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Russian water polo team's Sydney visa bid should face tough scrutiny

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Georgia Palgan and Suzan Giuliani

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Any Russian athletes seeking to enter Australia should be subjected to "the toughest security and visa checks", the Opposition has said as pressure mounts on the federal government to stop the country's water polo team competing in Sydney.

The Daily Telegraph yesterday revealed the anticipated entry of the Russian national women's side in next month's Water Polo World Cup finals at Sydney Olympic Park had sparked calls for urgent intervention from authorities, given the team's alleged links to sanctioned oligarchs and a Kremlin-tied oil giant.

The national team is directed by the Russian Aquatics Federation, whose chair Dmitriy Mazepin has been on Australia's sanctions list since April 2022.

Several members of the Russian national team also play for a club funded by Surgutneftegas, a Russian oil and gas giant sanctioned by Australia. The company's director-general, Vladimir Bogdanov, is likewise sanctioned.

The $960,000 prizemoney pool on offer at the tournament has prompted sanctions experts to warn any flow of funds through the federation, or to players linked to sanctioned entities, could constitute a breach of Australian sanctions law.

Opposition home affairs spokesman Jonno Duniam said the Coalition backed calls from Australia's Ukrainian diaspora for "a resolute approach".

"If Russian athletes are even to be allowed entry to Australia, it must only be after the toughest security and visa checks and without any platform for the use of Russia's flag or other national propaganda," Mr Duniam said.

The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) has written to Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong, federal Sports Minister Anika Wells, her NSW counterpart Steve Kamper and Water Polo Australia to demand urgent action.

"The Australian government needs to explain – urgently – how hosting their athletes is consistent with our own sanctions law," AFUO chair Kateryna Argyrou said, adding that more than 660 Ukrainian athletes had been killed since Russia's invasion of the country, with upwards of 800 sporting facilities destroyed in the conflict.

While AFUO is yet to receive a response, it is understood the Department of Home Affairs has not received any visa applications from Russian water polo players but is monitoring the situation.

The uproar follows World Aquatics' decision on April 14 to lift its ban on Russian and Belarusian national teams.

The move prompted Norway, Finland and Poland to refuse to host World Aquatics events in protest.

Water polo coach Andrei Kovalenko, who represented both Ukraine and Australia at the Olympics as a player, said the Russian team playing in Sydney would be "wrong."

"They will come wearing the same colours which are on the sleeves of Russian soldiers killing Ukrainians," Mr Kovalenko said.

"It shouldn't be done."