



24 JAN, 2025

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Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney

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EXCLUSIVE
Chris Barrett

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Few athletes from Western nations have ventured to Russia since the war began nearly three years ago, with the pariah state all but cast out of the international sporting arena.

The appearance of the Australian in the unofficial competition last month has drawn condemnation from Ukraine’s ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko.

The injury-plagued 28-year-old featured in the three-day mixed teams event in St Petersburg despite Tennis Australia urging players not to play in Russia.

The showcase, staged from November 29 to December 1, included current and former Russian players as well as

seven foreigners, among them Spain’s Pedro Martinez and Roberto Bautista Agut, Julia Putintseva of Kazakhstan and Kokkinakis, world No.71.

The event’s major sponsor was state-owned Russian gas and oil giant Gazprom, which has been the subject of financial sanctions imposed by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade since April 2022, just weeks after Russian President Putin embarked on war in Ukraine. **NEWS PAGE 10**



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The event's major sponsor was state-owned Russian gas and oil giant Gazprom, which has been the subject of financial sanctions imposed by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade since April 2022, just weeks after Russian President Putin embarked on war in Ukraine, as well as being targeted by the United States Department of Treasury.

Gazprom reportedly established its own private militia last year and is behind Putin's newly announced

plans to build a gas pipeline to Iran.

Alexander Ivanovich Medvedev, a former vice-chairman of Gazprom and an adviser to the head of its export division, was the tournament director.

"It's very disappointing to basically see an Australian tennis player going to Russia for money at a tournament sponsored by a state-owned enterprise whose proceeds go towards the production of weapons for the war against Ukraine," Ukraine ambassador Myroshnychenko said.

"They also use it for their domestic propaganda purposes."

Contacted by this masthead about Kokkinakis's participation in the St Petersburg exhibition, called North Palmyra Trophies, a spokesperson for Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said: "Australian sanctions laws apply to all activities in Australia, and extra-territorially to all activities by Australian individuals and bodies corporate overseas."

"Australian entities are expected to conduct due diligence before undertaking activities that may otherwise violate Australian sanctions laws."

"The Australian Sanctions Office is Australia's sanctions regulator and takes all necessary steps to ensure Australians and Australian business are in compliance with Australian sanctions law. We do not comment publicly on compliance matters."

This masthead does not suggest that Kokkinakis breached sanctions law by playing in Russia.

Anton Moiseenko, an expert on sanctions at the Australian National University, said for there to

have been a risk of a sanctions violation, payment would have had to be made by a blacklisted person or entity and other factors such as an individual's awareness of Australia's sanctions regime would also likely come into play. There is no suggestion that occurred.

According to a Tennis Australia source, the money Kokkinakis received as an appearance fee to play in St Petersburg did not come from Russia.

It is not known how much he was paid but speaking after a first-round win at Melbourne Park against Russia's Roman Safiullin last week, Kokkinakis said: "Unfortunately [on the] ATP [Tour] sometimes, if you make a semi-final of a 250 event, you don't get as much as what you would playing an exhibition".

Semi-finalists at this month's Brisbane International, an ATP 250 event, collected \$US33,055 (\$52,717) in prize money.

Kokkinakis was eliminated in the second round of the men's singles at the Australian Open last week, a result for which he earned \$200,000.

He had received criticism for playing an exhibition event before the Australian tennis summer from former doubles champion Todd Woodbridge, who questioned whether it was the right preparation after he withdrew from the Adelaide International with a shoulder injury.

He replied that after years of injury setbacks he was "trying to make a living" just like Woodbridge, who is a tennis commentator and game show host for Nine, the owner of this masthead.

Kokkinakis, who was a key fig-



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ure in Australia making the semi-finals of the Davis Cup last year and has a 1-0 career record against all-time great Roger Federer, added: “Sometimes you [have] got to weigh up your options as far as trying to do what’s best for your career, best for the ranking”.

Kokkinakis is managed by Tennis Australia’s player management arm, and it’s understood he was strongly advised by the organisation not to play in Russia. His manager, Fraser Wright, Tennis Australia’s head of player management, did not reply to a request for comment.

In a statement, Tennis Australia did not refer specifically to Kokkinakis but said it encouraged players not to take up offers from Russia.

“For several years Tennis Australia has publicly and privately supported Ukraine athletes and sought and abided by federal government policy and recommendations in regard to Russia. This support and compliance continues,” the statement said.

“We advise athletes against competing in Russia and are in ongoing discussions with DFAT to provide education to players about the potential ramifications for doing business in this area.”

Kokkinakas was listed on the Russian tournament website with

an Australian flag under his name and Medvedev, who is also chairman of Russian Premier League football club FC Zenit, promoted his involvement as a colourful athlete who had won ATP singles and doubles titles including the 2022 Australian Open doubles with Nick Kyrgios.

Fronting the cameras for an interview during the exhibition eight weeks ago, Kokkinakis recalled he had been to the Russian city once before, in 2015, remembering it as beautiful.

“This year I just went one morning for a little walk around the river but I think we have plans for the party tonight and I’ll maybe ask Sasha [Bublik] or Karen [Khachanov] where is good to go in St Petersburg,” he said, referring to a function for players involved in the teams contest at the city’s KSC Arena.

Bublik, of Kazakhstan, and Russia’s world No.19 Khachanov, were two of the other men in action.

“Everyone is so nice here. People are lovely. It’s a really nice city so hopefully I can explain a little bit more. Maybe after the next few days I can tell you what’s nice,” said Kokkinakis, who played singles matches against Bautista Agut and Khachanov as well as turning out for doubles.

St Petersburg hosted ATP and WTA Tour tournaments before the war and the exhibition event has been held for the past three years.

An ATP spokesman said it did not place restrictions on exhibitions in the off-season because players were independent contractors and able to choose where they competed.

Since it invaded Ukraine Russia has been excluded from most international sport including the Olympic Games, qualifying for the 2026 FIFA World Cup and football’s European club competitions. Russian and Belarusian athletes competed at the Olympics in Paris this year as neutrals and at the Australian Open they have played without their country’s name and flag next to their names.

Australians are not banned from travelling to Russia but the government’s current advice is not to go there because of the danger of arbitrary arrest and detention. Australians who are there are advised to leave immediately.

It emerged last week that Melbourne man Oscar Jenkins was feared dead after being captured by Russian soldiers while fighting for Ukraine.



Kokkinakis (left), with other players in Russia at a tournament function.



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Thanasi Kokkinakis
playing at the exhibition
event in St Petersburg.
Photo: Getty Images

