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**The birth of commercial military service companies in Russia**

During the 2010s, the organisation known as the Wagner Group has supported the Russian Federation and its allies in East Ukraine, Libya and Syria, among other conflicts. Wagner is referred to as either a Russian private military company or as an unofficial part of the Russian armed forces. In this article, I examine the process which has led Russia to utilise commercial military service providers as foreign and security policy tools. I employ a model of military reform proposed by Deborah Avant (2000). My central argument is that military service providers were created in Russia as a reaction to challenges posed by changes in the external security environment. The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and the following military reform created circumstances in which actors wishing to emulate the Western model of military outsourcing could advance their agenda. However, the patrimonial governance system of Russia had a significant impact on the resulting organisations differing substantially from their Western counterparts.