

**The Return of the Legend:
Anatoly Kashpirovsky's Treatment of COVID-19**

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Abstract

The tensions between western scientific and alternative medicine become more palpable during times of uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a period of confusion, evoking mistrust of conventional medicine, which has been unable to fully protect people from this new disease. This situation has compelled some to seek help and comfort elsewhere. This article demonstrates how people in post-Soviet countries and post-Soviet diasporic communities resurrected their faith and trust in Anatoly Kashpirovsky, a legendary psychotherapist and charismatic leader who first rose to prominence in the USSR in the 1980-90s.

On the basis of digital fieldwork conducted during the lockdown, I showcase how Kashpirovsky once again became popular in 2020 at a moment of global economic, social and political instability. While Kashpirovsky's audience finds comfort in his professional training and medical experience, his YouTube "health sessions" offer treatments for COVID-19 that relegate him to the realm of folk healer, magician, or psychic.

Introduction

In the fall of 2019 I had just moved to New York City after finishing my Master's program and, like many newcomers, I opted to settle in a place that would be affordable and, at least remotely, remind me of my home in Ukraine. I rented a room in Brooklyn, New York, specifically in Brighton Beach, a neighborhood well known for its Russian, or more precisely, post-Soviet community. In Brighton Beach one can live one's entire life without needing to learn English. Banks, pharmacies, doctors, pet groomers, schools, and essentially any business in this area readily serves clients in Russian. At first, I was overwhelmed by a wave of nostalgia. I felt as if I had traveled back in time, even though my surroundings were characterized by a strange mix of Soviet mentality and capitalism. Culture shock soon followed. Billboards were covered with posters of upcoming concerts with once notable Russian pop stars, (1) whose fame in Russia had long before faded away with the influx of newer, more popular performers. It was striking that people were nostalgic for the artists and music popular in the 1990s at the time of their immigration to the United States. In fact, the longer I lived there, the more I noticed how nostalgia for that period in Russian history was pronounced in other aspects of life in Brighton Beach as well.

What amazed me even more was the number of advertisements for psychics, healers, and seers. Some offered predictions about one's love life or career, while

others limited their expertise to divinations about obtaining a Green Card [*Gadanie na Grin Kartu*]. On one such poster, I was especially surprised to see a photo of Anatoly Kashpirovsky, the once legendary Soviet healer who would gather people into packed stadiums and cure individuals of a variety of diseases—his official website claims that he has treated over 500 illnesses. Kashpirovsky had disappeared from mainstream media over the past several decades following the peak of his popularity and he had moved to the United States. When I shared this information with my sister in Ukraine, she said, “Wow, seems like that little old man decided to remember his heyday there in Brighton Beach. I didn’t even know he was still around. I wonder who would still believe him?” A few days later, while trying to learn more about the life of the local community, I followed the advice of my landlady and bought a newspaper *Rusaskaia reklama* [Russian Advertisement] for 25 cents. In the weekly, 264-page newspaper, I found a full-page advertisement about sessions that Anatoly Kashpirovsky was offering twice a week in a local restaurant for \$35. The ad claimed that one could experience “the greatest miracles of mankind” in these sessions [Zaminonets 2016]. A few months later, in late March, when pandemic lockdown provided me some time to explore the Internet, YouTube suggested a video featuring Kashpirovsky to me (probably based on the number of views and its popularity in my area). This video presented his claims that he knew the cure for COVID-19. In fact, he had it written down on a piece of paper and was offering to share this secret with anyone who needed the cure. While the video played, his contact information, along with his bank account and PayPal information for donations, was repeatedly posted to the video’s live chat by his assistant. In April 2020, he started going live on his YouTube channel more frequently (once every two or three days), and the number of views grew exponentially.

These videos presented an opportunity to investigate why the alternative healer’s services were once again in demand during the pandemic. Firstly, a man whose purportedly innovative methods of treatment had gone viral all over the Soviet Union just at the moment of its collapse had been laying low for several decades. Suddenly, thirty years later, in the unprecedented time of a global pandemic, his services were once again in great demand. In this intriguing case, I saw a correlation between the current social, political, and economic environment and the spread and popularity of vernacular beliefs about health and medicine. Secondly, Kashpirovsky had become the voice for a number of social anxieties, including mistrust of official media sources, health care systems in post-Soviet countries, vaccines, and mass vaccination. He was also addressing existing simmering tensions between Russia and the West characteristic of the Cold War era. Finally, the very persona of Anatoly Kashpirovsky combines two features that make him appealing and trustworthy to people with a wide range of views regarding health care and vernacular healing traditions. On the one hand, he is a classically trained professional physician with more than 25 years of experience; on the other hand, he embodies the features of a charismatic leader and a folk healer, at least in the eyes of his patients.

In this article I argue that during times of uncertainty, failures by various states to handle these situations properly puts people in a position where they are receptive to the types of messages that blend medicine and folk healing practices. Kashpirovsky's unique amalgam of medicine and magic was not only dusted off, recycled and seamlessly integrated into the contemporary pandemic context, but was even perceived as innovative, given his use of medical terminology and his tapping into currents of conspiracy theory. Despite Kashpirovsky's consistent emphasis on his medical credentials, his actions and the responses of his patients reveal that he is mostly perceived as a faith healer, rather than as a medical doctor.

Methodology

As noted above, I conducted my fieldwork digitally during the lockdown in 2020. The main source for my research was the YouTube channel "Anatoly Kashpirovskiy," (2) where, starting in March 2020, Kashpirovsky has been broadcasting live treatment sessions. I relied on comments from his videos' live chats, which are posted in real-time during his presentations, as well as those from the comments sections following the videos, largely written by those who had watched the recordings later. Since I cannot obtain signed release forms from these people, I only use first names or nicknames in order to protect their identities. I do not include information regarding their locations nor their ages. All of them are from post-Soviet republics or are immigrants from those areas living abroad. I also cite personal memorates from my family and friends in Ukraine, who graciously granted permission for their use in this article. In addition, I often refer to Kashpirovsky's official website [www.kashpirovskiy.com], which offers an array of media, including videos, newspaper articles, and interviews, as well as information about, and links to his 19 books, "statistics about miracles," and responses from his patients. Unfortunately, my attempt to contact Kashpirovsky via email for further discussion was unsuccessful. (3)

I begin by providing background information about Anatoly Kashpirovsky, since this context is crucial to understanding who he is as well as why and exactly when he became so popular in the 1980s-90s. It is important to note that at that time he was offering both in-person and virtual "health sessions" that were broadcast on national television channels. I then proceed to discuss his current activities treating COVID-19 in 2020-2021, now online via his official YouTube channel. In this article I showcase how Kashpirovsky's persona combines features of both a biomedical doctor and a folk healer, which is particularly relevant in periods of grand socioeconomic, political, and informational instability. The medium of the Internet is also an important factor here in providing a space for vernacular creative expressions and sharing folk understandings of available healing practices. In terms of a theoretical framework, I particularly rely upon the experiential source hypothesis offered by David Hufford [1982], as well as on Bonnie O'Connor's study of alternative medicine [1995], and Diane E. Goldstein's research on AIDS and vernacular risk perception [2004].

Who is Anatoly Kashpirovsky?

Anatoly Kashpirovsky was born near Khmelnytskyi, a Ukrainian city not far from my own hometown. He graduated from Vinnytsya Medical Institute with a degree in psychotherapy and worked at a psychiatric hospital for 25 years. In his medical practice, he claimed to have developed innovative methods for treating illnesses, both mental and physical. In his books, as well as in numerous interviews, (4) he explains that the human body possesses all the chemical elements that people need to cure themselves of any illness or disability. To achieve this goal, according to Kashpirovsky, all a person needs is a push or a shock to trigger the healing process and allow the body to do its job. He calls this healing mechanism the “biological self-regulatory” function of the human body, i.e., a genetically encoded, complex process that functions on the subconscious level. This process can also be activated during an interaction between a psychotherapist and a patient. It can be accomplished by engaging the sensory organs—listening to the doctor’s voice or to relaxing music; eye contact with a doctor; obeying hand signals, etc.—but this step is not required.

In a 2010 interview, Kashpirovsky described the process as follows: “There are two types of faith—conscious and subconscious faith. My method addresses the subconscious. It is precisely through the subconsciousness that I give the commands of healing. That is why a patient doesn’t have to believe me with their mind” [Bennetts 2010]. This explanation corresponds with what folklorist Bonnie O’Connor [1995] calls vitalism, a concept common to many vernacular health belief systems. O’Connor [1995: 30] defines vitalism as the idea that a “body has its own ‘life force’ that promotes health and healing and is essential to wellness.”

In order to understand Kashpirovsky’s popularity in 2020, we must also understand his social role at the peak of his career. The late 1980s were marked by a number of traumatic events in the USSR. In 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded, leading to one of the most devastating environmental catastrophes in history. Mass dissatisfaction with state policy was growing, leading to Gorbachev’s *perestroika* political movement and *glasnost*, an attempt to introduce freedom of speech and access to public information. In 1991, the USSR collapsed, leaving a chaotic ruin of what once was presented as the world’s leading state and a population in crisis.

Despite the official policy of atheism and endorsement of scientific materialism, vernacular beliefs were remarkably persistent in the USSR [Kononenko 2006 cited in Lesiv 2018: 38]. In their article “Curing and Crippling: Biomedical and Alternative Healing in Post-Soviet Russia,” Brown and Rusinova [2002: 160] state that “despite repeated efforts by Soviet authorities to marginalize and punish alternative healers, ordinary people never stopped seeking them out. In the Post-Soviet era, these practitioners [became] more visible than ever.” Simon Huxtable [2017: 308] argues that the stress of the 1980s was closely connected to Kashpirovsky’s popularity: “The 1980s were a [period] when the predictability and certainty of the Soviet regime disappeared. Kashpirovsky’s

healing practices created a liminal space that perfectly captures the other-worldliness of the period.”

I reached out to a person who had personal experience with Kashpirovsky’s healing methods in the mid-1980s, long before he became a national phenomenon, when he was working as a psychiatrist at a hospital in Ukraine. Before that time, my interlocutor, Tetiana, had lost a young child, a two-year-old girl, as a result of what she believed to be medical negligence. After this loss, she experienced a serious form of depression for several years. Tetiana knew Anatoly Kashpirovsky personally through mutual friends, but she had never sought his help. After their mutual friends told Kashpirovsky about Tetiana’s loss, they had an informal conversation on one occasion. “After that [conversation], after years of depression and despair, I finally felt *nothing*. The wound is still there, but I *felt nothing*. He [Kashpirovsky] helped me move on” [Tetiana, 22 August 2020].

Since the beginning of his career, Kashpirovsky has always presented himself strictly as a medical professional. However, with the great popularity of his treatment methods and a growing audience, his patients began to see his deeds as miraculous and to view him as more than just a doctor; he began to be seen as a messianic healer. In 1988, Kashpirovsky held his first Kyiv-Moscow “telebridge” (live broadcast) when surgery to remove a tumor was conducted, without anesthesia, on a middle-aged, female breast-cancer patient. By talking to the patient on live television through a camera installed in the operating room, he purportedly helped her dull the pain. She admitted on camera that she was very nervous and asked for a glass of champagne. At one point she even started singing [Kashpirovskiy 2015]. While the surgery was successful, some years later the patient confessed in an interview on *Ria Novosti* [2019] that she had actually been in a lot of pain. However, she had pretended to be fine because of the pressure of the televised event. The doctors had also eventually given her local anesthesia as a result. Soon after, in 1989, a second “telebridge,” this time Kyiv-Tbilisi, took place when two hernia surgeries were conducted simultaneously without anesthesia (both patients were allergic to anesthesia).

The success of these experiments created a sensation among the viewing public. A series of six “Health Sessions with Dr. Kashpirovsky” followed on Central Television in Moscow [Kashpirovsky 2020b]. He always began these sessions, held in a packed auditorium, by reading letters of gratitude from his patients who shared stories of miraculous cures; then the healing session would begin. With relaxing music in the background, Kashpirovsky would begin speaking in a monotone. He did not mention diseases or healing, but rather used positive imagery, e.g., the power of laughter and positive emotions, or told stories of healing from his patients’ lives. Generally speaking, to the uninitiated, his presentations resembled a stream-of-consciousness monologue. Kashpirovsky, however, claims that he actually “slipped” some verbal and non-verbal psychotherapeutic tricks into his sessions that were subconscious and imperceptible to the audience. He emphasizes that he never conducted hypnosis on people, and that all of his patients stayed awake and conscious throughout their treatments. However, some of them did close their eyes, and others made

involuntary body movements. Footage of this behavior was later presented by the media as proof of “mass hypnosis” employed by Kashpirovsky. “It has nothing to do with hypnosis! Forget this word when you are talking to me,” he insisted in one of his interviews [Zanimonets 2016]. Sometimes he would invite a few people to the stage (he claimed to choose them from the crowd on the basis of emotional feedback he felt from them), arrange them into a line, and, with a single hand motion, “drop” them to the ground. They remained lying there until he told them otherwise. The audience was impressed by his control over people.

Anatoly Kashpirovsky received frequent attention from both journalists and health professionals, not to mention from millions of followers. “They idolize me,” Kashpirovsky said during a press-conference in 1989 [Bennetts 2010]. Some people claimed that there was a gender dynamic to his success. Kashpirovsky became a sort of sex symbol for many Soviet women. A news article on this topic [NTV 2020] states: “[In the auditorium], as well as behind the scenes, something spectacular and incredible was happening. According to witnesses, Kashpirovsky’s charms had a huge impact on women, as if it were a love potion, impossible to reject.” Reportedly, official medical consultations often prompted unofficial private ones at a later date.

Those who watched the healing sessions on television also hoped to get the best of their experience. As Tamila recounted to me in an interview in October 2020:

[...] Люди, старі і малі, притулялись до телевізорів хворими частинами тіла, і вірили, що так вилікуються. А інші копіювали освячення води, як у нас в церкві священник святить і читає молитву, і ставили банки з водою коло екранів телевізора. І тоді ця вода була як свята.

[...People, young and old, leaned against the screen of their televisions with the injured parts of their bodies, in hope that they would be healed. Others “mimick[ed] a [common] Orthodox Christian process of the blessing [of] water by a priest reading a prayer by putting jars with water next to television screens. Later they treated this water the same way, as if it were made holy.]

One of his patients, Galina, said that “faith in God, and a little bit in Kashpirovsky” was what helped her survive, when doctors informed her that she had less than six months left to live [Timofeieva 2017]. For his part, Kashpirovsky dislikes being called a folk healer or magician, and claims that he has nothing to do with any extrasensory practices. Moreover, he is very sensitive to critique and has threatened [2020a] to use his powers maliciously: “Whoever calls me a charlatan, know that you will receive a very serious psychological backlash [...] See, I can improve the shape of one’s nose; but I can also change it in a different way.” In fact, Kashpirovsky does not shy away from threatening to do harm to his patients, even when they feel extremely vulnerable and desperate. Galina

Vinogradova, author of the book *Saint or Satan?* about Anatoly Kashpirovsky, wrote [1996: xvii] that she once witnessed a similar situation:

“Please, please help me!” the woman pleaded, “you are my only hope. Nothing can cure my eczema!” She was trying to make him take a look. Finally, she brought her hands very close to his face. “Take your hands away from my face! Why do you do this? If I become angry, your hands will become even worse!”

It is abundantly clear that Kashpirovsky is well aware of his dominant position over his patients. In one of his YouTube videos [Kashpirovsky 2020a], he uses the proverb *Gol' na vydumki khitra* [Necessity is the mother of invention] to convey that those who are skeptical about him and his methods of treatment now will come back to him later, when all other recourses have been exhausted. Kashpirovsky always describes his methods as innovative, purely scientific, and based on many years of his own research. He repeatedly emphasizes this position in many interviews. For example, he once told Vinogradova [1996: xviii]: “I do not hypnotize anyone. I am a psychotherapist and psychotherapy is a science. I’m not a miracle worker like those charlatans who say they have ESP. I have nothing to do with that lot. Try to understand me.”

Despite the fact that he is always extremely vocal about his standing as a health professional, the pattern of religious elements in people’s responses to Kashpirovsky’s practices is revealing of their attitude toward him as a folk healer. Although laypeople tend to address him as “Doctor,” many treat him with an additional layer of respect by ascribing supernatural abilities to him. In “Hope for Ukraine, Fall of America, and Putin the Savior,” Mariya Lesiv [2018: 3] explains that “in pre-Soviet times, the supernatural constituted a prominent part of rural folk traditions in what is now Russia and Ukraine.” She also demonstrates how official media in these countries do not shy away from bringing news about supernatural events and practices based on folk belief to national media platforms. In her article “The Hypostasis of the Witchdoctor in Post-Soviet Russia,” Olga Gradinaru [2015] suggests that the phenomenon of Kashpirovsky can be explained by the long history of the existence of witch doctors, or healers, in Slavic culture: “The post-Soviet phenomenon of witchdoctors may be considered a form of a wide spiritual movement of neopaganism or neoshamanism, overlapping on the existing Slavic and Siberian cultural matrices and paradigms.”

I should add that the popularity of such vernacular responses and acceptance of alternative healing methods in post-Soviet communities should not be viewed as instances of cultural evolutionism; neither should they be “pathologized” or romanticized [Mullen 2000]. Bonnie O’Connor [1995: 23-24] states that vernacular health belief systems have become appealing to the “college-educated middle class [...] who are members of the multiplicity of health belief systems that comprise the New Age healing movement.” While I agree that Kashpirovsky might have fit into the requirements of a certain genre—witchdoctor, folk healer, or even a shaman—in laypeople’s eyes, there are more reasons than these Slavic

folk traditions (addressed below) to explain why he met with such a massive response. David Hufford argues for the experiential source hypothesis in considering patient descriptions of their illness (and cure). He explains [1982:15] that “certain parts [of the ‘Old Hag’, i.e. sleep paralyse] are culturally derived, but the experience is not.” Taking Hufford’s approach, I will concentrate on his patients’ experiences rather than questioning the exact nature of Kaspirovsky’s healing methods.

Healing COVID-19 Online

A number of leading journals in psychology and public health analyze reasons for COVID-19-related conspiracies and beliefs and their relationship to alternative healing methods. A group of researchers [Uscinski et al 2020] looked into the political views of their respondents and found that “belief that the virus was spread on purpose is most related to conspiracy thinking and is only slightly more concentrated among... self-identified Republicans and conservatives than Democrats and liberals.” In another case [Allington et al 2020], three studies were conducted that employed questionnaires about social media use, conspiracy beliefs, and health-protective behaviors with regard to COVID-19 among UK residents. The authors conclude [2020: 6-7] that “all three studies found a negative relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and COVID-19 health-protective behaviors, and a positive relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and use of social media as a source of information about COVID-19.” Desta and Mulugeta [2020: 713] argue that “the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) overwhelmingly challenges the competency of the digital generation.” Biddlestone et al. [2020:1] cite a feeling of powerlessness as one of the main factors leading to the development of conspiracy theories, including those about COVID-19, on individual and collective levels. The authors also “highlight the importance of examining the interplay between culture and both personal feelings (powerlessness) and information consumption (conspiracy theories) during times of crisis.” [Biddlestone et al 2020:1] These articles demonstrate that: 1) there is no correlation between cultural, historical, geographical or political background and conspiracy thinking, given the diversity of the groups in these studies; 2) lack of agency, fear of the unknown, and feelings of powerlessness push individuals and social groups to seek answers in alternative sources of information, which 3) indicate the compensatory function of folklore, as we see from vernacular responses often expressed on social media platforms.

Furthermore, we can illustrate the current situation in Ukraine and Russia with some statistics that demonstrate the state of informational hygiene in these countries. A new public information initiative “*Yak ne staty ovochem*” [How not to become a vegetable], led by Oksana Moroz, aims to promote information literacy among Ukrainians. According to the project’s preliminary research, 62% of Ukrainians get news updates from social media, and four out of ten Ukrainians believe that COVID-19 was created in a laboratory to reduce the population of the planet. In Russia, 24% of people do not trust official information about the

coronavirus; 35% have only some trust; while 47% of respondents believe that official mass media withholds information about the COVID-19 pandemic [Soroka 2020].

Folklorist Anika Wilson [2021] suggests that “ethnically, racially, regionally, and socioeconomically marginalized populations respond to their chronic disadvantage by constructing conspiracy rumor of threat to their well-being perpetrated by elites.” I suspect that Kashpirovsky’s patients living in both post-Soviet countries and émigrés living in Brighton Beach, New York feel marginalized at least on some level: the former in the context of their home countries, and the latter as new immigrants often working the kinds of jobs that do not provide health insurance.

In *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends*, Anastasiya Astapova [2020] examines Chernobyl-related conspiracy theories circulating in the Soviet and post-Soviet world, particularly in light of the Cold War-like tensions between Russia and the West that have intensified since 2014. In the same volume, Anna Kirziuk describes [2020: 81] how anti-Western conspiracy theories mentioned in secret documents circulated within the KGB and CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] leadership during the late Soviet period.

Just as during the period of *perestroika* in the USSR, the global pandemic of 2020 resulted in an unprecedented time of instability and despair for a large portion of the population. O’Connor [1995: 43] argues that “whenever there is danger, uncertainty, great incidence of chance and anxiety (even in *nonmodern* forms of enterprise), a proliferation of logistical and technological responses crops up.” However, while the global community of leading healthcare professionals is occupied with the development of new vaccines, vernacular responses provide answers to a number of lingering questions. Anatoly Kashpirovsky taps into a number of social anxieties, including fear about COVID-19. On the one hand, he has criticized the Russian government and healthcare system for their inability to meet the needs of the population. He also expresses mistrust of the untested American or “Anglo-Saxon” vaccines, claiming that the West is trying to “destroy Russia and to bring the biggest and the richest country to extinction.” [Kashpirovskiy 2020a]. On the other hand, he criticizes the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V (5): “The Mayor of Yalta (6) got vaccinated, and a few weeks later he died from complications of COVID-19” [Kashpirovskiy 2020a]. A number of newspapers, mostly Ukrainian [Ostrov 2020], also reported that Ivan Imgrunt, the mayor of Yalta, died three weeks after being vaccinated, hinting that the vaccine itself might have become the reason of his death. However, the Crimean branch of *Kosmomolskaia Pravda* wrote that “the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Crimea denied rumors that the late ex-mayor of Yalta, who died because of Coronavirus, was vaccinated against COVID-19” [Timoshchenko 2020].

While he does not openly refer to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 being created in a laboratory, in the spirit of the Cold War, Kashpirovsky explicitly hints at the Western (i.e., American) origin of the virus. This sort of explanation has already become a pattern when dealing with new unknown diseases. Diane Goldstein [2004: 91-99] provides a number of legends expressing

the opinions people held about AIDS having been created in a laboratory at a military institution devoted to biological warfare in Maryland (USA), Haiti or as created by such “older enemies” as Germany and Russia. In his comment about the deceased mayor of Yalta, Kashpirovsky also expresses mistrust of the newly introduced vaccine.

While the issue of vernacular reaction to vaccination and to the origins of the disease is one part of the folk response to COVID-19 [Kitta 2012; Goldstein 2004], there exists another factor: that of vernacular medicine. The next section focuses on this aspect, with examples drawn from posted reactions from Kashpirovsky’s online patients to his coronavirus treatment methods. The inability to prove or disprove facts about a novel disease leaves a lot of room for speculation and for finding comfort and explanation in folk narratives. Diane Goldstein [2004: 73] explores this cause-and-effect link between illness and narrative. The analysis of cultural processes also allows us to understand the reasons for and functions of these narratives. Bonnie O’Connor states [1995: 41] that “functionalist theories explain the existence or persistence of cultural traits such as folk belief and practice either *as a function* of a given set of social circumstances or constraints, or in terms of *the social functions* of the belief traditions themselves, or both.” Being unable to obtain answers to questions about possible COVID-19 treatments from official sources, people often refer to available online sources that offer alternative treatments. The fact that the treatment is coming from a once big name, Anatoly Kashpirovsky, makes this treatment method seem more trustworthy. Thus, the Internet and social media platforms have become the link covering the misinformation gap and serve a social function as a reliable and democratic source of information.

Both the persona of Anatoly Kashpirovsky and his healing methods combine elements of conventional and alternative medicine. This fact actually makes him appealing to a wide range of people across a spectrum of views regarding health and healing and has led to his success. Diane Goldstein argues [2004: 70] that “although lay models of health and illness tend to differ from biomedical models, this does not necessarily mean that physicians, medical researchers, or health educators hold strictly to medical models.” This is precisely the case with Anatoly Kashpirovsky and is a fact that is especially relevant in the Eastern European context.

In her book *Conjuring Hope: Healing and Magic in Contemporary Russia*, Galina Lindquist [2005] explains another very important nuance in the position of vernacular healers in this part of the world. She writes [2005: 6] that very often

healers are, by and large, people with biomedical knowledge on the level of a medical professional. Biomedical education leaves many healers equipped not only with a ‘scientific’ paradigm, but also with a good working knowledge of anatomy, pathology and pharmacology.

At the same time, biomedical doctors in the USSR, who did not present themselves as healers, often prescribed their patients therapies such as cupping

and mustard plasters. These practices show that there is a history of overlap between biomedicine and vernacular healing practices in this part of Eastern Europe in particular.

Kashpirovsky's approach to treating various diseases, including COVID-19, is both presented and perceived as innovative or progressive. Mariya Lesiv [2018: 45] provides an example of how "charisma building strategies involving the supernatural are closely connected to vernacular understanding of progress by the larger Ukrainian and Russian society." One should not assume that this is true only about rural or remote areas. Julie V. Brown and Nina L. Rusinova [2002: 162], in their research of medical practices in St. Petersburg, found that this dynamic exists in what is considered to be one of the largest economic and cultural centers of Russia:

After *perestroika* and *glasnost* [...] those practicing in post-Soviet St. Petersburg include, in addition to the folk healers and psychics, homeopaths, acupuncturists, herbalists, osteopaths, bioenergetics, advocates for special diets and regimes of fasting, and experts on various Asian medical theories.

Lesiv [2018: 47] claims that in Eastern Europe, due to folk healers' long history of "pre-existing favorable reputation," supernatural healing practices "are widely recognized by a larger society. In some venues, the supernatural has become a leading vehicle for communicating modernity, progress, and power, as understood at the vernacular level today."

This tendency of combining vernacular and institutional medicine and seeing this combination in approaches to healing as progressive is well demonstrated by the Kashpirovsky case and by his patients. On the one hand, they respect Kashpirovsky and his authority due to his formal medical training and experience in biomedicine. However, they also trust him because he does not represent the biomedical mainstream and reaffirms their beliefs in alternative healing methods. Offering "health sessions" online via his YouTube channel, as well as in person, Kashpirovsky claims that he uses strictly scientific, although innovative, methods of treating a variety of diseases, including COVID-19. Nevertheless, the responses of his patients show that people tend to perceive him as a folk healer, a psychic, or a magician, not primarily as a physician. On the other hand, as a medical doctor, Kashpirovsky entertains conspiracy theories about the possible harm that American vaccines can do to the Russian people. Here his audience expresses gratefulness for addressing these important issues, relying on his professional training and experience in biomedicine primarily.

Below are sample responses from Kashpirovsky's COVID-19 patients. Some have repeatedly sought his help before and provided their feedback on various improvements to their condition. All comments are translated from Russian. The style and punctuation of the comments have been preserved in the translations.

Natalia: I am on a finish line fighting coronavirus. Before the lecture I felt very nauseous, but after I felt significantly better. I could hold my breath for 1.5 min.

Liudmyla: I watched the session about coronavirus at night. The next morning, I could smell again. The X-ray shows bilateral pneumonia. I will keep watching the video. Thank you.

Olga: I used to be able to hold my breath for 30 seconds, but, after watching your video, I can hold it for 70 seconds. I appreciate it!

Elena: I am in the hospital with covid. Held my breath for 1 min. It's progress.

Galina: Thank you for the video, it is easier to breath now.

Dmitry: HUGE THANKS HELD BREATH FOR 40 SECONDS

Luda: I am so grateful, my health is improving every day.

Alena: Dear Anatoly Mikhailovich, we are desperate, my sister is a health professional, she is in intensive care with corona, we live in a small town [...], doctors can't help, how can you help

Marianna: Pneumonia lead to complications with bronchial asthma. Don't forget about me, please, this illness exhausted me

Tatiana: Yesterday I could hold my breath for 27 sec, today it is 50 sec. Thank You, Anatoly Mikhailovich.

Marina: 1 min 15 sec. Used to be 15 sec. fantastic.

Svetlana: Hooraaay I can smell my perfume hooraaay thanks

Vera: Hello, Anatoly Mikhailovich. My eyesight got better, my body has a better odor, joint pain disappeared, my face looks younger, my lips became plumper. I appreciate it!

Sergei: Last summer I had a light form of covid. After your live broadcasts from Moscow my blood pressure normalized, it used to be 90-150, it is easier to breath, I regained my good physical health

Ivan: Anatoly Mikhailovich, thank you. I can breathe with my nose, I stopped snoring, scars on my face disappeared, I have a smaller appetite and my stomach got smaller, I eat much less now.

As we can see, these comments offer a rather wide spectrum of responses. Some people express gratitude for the help they received previously, sharing personal updates about their health improvements (“my eyesight got better”), physical changes (“face looks younger, my lips became plumper”), or habitual changes (“I eat much less now”). The majority of the comments are related to the coronavirus, and they also vary from joyful updates about improvements or positive tendencies (“I can smell my perfume hooraaay thanks”), or words of despair stating that Kashpirovsky is their last hope to provide medical help (“doctors can’t help, how can you help”). The overall tone and context of these messages to Kashpirovsky suggests a desperate need for his help, implying that faith in other options, namely, mainstream biomedicine, has been exhausted.

The comments demonstrate established, most likely one-way, almost personal or “romantic” relationships, like Lindquist suggests [2005: 116], of patients with Anatoly Kashpirovsky (some refer to him as doctor or by his patronymic, Anatoly Mikhailovich, to show a greater degree of respect). Notably, these relationships were built through a social media platform, his personal YouTube Channel, and possibly other similar platforms previously; and they were triggered by mistrust of or disappointment with both conventional healthcare providers and official media in the time of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

In times of crisis, people often turn to vernacular ways of finding comfort and hope in various blends of conventional biomedicine and folk healing practices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments, official media sources, and conventional biomedicine failed to provide a necessary level of support to populations globally. As a result, people started seeking comfort and answers to their multiple questions elsewhere. For many, alternative methods of healing became the only way of coping with fear and anxiety regarding the new virus. Anatoly Kashpirovsky, a professional psychotherapist, healer, charismatic leader and scandalous figure from the 1980-90s, returned to meet the current needs of this group. Just as he did 30 years ago, he provides his healing sessions via the same media, video connection, this time, however, via a YouTube channel. Despite the fact that his healing methods have been questioned by many, and despite his almost 30-year-long absence from public view, his long-forgotten services were recycled during the pandemic of 2020 and presented as still effective and, moreover, progressive. Kashpirovsky combines features of a professional physician and a folk healer, which, without any doubt, widened his audiences and catered to the needs of many disaffected by biomedicine and distrustful of their government’s ability to address the pandemic. He also entertains conspiracy theories regarding the origin and the spread of the new virus, implying that the West is aiming to ruin Russia and bring the nation to extinction. His patients, who are both citizens of the post-Soviet republics and émigrés living in Europe and North America, find this opinion especially appealing and trustworthy, since, as expressed by Kashpirovsky, it conforms to their current concerns in the “Cold

War” atmosphere of shaky international relations between these nations. All in all, Kashpirovsky’s resurgence demonstrates the power of folk belief to address institutional mistrust and compensate for institutional failures during a time of crisis.

NOTES

1 Irina Alegrova, Liubov’ Uspenskaia and Mikhail Shuftinskii were among them.

2 In the article I use the transliteration “Kashpirovsky,” the most commonly used spelling in English-language sources. However, his official YouTube channel and website use the transliteration “Kashpirovskiy.” Except for citations from these sites, I will use the generally accepted English variant of his name.

3 Although I recognize that Ukraine and the Russian Federation are separate countries, I consider them together for the purposes of this article. The reasons for this decision include a shared post-Soviet legacy and Anatoly Kashpirovsky’s connection to and popularity in both countries.

4 Digital versions of his books and newspaper interviews can be found on his website www.kashpirovskiy.com.

5 While the official website calls Sputnik V the first registered vaccine in the world, as of May 2021, it has not been tested in Stage 3 clinical trials and has not been approved by any international healthcare institution, including the World Health Organization. The same website states “The vaccine received a registration certificate from the Russian Ministry of Health on August 11 [2020]. Post-registration clinical trials involving more than 40,000 people in Russia and Belarus were launched on August 25, 2020” [*Sputnik V*].

6 Yalta is a Ukrainian city in Russian-occupied Crimea. The Crimean Peninsula became one of the first places where the vaccine Sputnik V was delivered and offered to the population. As with many other policies and initiatives, this act is an effort by Russia to integrate Crimea into its state infrastructure and demonstrate its loyalty to the people there.

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