

# Tennis Development Brings Safin Back to Moscow

By [Howard Amos](#)

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Tennis great Safin, pictured close to his apartment in central Moscow, came back to live in the city two years ago. **Howard Amos**

Marat Safin is so keen to raise the standards of Russian tennis, he is even willing to live in Moscow.

Safin, who won two major titles before retiring in 2009, became vice president of the Russian Tennis Federation last year and an adviser to the president of the Russian Olympic Committee, moving to Moscow to concentrate on producing more quality Russian tennis players.

Safin, 31, spent nine years of his childhood in Spain before traveling the world over a decade from one tournament to the next.

He said he is committed to Russian tennis. "That's why I am here — otherwise I would live

somewhere else. ... I grew up here so it makes things easier, but sometimes I want to shoot somebody, particularly when I don't see sunlight in November."

Though living in a top-floor apartment around the corner from Patriarch's Ponds — which Safin said he bought as just one room before putting in the walls and designing the interior himself — probably makes the travails of Russian life a little easier to bear.

One of the best tennis players Russia has ever produced, Safin was the world No. 1 for nine weeks and achieved two Grand Slam titles — the U.S. Open in 2000 and the Australian Open five years later — although he was often as well known for his habit of smashing rackets, for once mooning the crowd after a sublime drop shot at the French Open, and for an impressive list of female conquests that allegedly included oligarch Roman Abramovich's girlfriend, Darya Zhukova.

In an interview with The Moscow Times near his home, he said his role models these days included legendary Soviet wrestler Alexander Karelin — who joined United Russia before forging a successful career in the State Duma — and former world tennis No. 1, Stefan Edberg, who is now making more money from managing an investment fund than he ever did playing.

"I respect the guys who have really done something: They finished [a sporting career], and they moved to something different where they want to achieve as well," Safin said.

But in Safin's chosen field of Russian tennis administration he will have an uphill struggle. Though Russia's female tennis players — from Maria Sharapova who reached the Wimbledon final this year to Svetlana Kuznetsova with two Grand Slam singles titles under her belt — have excelled in recent years, little has been heard from the Russian men.

And Safin is not convinced that the female success is sustainable. What happened to the men can also happen to the girls because fewer and fewer people are interested in tennis, and there are fewer and fewer professional coaches, he said.

Asked which young Russian players coming up in the game he would tip for future glory, he floundered. "I have no answer," he said. "It's kind of complicated."

Safin said he preferred his work for the Tennis Federation over that for the Olympic Committee because there are "less politics" and identified a number of steps that need to be taken to strengthen the game's future.

Russia needs a national tennis center like Flushing Meadows in the United States, Britain's Roehampton or Roland Garros in France, Safin said, and interest in the sport must be stimulated by big events and set-piece professional tennis tournaments. Tennis must also be brought to mainstream television, he added, and cited — as something to be emulated — the surge of interest in ice skating following its higher profile in broadcast media.

The bottom line, though, is money. Safin estimated that the Tennis Federation had an annual budget of about \$5 million, compared with \$80 million to \$100 million in France and about \$180 million in the United States.

Moreover, in Russia, finding money is not just about sponsors and government grants, Safin

said. You need a sugar daddy.

One example is politician and billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who “takes care” of the biathlon, Safin said. “[That’s] the way our system works. We are very limited in how we make money. ... That’s why we need someone to take care of us, somebody big — that’s the only way it can work.”

Asked about the biggest sugar daddy of them all — whether he would rather see Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Medvedev running Russia after the 2012 election — Safin refused to be drawn.

“We need someone who can control our country, otherwise it will be a mess — some people complain, some people don’t complain, but they [Putin and Medvedev] are doing the right thing. ... They are [both] smart enough not to make our lives more complicated.”

On more familiar ground, however, Safin was less cagey. If he had to choose between the two players who grab most of tennis’ headlines today — Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal — Safin said he would go for the Spaniard.

Nadal has more going for him, Safin said. “He is younger, faster and more hungry.”

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