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Ukrainians angry over Russian water polo team in Sydney

By Annabelle Banfield, Australian Associated Press, July 22 2026



Russia uses sport as a part of propaganda to legitimise its regime, Ukrainian protesters say. Photo: Steven Markham/AAP PHOTOS

The inclusion of a Russian water polo team in a tournament in Australia is outraging the Ukrainian community.

The World Cup Finals for water polo are being staged in Sydney from July 22-26, and the Russian women's national team is one of eight nations in the women's competition.

Ukrainian community members gathered outside Sydney Olympic Park's aquatic centre on Wednesday, waving flags and banners while chants of 'no blood in our pool' rang out.

World Aquatics lifted its ban on Russian and Belarusian teams and individual athletes competing under the flag of those nations in April.

The restrictions had been put in place after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but are being wound back using the premise politics should stay away from sport.

It's a sentiment that rings hollow for three-time Olympian Andrei Kovalenko.

Born in Ukraine, the 55-year-old started his career representing the Soviet Union, including playing for the 'Unified team' at the 1992 Olympics, before playing for Ukraine in 1996, then emigrating to Australia and representing the Aussie Stingers at Sydney 2000.



*Ukrainian Australians say Russia should not be allowed to compete in world sports.
(Steven Markham/AAP PHOTOS)*

"Sport, it is politics," Mr Kovalenko told AAP.

"Once they win something, they will get back and they will be representing Russia, wearing the same flag and a sleeve which those people who are killing Ukrainians are wearing.

"It's all part of propaganda and that's why I believe it's wrong. Sports never were out of politics."

The Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations had been campaigning against Russian involvement in the World Cup Finals for months before organising Wednesday's demonstration.

"There is maybe a misconception that athletics in Russia is like athletics in Australia, but it's not. It's very much a state enterprise and it's very closely involved with the state," the organisation's communications manager Nadia Mencinsky told AAP.

"The Russian national water polo team is part of the Russian Aquatic Federation that is actually headed up by a sanctioned individual named Dmitry Mazepin. He's been sanctioned by the Australian government.

"Russia very much uses sport and its national teams as a part of its propaganda and to normalise and legitimise its state."

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