**Novak Djokovic withdraws from ATP Cup in Sydney**

*Announcement by organisers comes amid speculation over Serbian tennis champion’s vaccination status ahead of Australian Open.*

Djokovic has won a record nine Australian Open titles [File: Antonio Bronic/Reuters]

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Tennis superstar Novak Djokovic has pulled out of the ATP Cup in Sydney, amid speculation about his vaccination status and whether he will defend his Australian Open title next month.

“World No.1 Novak Djokovic has withdrawn from the 2022 ATP Cup,” organisers said in a statement on Wednesday, ahead of the start of the tournament on Saturday.

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There has been intense speculation over the Serbian champion’s participation in both events. The 34-year-old, who has repeatedly declined to say if he has been inoculated against COVID-19, last month reiterated his stance about freedom of choice over taking the vaccine.

Tennis Australia, organisers of the Australian Open, which starts on January 17, have stipulated that all participants must be vaccinated against the coronavirus or have a medical exemption granted by an independent panel of experts.

[Djokovic has won a record nine Australian Open titles](https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2021/2/21/tennis-djokovic-wins-record-extending-ninth-australian-open), including the last three, and is in a three-way tie on 20 major titles with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

His father Srdjan told a Serbian television channel last month that Djokovic would probably pull out of the major, saying Tennis Australia’s stance on mandatory vaccination was tantamount to “blackmail”.

Owing to Djokovic’s current world ranking, Serbia received top billing for the 16-team ATP Cup event, which runs until January 9, and were put in Group A along with Norway, Chile and Spain when the draw was held this month.

“Team Serbia will now be led by world number 33 Dusan Lajovic,” the organisers’ statement said, adding that “Team USA’s Austin Krajicek has also withdrawn, and will not be replaced at this time”.

The season-opening event has also seen Austria, which failed the eligibility criteria following the withdrawal of both Dominic Thiem and Dennis Novak, be replaced by France.

Russia, last year’s winner, will be missing Andrey Rublev and Aslan Karatsev from that team. Evgeny Karlovskiy will instead join the team.

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