

‘Nyet’ to Russian water polo side

Georgia Palgan, The Daily Telegraph, 3 June 2026

A Russian national sports team allegedly linked to sanctioned oligarchs and a Kremlin-tied oil giant is preparing to play in Sydney next month, sparking calls to ban the team from competing. The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) has written twice to senior politicians – including Foreign Minister Penny Wong, federal Sports Minister Anika Wells and her NSW counter part Steve Kamper – as well as Water Polo Australia, demanding action ahead of the 2026 Water Polo World Cup Finals at the Sydney Olympic Park Aquatic Centre.

AFUO said the Russian team was directed by the Russian Aquatics Federation, whose chair Dmitriy Mazepin is an oligarch described by the European Union’s General Court as belonging to “the closest circle of President (Vladimir) Putin”.

Mazepin has been on Australia’s sanction list since April 2022. Members of the team also play for a club funded by Surgutneftegas, a Russian oil and gas giant also sanctioned by Australia. The company’s director-general, Vladimir Bogdanov, is also sanctioned.

With more than \$960,000 in prizemoney on the line at the World Cup, sanctions experts warned any flow of funds through the federation or to players linked to sanctioned entities could constitute a breach of Australian law.

“The Australian government needs to explain – urgently – how hosting their athletes is consistent with our own sanctions law,” AFUO chair Kateryna Argyrou said.

Water polo coach and former player Andrei Kovalenko, who represented both his native Ukraine and Australia, said the Russian team playing in Australia was “wrong”.

“They will come wearing the same colours which are on the sleeves of Russian soldiers killing Ukrainians – I don’t know how people can justify that,” Mr Kovalenko said.

Ms Argyrou said more than 660 Ukrainian athletes had been killed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ms Wong's office told the AFUO it was preparing a response to its letter.