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With Sports On Hold, Russia's Gamblers Bet on Coronavirus

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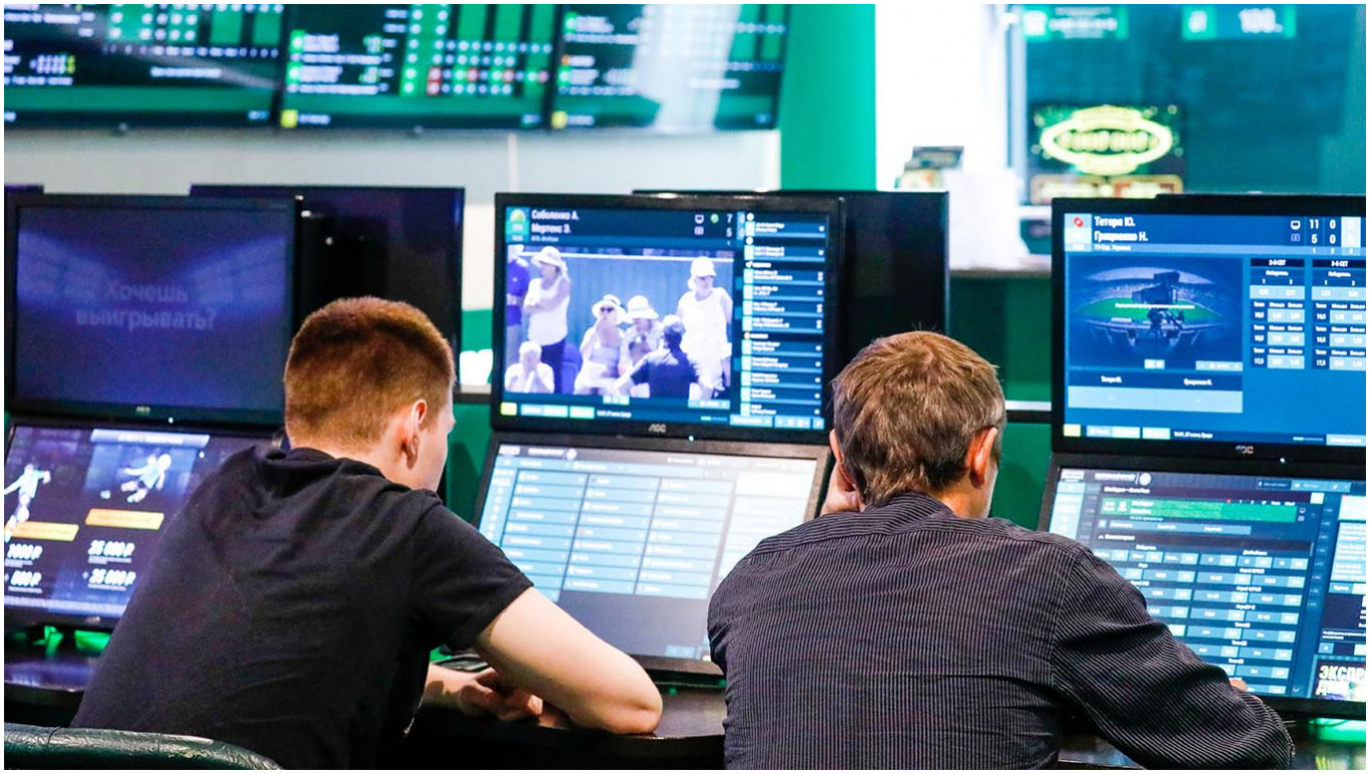

Russians are betting on the likelihood of a Covid-19 vaccine, the chances of a Moscow lockdown and more. **Artyom Geodakyan / TASS**

As the coronavirus pandemic has put sporting events around the world on hold, Russian bookkeepers and gambling enthusiasts have hinged their bets on something else: the coronavirus pandemic.

Major sporting events such as the UEFA Europa League and Champions League have been some of the first things to be shut down as world leaders worked to slow the spread of the highly contagious virus. Russia has suspended all football, hockey and basketball games from March 17 to April 10.

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Russian bookmakers, facing a sharp decline in income, have kicked off betting on non-sport-related forecasts such as the likelihood of a Covid-19 vaccine, a Moscow lockdown or a

buckwheat shortage in stores, the Mediazona news website reported this week.

At least two bookmaking websites, Betcity and PariMatch, have created new sections on their websites dedicated to betting on coronavirus-related events, Mediazona said. One bookmaker stopped taking bets entirely until sports tournaments are resumed.

"There are no matches, so bookmakers had to come up with something," Mediazona quoted Championat.com journalist Pyotr Kondakov, who covers betting topics, as saying. "We had to adjust because there's no getting around this."

The betting section on Championat.com, one of the most popular Russian-language sports outlets, is now filled with non-sports forecasts including "Will Pornhub open access to premium subscriptions for Russians?" "Will Yury Dud make a film about coronavirus in 2020?" and "Will Russia face a shortage of buckwheat and toilet paper?"

Anna Appolonova, a spokeswoman for the Betting League bookmaker, told Mediazona that the number of bets made on cyber-sports has also drastically increased since the health crisis began to unfold.

According to Appolonova, nearly 80% of Betting League's gamblers have started making bets on virtual football, an eightfold increase from this time last year. In particular, the LaLiga Santander Challenge, an online football tournament that featured famous offline athletes, drew some 23,000 bets.

The only offline sport event to see a spike in interest is the Belarussian Premier League, the only still-active football championship in Europe, with the number of bets on these matches increasing fourteenfold compared to last year, Appolonova said. Belarussian football is currently listed as the most popular betting category across all the bookmakers Mediazona studied.

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