Alternative Healing Practices, Conspiracy Theory, and Social Trust in Post-Soviet Russia

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By the end of the 1980s, Russia was rocked by the appearance of two ‘healers’ on national television, who quickly became extremely popular figures in the Russian mass media. Their names were Anatolii Kashpirovskii and Allan Chumak. Their performance on national television attracted an audience of several millions and caused a remarkable phenomenon that could be referred to as, without exaggeration, as a “mass psychosis.” In modern psychology, “mass psychosis” refers to the manifestation of direct, indirect and induced effects on groups of people whose behavior is characterized by extraordinary suggestibility and imitation. In this definition, not every element of this psychosis is unproblematic, since any human behavior is more or less characterized by the effects and effectiveness of suggestion and imitation.

But in this case, it is sufficient to rely on the fact that the target audience’s behavior when confronted by Kashpirovskii and Chumak—despite all the difference in the methods that they used—was remarkable in its massiveness and apparent irrationalism. The television appearances of Kashpirovskii (born 1939), a professional psychotherapist who had worked at the psychiatric hospital in Vinnitsa for 25 years, began after his speech in March 1988 on the program *Vzgliad* (*The View*) which covered the live surgical operation on TV in Kiev of a

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patient (Liubov' Grabovskaia) who suffered from breast cancer. The surgery for breast resection was performed without anesthesia (the patient had contraindications to this) under Kashpirovskii's remote hypnotic influence; Kashpirovskii himself was at the Ostankino television studio in Moscow. The operation was successfully completed. A few months later, Kashpirovskii repeated the same procedure at a distance from Moscow to Tbilisi with complicated operations to remove cavitary ventral hernias from two girls (O.B. Ignatova and L.N. Iurshova), one of whom demanded champagne excitedly during the operation, and the second moaned softly; and after coming out of her trance, one girl stated that she had experienced several orgasms at once. Participants in both the first and second operations were, by the way, respectable and highly regarded doctors of the country, and their rave reviews contributed greatly to Kashpirovskii's triumph in public opinion. In 1989, he became the host of the program *Seansy zdorov'ia vracha-psikhoterapevta Anatoliia Kashpirovskogo* (*Sessions on health by the doctor-psychotherapist Anatolii Kashpirovskii*) which was broadcasted by Central Television. Kashpirovskii would look at the audience with a heavy, unblinking gaze and a monotonous voice, calling on them to trust him. Kashpirovskii treated young and old alike and he saved children from all over the country from enuresis, dealt with internal "alarm clocks," resorbed postoperative sutures, and generally inspired hope in the restoration of health to all those who thought of themselves as sick. In 1989, these programs ran during prime time—immediately after the program *Vremia* (*Time*), which covered the main events of the day in the rapidly changing world of the perestroika USSR.[1] Kashpirovskii's star career on television was supplemented with tours around the country and mass medical sessions, during which dozens of patients fell down on the floor in hypnotic trance, waved their hands over their heads, lamented and laughed, and some stood up from their wheelchairs.[2]

According to Leonid Kravchenko, the first deputy chairman of the USSR State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, Chumak's public appearance on television in 1989 was caused by circumstances similar to those of

1 I would also like to note that the fifteen-minute program, which was just after the program *Vremia*, resembled an "adult" version of *Spokoinoi nochi, malyshy* (*Good Night, Kids*) with its famous lullaby soundtrack "Spiat ustalye igrushki" ("Sleeping tired toys").

2 The literature dedicated to Kashpirovskii is extremely extensive. For a revealing, if general, idea of how commendably Kashpirovskii was perceived by the masses in the late 1980s and early 1990s see Maksimov 1990; Morgovskii 1990; *Psikhoterapevticheskii i dukhovnyi fenomen A.M. Kashpirovskogo* 1992; Shenkman 1992.

Kashpirovskii's invitation: perestroika television was looking for new heroes and found them among those who were able to perform in a new format of communication with the audience.[3] Chumak (born 1935), a journalist by training, was an alternative to Kashpirovskii. He was not a psychotherapist capable of demonstrating the wonders of tele hypnosis, but he was close to the television community and had been working on Moscow television for many years (as a sports commentator). However, Chumak was not completely ignorant of the basics of psychological influence. Since 1983, he worked at the Educational Psychology Research Institute of General and Pedagogic Psychology of the USSR Academy of Pedagogic Sciences.

Chumak looked much more ordinary, quite unlike the athletic and dressed-all-in-black Kashpirovskii who seemed to be charged with the "demonic" aura of a magician. His program was called "Health Sessions" and was broadcast early in the morning, so that viewers had time to see it before work. A modest, everyday-dressed intellectual with thick glasses appeared in front of the audience. He was mostly silent to begin with, plunged into a mysteriously sleepwalk-like state and then began to make strange cross-shaped movements with his hands. These passes, or gestures, were able to "charge" various substances and things—ointments, creams, water in glass jars, tapes, etc., which the viewer was invited to place near the screen. Over the next three years, hundreds of thousands watched Chumak's programs, receiving tons of miraculous water as a reward, the consumption of which guaranteed the elimination of various diseases (the programs also became more specialized over time: some episodes were intended for patients with cardiovascular diseases, others for gastrointestinal distress and so on).[4] Like Kashpirovskii, Chumak also began to tour the whole country, relying on an audience that can be defined as "believing in a miracle" (this would be the English translation of Chumak's book *Tem, kto verit v chudo*, 2007), even though he did not call himself a psychotherapist.[5] In this case, public sessions of "charging" water may serve as a vivid example of the psychological setup that programs a response with the placebo effect: for example, Chumak simply suggested that the public compare "uncharged" cream to "charged" cream to see whether there was a therapeutic difference.

3 Cf. Tsvetkova 2014.

4 In 1992, the Moskvoretskii experimental beer factory established a line of Chumak's "charged" water. It was initially assumed that 100,000 bottles a year would be produced. Chumak himself estimated that amount as a "drop in the bucket" for Moscow, cf. Vandenko 1992. The production was subsequently curtailed.

5 Chumak 2007.

Crowds near newsstands in Moscow on 1 September 1989 can be regarded as the apotheosis of collective trust in Chumak. The object of the people's desire was to acquire a copy or a number of copies of the newspaper *Vechernaia Moskva* (*Evening Moscow*), which was, as previously reported in the media, "charged" with the healer's beneficial energy (it was well-known that second-hand dealers of this issue sold it at exorbitant prices, and suffering individuals ate pieces of the newspaper).

By order of the Ministry of Health ("Ob uregulirovanii netraditsionnykh metodov lecheniia" – "On the settlement of non-traditional methods of treatment"), some television programs were banned in 1993 and the mass psychosis, caused by the activities of Kashpirovskii and Chumak in 1989–92, began to decline; however, the two kept on sporadically appearing in their own "tour" activities.

One should also mention the activities of their increasingly multiplying competitors. In the 1990s, Dzhuna (Eugenia Davitashvili, 1949–2015), specialized in the practice of "contactless massage" and claimed to be an Assyrian queen, astrologer, "honorary academician of 129 world academies," as well as a personal therapist for Brezhnev and other party and artistic celebrities. Nikolai Levashov (1961–2012) treated incurable diseases at a distance and claimed that he had repeatedly saved Russia from various disasters, such as hurricanes, fires, ozone holes and radioactive contamination (once Levashov saved humanity as a whole from the collision of the Earth with the neutron star of Nemesis). Iurii Longo (Golovko, 1950–2006) once excited audiences with television sessions of magic—specifically telepathy, telekinesis, levitation, etc. Especially remarkable were his famous performances of "resurrections of the dead" (as it turned out later, during these sessions he was assisted by a friend who effectively played the revived dead).

Adepts and preachers of these movements usually appealed not to science, but to alternative and traditional medicine—from urine therapy and "healthy" starvation to magic and ritual procedures. Social trust in these cases is attained and maintained by persuading the public that the alternative methods of treatment can be used as a deliberate opposition to institutional medicine—an approach based on the logic of "we know your enemies." It is believed that the mistrust of institutional medicine and the rejection of professional medical care in Russia was motivated by such social factors as the destabilization of the national health system, a significant deterioration in clinical care, the collapse of the insurance institutions, the emigration of physicians, etc.[6] But apart from

6 Cf. Field 1987, Schecter 1997, Cockerham 1999, Maximova 2002, Rose 2000, Reshetnikov 2003.

these social reasons, the social trust in alternative medical treatments was also maintained through a number of cultural and psychological traditions in Russia.

The Soviet Union's collapse, a result of the reforms of perestroika, led to a profound defamation of scientific knowledge as a whole and to a major loss of credibility among the country's scientists and medical professionals.[7] At the same time, the public was increasingly attracted to alternative methods of treating conditions that regular science could neither explain nor cure. This interest was due to, on the one hand, the general mood of protest during the perestroika period and to the rise of "non-rational" and "irrational" hopes for change that often arise in situations of social instability, revolution, and ideological and economic crisis on the other. In my previous work on the cultural history of Russian medicine—in particular, in the study of the history of the cholera epidemics in Russia in the nineteenth century—I pointed out how a situation of danger and risk "constructs" social protest and helps to create an emotional consensus in distinguishing between "us" and "them."[8] Cholera epidemics, for example, often contributed to the emergence of the "enemies of the people," who were seen by the public as guilty of contagion. Another important phenomenon that emerged in these cases was linked to what is known in ethnographic studies as "cargo cults." In an article on the history of the Russian intelligentsia, Sander Brouwer made a witty comparison to the first representatives of the natives of Melanesia in the period in which "cargo cults" were also active. The natives believed that if they followed certain behavioral ceremonies, their unknown benefactors would one day bring them the gifts of social and economic prosperity. According to Brouwer, Russian intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century were similarly expecting that the West would bring them the gift of acculturation and modernization.[9] I find that this metaphor applies to different historical contexts as well: the few years that are associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms can, in my opinion, also be compared with a popular cargo cult, a kind of quickly spread social imagination in which the norms of rational criticism were suspended and the non-rational hopes and faith were emphasized.

Demand creates its own supply: at the end of the 1980s, bookshelves were filled with literature on occultism, magic, extrasensory phenomena, astrology; religious and mystical literature was republished frequently. These years also marked the beginning of an industry in which the emergence of new miracle-working healers was accompanied by the expansion of the market of paramedi-

7 Lonkila 1998.

8 Bogdanov 2005.

9 Brouwer 1999.

cal services, which were officially distributed among the population.[10] It quickly became big business from this point on, behind which lay not only individual scams but also officials charged with the production of innovative medicines and devices; such advertised and well-sold novelties included zirconium bracelets, neutrino generators for the treatment of cancer, bioactivators and biocorrectors. One type of these biocorrectors was patented by Dzhuna—holographic stickers allegedly protecting from exposure to harmful emissions from mobile phones and televisions etc. It is characteristic that the Commission on Pseudoscience and Research Fraud of Russian Academy of Sciences, created in 1998 at the initiative of Academician Vitalii Ginzburg (1916–2009),[11] immediately aroused and continued to provoke fierce attacks in the press and on the Internet by adepts of various kinds of alternative "sciences." It is necessary to remark that many of these adepts are institutionally connected with the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences, willingly encouraging fantasies about torsion fields, "wave genomes," ophthalmogeometry, ufology, etc.

Mass psychosis, associated with the hope created by miracle healers and various extrasensory practitioners, was sometimes ideologically, but more often emotionally connected with the spread of new religious movements throughout Russia, whose preachers largely appealed not to the traditional, but to the folk or alternative medicinal traditions—from urine therapy and starvation to magical manipulations. In the course of the last fifteen years, these methods have been actively promoted, for example, on the pages of the newspaper *Vestnik ZOZH* (*Health Promotion Review*), published twice a month with more than 3 million sold copies (considered alongside the most popular newspapers in the country, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, which sell only 2 million and 400 thousand copies respectively). By reading this newspaper one can learn, for example, that urine relieves obesity, alopecia, thyroid problems, acne, sweaty feet and liver diseases. It also improves eyesight, if the eyes are wiped with it. A headache is well treated by bumping one's head into cold glass rhythmically, given that this beat neutralizes the electrostatic charge. One can also easily cope with alcoholism at home: by taking three apples, sticking six nails into each of them, then taking out the nails, and eating apples and continuing to do this for a month and a half. As for women who are worried about their facial hair growth, it is recommended that they stop using condoms, because they influence such growth.[12]

10 Pachenkov 2001, Brown/Rusinova 2002.

11 Problemy bor'by s lzhenaukoi 1999.

12 Cf. Timonina 2015.

Taking into account the oddity of these texts, both the texts and their context are significant for understanding discursive and emotional mechanics that structure social trust, which in turn is "responsible" for this newspaper's huge audience. In general, there are three mechanisms: the urgency of treatment, the recognition of an illness and the conviction that scientific medicine is unable to cope with it. Talcott Parsons writes that patients become sick not when they feel pain, but when they are ready to become patients, undergo medicalization, and assume the "sick role."[13] It is sociologically correct to think that any medicine "constructs" diseases and appropriates or, in the words of Ivan Illich, expropriates health.[14] A patient should know what and who is opposing them. In this sense, Kashpirovskii's patients, Chumak's charged water supporters, and the readers of the Health Promotion Review likewise know their enemies—i.e., diseases and physicians.

As mentioned previously, it seems reasonable to assume that people's distrust of institutional medicine and refusal of professional medical assistance during the perestroika years were, by and large, determined (and continue to be determined) by the influence of such objective social factors as the destabilization of the national health care system, the deterioration of clinical care, the collapse of insurance systems, and the emigration of physicians.[15] Nevertheless, psychological and even cultural factors also came into play. In one of my previous works, I have already had the opportunity to point out that in a situation of danger and risk, the "construction" of social protest, helps to achieve an emotional consensus in maintaining the distinction between "own" and "alien."[16] Social trust in these cases is constructed and maintained by building (self)confidence in the reliability of (alternative) treatment methods based on an identifiable, deliberate and adversary-controlled opposition with adherents consolidating themselves based on the rule "we know our enemies."

Starting with Erik Erikson, who saw the basic social unit of the human personality in social trust, psychologists and sociologists have written about the rational and "positive" nature of trust as an innate confidence in the good will of other people and a generalized social expectation that other people are likely to fulfill their promises. The pragmatic and theoretical implications of social trust were considered to be both psychologically and economically appropriate—be it

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13 Cf. Lupton 1994: 89–90, 105–06.

14 Illich 1976.

15 Cf. Field 1987, Schecter 1997, Cockerham 1999, Rose 2000, Maksimova 2002, Reshetnikov 2003.

16 Bogdanov 2005: 351–54.

the anticipation of actions through a clarification of the common motives, the consolidation of social networks, the minimization of risks when making decisions under conditions of information deficit, the stabilization of expectations, the reduction of transaction costs in practices of economic exchange, and so on.[17] However, it is important to emphasize that building and maintaining the spheres and networks of social trust can be psychologically dramatic and epistemologically absurd, since they often rely on various "conspiracy theories." This theory should be shared by all those who are included in the network of social trust (which is known as the phenomenon of "group secrets" in child psychology). Medical conspiracy theories include the persistent ideas, opinions and rumors about the secret and coordinated activity of physicians, pharmacists and other members of the medical profession who are accused of deliberately damaging the health and lives of their patients. Medicine, as a practice and field of scientific knowledge, is directly connected with the health and life of people and has repeatedly been the subject of the social suspicion that its representatives use their knowledge and skills for malicious purposes. The question remains: what are these theories and how are they supported? Emile Durkheim, in his study of the dynamics of change in religious rituals, wrote that social trust acts as a form of moral solidarity and conformity to common symbols and signs of collective identity that are perceived as self-evident and beyond critical discussion. These symbols and signs can be both material (e.g., visual) and linguistic. Therefore, alternative healing practices (if we do not reduce them to just quasi-medical curiosities) deserve to be studied as a practice of linguistic and extralinguistic (nonverbal) social construction.

If we call these symbols attributes or, for example, "fixed objects" and reduce them to their defining semantics, then it will highlight their connection with threats and danger. In the social conditions of informational asymmetry, as Peter Kollock has shown, risk forms the basis of confidence: the more extreme the threat is seen to be, the more extreme the expectations associated with the exploitation of trust will be (as, in particular, it happens in the practice of multi-level marketing built on the principle of financial pyramids: for example, American *Herbalife*).[18] This fact was confirmed by studies by Craig Parks and Lorne Hulbert, who came to the conclusion that the degree of trust in others depends on the degree of reaction to the danger.[19]

17 Cf. Kollock 1994, Sztompka 1999.

18 Kollock 1994.

19 Parks, Hulbert 1995.

Put otherwise, strengthening social trust requires the construction of danger. There is nothing new here, of course. History is full of examples in which the achievement of such trust—and, accordingly, the confidence in those who embody it—is provided by the image of enemies who threaten or allegedly threaten a society. But from the linguistic and, more extensively, semiotic point of view, it is interesting how the discursive attributes of such trust are maintained at the communicative level—within the group of those who share this trust. I believe that one of the most effective factors in maintaining such trust is the predictability and repeatability of those markers that are correlated with the communication within this group. So, for example, if for an orthodox person an icon serves as such a marker, then for supporters of these two healers such markers would be a hypnotizing view of Kashpirovskii and silent manipulations with water jars of Chumak. In a certain sense, these are examples of predictable communication which, following linguist Lev Iakubinskii, can be referred to as a "stereotyped interaction": a situation of emotional rather than verbal commonplace.[20] Communicators do not need to understand each other if they agree to perform protest communication against a particular danger. It would be sufficient if this communication is marked in a specific way and is reproduced regularly. This is, in particular, the function of slogans, various memes and precedent texts, which are aimed not at defying and explaining something, but at pointing out those who associate themselves with them.

The reproduction of common symbolic attributes is interesting in this case due to its semantic vacancy. It has been observed that a word, phrase or utterance loses its meaning when repeated again and again. In linguistics, this phenomenon is called verbal or semantic satiation and it is actively investigated with relation to speech activity in most diverse aspects.[21] In recent years, interest in this phenomenon has been shown by experts in the field of cognitive science and by neurophysiologists in particular. One of their explanations for the nature of this phenomenon is that the repetition of the same word activates the corresponding neurostructure (i.e., a group of neurons) in the cerebral cortex. The activation of the same neurons, in turn, strengthens their reaction inhibition. The intensity of neuroreaction to this very word decreases with each subsequent repetition.[22] In such a situation, words and the "objects" associated with them—understood

20 Yakubinsky 1986.

21 Cf. Fillenbaum 1967, Jakobovits/Hogenraad 1967, Negnevitskaya 1970 and 1976, Black 2003.

22 Smith 1984, Smith/Klein 1990, Frenck-Mestre/Besson/Pynte 1997, Pilotti/Antrobus/Duff 1997.

as a complex of systemic and semantic links—serve as attributes of trust, that are always connected with them, regardless of what they mean or can mean. Kashpirovskii, Chumak, and other healers from the 1990s preached their methods of healing as protection from the world of dangers, illnesses and misfortune, as well as the dangers of official scientific medicine. These cases can serve as examples of how social confidence becomes non-reflexive. Trust in this faith is something that turns faith itself into something more closely resembling psychosis.

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Abstract

This article provides a study of post-Soviet methods of alternative healing: beginning in the late 1980s, these methods include hypnosis, "folk" and innovative forms of therapy, astrological predictions, spells and rituals, and new kinds of narcotics and medicines. Some of these methods were widely propagandized in the media during the perestroika period; their distribution was also accompanied by both radical ideological changes and the communicative transformation of the

languages of social trust in the public sphere. In my view, the intensification of social trust requires the construction of danger, particularly in terms of images of enemies who are portrayed as threatening to society. From a semiotic point of view, some of the most relevant factors in support of this trust are the predictability and repetition of markers associated with communication within a given group. Such instances can be examined as examples of "stereotyped interaction" (in Lev Iakubinskii's terms) and this is a situation of emotional, rather than verbal, prejudices and assumptions. All these factors, from the weakness for otherwise implausible alternative treatments to the mechanics and semantics of social trust, played into the social context existing at the time.