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‘Insult to Australia’s Ukrainian community’:

Political row over Russian team in Sydney



Rob Harris, July 21, 2026

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Russia’s women’s water polo team will compete in Sydney this week despite warnings from Ukrainian community leaders that members of the delegation have links to sanctioned entities, Moscow’s security apparatus and institutions associated with the country’s state-sponsored doping program.

The Albanese government has opted not to intervene in World Aquatics’ decision to allow the country’s return to compete in the World Cup, despite acknowledging concerns raised by the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations (AFUO) about the team’s composition.

The team’s return to international competition has ignited a political row before its World Cup match against the Netherlands on Wednesday afternoon, with the Coalition demanding to know why Australia is allowing a Russian national team to compete under its flag while the war in Ukraine continues.

Over the past month there has been an increase in the intensity of Russia’s air war, with strikes in May and June deploying significantly larger numbers of [drones and missiles in single attacks](#), leading to more destruction and more casualties.

Sports Minister Anika Wells said Australia remained steadfast in its support for Ukraine and opposed the normalisation of Russian participation in international sport.

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In a letter to the AFUO, she said all travellers were assessed under Australia’s visa, border control and sanctions frameworks on a case-by-case basis, and that material provided by the Ukrainian community had been referred to the Australian Sanctions Office for consideration.

“Russia’s participation in international competitions should not be normalised by international sporting organisations while its illegal invasion of Ukraine continues,” she said.

The response followed a detailed plea from the AFUO to Wells, Foreign Minister Penny Wong, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke and NSW Sports Minister Steve Kamper urging the

government to conduct rigorous visa and sanctions assessments before allowing the delegation into Australia.

Several players are contracted to Kinef-Surgutneftegas, a club funded by sanctioned Russian oil company Surgutneftegas, while others play for a club affiliated with Russia's Dynamo sports society, which the AFUO says maintains institutional links with the country's security and intelligence agencies. The AFUO also raised concerns about the employment of the team's coach and medical staff by Russian government institutions, and notes the Russian Aquatics Federation is chaired by oligarch Dmitry Mazepin, who was [individually sanctioned by the federal government](#).

The team's captain, Ekaterina Prokofyeva, who plays for Kinef-Surgutneftegas, attended the tournament launch in front of the Sydney Opera House on Monday.

AFUO chair Kateryna Argyrou said she was "deeply disappointed" that the government's reply failed to engage with the substance of the community's concerns.

She said the AFUO had presented documented evidence linking members of the delegation to sanctioned organisations and institutions connected to the Russian state, yet received little more than a generic assurance that visa and border checks would apply.

Argyrou said allowing Russia to compete under its national flag and anthem at Sydney Olympic Park would provide the Kremlin with powerful images to portray the country as being welcomed back into international sport despite its invasion of Ukraine.

"A national team from Russia is not simply a collection of individual athletes – it is a representation of the state itself," she said. "These athletes are funded by the state, linked in several cases to a sanctioned oil company, and directed by a federation headed by a man

sanctioned by Australia and described by the European Court as belonging to [‘the closest circle of President Putin’](#), an indicted war criminal.”

Leading sanctions expert Anton Moiseienko, an associate professor of law at the Australian National University, told this masthead last month that Australia’s broad regime would likely extend to athletes who are employed by teams owned or run by entities or individuals. Under Australia’s sanctions regulations, often referred to as [Magnitsky laws](#), it is a criminal offence to directly or indirectly make an asset available to a sanctioned individual or entity.

Argyrou also questioned how the government could speak of sporting values while Ukrainian athletes continued to train under air-raid sirens. More than 660 Ukrainian athletes have been killed since the invasion began and more than 800 sporting facilities damaged or destroyed, she said.