

‘No blood in our pool’: Fury as Russian water polo team competes in Sydney

Russia’s women’s water polo team is controversially competing in Sydney despite international sanctions, with the local Ukrainian community accusing the Federal Government of enabling a “propaganda win” for Vladimir Putin.

Olivia Lancuba, The Daily Telegraph, 23 July 2026

On Wednesday night, the Russian women’s water polo team competed in Sydney for the World Cup Finals despite ongoing sanctions and international condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, prompting protests from Australia’s Ukrainian community and criticism of the decision to allow them to play.

Demonstrators gathered outside Sydney Olympic Park Aquatic Centre (SOPAC), accusing organisers and the Federal Government of allowing Russia to use international sport to rehabilitate its image while the war in Ukraine continues.



Members of the Ukrainian community holding flags and placards as they protest the inclusion of Russia in the 2026 World Aquatics Water Polo World Cup Finals at the Sydney Aquatic Centre. PICTURE: DAVID GRAY / AFP

Ukrainian Council of NSW president Andrew Mencinsky said there was no justification for Russia's national team competing in Australia while civilians continued to die in missile attacks.

"Nothing has changed," Mr Mencinsky said.

"Russia continues its attack on Ukraine. Why then are members of the Russian national team allowed to participate in global sporting competitions in Australia?"

He described the tournament as "a propaganda win for Russia", arguing the team's presence allowed Moscow to "sportswash" its reputation.



Police officers on patrol as members of the Ukrainian community protest. Picture: DAVID GRAY / AFP)

"When they perform here, it sends a signal that Russia is welcomed back into the community of civilised nations. That is simply wrong," he said.

Mr Mencinsky said more than 650 Ukrainian athletes had been killed since Russia's full-scale invasion and more than 800 sporting facilities had been destroyed, making fair competition impossible.



Ukrainian Council of NSW president Andrew Mencinsky said more than 650 Ukrainian athletes had been killed since Russia's invasion. Picture: DAVID GRAY / AFP

"We do not want the blood that Russia has spilt in Ukraine on our sports fields or in our swimming pools," he said. "No blood in our pool."

He also criticised Water Polo Australia and the Federal Government, saying information had been provided suggesting members of the Russian team should have been denied entry under Australia's sanctions regime.

Mr Mencinsky said Sport Minister Anika Wells had acknowledged receipt of the material and advised it had been referred to the Government's sanctions team for consideration, but no action followed.



Protesters waved Australian and Ukrainian flags in solidarity. Picture: Jonathan Ng

“Sanctions are sanctions. They should not be here,” he said.

Protester Anton Vitaly said Russia was using international sport as a diplomatic tool to normalise its presence on the world stage while the war continued.

“Norway, Finland and Poland refused to host water polo events while Russia competed with its flag and anthem,” he said.

“Australia has the same sanctions and the same commitments. Australia made the opposite choice. How was this permitted to happen, and what will be done to ensure it never happens again?”



The presence of the Russian water polo team has been traumatic for the local Ukrainian community. Picture: Jonathan Ng

Vitaly said the impact of the war on Ukrainian sport made the team's presence in Sydney especially confronting.

He said the latest attacks on Ukraine's capital underscored protesters' anger.

“Just yesterday, within one hour, 50 missiles were sent to Ukraine's capital city,” he said.

“Each one could destroy an area three times the size of SOPAC.”

Vitaly also argued the team should not be treated as a group of neutral athletes.

“These are not individual athletes,” he said. “They are representatives of Russia and are supporting Russia's actions, at an international event.”

Russia defeated the Netherlands 11–6 in the quarter-final, ensuring the team will remain in Sydney for Friday night's semi-final.