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RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES AS A CATALYST FOR STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION**

ABSTRACT

Russian private military companies (PMCs) – being in fact neither private nor companies – have become an important instrument of strategic influence for the Kremlin. Apart from their military activity, as manifested especially during the war in Ukraine, such deployments abroad induce strategic ambiguity and deception in line with the national foreign and security policy objectives. The examination of this influence is the main research problem of the study. For this purpose, a seven-element analytical model by Robert Mandel concerning strategic manipulation has been employed. This allows to emphasize these elements of the Russian PMCs' specificity that enable actions of this kind, present Russia's strategic objectives being pursued this way and assess the efficiency of the discussed actions. The approach applied in the paper, unlike most of the publications concerning those entities, allows to address the use of PMCs by Russia not as military power providers but as actors making a psychological impact on others both directly (by performing information and psychological operations) and indirectly (by shaping the perception of the Russian Federation internationally). As the paper presents, the latter might be considered crucial, as Russia benefits from having a handy tool

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for, among others, increasing the threat perception in targeted countries or regions by putting political-military pressure "below the threshold of war" and providing itself with low-cost power projection capabilities (even if very often unreliable).

Keywords: private military companies (PMCs), Wagner Group, hybrid warfare, strategic manipulation, strategic ambiguity, deception, disinformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Private military companies (PMCs) can be defined as "profit-driven organizations that trade in professional services intricately linked to warfare. They are corporate bodies that specialize in the provision of military skills-including tactical combat operations, strategic planning, intelligence gathering and analysis, operational support, troop training, and military technical assistance" (Singer, 2001, pp. 186–187). Peter W. Singer formulated this definition for "privatized military firms", as concerning a broader range of the referred actors, while arguing PMCs offer their services only at the operational level, unlike military-related tasks of other kinds, "despite sharing the same causes, dynamics and consequences". Nonetheless, in later years, PMCs have been defined more inclusively – in a way that is closer to Singer's definition of "privatized military firms". In the post-Cold War era, those contractors have become a notable actor in armed conflicts. Russian "creative interpretation" of the PMCs' idea has challenged, however, the original definitional framework significantly, which is to be explained below. Nowadays, enterprises of this kind serve a wider range of objectives, and their significance is not necessarily to be considered solely in military terms, as some of those make their contribution also by putting information and psychological pressure, which is useful as an enabler for strategic manipulation by bringing elements of ambiguity and deception.

The Wagner Group participating in heavy fighting in Ukraine after February 24, 2022 (especially at the battle of Bakhmut) proved its reason of being as a viable reservoir of manpower for Russian military efforts. However, its fate afterwards – the mutiny in June 2023 and the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin two months later – leads to a supposition about the possible fragmentation and emergence of new groups of this kind instead, while of much smaller range of actions and resources. This, in turn, could mean that the scale of Russian PMCs' operations abroad will be restrained again (without a "monopolist" anymore) as loyal, deniable proxies (Ихтамнет, *Ikhtamnet*), as such companies used to do before 2022, rather than mass military units designated for overwhelming the enemy in long, heavy battles. Such an assumption is justified, as those enterprises continue their covert operations in multiple countries (African in particular), despite the Wagner Group-related developments in Ukraine and Russia itself.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The PMCs' phenomenon was extensively explored in the first decade of the 21st century (e.g., Singer, 2001; Kinsey, 2006), as well as developed for many different contexts in the subsequent one based on, among others, lessons learned from the PMCs' participation in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (e.g., Karmola, 2010; Cameron & Chetail, 2013; McFate, 2014; Spearin, 2017). However, the further developments have challenged the original analytical schemas.

The mere issue of PMCs has been widely researched over the past two decades from many different perspectives. Most recently, along with the growth in activity of Russian enterprises of this kind, more and more studies on their nature, actions and significance have been developed and published. Those pieces are either more comprehensive (e.g., Marten, 2019; Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020; Karagiannis, 2021) or focus on some specific aspects of the issue such as, for instance, the PMCs' importance for Russian foreign policy (Giedraitis, 2020), their actions as a threat for the NATO member states (Spearin, 2018), geoeconomic implications (Arnold, 2019), as well as the status in the light of international law (Chifu & Frunzeti, 2020). Apart from the academia, multiple insightful analyses with a strong focus on a practical dimension of this issue were offered by think tanks (e.g., Rondeaux, 2019; Katz et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021). Nevertheless, none of these publications deals primarily with Russian PMCs conceived as an instrument of information and psychological pressure, while this aspect is mainly being considered only consequential to their military actions, unless addressed in the broader context of the Kremlin's hybrid warfare toolbox (e.g., Górka, 2023). This paper, therefore, aims to explain the significance of Russian PMCs' deployments all around the world but only in non-military terms – by writing those into the identified policy patterns, as well as indicating which strategic objectives of the Russian Federation are pursued this way. Moreover, even though literature regarding theory of strategic ambiguity is quite well developed (e.g., Jervis, 1976; Williams, 1983; Eisenberg, 1984; Sobel, 1992; Baliga & Sjöström, 2008; Fridman, 2023), the article might expand the scope of such considerations into the phenomenon of PMCs.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Robert Mandel (2019) explains the meaning of strategic ambiguity and deception in the context of information overload. Strategic ambiguity means thus "the promotion of a «hazy middle ground» where «the information we need to make sense of an experience seems to be missing, too complex, or contradictory»" applied to "communication content or to perpetrator and victim identities or motivations" (Mandel, 2019, p. 33). This is mainly about making the reality as less understandable as possible, which aims to impede addressing challenges in an appropriate way. Strategic deception is, in turn, "deliberate misrepresentation of reality done in order to gain competitive advantage", which "includes both classic deception, inducing new information about something that is not true, and denial, blocking access to existing vital information, as well as deception by

commission (intentionally injecting false data) and by omission (intentionally leaving out crucial data)" (Mandel, 2019, p. 34). This term may cover all messages and actions aimed to mislead the recipients and potentially drive them to take measures that are advantageous for the initiator.

What must be stated is the fact Mandel only integrates the concept of "strategic ambiguity" into his research framework, while this notion has functioned in the scientific discourse for decades. Robert Jervis (1976) discussed the role of ambiguity, as he translated cognitive psychology into the realm of international relations. It was, however, Phil Williams who introduced the term "strategic ambiguity" into international security-related considerations based on, among others, Thomas Schelling's idea of "the threat that leaves something to chance", which exploits uncertainties (Schelling, 1959), as he explained this way the rationale behind American security guarantees for Western Europe by the military presence, which had led to a paradoxical situation that "although the conventional forces may be a prerequisite for escalation, they can also be regarded as an insurance against it" (Williams, 1983, p. 197). This concept, defined as "instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 230), even though it originated from communication studies, has been adapted by analysts of international politics in multiple ways – either as an element of theoretical framework (e.g., in considerations based on game theory) (Sobel, 1992) or instrumentally, to explain several international phenomena such as states' nuclear postures (Deutch, 2005), US policy towards Taiwan (Zhongqi, 2003), or Russian information warfare (Fridman, 2023).

As a research framework, Mandel applies a particular analytical model based on seven components: 1) description (of a particular process or situation); 2) the role of information overload in inducing strategic manipulation; 3) rationale and purpose (of the initiator); 4) policy effectiveness; 5) perceived legitimacy; 6) unintended consequences; 7) lessons for future management. Through the prism of this model, the paper aims to verify how Russian PMCs destabilize international security by making an indirect impact on both an area of deployment and the entire international community. For this purpose, the study serves not only theory testing but mainly answering the main research question on how actions of those Russian companies bring about strategic ambiguity and deception in line with the Putin's administration foreign and security policy objectives. In order to formulate comprehensive conclusions, two ancillary research questions are to be answered: 1) Which elements of the Russian PMCs' specificity (in terms of their functioning) foster strategic manipulation? 2) Which objectives of Russian foreign and security policy are pursued by strategic manipulation with the use of PMCs? Mandel's seven-element model has been employed as a methodological framework for this article, which was preceded with the presentation of distinctive features of Russian PMCs as major enablers for that.

4. SPECIFIC FEATURES OF RUSSIAN PMCS FOSTERING STRATEGIC MANIPULATION

The "Russified" understanding of PMCs and their nature do not match the "conventional" definition. Certain Russian authors even try to reformulate it by extending their scope, indicating close organizational bonds and interdependencies between those companies and national decision makers (Kurilev et al., 2017; Nebolshina, 2019). The Russian vision of PMCs draws from Western patterns, adjusted to the local circumstances though – not only to the relevant attributes of the Putin-centric political system but also to such conditions as Russian strategic culture, the heritage of the USSR, or implications of the political and economic transformation in the 90s (Arnold, 2019). Table 1 presents major contemporary Russian PMCs.

Table 1
Selected Russian private military companies operating in the years 2013–2021

Name	Range of services rendered (presumably)	Areas of deployment	Specific features
the Wagner Group (Wagner ChVK)	combat actions, military support (training, command, advisory--consultative actions, providing military equipment, field support etc.), protection services (providing site, personal or transport security), intelligence-related tasks, propaganda and disinformation	Ukraine, Syria, Libya, multiple countries of Sub-Saharan Africa	tied to a business network owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin who used to be Putin's close loyalist for many years
Moran Security Group	military support, protection services	Syria, Iraq, Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden	operating mostly in maritime environment (with its own fleet)
the Slavonic Corps	combat operations, military support, protection services	Syria	formed *ad hoc* to provide allied Syrian militias with support in the field

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Range of services rendered (presumably)	Areas of deployment	Specific features
E.N.O.T. Corp.	combat operations, military support, protection services, intelligence-related tasks, propaganda and disinformation	Ukraine, Syria	far-right, nationalist (or even neo-Nazi) agenda
RSB-Group	combat operations, military support, protection services	Ukraine, Libya, Gulf of Guinea, Gulf of Aden	capable to operate in maritime environment as well
Patriot	combat operations, military support, protection services	Syria, Yemen, Sub-Saharan Africa (Burundi, Central African Republic)	closely associated with the ministry of defence
MAR ChVK	combat operations, military support, protection services	Ukraine, Libya	nationalist agenda
Shchit ChVK	protection services	Syria	closely tied to the 45th Spetsnaz Airborne Brigade

Note: own elaboration based on Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2018; Arnold, 2019; Jones et al., 2021; Sukhankin, 2018; Sukhankin, 2019a; Sukhankin, 2019b; Sukhankin, 2019c; UHHRU, 2018.

Before analyzing the Russian case, it must be stated that a number of advantages result obviously from the mere nature of PMCs as (at least officially) privately owned entities. Such features as lower costs (compared to those of a regular army), an access to hardly achievable military capabilities (e.g., to conduct expeditionary operations demanding adaptability and expertise in local conditions) and certain political gains (to name avoiding casualties among regular soldiers or evading restrictions on the use of force resulted from international law) might serve as examples (Mandel, 2001; Singer, 2001; McFate, 2014).

A type of operational bond between those firms and Russian government, making their commercial and private nature highly contestable, remains a major enabler for using them as instruments of strategic manipulation. This relation is much more than just outsourcing. Those companies act in compliance with the national military doctrine, while never working on behalf of an actor whose interest is discordant in any way to the Russian one. Furthermore, they operate together with the regular armed forces and make use of arms and equipment (*vide* the deployment of Russian aircraft

Su-24, MiG-29, and Su-35 on the bases in Libya along with the Wagner Group operating there) (Jones et al., 2021) or infrastructure owned by the Russian armed forces (e.g., a military training base in Molkino as held by GRU) (Rácz, 2020). This peculiar interoperability gives Russia an opportunity to include PMCs (together with other irregular armed groups – mercenaries, paramilitary groups, local militias, etc.) into so called "integrated force grouping", defined by Vadim Skibitskyi as "the joint communication and intelligence space", enabling to "operate under the direct control of Russian military command under the general military concept", which may target any other state (Skibitskyi, 2020). The use of PMCs complies largely with the idea of irregular warfare (also by non-military means), actively developed by Russia in the 2010s (Selhorst, 2016), while drawing also from the "traditional" Russian concept of hostile deception (*maskirovka*).

A specific feature of Russian PMCs is also their ability to launch information and psychological warfare. Most of such efforts concern propaganda and disinformation (such as anti-Ukrainian indoctrination in Crimea and Donbas, a pro-Assad campaign in Syria, media coverage in favor of Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in Libya, or many different types of political messages in states of Sub-Saharan Africa), as well as subversion in such forms as sabotage, destabilization, covert influence, or suppression of protests (Jones et al., 2021).

But arguably the crucial factor is a deep and dense web of interconnections between Russian state organs (or at least groups in power, regardless of their formal status) and PMCs. This concerns the executive (the presidential administration and the ministry of defence), as well as security and intelligence agencies – FSB, GRU, and SVR, in particular (Jones et al., 2021). Perhaps the decisive strand in this network concerns numerous informal ties between the power and oligarchs – mostly of business or basically corruption-related nature – especially from the energy sector (Marten, 2019). Private interests mingle with state policies, making actual intentions hardly identifiable. Such a role of PMCs in Russia results also from their ambiguous legal status. Article 13(5) of the Russian constitution states that "the creation and activities of public associations whose aims and actions are aimed […] at setting up armed units' is prohibited" (Venice Commission, 2020, p. 6). Moreover, the criminal code penalizes organizing of an illegal armed formation or participation in it (Article 208), as well as mercenarism – defined by Article 359 as "recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities" – and participation by an individual mercenary in such actions (WIPO, 2012, p. 170). None law determines the status of PMCs as commercial entities in Russia, in spite of certain attempts of the State Duma to enact such a regulation (Dyner 2018, p. 2). Some of Russian PMCs have been legalized abroad – in tax havens in particular, e.g., the Slavonic Corps in Hong Kong, Moran Security Group in Belize and the Cook Islands, or RSB–Group in the British Virgin Islands (Klein, 2019; Sukhankin, 2019d). Russian authorities sometimes make use of this legal puzzle, as in the case of fighters from the Slavonic Corps detained by FSB in 2013 accused of mercenarism when back in Russia from Syria after defeats at the battlefield (Weiss, 2013).

5. THE ROLE OF PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES FOR RUSSIAN STRATEGIC MANIPULATION

A causal link between opportunities for strategic manipulation resulting from the aforementioned features of Russian PMCs and political objectives being pursued this way is a matter of analysis below, in accordance with Mandel's seven-element model.

5.1. DESCRIPTION OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

The number of countries with supposed presence of Russian PMCs grew significantly over few years to reach 29 in 2020 (whilst four in 2015) (Jones et al., 2021). These were 17 African countries (Botswana, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe), eight Asian (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brunei, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Yemen), three European (Belarus, Serbia, and Ukraine), and Venezuela. Strategic significance of these deployments varies obviously depending of a particular country.

A key factor allowing the consideration of the manipulative nature of Russian PMCs-related policy is deniability (Singer, 2001). That means a chance to avoid taking any international liability for such actions. It is obviously a common feature for all private military and security companies being employed by states for expeditionary tasks; however, in the discussed case, it is even more conspicuous given the nature of such firms, especially their ties with the authorities, which are informal whilst close. Despite being an open secret, it preserves Russia from negative consequences for, among others, challenging other states (great powers particularly), acting without a clear mandate from UNSC, or violating international humanitarian law, human rights, or any other internationally recognized norms and procedures. That is, e.g., the case of the Wagner Group's actions in the Central African Republic. The *ad hoc* group of UN experts accused these contractors of such atrocities as mass executions, forced disappearances, illegitimate detentions, tortures, and indiscriminating attacks on civilian targets (OHCHR, 2021). Russia is thus able to conceal its *de facto* military involvement abroad, minimizing at once possible repercussions for that. This may also mislead the international community – both directly (by taking specific actions aimed at achieving this purpose) and indirectly (by an impact on their perception of Russia and its policies).

Strategic manipulation resulting (directly and indirectly) from the activity of Russian PMCs in the most recent years is fairly consistent with the concept of "hybrid" or "non-linear" warfare. This may concern, among others, taking control over a territory without resorting to the use of conventional armed forces, creating an opportunity (a pretext) for the use of military force, as well as interfering politics and policies of other states by non-military means (Chivvis, 2017). The expeditionary use of PMCs remains thus compliant with the Russian strategy of asymmetric warfare, given such of its elements as destabilizing a particular country (e.g., through putting information/psychological pressure and supporting like-minded political circles), con-

ducting a proxy war, or assisting local groups in their low-intensity guerilla warfare (AWG, 2020).

5.2. THE ROLE OF INFORMATION OVERLOAD IN INDUCING STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

The direct impact of this kind relates to initiating and conducting information and psychological operations, which is specific to several Russian PMCs. It concerns propaganda in traditional media outlets and social media but also more advanced forms of social engineering (e.g., in cyberspace) and assisting special forces or services in their covert operations serving to deceive public opinion (Jones et al., 2021). This deception may be exampled with cases of the Wagner Group's members posing as the Syrian Army in order to improve Assad troops' public image (Jones et al., 2021), as well as by numerous pro-Russian fake news addressed to Ukrainians being spread in social media (Kollars & Petersen, 2018). Russian PMCs may become a matter of information warfare themselves, as it happened in the case of the Turan Group that was allegedly to operate in Syria and has eventually turned out to be inexistent (Levien, 2018), as well as Vega Strategic Service, whose status, structure of members, and scope of taken actions raise high uncertainty due to contradictory information (Sukhankin, 2019a; Andriukaitis & Sheldon, 2019).

But perhaps the indirect strategic impact of its PMCs' activity brings Russia even higher benefits. As fueled by information overload, it concerns mostly perception of this state's actions on the global (for positioning Russia as a superpower) and regional (for consolidating its sphere of influence) scale. The mere appearance of such an entity in any country results in an increased threat perception and sense of uncertainty regardless of its actual actions, as it happened to Belarus (a Russia's ally) where contractors of the Wagner Group were identified in July 2020 (Nechepurenko, 2020). Although likely not taking any action against Belarusian national security, they were detained, and Alexander Lukashenko considered their presence threatening the upcoming presidential election (Marten, 2020). Russia guards secrecy of such operations very strictly, while strengthening this ambiguity and preventing exposure of real intentions, purposes, or a scale of such an involvement – not only in terms of misinforming and misleading the observers, since possible "disrupters" (e.g., investigative journalists, social activists, or anyone being in position to disclose some facts) are being suppressed or even physically eliminated, like three Russian reporters tracking troops of the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic (Roth, 2018). Even though, the clandestine nature makes information on PMCs and their actions hardly verifiable anyway. A recipient needs to gain knowledge about that from sources (very obscure sometimes) whose reliability is difficult to determine and might be questionable. It makes, therefore, a very favorable circumstance for spreading contradictory, fake, or manipulated information regarding the PMCs and their operations.

This ambiguity is being multiplied by the variety of actions possible to be taken by Russian PMCs – those of combat or paramilitary kind, protection services, propaganda and disinformation, assisting covert operations of secret services, as well as

any form of political support for a government in a state of deployment. Such a wide scope of potential tasks increases the uncertainty regarding Russia's actual intentions and plans, which results in higher threat perception locally and internationally. Candace Rondeaux indicates in this context the objective of deliberately creating "misdirection around the patterns of deployment of thousands of Russian operatives manifested force-multiplying surprise" regarding their presence in Ukraine (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 61).

Another obstacle for appropriate identification of Russia's intentions and strategic purposes related to PMCs' deployments, as well as anticipation of its future actions, results from the intermingling of strategic interest and objectives with strictly commercial motives. The latter may concern contracts or concessions – for state-owned enterprises or "befriended" private businessmen. Both of these justifications may be (and very often are) closely interconnected, as in the case of Prigozhin who ran – besides the Wagner Group – Evro Polis Ltd., a company operating in the energy sector that obtained lucrative contracts for natural resource exploitation in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic (Mackinnon, 2021).

5.3. RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

In 2012, Vladimir Putin named Russian PMCs (while talking about possible future creation of such entities) "an instrument for the realization of national interests without the direct participation of the state" (RIA Novosti, 2012). Since then, their use may be perceived as attributable to the pursuance of vital Russian strategic objectives. In this context, challenging the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2013), as well as a quest for global multipolarity (Smith, 2013), need to be recognized as Russia's overarching strategic ends, while any other is mostly ancillary to these. Maintaining the status quo in its sphere of direct influence composed of the post-Soviet states (Cooley, 2017) and keeping bridgeheads beyond this zone as regards allied like-minded states from other continents, such as, e.g., Syria, Libya, and Venezuela (to name only these, where such contractors were deployed), are, however, preconditions for this pursuance.

PMCs deployed abroad may contribute to destabilizing international security in several ways. Their advantages in comparison to regular armies are, *inter alia*, masking actual military presence and circumventing restrictions imposed either by international organizations or states. The risk of counteraction – especially understood as the use of military force – is much lower when an opponent is hardly identifiable. As for alliances, this is what makes a possible application of the clause of mutual assistance (e.g., Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) much more in doubt, as proper attribution of such an attack to an external perpetrator is poorly provable (Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020). As regards international sanctions, the Libyan case indicates Russian PMCs may serve to bypass those restrictions. The Wagner Group helped equip the Libyan National Army (LNA) – even with military aircraft – in spite of the arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011 by UNSC (Majumdar Roy Choudhury et al., 2021).

The expeditionary actions of Russian PMCs ultimately serve to undermine the liberal, rules-based international order. On the macroscale, Russia aims to transform it by

injecting the logic of power politics. This is to enable the emergence of global and regional vulnerabilities by creating zones of instability, provoking armed conflicts, inter- and intranational tensions because of increased threat perception, as well as inciting hostility against particular states (or non-state actors) in accordance with Russian national interests (Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2018; 2020). PMCs from this country may be found instrumental in constructing the international image of Russia as a superpower by presenting its military capabilities as larger than they actually are, which aims at resulting with the increased threat perception internationally. The power projection capacity (even if false or at least exaggerated) is in particular a basis for Russia to present itself as an actor of global interest and influence.

The use of PMCs abroad by Moscow might also be interpreted as another cog in the "lawfare" machine. In the discussed context, this term means, as Mark Voyger defines it, "the domain that intertwines with, and supports, Russian information warfare, thus providing the (quasi)-legal justification for Russia's propaganda claims and aggressive actions" (Voyger, 2018, p. 36). This regards, e.g., possible sending those contractors as troops of "peacekeeping forces" under the flag of an international organization (OSCE, CIS, or CSTO) or assistance providers to a separatist belligerent endorsed by the Kremlin (e.g., in training and equipping local military forces) in order to enable eventual justification of territorial and political claims for such an actor in the light of international law.

5.4. POLICY EFFECTIVENESS OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

Regardless of the mere military performance of Russian PMCs, the deceptive and manipulative effect turned out to be quite effective. Russia was given a chance to demonstrate itself as a supra-regional player. Besides the so-called "Near Abroad" perceived as a sphere of its direct influence, Moscow impacts the Middle East and becomes more and more significant in Africa – both North and Sub-Saharan – not only by meddling in internal political and economic processes in those countries but also by playing roles of a peacemaker, arbitrator, or mediator in armed conflicts and taking active part in peace processes (as in the Syrian and Libyan cases) in order to pursue its national interest on such occasions. The ultimate purpose remains, however, to challenge the West by demonstrating higher power projection capabilities and international influence than the actual ones. Dozens of bilateral agreements on cooperation in various domains (also of military nature) signed in most recent years with African states serve this purpose (Siegle, 2021; Kohnert, 2022). Currently, the African policy of Russia targets mostly France and the USA by aiming to reduce their impact (of political, economic and military kind) on such countries as the Central African Republic, Mali, Mozambique, and, most recently, Niger and Chad which concerns, among others, assisting in military coups and supporting local juntas in consolidating their power. The deployments of Russian PMCs are a vital element as they are compliant with this vision of Russian foreign policy. Furthermore, it is often amplified by tailored propaganda narratives – both domestically and externally – being aired by Russian traditional media (dedicated mostly, though not only, for viewers from the "Russian world") and spread in social media.

Those networks distribute propaganda (e.g., for electoral interference) in favor of allied leaders in the countries of PMCs' deployment. Not all of such campaigns were successful though, which are the cases of president Hery Rajaonarimampianina of Madagascar losing the 2018 election and president Faustin-Archange Touadéra resorting to numerous manipulations during the 2020–2021 election in order to remain in power.

Russian ability to adjust its PMCs' actions to different country- or region-specific contexts – by taking into account numerous factors of social (e.g., internal divisions, attitudes of local populations, especially anti-Western, anti-American, anti-imperialist, or anti-colonial sentiments), political (armed conflicts or nature of political systems, which are authoritarian regimes with a long record of human rights violations offered to make deals with without preconditions), or economic kind (existence of natural resources to exploit, geographic location of important trade implications) – determines the success or failure in achieving the related objectives. It is, however, a two-way street, since at the same time the discussed practices of Russia may be seen by the international community (especially the West) as another reason to mistrust Moscow's intentions, isolate it internationally, and avoid any closer cooperation, as well as another instrument of its aggressive and unforeseeable foreign policy based on constant readiness to hostile unlawful acts. Moreover, the chronologies of events in Syria and Ukraine indicate that the Russian PMCs' activities can be interpreted as some kind of intermediate stage, a prelude before resorting to a direct military intervention or even a full-scale aggression, which amplifies such distrust.

5.5. PERCEIVED LEGITIMACY OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

When it comes to the expeditionary use of PMCs by Russia, the major element of legitimacy concerns the domestic public opinion, as the majority of Russians seem skeptical towards expeditionary interventions of the regular military units. The 2017 Levada survey showed only 30% of them wanting the operation of the Russian armed forces in Syria to be continued, while 49% expressed their unwillingness (Levada Center, 2017). This tendency might be interpreted as constant, and it signalizes some kind of "the Afghan syndrome" – general reluctance to sending Russian troops abroad (at least outside the post-Soviet sphere) as a heritage of the protracted USSR intervention in Afghanistan (1979–1989) remaining in Russian collective memory as a trauma (Trenin & Malashenko, 2010). The use of PMCs allows thus to conceal the mere fact of such a *de facto* intervention and its details (the scale and costs of the involvement, possible defeats on the battlefield, number of casualties, etc.).

At the international level, the scope of possible repercussions is limited due to lacking relevant political and legal instruments, as the use of such companies in service of a state is not *sensu stricto* prohibited by international law (regardless of being fully-fledged private contractors or these in name only). That makes a handy justification for Russian authorities, employing the "everything which is not forbidden is allowed" logic. On this background, holding Russia liable for the PMCs-related violations of international law and atrocities their personnel committed seems scarcely feasible in

a "conventional" way (by relevant decisions of UNSC, international courts and tribunals, etc.). There is, however, another political constraint for the West in this respect, since when it comes to the misuse of PMCs, Russia is not the only guilty party. The expeditionary use of PMCs under American command – especially in Iraq – caused controversies both in terms of violating international law (human rights and international humanitarian law particularly) and close informal ties between such firms and the authorities. The latter might be exampled by the inglorious record of Blackwater (the world's largest and best-known PMC at the time, rebranded twice before merging with another PMC – Triple Canopy – into Constellis Group in 2014), whose contractors committed serious abuses of force in Iraq (Singer, 2007; Palou-Loverdos & Armendáriz, 2011). Furthermore, the owner and co-founder of Blackwater, Eric Prince, was tied to the CIA (Simons 2009), as well as to the Republican Party (Pierpaoli Jr, 2010). All of that makes a convenient excuse for Russia.

5.6. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

The expeditionary use of PMCs by Russia has triggered international sanctions for their actions, as imposed on this state by several international actors. Apart from his role regarding the cyber interference in the US 2016, 2018 and 2020 elections, Prigozhin was targeted by the American authorities in December 2016 "for having materially assisted, sponsored, or provided financial, material, or technological support for, or goods or services in support of, senior officials of the Russian Federation" regarding the destabilization of Ukraine (US Embassy in Russia, 2016). In July and September 2020, the US Department of Treasury sanctioned 11 individuals, as well as 12 legal entities associated with Prigozhin (mostly serving him to evade the already imposed restrictions). The justification concerned the expeditionary activity of the Wagner Group (in Sudan and the Central Africa Republic particularly) (Department of Treasury, 2020a; Department of Treasury, 2020b). Prigozhin was also sanctioned by the European Union (Council of the European Union, 2020) and the United Kingdom (UK Government, 2022), long before the war in Ukraine had made him an internationally known figure.

Presumably the most important involuntary consequence of the discussed activity of Russian PMCs in the long run concerns building awareness within the international community (the West in particular) of those practices and their actual meaning, as well as the status of such companies and their interconnections to particular domestic business and political groups in Russia. The deniability becomes less and less viable, as the Wagner Group and similar entities are more often perceived internationally as an armed wing of the Kremlin. Identification of Russian PMCs' members in a foreign country puts its security services on high alert, as it occurred in Belarus in July 2020 (Mackinnon, 2020). This case, which eventually turned out to result from a ruse arranged by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) (Chance & Ullah, 2021), illustrates national secret services and intelligence agencies applying sophisticated operations to prevent PMCs' destabilizing actions.

5.7. LESSONS FOR FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF AMBIGUITY AND DECEPTION

In the discussed context, the most important lesson is arguably a confirmation that private military companies (when strongly influenced by authorities) actually turn out to be a sound instrument for putting strategic pressure on other actors in international relations. A major advantage results from no clear countermeasures in international law, as further evidence of the insufficiency of current universal norms preventing unauthorized use of force against another state. Regardless of the doubts signaled in the previous paragraph, not only Russia recognizes the PMCs-related opportunities. The rapid development of such entities in China after 2010 (since the authorities have regulated PMCs' activity within the domestic law) – to name only DeWe Security and Hua Xin Zhong An – deserves attention (Nebolshina, 2019; Goble, 2021).

As the Wagner Group actions in Africa proved, sometimes the mere fact of the deployment of a state-controlled PMC serves strategic objectives better than the pursuance of strictly military tasks by such an entity. While the operational record could be assessed as relatively poor, for the purposes of strategic manipulation, the use of force (and its purely military result) is rather secondary to the psychological effects of such deployments and their media coverage – as creating the false perception internationally and presenting a sending state as assertive, militarily capable, and politically influential. From this perspective, paradoxically, even a defeat at a battlefield might positively serve a particular greater cause.

The catalogue of countermeasures available to the international community includes relevant mechanisms of international (e.g., measures resulting from bilateral treaties) and domestic law, as well as sanctions possible to be imposed on states, individuals, or private entities. However, most of all, building international awareness of the problem and resilience through information and education is decisive for counteracting any kind of international manipulation efficiently. Campaigns through media outlets or public diplomacy instruments aimed at increasing social and international awareness of the Russian PMCs' activity, exposing their failures (in order to undermine the threat perception), as well as fact-checking and countering this kind of ambiguity and deception in any other way, if effective, seem the most powerful remedy.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The use of its PMCs by Russia as an instrument for not only military actions but also for putting pressure on other states complies largely with one of its strategic guidelines based on irregular measures of non-linear confrontation "below the threshold of war". It has become a quite established practice of the Kremlin, as the territorial range of such actions has increased significantly at the turn of the 2010s and 2020s. Strategic manipulation is an integral element of this Russian approach.

In terms of ambiguity, such deployments are to conceal two truths of fundamental meaning – Russia's real motivations and a scope of its actions actually intended to be taken. An interest of Moscow – ranging from strategic objectives (e.g., to consolidate

its sphere of influence, remodel a regional balance of power, project its power internationally, increase the threat perception, destabilize a country or a region, etc.) to remunerative contracts or business opportunities – is usually hardly identifiable at a glance, as the motivations blend each other. The mere nature of Russian PMCs, as controlled by the authorities and tailored to the political and economic system of this state, allows to create such – corruption-related, as a matter of fact – interconnections between the Kremlin and its loyal businessmen. A strategic purpose may serve only as a handy excuse to put the state apparatus into service for the sake of particular interests, then. Because of multiple tasks possible to be carried out by these PMCs (including combat actions, paramilitary tasks, protection services, or even political propaganda), proper attribution of the intentions behind requires identifying those in real time (each case on an individual basis), while this necessity significantly obstructs employing possible countermeasures.

When it comes to deception, the discussed idea concerns, first, military interventions ordered and *de facto* strategically commanded by Russian authorities – without the regular armed forces but with military units operating on behalf of the state. This helps Russia overcome several limitations – arising from, *inter alia*, international law or possible punitive reactions of the international community – concerning the use of military force against another state or an intervention in its domestic matters. The Russian "contribution" for the development of the PMCs' idea concerns using them as a direct instrument for putting pressure of information or psychological kind, either on a particular state or globally. This may cover such actions as campaigns of propaganda and disinformation in traditional and social media, direct social engineering, cyberattacks, and foreign electoral interventions, as well as, in military terms, demonstrations of force, quasi-humanitarian convoys, or hostile operations of military intelligence.

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