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Russia Would Welcome Unvaccinated Djokovic, Tennis Exec Says

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Tennis star Novak Djokovic takes his seat on a plane to Belgrade. **Darko Bandic / AP / TASS**

Russia would welcome Novak Djokovic at its tournaments in St. Petersburg and Moscow, a senior tennis executive said Sunday after Australia deported the No.1-ranked star over its coronavirus vaccination requirements.

Alexander Medvedev, the Association of Tennis Professionals' (ATP) general tournament director in Russia, blasted what he called a lack of judicial independence after an Australian court threw out Djokovic's bid to defend his Australian Open title and win a record 21st Grand Slam.

"I know Novak personally, I want to express my words of support to him and say that we'll be glad to see him in Russia at our tournaments," Medvedev told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

"It's a very sad and hurtful incident," added Medvedev, who also presides over the Women's Tennis Association in St. Petersburg and the city's Zenit football club in addition to being a

senior executive at Russian gas giant Gazprom.

“The man did not commit any crimes and has spent several days in what amounts to a bullpen... Where is judicial independence?”

The Australian Open began Monday overshadowed by the controversy surrounding the unvaccinated Serbian.

Djokovic flew into Melbourne last week claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on Dec. 16.

The Australian government canceled Djokovic’s visa and placed him in an immigration detention hotel.

A judge overturned that, but the government then tore up Djokovic's visa for a second time, triggering Sunday's court hearing, which the tennis ace lost.

The world men’s tennis No. 1 landed in Dubai on Monday after losing the high-stakes legal battle over his vaccination status.

Djokovic has not publicly disclosed his Covid-19 vaccination status but has expressed opposition to vaccines in the past.

AFP contributed reporting.

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