “exploratory” 2nd order analysis outlining the key data and basic characteristics of the Czech private security market is already available (Bureš, 2012). This article adds the 1st order reflexivity by presenting the perspectives of eight owners and/or top-level managers of PSCs operating in the Czech Republic, with whom the author of this article conducted semi-structured interviews.3 Although this sample is undoubtedly a small one,4 it is representative of the current PSCs’ market in the Czech Republic as it includes the representatives of all types of PSCs in terms of the company size, ownership, and service specialization. Several of the interviewees are also representatives of the largest and most active professional associations of PSCs, whose positions have (re)shaped both the PSCs practices and the context in which they operate. The transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were purposefully translated as authentically as possible to preserve the original discourse, whose form is as important as the actual content. Unfortunately, the space restrictions do not permit the publication of the entire transcripts of all interviews in this article, but its author will provide them to anyone upon request.
Global Security Assemblages Analysis of Private Security Companies in the Czech Republic

The origins of the global security assemblages model developed by Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams can be traced to the criminological concepts of nodal and/or network governance, whose primary aim is to explain the increasing participation of private actors in the provision of security. In contrast to most IR treatments of private security actors, which suffer from a “mercenary misconception” (excessive focus on the more sensational private military companies and corresponding neglect of the expansion of commercial private security companies, and resulting tendency to view all private security actors as illicit, illegal, and immoral (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011: 14)), the nodal/network governance perspective presents a more nuanced picture of the constantly evolving web of relations between various public and private actors (the nodes), which is always located in a particular time and place (e.g. Leander’s context). Thus, rather than the often presented view that the rise of private security actors implies the decline of public security actors, the global security assemblages model suggests that “what is at stake in ‘security privatization’ is much more than a simple transfer of previously public functions to private actors. Instead, these developments indicate important developments in the relationship between security and the sovereign state, structures of political power and authority, and the operations of global capital” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2009: 3) As such, privatization of security “does not happen outside the structures of the state: it is embedded in the social and the legal and may well involve the participation of elements of the public security forces.” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011: 236)

States are therefore not disappearing, or fading away, “rather particular component of the state are undergoing a process of ‘denationalization’ and rearticulation.” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011: 91) Importantly, however, these processes do lead to shifts in the relative positions of private actors within the security field and they also alter the context of political contestation. In the security field, a result of these shifts is the emergence of what Abrahamsen & Williams (2011: 91) call global security assemblages: “transnational structures and networks in which a range of different actors and normativities interact, cooperate and compete to produce new institutions, practices and forms of deterritorialized security governance.”

In order to comprehend the constantly evolving reassembly of security governance in a particular time and location, Abrahamsen and Williams (2011: 8) stress the need to:

[T]hink of security within categories that can retain the continuing salience of the public-private and national-international divides, while at the same time locating them
within wider social transformations in order to see how their shifting configurations reflect and influence how power is organized and legitimated in different historical periods and political settings.

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Abrahamsen & Williams 2011 have in mind a broader understanding of power than Weber’s monopoly of physical coercion. In addition to this material form of power, they include symbolic and cultural power (or what Bourdieu called “capital”). Specifically, therefore, we need to focus not just on the material power of PSCs, which stems from the accumulation of economic capital and material resources, but also on the cultural power, which takes many forms (Bourdieu 1986), but in case of PSCs, it is primarily derived from their day-to-day provision of the protection of liberal property rights, and from their legal status as ‘agents’ of their customer, who control or own private property. (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011: 108-109) In contrast, the symbolic power is primarily grounded in abstract symbolic systems. For example, in case of states, an important source of their symbolic power is the claim to legitimate monopoly on the use of force to provide the public good of security. No other actor in the security field at the moment can make a similar claim, which is also one of the reasons why the “expansion of private security risks undermining its own symbolic capital and legitimacy if it comes to be seen as eroding the public good of security and its constitutive social role.” At the same time, however, the incapacity (real or perceived) of public security actors of delivering public security allows PSCs to portray themselves as legitimate and competent actors who are in fact “helping an overstretched state, as stepping in where an incompetent, inefficient or ineffective public authority is incapable of meeting it obligations” (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011: 110)

While Abrahamsen and Williams applied the model to analyze the role of private security actors in the security fields of two African countries, in the following paragraphs it is utilized to analyze both the (mirco-)practices of PSCs and the context of security governance in the Czech Republic. Concerning the latter, PSCs have already accumulated considerable material power. The total number of PSCs’ employees has for several years outnumbered the national police personnel (55 000 to 39 000 as of 2012) and the annual revenue of the Czech-based PSCs exceeds $1 billion, which translates into 0,5% of the Czech GDP. (Asociace soukromých bezpečnostních služeb, 2010) Much of this power has been generated by the three largest PSCs in the market. SECURITAS CR Ltd., a local subsidiary of the Swedish PSC Securitas AB, is number one in terms of the annual revenue ($85 million), as well as the number of employees (4,500). (Securitas CZ, 2011) Number two is the subsidiary of a British PSC, G4S, with an annual revenue of $82 million and 2,500 employees. (G4S CZ, 2011)
Number three in the market is the aforementioned biggest Czech-owned PSC Mark2 Corporation with 1300 employees and revenue of $52 million. (Sýkorová, 2011)

The fact that the two largest PSCs in the Czech Republic are local subsidiaries of the two biggest global PSCs confirms the importance of the global in the analysis of the Czech security field. As elsewhere in the world, international PSCs took advantage of their superior know-how, capital base, and better insurance deals and quickly established themselves as the biggest players in the market. For their part, however, all interviewed representatives of the local branches of foreign PSCs stressed that their presence and practices cultivate the Czech security field not only by importing the latest security technologies and locally inaccessible know-how, but also in terms of cultivating the norms and ethics of the private security business in the Czech Republic. For example, the general director of Securitas has stated that a key difference between local Czech and foreign PSCs is that the latter have “codes of ethical behavior that include no sponsorship and no meddling in politics, no cooperation with criminals elements etc. Unfortunately, in the absence of a [PSCs’] law in the Czech Republic, it all depends upon the moral credit of the owners of the local Czech PSCs.” Similarly, the general director of Pinkerton Czech Republic commented on the aforementioned scandals of ABL: “Pinkerton is not allowed to work for political parties in their political struggles. We cannot spy on one political party for another. We can only provide security for a party congress.” At the same time, he acknowledged the superior knowledge of the local security field is a key asset of Czech PSCs specializing in detective services. Another PSC representative also highlighted the importance of the local context when he complained that: “You will always keep stumbling on something over which foreign investors shake their heads. A funny example might be a giant slingshot used by workers to shoot poultry from a factory of one well-known company in the nearby fields.” The peculiarity of the post-communist Czech mentality is indeed something that the managers of foreign PSCs often find difficult to comprehend, which confirms the importance of the local in the analysis of the Czech security field.

Concerning the symbolic power, as in the two previous case studies utilizing the global security assemblages model, the representatives of Czech PSCs have tried to explain the steady growth of the Czech private security sector by references to the failure of various Czech public security agencies to act at all, effectively, and/or sufficiently well. They also frequently contrasted the mediocre public security services with professional, cost-effective and technologically superior security solutions provided by their PSCs:
How many corrupt authorities are there in criminal and/or administrative proceedings? Not to mention, how often are these authorities stupid? Why should a citizen not secure his own database of evidence, upon which he can base his rights and compete with the corrupt criminal law prosecutor, whom we also have plenty of? Both citizens and legal entities are entitled to say wait a moment, I can also arrange this myself, when the state fails to act. (Kameník, Association of Security Services)

If the state did what it is supposed to do, nobody would demand PSCs service. Who would want to pay for them? But the state is not delivering, so there is a demand. ….

One of our clients from the banking sector, for example, originally relied on a remote control center provided by the state authorities. Whenever they had a security incident, the police either came late, or not at all, because they had a foreign delegation or a murder case in town. So we got a new order because the bank wanted the service to be always perfect. (Růžička, Alkom)

The aforementioned quotes not only represent a frontal attack on the symbolic power of the Czech state to provide security as public good available to all. They also symbolize conscious attempts to present the PSCs as alternative providers of security services without whose existence the Czech state would no longer be able to function: “If the private security services went on strike for a week, I would like to see what would be left of the state and of the private property of its citizens.” (Zapletal, Union of Security Services) Although the Czech state would certainly survive such a strike, it is clear that it is at times participating in its own partial disassembly.

In addition to accusing the Czech state of failing to perform as provider of public security, several PSCs representatives also accused the Czech public authorities of being the worst costumers whose actions are distorting the entire market with PSCs services. Regarding the latter, the representatives of more established PSCs blame the public sector authorities for awarding 90% of all their contracts solely on the criterion of the lowest price. Although cost cutting is usually considered to be one of the key reasons for security privatization, in the Czech Republic the public sector apparently awards contracts to private providers whose price offers cannot even cover the payment of the legally-required minimum wage for their employees. According to the interviewed PSCs’ representatives, this practice encourages the proliferation of PSCs of rather questionable reputation, which account for up to 40 percent of the market (see below). Moreover, it significantly decreases the quality of private security services that are provided to even the key public institutions such as the Czech National Bank or the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic. This prompted the Secretary of the Union of Private Security Services of the Czech Republic to propose a black swan scenario of a gradual infiltration of the Czech public sector by a terrorist and/or criminal organization that would use a few fake private security and IT companies to win the open tenders for the
provision of security and IT solutions to the key national security installations by offering the lowest prices: “So in a few years, they will have their men everywhere. Then, on one fine morning, they will have the Czech state in check by controlling the key objects and communications. But the government has saved. Maybe it's fantastic, but beautifully simple. It takes just a couple of companies that will win by offering the lowest price in open bid tenders.” Although certainly hyperbolic, the scenario merely represents the most extreme example of the PSCs representatives’ attack upon the symbolic power of the Czech state, which is presented not only as being ineffective or incapable, but hazardously irresponsible in the provision of even the most basic national security functions.

When it comes to the cultural power, many of the interviewed PSCs’ representatives specifically emphasized the principal-agent relationships that they have with their customers, pointing out that as agents, PSCs do only what their principals contractually ask them to do when it comes to the protection of their own property: “PSCs exist only because private citizens transfer to professionals the protection of their private property rights, health, and information. It is about a primary and defensive protection, whereby they protect their interests, because the state can never guarantee that no one will ever be assaulted or robbed.” Interestingly, the author of this statement, the secretary of the largest umbrella professional association of Czech PSCs, as well as two other interviewees, has also invoked the principal-agent relationship to criticize the negative media coverage of the aforementioned ABL scandal concerning allegations of spying upon local politicians in Prague:

The same applies to ABL’s tracking of politicians – did they have a reason, order, or legal interest? Nobody has asked them this question. And that is the problem. Hypothetically, it could have the case that they had a contract to collect evidence of corruption. For example, a gentleman’s request was repeatedly rejected, so he felt aggrieved by decisions of the town hall and he suspected some kind of intrigue. There would be a written contract with the PSC and it would be a totally different story. A private detective would collect the evidence and the gentlemen would use it in a civil litigation. (Kameník, Association of Security Services)

All interviewees also complained that due to the negative media coverage of one PSC’s scandal, it would be difficult to find a business sector with a worse public image and poorer reputation than theirs. On the one hand, this confirms Leander’s claim that scandalous cases draw away the attention from the “normal and well-behaved market.” On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, the PSC industry advocates and lobbyist have clearly not managed to seize upon the hitherto biggest PSC scandal “to become the sole interpreters of the normal situation.” (Leander, 2010: 60) They have, nonetheless, in unison argued that the ABL scandal was an isolated bad egg spoiling the basket and they mostly blamed its occurrence on
the absence of a specific legal code that would define the scope of, and set the basic rules for, the provision of PSCs services in the Czech Republic. As such, as both Leander (2010: 60) and Abrahamsen and Williams (2011: 116) predicted, the PSCs’ representatives did stress the importance of legal regulation while completely neglecting that “the private security sector should not be approached simply in terms of regulation, quality control and wages. Instead, security provision located within a field of struggle and connected to fundamental political and economic questions.” Nevertheless, the absence of any specific legal regulation to the provision of private security services is a rather peculiar feature of the Czech security field and, as discussed in the next section of this article, it is accounts for a significant part of the explanation of both the ABL scandal and other oddities of the Czech security field.

Too Much or Too Little Political Interest in Czech Private Security Companies?

There is little doubt that the two decades-long absence of a specific legal code for the provision of private security services goes a great deal towards explaining many of the peculiar features of the Czech private security market, including the existence of 7000+ PSCs in a country with a population of 10.5 million whose territory is slightly smaller than that of South Carolina (since literally anyone could establish a PSCs due to the lack of any minimum requirements concerning the level and type of education, clean criminal record, or state of health); the existence of 16 different professional associations (which have thus far mostly focused on promoting narrow specific interests of their own members, in particular when it comes to securing relatively minor, yet potentially lucrative, legislative changes related to the technical standards for the provision of their specific security services); and a relatively large market share (30 percent) of the so-called “gray zone” PSCs that use unethical security practices, in addition to the 10 percent share of the unregistered “black zone” PSCs that use even illegal practices. It is therefore not surprising that both the representatives of the more reputable PSCs, as well as many public security officials, are not happy with the continuation of the legal and regulatory lacuna. The former see the adoption of some kind of basic legal rules as the key factor for the continuation of their business, with the hope that a new law could also gradually eliminate their gray and black zone competitors. The latter are generally suspicious of PSCs real goals, especially due to the continuous inroads to what they perceive as inherently governmental functions. It would therefore appear that all legitimate actors in the Czech security field agree with the director of Pinkerton’s Czech branch that “the worst option is that the state keeps pretending that the PSC problem simply does not exist, thus
allowing it to live its own life and make its own rules.” Yet, as of early 2013, the new legal code for PSCs’ activities is still awaiting its adoption. This naturally begs the why question.

The “official” part of the answer consists of two elements, both of which highlight the importance of context in shaping both the public and private dimensions of the Czech security field. Firstly, the first PSCs were established only in the early 1990s, when the Czech Republic embarked on what some economists have subsequently called a “shock-therapy” transition toward a free market economy (Lavigne, 1995), which included both the privatization of state assets and the opening of market opportunities for the provision of all kinds of services, including security. The emphasis on establishing the market economy as quickly as possible was based on the neoliberal believe that the invisible hand of the market is inherently superior to the public sector in provision of any service. In practice, the push for speedy privatization also meant that the necessary legal, regulatory and bureaucratic changes lagged behind, or, as in the case of PSCs, they were never put in place at all. Secondly, it is also important to note that the entire post-1989 Czech market for private force encompasses only the lower levels of the force continuum. In the Czech Republic, the term private security company therefore refers to entities that provide mostly passive security services to counteract the “decent ordinary crimes” such as burglary or mugging. The higher levels of the force continuum are not covered – there are no private military companies in the Czech Republic, local or international. As a consequence, it was not until the ABL scandal that the wider public and, correspondingly, the mainstream political parties became seriously interested in the private security businesses.

The ABL scandal also marks the beginning of the more intriguing “unofficial” part of the explanation for the continuing lack of legal framework for PSCs activities. As already noted above, following the 2010 general elections, the official party leader of Public Affairs was given the post of Minister of Interior despite the fact that a number of other high ranking Public Affairs politicians have previously worked for, or received contracts from, the largest Czech PSC, ABL. Thus, even before the leakage of the ABL’s Strategic Plan, the extent of personal connections between ABL and the political party Public Affairs prompted concerns which, with reference to the experience from other countries, could be described as the risk of “reverse revolving doors.” While in a number of Western countries formerly high-ranking political officials have at times assumed positions on the boards of national PSCs, (Leander, 2007: 53) in the Czech Republic the former owner and other top managers of a major PSC have occupied the highest political positions, including the positions in the Ministry of Interior that was charged with the preparation of the new law for PSCs activities. This raised a
number of concerns that were aptly summarized by the Minister of Interior in the shadow government of the main opposition party:

The new law should not become an instrument intended to restrict competition in favor of several major security agencies. Likewise, it should not become a pretext for a significant extension of these services. In order to avoid such a situation, neither the representatives nor former employees of [private] security agencies should directly participate in its preparation in their role of the Deputy Ministers of Interior. Suspicion of a conflict of interest would be entirely appropriate in such a case. (Tejc, 2010)

Interestingly, however, two interviewed senior level bureaucrats in charge of drafting the law at the Ministry of Interior stated that not only has nobody ever tried to put some political pressure on them, they did not even receive any kind of political instructions concerning the key aims of the law. As such, judging from their hitherto experience with other cases of law drafting, the preparation of the new legal code for PSCs’ activities was actually a remarkably apolitical endeavor. They produced the first official draft of the law, which was then analyzed by the representatives of all PSCs’ associations, who jointly submitted more than 100 proposals for revision in the regular legislative procedure of consultation via the Czech Chamber of Commerce, the official entity representing the interests of all Czech businesses. Of these, according to the president of one of the Czech PSCs’ associations, more than 95% were at least partly accepted and 80 were accepted completely after a series of “tough but professional” meetings with the Ministry of Interior officials. The final draft of the law can therefore be seen a compromise satisfying both the public officials and most of the PSCs’ representatives, which highlights the importance of analyzing the changing positions of both private and public actors in the Czech security field.

As of early 2013, the law still awaits governmental approval and a subsequent vote in the parliament. In both venues, the law may be rejected as such. If it does proceed to the parliament, however, the different PSCs’ associations are likely to try to change its specific provisions, and possibly even its spirit via lobbying of individual MPs, who all have the right to propose amendments. This possibility should not be underestimated, because, as one current MP and former ABL employee noted, the majority of Czech MPs actually “has no clear idea about the services of private security agencies and the difficulties and problems related to their provision.” (Kyncl, 2011: 3) For their part, however, several of the interviewed PSCs’ representatives raised another, and potentially far more troublesome, possibility that the hitherto absence of the law is a result of too much, rather than too little, of political interest. Although no political party had ever paid much attention to the private security businesses before 2010 and even after the ABL scandals, PSCs never figured high on Czech
political parties’ agendas, for some individual politicians, the exact opposite may have been the case. According to the president of the Association of Private Security Services, for example, “every fourth member of the parliament has a family member, or some close associate, who owns a security company.” Similarly high percentages of current, or at least former, (co-)owners of PSCs are allegedly also to be found among high ranking public officials in various ministries of the Czech government, including those in charge of various aspects of public security provision. Thus, according to the director of Securitas Czech Republic and Slovakia, “it is logical, that when someone wants to put in place the rules of the game, that would complicate their business, increase their costs, or lead to the reduction of the number of PSCs from thousands to hundreds, they will of course do all they can to prevent all attempts to create any such rules.” It is unfortunately impossible to verify such claims but even if they were exaggerated several times, such entrenched levels of reversed revolving doors could still only be described as alarming. This in turn suggests that as scandalous as the ABL case may have been, it was just the most visible top of a larger iceberg whose hidden parts may well have a far more adverse impact on both the political decision-making (via the PSCs’ co-owners among the politicians) and the actual provision of public security (via the PSCs’ co-owners among the public officials) whose shortcomings increase the demand for private security solutions. In either of these cases, the reversal of the revolving doors de facto implies the elimination of the traditional differences between the private and the public in Czech politics as well as in the Czech security field.

Impact of Private Security Companies on the Provision and Perception of Security as a Public Good

The broader impacts of PSCs’ activities upon the provision of security have already been analyzed by a number of experts. This includes Abrahamsen and Williams (2011: 76), who argued that PSCs’ induced shifts in the security field enhance the commodification and depoliticization of security, “whereby security becomes a service to be bought and sold in the marketplace and a commodity capable of being globally exported as a set of technical capabilities and skills. In consequence, security ceases in part – but in an important part – to be a quintessentially social and public concern.” Going a step further, Elke Krahmann (2008: 387-388) suggested that commodification of security affects the answers to seven key questions regarding its very definition: security for whom, security for which values, how much security, from what threats, by what means, at what cost, and in what time period? Although there is no room here for comprehensive answers to any of these questions, the
following paragraphs offer some examples that illustrate how specific PSCs’ practices affect both the perception and provision of security as a public good in the Czech Republic.

Regarding the “for whom?” question, Krahmann (2008: 388) argued that commodification of security affects the answer because it entails the provision of security as an excludable good (e.g. one where some members of the society are not benefiting from its provision). Interestingly, while one half of the interviewed PSCs’ representatives vehemently denied that the activities of their companies contribute to the commodification of security and the other half openly admitted that they indeed do, both camps ultimately agreed that excludable provision of security is a perfectly normal, or even positive, feature of a capitalist society:

Your security needs correspond to the amount of your property. If the state respects its constitution under which it must not make distinctions among its citizens, then logically the level of security, which is sufficient for a man who has no property, cannot be sufficient for a man who has some property. The more affluent simply have a greater need to protect themselves. … So yes, there is commodification in the sense that security is for sale and I see it in positive terms. (Kameník, president of the Association of Private Security Services)

I disagree with the claim that commodification makes security accessible only to those who can pay. It’s exactly the opposite because those who have some possessions primarily take care of them themselves. This frees the hands of the state to take care of general security and to devote more resources to the prevention and prosecution of crimes. The more people who have secured their property, life and health, the less of a burden on the public security system. (Zapletal, secretary of the Union of Private Security)

These arguments are not necessarily novel, because PSCs executives all around the world have long sought “to mollify concerns over the expansion of private security by arguing that their employees just provide another layer of protection on top of public policing: ‘an additional set of eyes and ears.’” (Sklansky, 2006: 97) The problems is, as Sklansky noted, that in addition to this ideal augmentation relationship between publicly and privately provided security, there are two other possibilities: 1) displacement, whereby PSCs make security provision less egalitarian in two ways: by reducing the demand for public policing officially committed to protecting everyone, and by reducing the political pressure on public police forces to comply with norms of due process and dignity; and/or 2) transformation, whereby the public police may find themselves copying the strategies, rhetoric, and self-conception of the PSCs, e.g. emphasize more “efficiency and goal achievement” and take less “into account broader values such as integrity, the accommodation of interests, and morality.” (Sklansky, 2006: 98-99) It is beyond the scope of this article to determine which of these three
When looking for answers to the “security for which values?” question, Krahmann (2008: 389) argued that it is crucial to keep in mind that “[c]ollective security requires political agreement and compromise as to what security interests and values should take priority, while the provision of security through the market permits citizens and companies to pursue their particular security interests and beliefs.” In case of the Czech Republic, the ABL scandal suggests that at least some PSCs representatives may be willing to go even a step further and pursue both their particular security and economic interests by manipulating the very processes of political decision-making. This clearly underscores the urgent need to legally clarify the context within which private security actors can participate in political decision-making processes, (Leander, 2007: 52-53) especially in a country with a sizeable number of politicians who (co-)own PSCs. The ABL scandal has, however, already impacted Czech politics in at least two rather unfortunate ways. The first concerns the introduction of the business-firm-party model as a way to advance particular business interests, which has already inspired a few other Czech billionaire businessmen to try it out instead of traditional lobbying. Moreover, even in comparison with other examples of business-firm-parties in Europe (e.g. Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia), the Czech variant in the form of Public Affairs is rather unique due to being interlinked with the largest national PSCs, whose owner essentially performed a hostile take-over of a previously minor political party in order to secure “a permanent political base.” (Hloušek, 2012) This also points to the second negative legacy of the ABL scandal – the introduction of security methods and practices into political processes:
Close links between business and politics are, generally speaking, a major problem in the Czech Republic. But when it is further compounded by the introduction of security practices and manners, which simply are occasionally very offensive, it turns into a deadly cocktail. I spent many years working in covert operations and the worst option is when people performing them start to use their methods to spy upon their colleagues and friends. That is the final stop. And once this world is immersed into the normal life via a PSC, and everyone is tapped and recorded, it is completely devastating for the entire society. ... In the very moment, when the political competition takes place on the basis of security methods, it is all wrong. Everyone is afraid to speak his mind because he knows that the other is recording it just to pull it out in a completely different situation two years from now. (Beroun, Pinkerton Czech Republic)

Although several other interviewed PSCs representatives have argued that the alleged “security practices,” such as tapping of political opponents had been present in the Czech Republic long before ABL and other PSCs was even created; and that “security manners” such as spying are not really different from what investigative journalist do all the time, the legacy of the ABL scandal is undisputable. Not only has it further eroded the already dubious reputation of the entire Czech private security sector, but it has also produced a new word to describe the considerable backlash against the so-called “a-be-li-zation” of Czech politics.

Regarding the “how much security?” question, Krahmann (2008: 390) argued that as profit-oriented firms, PSCs have a vested interest in the expansion of their market and as such, “it is to their advantage to overstate the need for security.” They do so in a number of ways, most of which are also detectable in the Czech Republic. Firstly, at least the more sophisticated larger Czech PSCs do occasionally attempt to maximize their contracts by exacerbating citizens’ security fears via adverts that stress the rising levels crime (even though the official statistics point to a slight long-term decline in the number of registered crimes), the constant emergence of new kinds of threats to their lives and properties (ranging from terrorism to natural disasters such as floods, which have devastated several region of the Czech Republic in the last decade), as well as the foolishness of relying entirely on public security measures when it comes to responding them (often citing the aforementioned declining numbers of public security agencies’ personnel). Secondly, almost all interviewed PSCs’ representatives called for a greater role of PSCs’ employees as consultants, whose knowledge and experience should be utilized already in the initial analysis of existing security risks and plausible security responses to them. Specifically, pointing out the aforementioned detrimental repercussions of the public sector institutions’ practice to award all security-related contracts solely on the on the criterion of the lowest price, and the lack of understanding of the new and complex security technologies by public officials, several interviewed PSCs’ representatives have proposed that all security-related public tenders
should be preceded with an open tender to specify the very conditions for, and objectives of, the desired security solutions. The problem is that although this may indeed be a way how to eliminate wasteful purchases of outdated and/or inefficient security technologies (of which the interviewees provided numerous stories and examples), the outsourcing of security and risk consulting also puts PSCs “in a position where they may manipulate public threat assessment and policy to create demand for their services” (Krahmann, 2008: 391) (of which there are plenty of examples in the academic literature). (Leander, 2005: 813–14)

Regarding the remaining key questions (security from what threats, by what means, at what cost, and in what time period?), PSCs in the Czech Republic nowadays offer a wide range of security services. As elsewhere in the world these services primarily deal with individual (and therefore excludable), rather than collective, security threats. (Krahmann, 2008: 392) Specifically, in terms of the services provided, property and personal protection have traditionally generated much of the Czech PSCs’ turnover, with private detective services coming at a distant second place. More recently, however, there has been a sizeable shift from the provision of direct physical security services (i.e. the deployment of guards) towards greater utilization of electronic monitoring systems (i.e. CCTV systems complemented with distance patrol services). (Asociace soukromých bezpečnostních služeb, 2010) This trend is a result of greater availability, decreasing costs and increasing sophistication of, as well as trust in technical security solutions. But it also illuminates some plausible answers to the questions of “security by what means, at what costs, and in what time period?” Firstly, as Abrahamsen and Williams (2011: 110) pointed out, “[t]he increasingly technological nature of security provision is not neutral in its impact on the security field” because in combination with the aforementioned processes of commodification and depoliticization, it further enhances “the capacity of private actors to claim expertise – to acquire cultural and symbolic capital and to exercise power across national boundaries.” Secondly, technological security solutions (including burglar alarms, CCTV, computer security, mobile security, and various personal security devices) are also often presented as the most effective responses to the new security threats (especially terrorism) and they also have the advantage of allowing for excludability and specific performance measurement, which are both crucial features for profit-oriented PSCs. (Krahmann, 2008: 393) Thirdly, “protective technologies and strategies, such as alarm systems, are soon outdated and need replacing [and o]ther services such as body and site guarding need constant provision in order to be effective. The focus on excludable security thus helps to ensure constant demand. (Krahmann, 2008: 395) In this context, it is not surprising that all interviewed PSCs’
representatives agreed that the future development of the Czech market with private security services depends on the continuous introduction of new security technologies rather than on new physical security contracts. For many Czech citizens, however, the rise of technological security solutions may be less of a blessing. Firstly, by being extremely excludable, they are likely to further enhance the conceptualization and implementation of security as a private, rather than public good available to all. Secondly, due to their very nature, many technological security solutions have significant repercussions upon another important value of Western societies – liberty. Options, and for some even the very possibility, of reconciling the values of security and liberty are hotly contested. (Loader & Walker, 2007: 51-70) There is, nonetheless, no doubt that PSCs put security first (or, more precisely, second after profit), which may not correspond to the preferences of the Czech society at large.

Concluding Remarks
The findings from the previous sections of this article confirm the utility of the practice approach to the analysis of PSCs. Firstly, the application of the global security assemblages model revealed that although the practices of PSCs are not unidirectionally and/or irreversibly leading to a disassembly of the Czech state, they do contribute to a significant rearticulation of the Czech security field by utilizing their considerable and steadily growing material power; their principal-agent cultural power vis-à-vis their private customers’ property protection; and their skilful exploitation of the decline of state’s symbolic power (e.g. by contrasting the failure of public authorities to maintain the desired levels of security with the cost-effective and professional provision of PSCs’ services). In addition, the practice perspective also proved to be uniquely suitable for examining changes in the security field understood in Bourdieu’s terms as sites of struggle as much as sites of positions. This, according to Leander (2010: 68-69), implies that looking at practices should also involve “emphasizing the lack of fixity”, which in turn brings out the importance of resistance in the analysis of all changes in the security field. This insight proved useful for understanding the abrupt rise and fall of fortune of the ABL founder’s plan to achieve a dominant market share via “uniform building of stable economic and political power.”

Secondly, by avoiding both the formalist and atomist blunders identified by Leander, the practice approach allows for situating the sensational case of ABL’s dubious Strategic Plan and the subsequent implementation practices into the larger socio-political-economic-legal context of the security field in the Czech Republic. In particular, the combination of unfortunate legacies of communist mentality and the neoliberal “shock-therapy” approach to
the transition from a centrally-planned to a market economy represents a crucial part of the “official” explanations for the continuing absence of a specific legal code for PSCs’ activities. Even more importantly, however, the practice approach allowed for complementing this 2nd order academic account with even more intriguing 1st order reflexivity derived from interviews with PSCs representatives. These revealed the existence of the reversed revolving door phenomenon and the corresponding possibility that the absence of the legal code is due to too much, rather than too little, political interest in PSCs’ activities.

Thirdly, the practice approach also confirmed the need to take into account the fact that the context itself may have been “a-be-li-zed” in a number of profound ways. Generally speaking, PSCs’ induced shifts in the security field have enhanced the commodification of security in the Czech Republic, which in turn affected both the perception and provision of security as a public good. More specifically speaking, ABL’s introduction of security methods, manners and practices rearticulated the field of politics in a number of profound ways. Not only it is nowadays allegedly a standard practice for Czech politicians to bring small whiteboards and plenty of markers to all important meetings, but other affluent businessmen may be tempted to try out the ABL’s business-firm-party approach to politics. Representatives of the traditional Czech political parties (who do not co-own a PSC) should therefore urgently focus their attention on the adoption of the much delayed legal regulation of PSCs’ activities. In the longer-term, they should also seriously debate the level of public security that ought to be available to all people living in the Czech Republic. The fields of security and politics are both too important to be reconstructed by private security/public political “supergurus” alone.
References


1 Bárt sold all his shares in ABL to his brother after the 2010 general elections and claimed that he has nothing to do with the company ever since.

2 ABL denied any wrongdoing and sued the media reporting on this scandal.

3 All interviewees have explicitly consented to being openly identified by their name and corporate affiliation. In alphabetical order, they include Jan Beroun, director of Pinkerton Czech Republic; František Brabec, honorary president of the Czech Chamber of Detective Services; Michal Fábera, as of 2012 general director of ABL/M2.C, owner of Orange Group, and honorary president of the Security Club (professional association of the largest Czech PSCs); Jiří Kameník, owner of Cenzus (a small detective services company) and president of the Association of Private Security Services of the Czech Republic (professional association of small- and medium-sized Czech PSCs); Michal Kuník, director of Securitas Czech Republic and Slovakia (the largest PSCs in the Czech Republic); Václav Růžička, CEO and chairman of the board of Alkom (a medium-sized technical security services company); and Radek Zapletal, Secretary of the Union of Private Security Services of the Czech Republic (the largest umbrella association of all types of PSCs). All interviews were conducted in the summer of 2012.

4 The author contacted 11 additional owners and/or top-level managers of major PSCs, but they did not respond to the interview request.

5 Many Czech employees still continue to behave as they were used to under socialism, e.g. following the adage “if you do not steal from the state, you are stealing from your family.”

6 Alternative explanations include the existence of one-contract duration PSCs; the existence of the so-called svarc-system whereby companies try to reduce their mandatory social benefits contributions by forcing their employees to become self-employed individuals whom they can then hire contractually; and, at least in the 1990s, the fact that PSCs represented an ideal employment opportunity for the former members of the communist era security services.

7 Alternative explanations include the competition between smaller and bigger PSCs, domestic and foreign-owned PSCs, as well as personal antipathies among some of the top representatives of the leading PSCs, who all want to become a president of something.

8 These estimates, as well as terminology, are from the interview with the secretary of the largest PSC association Zapletal.

9 This may change soon, however, due to the planned personnel cuts in the now professional army and the growing interest of various Czech companies in the post-conflict reconstruction contracts all around the world.


11 Most importantly, the draft of the law: 1) Requires all PSCs to obtain a license from the Ministry of Interior, which is subject to re-evaluation every 10 years; 2) Divides PSCs services into five categories (patrol, detective, technical, transport services, and security consultancy) and sets the conditions for obtaining a license for each of these categories; 3) Clarifies the conditions for employee proficiency of PSCs (clean criminal record, appropriate training, standardized qualification exams, and mandatory health checks) and sets the minimum qualification standards for both managers and regular employees; 4) Does not grant PSCs and their employees any legal powers beyond those granted to any other citizen of the Czech Republic; 5) Explicitly prohibits the PSCs to take on the functions performed by the state or municipal police forces, and/or the Czech Army. (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2012)