

# REGULATION OF ONLINE GAMBLING IN RUSSIA: ISSUE OF LOOT BOXES AND MICROTRANSACTIONS

**Tripti Bhushan**

Lecturer  
O.P Jindal Global Law School  
Sonipat, Haryana  
Email-tbhusshan@jgu.edu.in

## **Abstract**

The rapid growth of online gaming and the proliferation of loot boxes and microtransactions has raised concerns worldwide about their potential impact on players, particularly among vulnerable populations such as minors. Russia, as a significant player in the gaming industry, faces unique challenges in regulating online gambling, including the contentious issue of loot boxes and microtransactions. This research paper examines the current regulatory landscape for online gambling in Russia, explores the controversy surrounding loot boxes and microtransactions, and proposes potential regulatory measures to address these concerns while balancing the interests of the gaming industry and player protection.

**Keywords:** online gaming, Microtransactions, gambling, Loot Boxes


## **1. Introduction:**

The global online gaming market has experienced exponential growth in recent years, driven by advancements in technology and changing consumer preferences. Within this landscape, the introduction of loot boxes and microtransactions has become a hot-button issue, generating debates about their classification, potential for addiction, and impact on gambling behaviors. In Russia, the regulation of online gambling poses unique challenges due to its cultural, legal, and economic factors.

In recent years, the rapid growth of online gambling platforms has introduced a plethora of complex regulatory challenges across the global landscape. One country grappling with these issues is Russia, where the convergence of online gambling, virtual economies, and digital entertainment has raised concerns about the regulation of emerging practices such as loot boxes and microtransactions. As the digital realm continues to evolve, the intersection of gaming and gambling has become a focal point for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and the wider public. This introduction delves into the intricate landscape of online gambling regulation in Russia, with a specific focus on the contentious matters of loot boxes and microtransactions. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of these issues, from their economic impact to their potential psychological effects, this discussion aims to shed light on the intricate balance that authorities must strike between innovation, consumer protection, and maintaining the integrity of the online gaming environment in the Russian context.

## **2. Regulatory Overview of Online Gambling in Russia:**

This section provides an overview of the current regulatory framework for online gambling in Russia. It discusses the legal status of online gambling, including its definition, licensing requirements, and the roles of various governmental agencies in regulating the industry. The effectiveness of existing regulations in addressing emerging issues such as loot boxes and microtransactions will be analyzed.



The regulatory landscape of online gambling in Russia has undergone significant changes in recent years, reflecting the country's evolving approach to this rapidly growing industry. Online gambling is a multifaceted sector that encompasses various forms of betting, casino games, and other interactive gaming activities conducted over the internet. In Russia, the regulation of online gambling has been characterized by a mix of restrictive policies and attempts to establish a more structured framework for the industry.

### **Historical Perspective:**

Online gambling in Russia has a complex history that has been marked by periods of prohibition and attempts at regulation. In 2006, the Russian government passed federal legislation that effectively banned most forms of gambling, both land-based and online, with the exception of a few designated gambling zones. This move aimed to combat the proliferation of unregulated gambling establishments.

However, the rise of online gambling platforms operating from outside Russia's borders posed a challenge to enforcement efforts. Russian citizens continued to access these offshore platforms, leading to a debate about the effectiveness of the existing regulations and the potential benefits of a regulated online gambling market.

### **Regulatory Evolution:**

In 2014, Russia took steps to regulate online gambling more comprehensively. Federal Law No. 244-FZ was passed, which allowed certain types of online betting activities within the country's borders. This law authorized online sports betting operators to obtain licenses from the Russian government. This represented a shift from the previous blanket prohibition of online gambling.

The law also introduced strict requirements for obtaining a license, including financial guarantees, technical standards for online platforms, and compliance with anti-money laundering and responsible gaming measures. These requirements were designed to ensure the transparency and integrity of licensed operators while minimizing the risks associated with online gambling.

### **Current State of Online Gambling:**

As of the most recent knowledge available, the Russian online gambling market remains heavily regulated. The government has maintained a strict stance on unlicensed online gambling operators, imposing fines and blacklisting websites that do not comply with Russian law. The blacklist includes a substantial number of offshore online gambling platforms that continue to target Russian players.

In addition to online sports betting, Russia has also taken steps to regulate other forms of online gambling. There have been discussions about the potential legalization of online poker, which has a significant player base in the country. However, at the time of the knowledge cutoff, the legal status of online poker in Russia remained uncertain, with ongoing debates about its classification as a game of skill or chance.

### **3. The Controversy Surrounding Loot Boxes and Microtransactions:**

Loot boxes and microtransactions are in-game mechanisms that allow players to purchase virtual items, often with real-world currency, without knowing the exact contents of what they will receive. This section explores the controversy surrounding these features, including concerns about their resemblance to gambling, their potential to exploit vulnerable players, and the lack of transparency in their mechanics.

In recent years, the gaming industry has seen a significant rise in the use of loot boxes and microtransactions as a monetization strategy. While these mechanisms can provide additional revenue streams for game developers and publishers, they have also sparked controversy worldwide, including in Russia.

Loot boxes are virtual items that players can purchase in games. When opened, these boxes contain random in-game items, such as skins, characters, weapons, or other enhancements. Microtransactions, on the other hand, are small purchases made within the game, often for cosmetic items or in-game currency. While these features may seem harmless, they have raised concerns about gambling-like behavior, particularly when players spend real money to acquire randomized items.

In Russia, the debate over loot boxes and microtransactions has primarily focused on their potential impact on players, especially younger individuals. Critics argue that these systems can lead to addictive behavior, as players may chase the thrill of getting rare or valuable items. This has prompted concerns about gambling addiction among minors and the need for stricter regulations.

One key aspect of this controversy in Russia is the classification of loot boxes. Some argue that they should be considered a form of gambling due to their unpredictable nature and the real-world money involved. This perspective has led to discussions about whether loot boxes should be subject to the same regulations as traditional gambling activities, such as age restrictions and transparency requirements.

To address these concerns, regulatory bodies in Russia have been evaluating the potential risks of loot boxes and microtransactions. There have been calls for increased transparency from game developers and publishers regarding the odds of obtaining specific items from loot boxes. Additionally, some Russian officials have proposed introducing age restrictions on games with these features to protect younger players from excessive spending and potential addictive behaviors.

The controversy in Russia echoes similar discussions in other countries, where governments and industry stakeholders are grappling with how to strike a balance between the financial interests of the gaming industry and the protection of players, especially minors. Finding a solution that addresses these concerns without stifling innovation and creativity in the gaming industry remains a complex challenge.

As the gaming landscape evolves and as more research is conducted on the impact of loot boxes and microtransactions, it is likely that further regulatory measures will be considered in Russia and elsewhere to ensure a safer and more transparent gaming environment, particularly for the most vulnerable players.

To address the issue of loot boxes and microtransactions in Russia, a comprehensive approach involving legal regulations, industry self-regulation, and public awareness campaigns is necessary. Here's a solution that combines these elements:

#### **Legal Regulations:**

- a. **Age Restrictions:** Implement strict age restrictions for the purchase of games containing loot boxes and microtransactions, similar to age ratings for movies. This will ensure that minors are protected from potential addictive or predatory practices.
- b. **Transparent Odds:** Mandate that game developers disclose the odds of obtaining specific items from loot boxes. This transparency will allow players to make informed decisions about their purchases.

c. **Limit Spending:** Set limits on the amount of money players can spend on microtransactions within a certain time period to prevent excessive spending and protect vulnerable individuals.

d. **Definition of Gambling:** Clearly define loot boxes and microtransactions in legal terms, considering whether they should be classified as a form of gambling or if they need their own specific classification.

#### **Industry Self-Regulation:**

a. **Responsible Design:** Encourage game developers to create games that are enjoyable without relying on aggressive microtransactions or loot box mechanics. Reward game designs that prioritize player experience over monetization.

b. **Consumer Feedback:** Establish a platform for players to provide feedback on in-game purchases and report any predatory practices. Developers should take these reports seriously and make necessary adjustments.

c. **Voluntary Restrictions:** Encourage game companies to implement voluntary spending limits or "cooldown" periods between purchases to prevent impulsive spending.

#### **Public Awareness Campaigns:**

a. **Education:** Launch public campaigns to educate players, parents, and guardians about the potential risks associated with loot boxes and microtransactions. Provide information on responsible gaming and spending habits.

b. **Promote Alternatives:** Highlight games that don't rely on loot boxes or predatory microtransactions as positive examples, encouraging the industry to adopt similar models.

c. **Support Groups:** Establish support groups for individuals and families affected by excessive spending on microtransactions, providing resources and counseling services.

#### **Oversight and Enforcement:**

a. **Regulatory Body:** Create a dedicated regulatory body responsible for overseeing and enforcing these regulations. Ensure that this body has the authority to investigate and penalize companies that violate the rules.

b. **Regular Audits:** Conduct regular audits of games that offer loot boxes and microtransactions to ensure compliance with disclosure requirements and spending limits.

By implementing these measures, Russia can work to mitigate the negative impact of loot boxes and microtransactions while promoting a healthier gaming environment for players of all ages.

#### **4. International Approaches to Regulating Loot Boxes and Microtransactions:**

A comparative analysis of how other countries have approached the regulation of loot boxes and microtransactions will be presented. This section examines examples from countries that have implemented specific regulations, such as disclosure requirements, age restrictions, or outright bans, and evaluates their effectiveness.

The rise of loot boxes and microtransactions in the gaming industry has sparked significant controversy worldwide. These features, often found in popular video games, involve the purchase of in-game items, characters, or other content using real or virtual currency. Concerns about their addictive nature,

impact on younger players, and the potential for gambling-like behavior have prompted various countries to explore regulatory measures. This article will examine the international approaches to regulating loot boxes and microtransactions and discuss the specific context of Russia.

### **Global Regulatory Landscape:**

Several countries have taken steps to regulate loot boxes and microtransactions, each with its own unique approach. Some notable examples include:

1. **Belgium:** In 2018, Belgium classified certain loot box mechanisms as gambling and therefore illegal, requiring game developers to remove such systems or face heavy fines.
2. **China:** Chinese regulations mandate that game publishers must disclose the probabilities of obtaining in-game items from loot boxes, providing greater transparency to players.
3. **The Netherlands:** Similar to Belgium, the Netherlands has prohibited certain forms of loot boxes, considering them a form of gambling if the contents can be traded outside the game.
4. **United States:** While there is no comprehensive federal regulation, some U.S. states have introduced bills aimed at regulating loot boxes, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has expressed concerns and is monitoring the situation.

### **Russia's Regulatory Approach:**

As of my knowledge cutoff date in September 2021, Russia had not implemented specific nationwide regulations concerning loot boxes and microtransactions in video games. However, it's essential to note that the gaming landscape can change rapidly, and there may have been developments since that time.

Russian authorities have typically focused on broader issues related to online gaming, such as age restrictions, content ratings, and ensuring the protection of minors from potentially harmful content. While loot boxes and microtransactions may not have been the primary focus, the global discourse on these issues has the potential to influence Russian policymakers.

### **Potential Challenges and Considerations in Russia:**

If Russia were to consider regulating loot boxes and microtransactions, several challenges and considerations would arise:

1. **Cultural and Economic Impact:** Balancing the interests of the gaming industry, which often relies on these monetization methods, with the need to protect players from potential harm.
2. **Legal Classification:** Determining whether loot boxes should be considered a form of gambling under Russian law, which could have implications for their legality.
3. **Transparency:** Ensuring that players have clear and accurate information about the odds of obtaining items from loot boxes.
4. **Enforcement:** Establishing effective mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing any regulatory measures.

While Russia has not yet implemented specific regulations on loot boxes and microtransactions, the international landscape provides various examples of approaches that could inform future policy decisions. Balancing the interests of the gaming industry and player protection remains a complex task,

and any regulatory measures should take into account the evolving nature of the gaming industry and the potential impact on Russian gamers.

### **Challenges and Future Prospects:**

The regulatory framework for online gambling in Russia faces several challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the continued presence of unlicensed offshore operators that attract Russian players. These platforms often operate outside the reach of Russian authorities, making it difficult to enforce regulations effectively.

Another challenge is the need to strike a balance between regulation and consumer protection. Ensuring that licensed operators adhere to responsible gaming practices and provide a safe environment for players is crucial. Additionally, addressing potential issues related to problem gambling and underage participation remains an ongoing concern.

Looking ahead, the future of online gambling regulation in Russia will likely be influenced by several factors, including technological advancements, shifts in public opinion, and the experiences of other countries with regulated online gambling markets. As the industry continues to evolve, there may be opportunities to refine and update the regulatory framework to better address emerging challenges.

In conclusion, the regulatory overview of online gambling in Russia reflects a complex and evolving landscape. From a period of strict prohibition, Russia has moved towards a more regulated approach, allowing certain forms of online betting under specific conditions. However, challenges related to unlicensed operators and ensuring responsible gaming practices persist. The future of online gambling in Russia will be shaped by ongoing discussions, technological advancements, and the need to strike a balance between regulation and consumer protection.

### **International Approaches to Regulating Loot Boxes and Microtransactions:**

- 1. Legislative Action:** Several countries have started to consider or implement legislation aimed at regulating loot boxes and microtransactions, particularly in video games. These measures typically focus on improving transparency, age restrictions, and addressing concerns about gambling-like elements in these mechanics.
- 2. Age Restrictions:** Some countries have proposed or enforced age restrictions on games containing loot boxes or microtransactions. This is to ensure that younger players aren't exposed to potentially addictive or gambling-like mechanics.
- 3. Disclosure Requirements:** Some countries have called for increased transparency regarding the odds of receiving specific items from loot boxes. Developers may be required to disclose the probabilities, helping players make more informed decisions.
- 4. Classification as Gambling:** Some authorities argue that loot boxes, especially when they involve real-world money and offer randomized rewards, should be considered a form of gambling. If classified as such, stricter regulations may apply.
- 5. Consumer Protection:** Efforts to protect consumers, especially minors, from potentially predatory practices in video games, are a common focus. This can involve investigations into misleading marketing or designing mechanics to exploit players.

Regarding Russia, it's essential to verify the most recent developments and laws. As of 2021, Russia hadn't taken the lead in terms of specific regulations targeting loot boxes and microtransactions.

However, the broader discussions around consumer protection and gambling regulations were ongoing in many countries, and Russia might have taken steps since then.

### **International Approaches to Regulating Loot Boxes and Microtransactions: A Comparative Analysis of Russia, U.K., Australia, and India**

Loot boxes and microtransactions in video games have become a contentious issue due to concerns over their potential to encourage gambling-like behaviors, especially among younger players. Various countries have taken different approaches to regulate these mechanics in the gaming industry. This comparative analysis explores how Russia, the U.K., Australia, and India have approached the regulation of loot boxes and microtransactions.

#### **Russia:**

In Russia, loot boxes and microtransactions have faced increasing scrutiny. The Federal Antimonopoly Service (FAS) has been actively involved in addressing issues related to in-game purchases. In 2020, the FAS issued warnings to game developers, requiring them to disclose the odds of receiving items from loot boxes. This move aimed to increase transparency and protect consumers from misleading practices. However, as of my knowledge cutoff in 2021, Russia's regulations focused primarily on transparency rather than outright bans or strict controls.

#### **United Kingdom:**

The U.K. has a significant gaming industry, leading to increased attention on loot boxes and microtransactions. The UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee conducted an inquiry into immersive and addictive technologies, including loot boxes. The committee called for loot boxes to be classified as gambling and regulated under gambling laws, which would require stricter age restrictions and enhanced consumer protections. This approach reflects a more direct regulatory stance compared to Russia.

#### **Australia:**

Australia has shown a similar interest in regulating loot boxes and microtransactions. The Australian government's inquiry into microtransactions in video games led to recommendations for implementing age restrictions and disclosure of odds for loot boxes. However, as of my last knowledge update in 2021, Australia had not classified loot boxes as gambling, but the discussion indicated a growing concern over their potential impact.

#### **India:**

In India, the gaming industry has experienced rapid growth, and the government has started paying attention to the impact of loot boxes and microtransactions. While formal regulations specifically targeting loot boxes might not have been implemented as of my knowledge cutoff in 2021, Indian authorities have been exploring options for regulating online content, which could indirectly affect how loot boxes are handled. India's approach may evolve in response to increased awareness of the potential risks associated with loot boxes.

The regulation of loot boxes and microtransactions in video games varies among Russia, the U.K., Australia, and India. While all these countries have shown some level of concern, the approaches range from transparency requirements in Russia to calls for gambling classification and age restrictions in the U.K. and Australia. The gaming industry's dynamic nature and the evolving understanding of loot boxes' impact may lead to further regulatory developments in these and other countries.

## **5. Proposed Regulatory Measures for Russia:**

Based on the analysis of the current regulatory landscape, the global controversy, and international best practices, this section proposes a set of regulatory measures tailored to address the issues of loot boxes and microtransactions in the Russian context. It discusses potential requirements for transparency, age restrictions, consumer protections, and industry self-regulation.

The rapid growth of the gaming industry has brought about new monetization methods such as loot boxes and microtransactions. While these mechanisms can enhance player experiences, they have also raised concerns regarding their potential to encourage addictive behaviors and exploit vulnerable players. In response to these concerns, this proposal outlines a set of regulatory measures aimed at promoting transparency, consumer protection, and responsible gaming practices in Russia.

### **1. Disclosure and Transparency:**

- a. Game publishers and developers must provide clear and comprehensive information about the odds of obtaining specific items from loot boxes.
- b. All games containing loot boxes or microtransactions should prominently display a label indicating the presence of in-game purchases on the product packaging and digital storefronts.
- c. Clear and concise information about the potential costs associated with microtransactions must be provided to players before purchase, including the price range of items and any recurring subscription fees.

### **2. Age Verification and Player Protection:**

- a. Implement a robust age verification process to restrict access to games with loot boxes or microtransactions that may be deemed inappropriate for certain age groups.
- b. Introduce spending limits for players, with an option to set weekly or monthly budgets to prevent excessive spending on microtransactions.
- c. Require game developers to provide tools that allow players to track and manage their in-game spending over time.

### **3. Regulation of Virtual Goods and Trading:**

- a. Define virtual goods obtained from loot boxes and microtransactions as "virtual commodities" and establish a regulatory framework to prevent unauthorized trading of these goods on third-party platforms.
- b. Ensure that virtual goods can be converted back into in-game currency or other tangible benefits, providing players with the ability to recoup value from their purchases.
- c. Develop mechanisms to address fraudulent or deceptive practices related to the sale of virtual goods.

### **4. Research and Monitoring:**

- a. Establish an independent research body to continually assess the impact of loot boxes and microtransactions on player behavior, mental health, and gaming addiction.
- b. Regularly review the effectiveness of the proposed regulatory measures and adapt them as necessary based on research findings and industry developments.



c. Collaborate with international gaming organizations and regulatory bodies to share best practices and experiences in addressing the challenges posed by loot boxes and microtransactions.

These proposed regulatory measures aim to strike a balance between the benefits of loot boxes and microtransactions for the gaming industry and the protection of players, particularly vulnerable individuals. By promoting transparency, responsible gaming practices, and consumer protection, Russia can create a more equitable and enjoyable gaming environment for players of all ages.

## **6. Balancing Industry Interests and Player Protection:**

The final section of the paper explores the delicate balance that must be struck between fostering a thriving gaming industry in Russia and safeguarding players, especially minors, from the potential harm associated with loot boxes and microtransactions. It discusses the role of responsible gaming practices, public awareness campaigns, and ongoing collaboration between regulators and the gaming industry.

In recent years, the gaming and gambling industry in Russia has experienced significant growth, with both domestic and international stakeholders looking to tap into the potential of this lucrative market. However, as the industry expands, it becomes essential to strike a delicate balance between promoting industry interests and ensuring robust player protection measures.

One of the critical aspects of this equilibrium is the regulatory framework. A well-defined set of regulations that addresses various aspects of gaming and gambling is crucial. It should encompass licensing, taxation, advertising standards, and age restrictions to ensure a fair and competitive environment for operators while safeguarding vulnerable individuals, particularly the youth, from the potential harms of excessive gambling.

Transparency is another vital element. Transparent reporting of revenues, player winnings, and other financial aspects helps maintain trust between the industry, the government, and the public. This transparency ensures that tax revenues are appropriately collected, discourages illicit activities, and provides an accurate representation of the industry's overall impact on the economy.

In addition to regulatory measures, promoting responsible gaming practices is imperative. Operators should be encouraged to implement tools such as self-exclusion programs, spending limits, and educational resources to help players make informed decisions about their gambling habits. Moreover, public awareness campaigns about the risks associated with excessive gambling can play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of individuals and families.

Collaboration between the industry, government, and relevant non-governmental organizations is pivotal. Regular dialogue allows for the identification of emerging challenges and the development of effective solutions. It also helps in creating a robust framework that adapts to technological advancements and changing market dynamics.

An area of particular concern is the potential for addiction and the associated social issues. Allocating a portion of gaming revenues to support addiction prevention, treatment, and research initiatives can demonstrate the industry's commitment to mitigating these concerns. This investment not only addresses a pressing societal problem but also demonstrates the industry's dedication to the overall welfare of the country.

Balancing the interests of the gaming and gambling industry with player protection in Russia is a complex endeavor, but it is essential for the sustainable growth of the sector and the well-being of the population. By implementing comprehensive regulations, encouraging responsible gaming practices,

and fostering collaboration between stakeholders, Russia can create a thriving industry that benefits both the economy and its citizens while minimizing potential harms.

## 7. Conclusion:

This research paper concludes by summarizing the key findings and highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and adaptable regulatory approach to address the evolving challenges posed by loot boxes and microtransactions in the context of online gambling in Russia. It emphasizes the need for ongoing research and collaboration to ensure the protection of players while fostering a sustainable gaming ecosystem. In conclusion, the regulation of online gambling in Russia, particularly with regard to the issue of loot boxes and microtransactions, is a multifaceted challenge that requires careful consideration. The rise of loot boxes and microtransactions in video games has sparked concerns about their potential to blur the lines between entertainment and gambling, especially when they target younger audiences.

Russian authorities have taken some steps to address these concerns. In 2020, amendments to the federal law "On Advertising" imposed restrictions on promoting gambling services, which included loot boxes and microtransactions in some cases. This move reflects the government's recognition of the need to protect vulnerable individuals, particularly minors, from potential harm associated with these practices.

However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on their enforcement and continuous adaptation to the rapidly evolving landscape of online gaming. Regulatory authorities must remain vigilant in monitoring the industry and adjusting policies as needed to prevent the exploitation of consumers.


Furthermore, international cooperation and collaboration with gaming industry stakeholders are essential in shaping comprehensive regulations that strike a balance between consumer protection, industry innovation, and revenue generation. Transparency in odds, age verification, and clear labeling of virtual items' value are crucial components of any regulatory framework addressing loot boxes and microtransactions.


The ongoing dialogue between regulators, gaming companies, advocacy groups, and the public will play a pivotal role in crafting effective policies that maintain the integrity of online gambling while minimizing potential harms. It is essential to find a solution that acknowledges the entertainment value of loot boxes and microtransactions while mitigating their gambling-related risks, especially for younger individuals.

In the end, the regulation of online gambling in Russia with respect to loot boxes and microtransactions requires a nuanced approach that considers the diverse perspectives of stakeholders. By finding a balance between fostering a vibrant gaming industry and safeguarding consumers, Russia can set a precedent for responsible online gambling practices in the digital age.

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