

# Hoisted by Their Own Petard: Wimbledon's Russian Player Ban

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*It was, all and all, an odd spectacle. The Ladies' Singles victor for Wimbledon 2022 had all the credentials that would have otherwise guaranteed her barring. Being Russian-born, news outlets in Britain walked gingerly around The All England Club's decision to ban Russian players yet permit Elena Rybakina to play. Sky News [noted](#) that, “Moscow-born Elena Rybakina, who represents Kazakhstan, has won the Wimbledon women's singles title in a year that Russians are banned from the tournament.”*

The April decision by The All England Club to ban both Russian and Belarussian players in response to the Ukraine war did not go down well with the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) and WTA (Women's Tennis Association). Their gruff response was to strip Wimbledon of ranking points. “It is with great regret and reluctance that we see no option but to remove ATP Ranking points from Wimbledon for 2022,” [stated](#) the ATP in May. “Our rules and agreements exist in order to protect the rights of players as a whole. Unilateral decisions of this nature, if unaddressed, set a damaging precedent for the rest of the Tour.”

For the ATP, discrimination regarding individual tournaments was “simply not viable.” The WTA followed in step. “Nearly 50 years again,” [declared](#) the body's chairman Steve Simon, “the WTA was founded on the fundamental principle that all players have an equal

opportunity to compete based on merit and without discrimination.” Individual athletes engaged in an individual sport “should not be penalised or prevented from competing solely because of their nationalities or the decisions made by the governments of their countries.”

In solidarity, a number of tennis players also opposed the measure. Serbia’s Novak Djokovic [thought](#) the decision “crazy”. Spain’s Rafael Nadal [noted](#) how it was not the fault of players as to “what happening in this moment with the war.” The decision made by the Wimbledon organisers had been taken unilaterally. “The government didn’t force them to do it.”

Rather than taking a position of stout, unflagging independence, The All England Tennis Club [revealed](#) a craven streak in response to the UK government, which had sought to “limit Russia’s global influence”. The decision regarding banning Russian and Belarussian players from Wimbledon was “the only viable decision” given its standing as “a globally renowned event and British institution”. In taking such a position, the Club members had shown they could be as political, aligned and patriotically discriminatory as any other institution claiming fairness.

The Club also claimed to be doing this for the players. “We were not prepared to take any actions which could risk the personal safety of players, or their families. We believe that requiring written declarations from individual players – and that would apply to all relevant players – as a condition of entry in the high-profile circumstances of Wimbledon would carry significant scrutiny and risk.” Would it not have been better to simply avoid such a scandalous loyalty (or, in this case, disloyalty) test from the start?

Equally implausible was the argument that the Russian regime was somehow unique in extolling the virtues of its athletes as part of its “propaganda machine”, a point that served to diminish the humanity and individual worth of the sporting figures in question.

While we can accept the notion that high profile sportspeople are often puppets of the State in question, show ponies watered, fed and even, on occasion, drugged, the decision to specifically target Russia and Belarus could just as well have extended to many other players in many other sports. A rotten government, in other words, would immediately disqualify the athlete from entering the tournament. It should have cast grave doubt on Kazakhstan, a country stacked with [its own oligarchs and corruption woes](#). Little wonder that the entities responsible for the tennis tour were furious.

At the tournament’s end, the merits of the ban were there for all to see. The Duchess of Cambridge presented the winning trophy to a Russian-born player, the very thing the Club had sought to avoid. Tennis fans responded by [lighting up](#) the social media scene with acid scorn. In the biting [assessment](#) of tennis writer Mark Zemek, the move by the Club had been exposed “for the morally unimaginative and stupidly cruel decision it was, is, and always will be.”

Instead of heaping ridicule on the organisers, some press outlets preferred to [focus](#) on Rybakina’s switch to Kazakhstan four years ago, something done in the spirit of receiving greater monetary reward. (So much for the patriotic element.) “Her win is historic because she is the first player to represent Kazakhstan to win a Grand Slam title.”

When the press sought to sniff out any lingering Russian loyalties, Rybakina [responded](#) to the nonsense with gusto. “What does it mean for you to feel? I mean, I’m playing tennis, so for me, I’m enjoying my time here.” As for how much time she continued to spend in

Moscow, Rybakina [suggested](#) with mystic obliqueness that she did not “live anywhere, to be honest.” If only that treatment had been afforded to Daniil Medvedev and his compatriots.

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