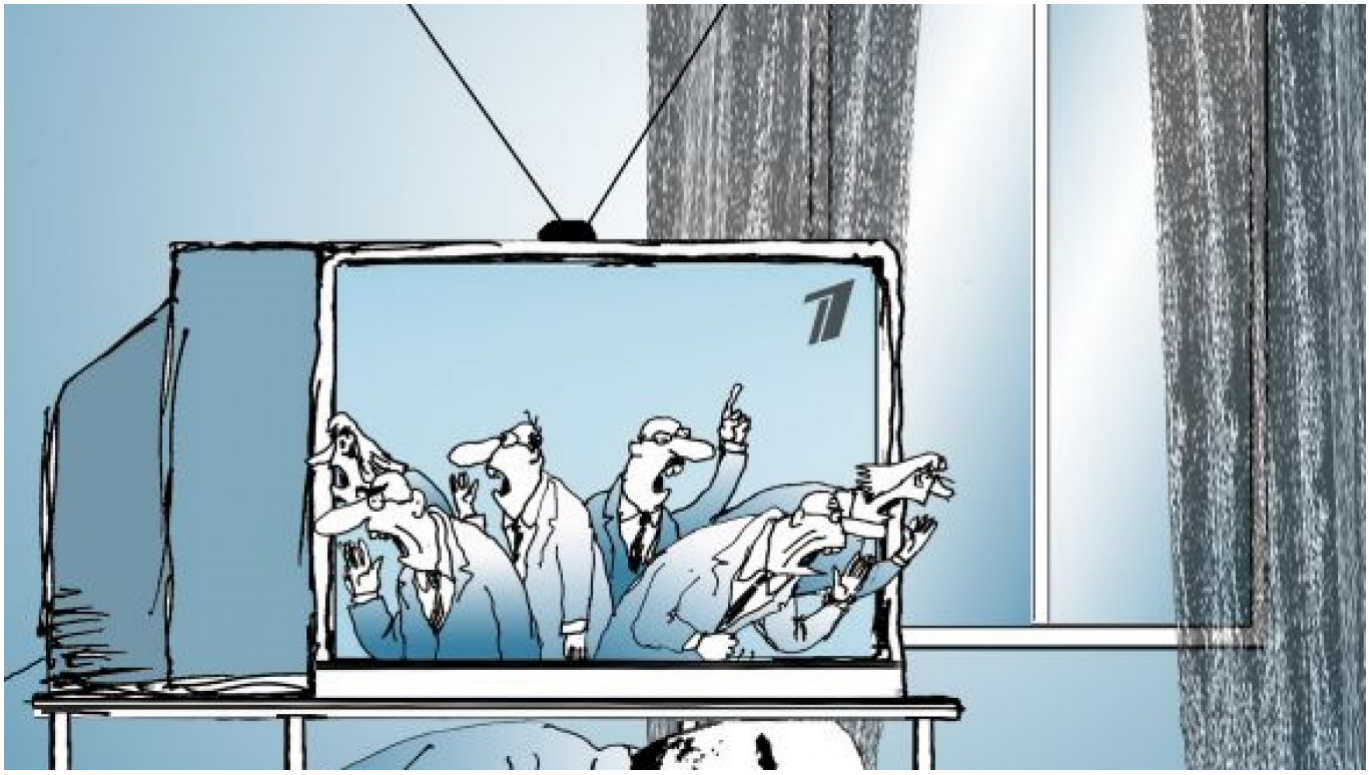
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In the Spotlight: Out-Doctored Folk Healers

By Anna Malpas

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Last week, the popular folk healer and host of Russia's crankiest television show, Gennady Malakhov, mysteriously disappeared, just as he was supposed to film his show, "Malakhov Plus."

The show, where Malakhov offers cures involving honey, household plants and urine in his trademark country-bumpkin style, runs every morning on Channel One. The state channel has attracted criticism for giving credence to dubious healing methods — in one nasty episode, a boy was told that his health problems were because of a curse on his mother.

Malakhov has written more than 100 books, including "How to Cure the 200 Most-Common Illnesses." A balding, unglamorous man, he speaks with a strong regional accent and has the ungrammatical catchphrase, "Dobrogo Zdorovitsa," or good health. His faithful audience of middle-aged women brings along notebooks to the studio to record every word of wisdom.

Channel One raised the alarm after Malakhov failed to turn up to film his show last Friday and

did not answer any of his telephone numbers.

The GZT.ru web site reported that several fake Malakhovs had phoned the channel to give their excuses, including one who said he had been on a drinking binge for the last 48 hours.

A colleague at Channel One, host Andrei Malakhov, gave an incredibly bitchy explanation to GZT.ru. "I think it's all a good advertising campaign for the folk healer," he said. "I know 100 percent where to find him because I know the situation from the inside. He is at his dacha near Sergiyev Posad with his lover."

Gennady Malakhov, who is married with two children, is planning a show for another channel, Andrei Malakhov added.

It was Lifenews.ru that finally tracked Malakhov down at his country house in the Rostov region and posted a video of an interview on Wednesday. The healer said he had run away from the show because of the tiring schedule, which he called a "colossal burden."

"Television has just worn me out," he said.

Lifenews.ru wrote that Malakhov had gone to ground so meticulously that the phone cable to the house had been cut.

Channel One responded by saying he would have to pay a fine of 1.5 million to 2 million rubles ($49,000 to $65,000) for breaching his contract.

Malakhov hinted to Lifenews.ru that there was another reason for his decision to quit: his two new co-hosts, who are medical doctors.

Malakhov's previous co-host, actress Yelena Proklova, who beamed approval for all his tips, was replaced this summer with doctors in a reported attempt to boost ratings.

Channel One itself hinted at Malakhov's opposition. In a recent sketch on its parody show "Big Difference," it showed him furiously comparing the appearance of a medical doctor on his show to the Nazi invasion of 1941.

Komsomolskaya Pravda suggested this week that Malakhov disliked his folksy tips being sneered at by pesky medical types.

"The wild preacher of the miraculous powers of garlic and radishes found himself hosting a new version of the show surrounded by doctors," it sympathized, tongue-in-cheek.

"He — the height of folk wisdom — was forced, on his own show, to listen to these college-educated types."

A viewer called Mila shared the concern on Channel One's web site. The doctors are taking all the fun out of the show by telling the guests to get medical treatment, she complained.

And given the nastiness of most Russian clinics, I can see her point.

"When they call the ladies who come on the show 'patients' suffering from obesity or hair loss, they scare everyone — not just the guests, but the viewers," Mila wrote.

“It’s a pity because it’s practically the only show on television with a positive message,” she added.

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