

An analysis of cross-border
influence operations targeting
Western policymakers

Externally Facing Influence Campaigns

Moldova's 2024-2025 elections

Author: David Smith

Produced in cooperation with
WatchDog.MD Community

Externally Facing Influence Campaigns

An analysis of cross-border influence operations targeting Western policy makers (think tanks, politicians, etc).

Table of Contents

Externally Facing Influence Campaigns	1
Table of Contents	1
Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Section 1: Case Studies	3
Case 1: Stanislav Pavlovski & Stop Media Ban	3
Offline Campaigning - Conferences and Lobbyists	5
Case 2: Ilan Shor's US and EU Lobbying	6
Case 2.1 Vasilie Tarlev and Qorvis Holding Inc.	6
Case 2.2 Fortius Consulting and Victoria Șapa	8
Case 3: Bausman's Bloggers	9
The Journalists & Bloggers	10
FIMI Produced	11
High Level Meetings and Clear State Organization	11
Case 4: MEGA in Moldova	12
Pre-Conference Drama	13
The Conference	14
FIMI From the Event	14
Section 2: Tactics and Allies	15
Section 2.1 Astroturfing	15
Section 2.2 Utilizing Existing US / EU Infrastructure to Make and Spread FIMI	16
Section 2.3 Agents, Allies, Fellow Travelers and Useful Idiots	17
Section 3: Shifting Grassroots Targeting	17
Conclusion	18

Executive Summary

This report examines a less-studied category of Russian-linked foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) targeting Moldova during the 2024 - 2025 election cycle: bespoke, “grassroots¹” influence operations aimed at policymakers, think tanks, journalists, academics, and elite networks in the United States and Europe. While much existing analysis emphasizes mass-audience social media manipulation in Romanian and Russian, the cases here show how Kremlin-linked actors exploit Western institutions and commercial influence infrastructure to shape policy and perceptions of Moldova’s democracy and EU accession.

¹ Grassroots refers to influential figures within a community. It's the opposite of "grassroots" which is about the everyman. Grassroots strategies seek to influence the elite while grassroots strategies build a power base from the wider population.

Across four case studies, the report documents a consistent pattern of reputation laundering and narrative distribution. First, Shor-linked astroturf entities - most notably the International Center for the Protection of Human Rights and Democracy (ICPHRD) and Stop Media Ban - used ostensibly pro-EU, rights-based messaging to portray Moldova as authoritarian, censorious, and unfit for EU integration. These campaigns relied heavily on PR intermediaries and a network of pseudo-media outlets that mimic journalism while selling sponsored influence, enabling content placement with deceptive bylines and the appearance of independent reporting. The report also highlights information-laundering dynamics whereby paid placements can be republished, recycled, and re-imported into Moldovan media as "authoritative foreign coverage."

Second, the report analyzes lobbying efforts linked to Ilan Shor's political ecosystem, including a documented U.S. contract with Qorvis for presidential candidate Vasile Tarlev and later outreach by Fortius Consulting on behalf of Victoria Șapa. These examples illustrate how financial opacity and weakened enforcement of transparency frameworks can facilitate private influence efforts even when formal legal regimes exist.

Third, the report presents original analysis of a "blogger delegation" organized via Russian Orthodox Church structures and led by Charles Bausman, generating long-tail English-language content aimed at niche far-right audiences and, indirectly, U.S. decision-makers. Finally, the report examines the 2025 MEGA conference in Chișinău as a hybrid influence event marked by opaque financing and post-event English-language amplification through familiar pseudo-media channels.

Synthesizing these cases, the report identifies core enabling tactics: astroturf organizations with shallow infrastructure; the use of PR / lobbying firms as "agnostic" contractors; and gaps in EU-wide lobbying transparency, sponsorship labeling, and financial due diligence. The concluding assessment finds a clear strategic shift from broad, values-based outreach in 2024 toward narrower targeting of far-right MEGA / MAGA-adjacent networks in 2025 - an evolution aligned with both opportunistic political timing and deeper ideological convergence.

Introduction

In the context of Moldova's 2024 and 2025 elections, journalists and analysis have produced excellent reporting on Russia's hybrid war against Moldovan democracy via foreign information manipulations and interference (FIMI). Most of the work researching this area has focused on social media campaigns aimed at mass audiences. These were in Romanian / Russian to target the Moldovan population, as well as campaigns such as Storm-1516 and MATRYOSHKA targeting Western audiences.

This report is going to examine a different category of FIMI campaign that has gotten less attention. As opposed to the campaigns mentioned above that were mass-market and often sought virality, this category of campaign is bespoke and has a more grassroots than grassroots focus. We will look at how Kremlin linked FIMI actors exploit Western media, companies and institutions to target decision makers in order to shape policy related to Moldova.

In some cases, this involves the use of direct agents of influence, such as PR companies or lobbyists, being paid (often opaquely) via Kremlin actors. In other cases it can involve a web of fellow travelers or useful idiots who propagate Kremlin messaging about Moldova within their personal networks. The case studies outlined below show instances of pop-up events, such as conferences, that are used to drive press releases and media narratives for a few days only. There are other cases that involve longer term campaigns that avoid headlines or almost any public notice for long periods of time.

In Section 1 we'll first look at a series of 4 case studies highlighting these bespoke FIMI campaigns. Then in Section 2 we will examine some of the tactics and accomplices required to create the campaigns. Specifically, we will look at how failures in regulation, especially around financial transparency, have allowed the Kremlin to turn Western institutions against Moldova and the West more generally. Finally, In Section 3 we will examine how the focus of these campaigns has shifted from targeting broader political constituencies in 2024 to a narrower focus on certain elements of the far-right in 2025.

Section 1: Case Studies

Case 1: Stanislav Pavlovski & Stop Media Ban

Note: Unless supported via inline links, the facts of this case are sourced from the Moldova Matters investigation [The Western PR Campaign Undermining Moldova's EU Aspirations](#).

Throughout 2024 two astroturfing campaigns with links to Ilan Shor worked to discredit Moldova's EU accession. The organizations were the International Center for the Protection of Human Rights and Democracy (ICPHRD) led by Stanislav Pavlovski and Stop Media Ban, founded by Alexei Lungu and later led by Ludmila Belcencova.

Here are brief bios for these 3 figures:

- **Stanislav Pavlovski** - A Moldovan lawyer and [former judge appointed](#) by Moldova to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) from 2001 to 2008. As part of the Platform Dignity and Truth (DA) he briefly served as Minister of Justice in Maia Sandu's 2019 cabinet. He remained DA founder Andrei Nastasi's close political ally and played a senior role in his 2024 presidential campaign.
- **Alexei Lungu** - A former "journalist" who became leader of the "Chance" party in 2023. He is known as one of Shor's top surrogates in Moldova.
- **Ludmila Belcencova** - Former "journalist" (really [Communist party spokeswoman](#)) who has moved over to supporting Shor's protest movements and organizations.

Both ICPHRD and Stop Media Ban spread similar messages through their campaigns. Themes included:

- Under President Maia Sandu **media freedoms in Moldova have been systematically eroded** with dozens of opposition media outlets closed.
- The exclusion of opposition candidates from elections represents **democratic backsliding**.
- Maia Sandu is an **authoritarian and is seeking to create a totalitarian system**
- **Moldova is not ready for the EU** due to these internal problems.
- **Moldova is dangerous to the EU** and could become a new "Hungary"

These critiques are always made from an ostensibly pro-EU position. The author, often Stanislav Pavlovski, makes it clear that he wants Moldova to join the EU... but. **There is always a but.** Both the ICPHRD and Stop Media Ban present themselves as organizations dedicated to freedom of speech and human rights globally. Around 30-50% of the content on their websites would be about Moldova pushing the themes above. The rest of their (unpaid / boosted) website content would highlight real human rights abuses in countries such as Venezuela or Iran.

ICPHRD and Stop Media Ban officially have no affiliation, but the site and figures associated with them consistently cross post and cite each other's work. They were both also consistently referenced on <http://itf-ilan.com> (Just the Facts: Ilan Shor) - a former campaign website for Ilan Shor.

These astroturfed NGOs contracted PR / Lobbying firms in jurisdictions with poor transparency laws, including the EU. These firms will place articles and op-eds via the following methods:

- **Wire services** - They [distribute articles on paid wire services](#). In one case, a PR company called Broken Pot Media Ltd placed 5 articles with EIN Presswire between March 28th and August 1st. Of them, 2 were about or by Stanislav Pavlovski, 3 were written directly by Ilan Shor's lawyers and 1 was a profile of Shor candidate Victoria Furtuna.
- **Paid advertorials** - Some articles were distributed as paid, but properly labeled, advertorials. Such as [this piece by Stanislav Pavlovski in Euractive](#).
- **Pseudo-media outlets / Undercover Lobbying Sites (see footnote)²** - Most articles were released in a cluster of news websites such as EU Reporter, the London Globe, the Globe Netherlands, Brussels Standard, etc. These articles disguise their authorship behind fake journalist bylines - often with stock images for pictures. Many of these sites are owned by former British TV executive Colin Stevens. EU Reporter, the flagship site, advertised itself [with a video saying](#):

"Our business model is to offer political parties, businesses, NGOs, industry associations, financial institutions and governments the opportunity to use EU Reporter to influence the European political decision-making process by sponsoring coverage and the placement of positive news stories and editorial comment related to them,"

The narrator tells the viewer: "Use EU Reporter to influence."



A selection of articles published on EU reporter

Articles placed in this ecosystem are used for direct influence on decision makers who might inadvertently believe they are real websites or click on social media links to them. They are also used for information laundering, such as one case where an [article attributed to Stanislav Pavlovski](#) was placed in EIN Presswire by Broken Pot Media Ltd. This article is written in the 3rd person with Mr. Pavlovski quoting himself for much of the writing. The [Associated Press \(AP\) picked](#) up the article from EIN Presswire and distributed it. Mr. Pavlovski then re-released the article on his website under the pretense that the AP was writing an article about him, instead of publishing a paid article by him.

Finally, these articles in the English language (or other foreign) press can be laundered back into the Moldovan media ecosystem with Kremlin networks citing the supposedly authoritative foreign press while making attacks against the government or Moldova's EU trajectory.

Across the various clusters of PR placed articles we see support for Stanislav Pavlovski and ICPHRD, Ilan Shor's political lieutenants such as Victoria Furtuna, Stop Media Ban, Andrei Nastase as well as direct appeals by Ilan Shor's lawyers against the sanctions placed on him.

² This mechanism of this was reported in a 3 part Politico investigation called Dark news: The murky world of undercover EU lobbying ([Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)) - also a [NYTimes article](#) on the same phenomenon with Huawei.

Offline Campaigning - Conferences and Lobbyists

In addition to the online campaign, Stanislav Pavlovski secured the services of a US based lobbying firm in an attempt to set up meetings with politicians and think tanks in Washington DC. We'll discuss lobbying aspects of this ecosystem in Case Study 2.

Stanislav Pavlovski and the ICPHRD held 2 offline conferences which generated some of the material used to feed the articles mentioned above. Firstly, on April 17th and 18th 2024 they held the "[2024 Rule of Law Symposium](#)" in New York City. The event's press release stated:

"The symposium will feature esteemed participants including Carsten Zatschler, Adjunct Professor at University College Dublin and expert in EU law, and Justin S. Weddle, a US-based criminal lawyer with experience in Eastern European legal systems. Matthew Hoke, a former FBI agent, will also contribute insights into cross-border financial crimes. Additional invitees include Barnes & Thornburg Partner Scott Hulsey, as well as Kibler Fowler & Cave's Nathan Park, who will in turn provide diverse perspectives on Moldova's legal and political landscape."

Stanislav Pavlovski called the event a "*significant step forward in our ongoing commitment to justice, democracy, and human rights.*" In reality, it was primarily about whitewashing Ilan Shor. At the time, Carsten Zatschler was a member of Ilan Shor's 4 person legal team challenging EU sanctions in European courts.

Participants Justin S. Weddle and Matthew Hoke were there to present "independent" assessments that they were hired (by unknown persons) to conduct into the legal cases in Moldova against Ilan Shor. They unsurprisingly concluded that the cases were baseless and that he was a scapegoat for unknown persons. Further they concluded that the existence of such cases in Moldova should not "*be treated as a reliable basis for U.S. institutions to reach conclusions about Shor and his conduct.*" The quote is from an [EU Reporter article](#) about the event.

The second major offline event held by the ICPHRD was their [June 25th, 2024 conference in Chisinau](#) entitled "Freedom of Speech: A Cornerstone of Democratic Societies." At this event Stanislav Pavlovski and his son in law Leonid Tverdun hosted and moderated discussion panels consisting of international experts - many of whom are household names in their home countries. They included:

- [Mitchell Barak](#) - An "Israeli-American public opinion expert" who runs a strategic communications firm based in Israel. He was a former aide to Bibi Netanyahu and is a regular contributor to the BBC, Al Jazeera and others.
- [Zeynep Ardic](#) - A member of Faculty of Law at Istanbul Medeniyet University.
- [John Fund](#) - A senior editor of [The American Spectator](#), and reporter for The National Review Online. Fund has a long history of op-ed journalism in the US.
- [Tanya Beckett](#) - A British TV and radio journalist, currently a [presenter at the BBC world service](#).
- [Ivor Gaber](#) - British academic and journalist, professor of political journalism at University of Sussex. A member of UNESCO's intergovernmental Council of the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) representing the UK government.
- [Conor Powell](#) - A veteran TV correspondent reporting for Fox and other outlets from various conflict zones. More recently a podcast host and producer.
- [Daniel J. Mitchell](#) - A libertarian economist and commentator and a former senior fellow at CATO institute.
- [Daniel Pomerantz](#) - CEO of [Reality Check](#), a 501c3 non-profit focused on public research to reduce polarization.

- Walid Harfush - Vice President of Euronews for Central and Eastern Europe.



Photos credit ICPHRD. Left: Daniel Pomerantz and Conor Powell on a panel at the conference; Center: Daniel Mitchell speaking at the conference; Right: Stanislav Pavlovski at the conference

The conference was small with around 10 attendees other than the speakers. It was not reported publicly in the Moldovan press, and was totally missed within Moldova, until it was reported on by [Moldova Matters in October](#). According to participant Conor Powell, none of the discussion was centered on Moldova at all and Ilan Shor was never mentioned. The format was academic and abstract - focusing on the importance of a free press.

Following the conference ICPHRD selectively edited quotes for their website and press releases to imply that Moldova under PAS and Maia Sandu had major problems with freedom of speech and human rights.

The ICPHRD's old website ([humanrightscenter.eu](#)) disappeared somewhere in March 2025 but then reappeared in the same month as [cadod.eu](#). The new acronym CADOD is never explained and the old acronym ICPHRD remains throughout the website. Stop Media Ban's website became defunct sometime in late 2024.

Case 2: Ilan Shor's US and EU Lobbying

In the world of corporate bespoke public influence, there is a fine line between a public relations (PR) company and a lobbyist. Even when these functions are regulated differently they often coexist within a single company or corporate group. While Case 1 showed how Shor-linked groups used PR firms to support their spread of FIMI to an American and European audience, this case will look at 2 instances where politicians linked with Ilan Shor hired lobbying firms in order to deliver Kremlin talking points in private meetings with decision makers in the US and Europe.

Case 2.1 Vasilie Tarlev and Qorvis Holding Inc.

Note: Unless supported via inline links, the facts of this case are sourced from the Moldova Matters' 3 part investigation into the topic published at Part 1: [A Moldovan Politician's \\$85,000 PR Campaign - in America](#), Part 2: [Amend, Reverse, Repeat: Qorvis Scrambles to Fix FARA Filings After Moldova Matters Investigation](#), Part 3: [The \\$45,000 Discrepancy: Inside a Failed Moldovan Lobby Push in Washington](#).

On September 6th, 2024 the high powered Washington DC based PR and lobbying firm Qorvis Holdings Inc. signed an \$85,000 contract to support Moldovan presidential hopeful Vasile Tarlev. Former Prime Minister Tarlev had recently re-entered politics after a long hiatus and has since been closely linked to Ilan Shor. His contract with Qorvis put him alongside existing clients of the company including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, government of Cambodia, Republic of Equatorial Guinea and others.

According to Qorvis' Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) filings, this \$85,000 contract was to cover an 8 week program with the following goals:

Scope of Services:

1. Analyze Reputational Goals
We will conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current perceptions of Mr. Tarlev among U.S. policymakers, media, and online platforms. This analysis will guide our strategy to manage his reputation effectively.
2. Enhance Online Reputation
We will create and disseminate media content to showcase that Mr. Tarlev's achievements and political stances.
3. Thought Leadership Development
We will establish Mr. Tarlev's history of thoughtful leadership in foreign policy.
4. Schedule Policymaker Meetings
We will arrange meetings with influential policymakers and think tanks in Washington, D.C.

Screenshot from the FARA filing

This was the 8 week outline of proposed services:

We propose an 8 week program with the option to extend the campaign if required.

Weeks 1–4:

- Develop a daily intelligence map of key targets.
- Message development and drafting of collateral materials.
- Initial meetings with U.S. officials.

Week 5:

- Expand outreach to additional Senate and House members.
- Continue meeting scheduling.

Weeks 6–8:

- Finalize messaging based on feedback from initial meetings.
- Begin targeted outreach to think tanks.
- Continue media engagement and policymaker meetings.

Ongoing:

- Continuous execution of remaining plan elements.

Screenshot from FARA filing

Qorvis was paid \$45,000 as a retainer fee on September 30th with the balance to be paid on October 10th. This campaign represented the only FARA reported hiring of a US lobbyist by a Moldovan politician since Vladimir Plahotniuc fell from power in 2019.

Qorvis immediately began work "*advising the foreign principal on political sentiment [in the US]*" and sending emails to "*Gauge Interest in Meeting with Vasile Tarlev*." This included 11 members of congress, the World Bank, the IMF and one newsroom, the "*Washginton [sic] Examiner*," and others including think-tanks. These emails indicated an invitation to meet with Vasile Tarlev on his planned December 10th to 13th, 2024, trip to Washington DC. It claimed Mr. Tarlev is "*focused on strengthening Moldova's ties with the United States, supporting regional security and advancing Moldova's political and economic development*."

Ultimately, Mr. Tarlev never traveled to the United States due to unspecified visa issues. Therefore, the contract was never fully completed and the later \$40,000 was not paid.

Curiously, Vasile Tarlev was listed by Qorvis on their FARA filing as the beneficiary of the services but not as the signer of the contract or the person paying. This was listed as the “American Charity Fund for Helping Children of Ukraine and Moldova Inc” (ACFHCUM). As Moldova Matters reported, nothing about this organization, the source of the money or the contract itself was as it first appeared. The charity was used to obfuscate the real source of the payment, a man living in New York named Sam Alaverdov (a director in the charity), who paid personally. Mr. Tarlev also made no filing to Moldova’s National Integrity Authority (ANI) even though this payment on his behalf far exceeded the required reporting threshold.

While it was not easy to find information about this contract, it was still possible at the time. The US FARA law was still in force and US regulations required transparency when it comes to lobbying efforts by foreign entities. That is not true of the European Union which does not have any bloc-wide regulations on lobbying. It is possible that Mr. Alaverdov, on behalf of Mr. Tarlev, paid \$45,000 dollars for 18 emails. It is also possible that other services were provided for this money out of the Qorvis office in Europe - services that would not be transparently reported.

Case 2.2 Fortius Consulting and Victoria Šapa

Note: Unless supported via inline links, the facts of this case are sourced from the Moldova Matters’ 2 part investigation into the topic published at Part 1: [Shor’s New Agent in Washington - Victoria Šapa](#), and Part 2: [Fortius Consulting, Shor and MEGA](#).

In April 2025 a small strategic consultancy company called Fortius Consulting, based in Madrid Spain, began circulating the following profile document to DC based think tanks and lawmakers.

PROFILE

VICTORIA ȘAPA**Moldovan Political Leader & Entrepreneur**

Background & Professional Experience: Victoria Șapa is a conservative Moldovan political leader, entrepreneur, and advocate for economic development. With a career spanning both Moldova and North America, she brings a unique perspective on governance, business investment, and social policies. Born in Moldova in 1986, she later emigrated to Canada, where she gained experience in construction, real estate, and urban planning. In 2023, she returned to Moldova to run for mayor of Bălți, Moldova's second-largest city, as the candidate of the "Şansa" (Chance) Party.

Political Vision & Key Initiatives: Victoria Șapa is committed to modernizing Moldova's infrastructure, promoting foreign investment, and enhancing social welfare programs. Her key policy priorities include:

- Comprehensive infrastructure development, including road and housing improvements.
- Promoting investment-friendly policies to attract North American and European businesses.
- Expanding social support programs, particularly for pensioners and low-income families.
- Strengthening Moldova's international partnerships for economic growth.

Geopolitical Stance: As Moldova navigates its path between European integration and regional complexities, Victoria Șapa advocates for pragmatic foreign policy approaches that balance Moldova's historical ties with new opportunities for economic and political alliances. She seeks to engage with U.S. policymakers and investors to strengthen Moldova's democratic institutions and economic resilience.

1

Fortius was acting as an unregistered lobbyist for a foreign politician as they failed to make any FARA filings associated with this outreach or subsequent meetings. The politician they were representing was Victoria Șapa. In Fall 2023 Șapa stood for the "Chance" party as one of 6 candidates run by the Shor network in the Balti mayoral elections in Moldova. She did not win and this was the whole of her electoral political career. But her connections to Shor run deeper as she grew up with Ilan Shor and Marina Tauber and has been friends with them since childhood. Additionally, she sat in the front row with top Shor lieutenants at the launch of the Pobeda (Victory) bloc in Moscow in May 2024.

With the lack of FARA filings we don't know what kind of meetings (if any) Victoria Șapa had in DC as a result of this outreach. Upon entering office US Attorney General Pam Bondi issued new guidance that effectively neutered enforcement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act by massively deprioritizing it. Bondi, who herself worked as a lobbyist for Qatar only months before this action, effectively turned out the lights on foreign lobbying of American officials during the second Trump administration.

Case 3: Bausman's Bloggers

Prior to the 2025 parliamentary elections the Moldovan press reported on an operation dubbed "Matushka" whereby the Shor network recruited Orthodox Clergy to influence devote voters to vote against parties supporting EU integration. One element of this campaign was a physical newspaper and digital social media presence called "Salt and Light." On October 1st, after the election, the Digital

[Forensics Lab \(DFL\) wrote an article](#) analyzing one aspect of this campaign involving foreign influencers. They wrote:

To reinforce the narrative that the Moldovan Orthodox Church is “under siege” by the pro-European government, Salt and Light [invited](#) a group of conservative bloggers from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada to Moldova. The visit was heavily [promoted](#) on their [Telegram channel](#) and amplified by Moldova24 (MD24), a television outlet previously [identified](#) by DFRLab as part of the Ilan Shor network and reliant on RT’s digital infrastructure.

This strategy aims to lend legitimacy to pro-Kremlin talking points by showcasing endorsements from foreign voices, framing the situation in Moldova as part of a broader geopolitical struggle. One post claimed: “The church schism in Moldova is now being discussed not only inside the country... Journalists and bloggers from the US, UK, and Canada, after seeing the situation with their own eyes, admit: events are unfolding according to an alarming Ukrainian scenario.” The campaign went further by attempting to [appeal](#) directly to US Vice President JD Vance to “intervene and help defend the traditional Church.”

The visit of the “bloggers” [was first reported by](#) context.ro on September 18th - immediately prior to the elections. Their report is primarily [based on a Telegram post](#) from the Salt & Light channel. Both reports focused on how the visit of this group was designed to lend credibility to Kremlin talking points in the Moldovan elections. That is true, **but there was also a foreign targeted FIMI campaign that has not previously been reported**. The following is original work produced for this report.

The Journalists & Bloggers

Here is a listing of the people who Salt and Light claim joined this trip:

- **Charles Bausman** - An American with a long history of working as a Russian propagandist. He publishes content called “Fascist” and “antisemitic” [by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#). Bausman entered the US Capitol on January 6th and fled to Russia soon after [according to the New York Times](#). He was the organizer of this delegation alongside the Russian Orthodox Church.
- **Conrad Franz** - An American who hosts the “[World War Now](#)” podcast and Substack newsletter (24,000+ subscribers). Its tagline is “*Covering the Third World War and political and religious realignment from the perspective of Christian prophecy and rising multipolarity.*” Franz is a convert to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR).
- **Buck Johnson** - American from Texas, host of the Counterflow podcast. Also a convert to ROCOR, Johnson’s podcast combines Orthodox Christianity, masculinity and Libertarianism.
- **James Delingpole** - A British far-right commentator and podcaster, former editor of Breitbart UK, known for conspiracy-driven culture-war content, climate change denial, and repeated alignment with pro-Kremlin narratives and Russian state-adjacent media themes.
- **John-Henry Westen** - Canadian co-founder and editor-in-chief of LifeSiteNews. The site takes an ultra-traditionalist Roman Catholic approach to the news. The site is known for publishing mis- and dis-information and was permanently removed from YouTube in 2021 for promoting MAGA “stop the steal” content. Westen is close to the MAGA movement and was [pictured visiting Maralago](#) in March 2025.
- **Thomas Herman Ertl Jr.** - Unknown. I have been unable to find any writer operating under this name.

Salt and Light used confusing variations of many of the “journalists and bloggers” names. They also made a mistake, as Buck Johnson did not actually come to Moldova. On his podcast he later spoke about being invited on the trip by Charles Bausman but dropping out at the last minute for unclear personal reasons.

In an interview with orthochristian.com, Conrad Franz is introduced as follows:

“Conrad was invited to Russia by the Moscow Patriarch Department for the Church’s Society and Mass Media Relations, to get firsthand experience of our Church life—in Moscow, Moldova, and the Donbas.”

I reached out to all the trip participants (except Thomas Herman Ertl Jr.) for comment about who funded the trip and what it entailed. None responded. In subsequent articles and podcasts none directly state who paid for the trip, but multiple participants explain that it was organized by the Russian Orthodox Church.

FIMI Produced

In a future report I will be looking at the role of faith based groups in Kremlin FIMI operations around the Moldovan elections. In that report, we will look at key themes, messaging and the roles played by various individuals, witting or unwitting, in Kremlin information operations. For now, here is a listing of the content produced by these individuals referencing Moldova and their trip after the fact. All of this material is in English and most came out well after the Moldovan election. This implies that the blogger delegation had a dual purpose: 1) to support the Romanian and Russian language FIMI operations reported by DFL above, and 2) to produce longer term content for highly specific audiences in the English speaking world.

- LifeSiteNews, “[EU’s Shocking Push for LGBT in Europe’s Most Conservative Christian Country – Moldova](#),” article by Charles Bausman (Sept. 30, 2025)
- Counterflow Podcast Episode 383, “[A Report on Russia, Moldova, and the Church, with Conrad Franz](#),” Host Buck Johnson interviews Conrad Franz (Oct. 8, 2025)
- World War Now Podcast, “[BREAKING: MOLDOVA PERSECUTING ORTHODOXY! Church Targeted by State! ON THE GROUND REPORT](#),” Hosted by Conrad Franz and co-host Dmitriy Kalyagin (Sept 20, 2025)
- The Spectator, “[Believe it or not, Russia is great](#),” James Delingpole (Sept. 25, 2025). Reprinted in part in [The Irish Sun](#) (Sept. 28, 2025)
- Delingpod, “[Conrad Franz](#),” podcast host James Delingpole interviews Conrad Franz, (October 14, 2025)
- Delingpod, “[Dick Delingpole](#),” podcast host James Delingpole lets his brother Dick Delingpole interview him about his trip to Russia (October 17, 2025)
- Delingpod, “[Charles Bausman](#),” podcast host James Delingpole interviews Charles Bausman about their trip (October 21, 2025)
- Orthodox Christianity ([orthochristian.com](#)), Part 1: “[ORTHODOXY WILL BE PREACHED AND SPREAD AS THESE FATEFUL DAYS UNFOLD](#)” Part 2: “[PERSECUTION IN MOLDOVA](#)
- [Conrad Franz talks about his trip to the pious land of Moldova](#),” articles chronicling a 2 part interview of Conrad Franz by Nun Cornelia (Rees) (Dec. 12, 2025)

With the last interviews and articles coming in mid December, the English language output from this election time visit to Moldova may not yet have finished.

High Level Meetings and Clear State Organization

In his interview on Orthodox Christianity dot com, Conrad Franz is introduced as having been “*invited to Russia by the Moscow Patriarch Department for the Church’s Society and Mass Media Relations*” (...) “*to get firsthand experience of our Church life—in Moscow, Moldova, and the Donbas.*”

From various articles and interviews it is clear that the Russian Orthodox Church, through the department listed above, issued the invitations for this trip. Charles Bausman coordinated the trip itself and may have been the one to select the participants.

After their travels to Moldova, the group apparently split apart. Conrad Franz went on to travel to Transnistria which he stated was “*not part of the tour because there is no persecution there.*” While there he met with Transnistrian “President” Vadim Krasnoselsky. From there he went on to Moscow and then to the Donbas where he toured frontline positions and churches.

Charles Bausman and James Delingpole also went on to Moscow after Moldova. In their podcasts they speak of meetings with “high level ministers” and with Deputy Chair of the State Duma Pyotr Tolstoy.

The level of organization and facilitation by the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian state, as well as the rapid dissemination in the Shor network, imply a coordinated effort. But that does not imply (necessarily) that any individual who participated played an entirely knowing role. We’ll discuss this more in Section 2 and in a future report on the role of religious groups in election related FIMI.

Case 4: MEGA in Moldova

On July 28th, 2025 Moldova suddenly discovered that the Make Europe Great Again (MEGA) [movement was holding its 4th edition conference](#) in Chisinau. The event was occurring on July 28th and 29th and its existence took the Moldovan press by surprise.

MEGA conferences [began with an event](#) in April 2024 in Bucharest Romania. At the time it made very little news in Moldova, except for a [photo that Chisinau Mayor Ion Ceban posted](#) of him and Donald Trump Jr. with the caption “Make Moldova Great Again.” From the first through the second edition, [which was held in Brussels](#) at the EU parliament, the organizers were listed as the ECR Group and Romanian AUR Party. Throughout George Simion has appeared as the central figure. The conferences drew a diverse set of far-right figures from across Europe and the United States - including a speaker named Juan Ángel Soto Gómez, founder and CEO of Fortius Consulting.

In this initial phase, MEGA was essentially a fairly standard conference of far right populist figures. It had a website with lists of speakers, headshots, an agenda, information about hotel bookings, etc. The Chisinau edition was different. The old [mega2025.eu](#) website appears to have been removed some time before the Chisinau event. On July 28th, 2025 a new website was in its place proclaiming the 4th edition with the following logo:



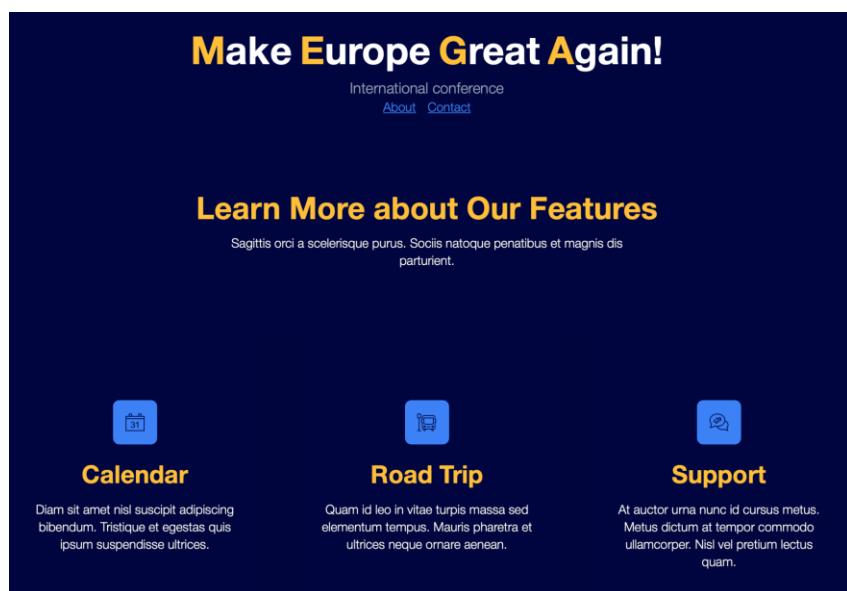
Screenshot from the MEGA 2025 [website](#)

On the site it described the conference as:

“held under the auspices of a major international distinction, namely the distinction between the world of Donald Trump and the world of George Soros”

Critically, the website did have areas for press registration and agenda, but most were blank. Technical [analysis showed that the website](#) itself did not exist at that time when viewed via VPN from the US, Germany, Romania or Russia, or when checked via verifier website downforeveryoneorjustme.com. The website was only available in Moldova, and had major configuration errors / abnormalities. It seems possible that the website was only unveiled at the same time the conference opened.

Other issues with the website included how incomplete it was - the site was a hastily made template with little to no real information and lots of dead ends. For example, all the social media links were fake or broken, and the site was (and is) dominated by nonsensical placeholders and Latin text:



Screenshot of mega2025.eu/about

Pre-Conference Drama

The day before the conference news broke that a number of people traveling to attend it had been turned back at the airport and put on return flights. These included:

- Ondřej Dostál - Czech MEP of the Stačilo (Enough) party
- Dimos Thanasoulas - spokesperson for the Greek sovereigntist party NIKI
- Brian Brown - American President of the International Organization for the Family (IOF), the organization that organizes the World Congress of Families (WCF), of which Brian Brown is also president.

George Simion, who did not attend the conference as he is banned from entering Moldova, put out a statement that said 10 AUR party leaders were also stopped and turned back at a land border.

Moldova's Security and Intelligence Service SIS released a statement explaining the refusals which said:

“These individuals were to participate in an event with obscure organizers, without transparency of financing and with dubious connections to the Shor criminal group. Based on the information,

some participants and organizers aim to promote an extremist agenda, to undermine the territorial integrity and democracy of the Republic of Moldova. For example, one of the participants is a promoter of Russia's war against Ukraine, but also a loyal supporter of Russia's occupation of territories that do not belong to it, using the hostile narrative of "protecting the interests of oppressed Russian citizens", referring also to the Transnistrian region.

Against the backdrop of tense regional security, SIS draws attention to a series of actions camouflaged as civic or cultural events, which are part of a broader spectrum of hybrid actions undertaken by Russia on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. These actions will intensify, and the institutions will exercise their legal mandate and will always act in the interests of the Republic of Moldova and to protect the constitutional order."

Brian Brown was eventually let into the country thanks to a last minute intervention by the US Embassy. [Brown is noted](#) as a close confidant of Donald Trump Jr. He also has ties to Igor Dodon going back to at least 2018 when the WCF held a conference in Chisinau. Recently, he has also been very visible at events for George Simion. The [New York Times wrote an analysis](#) of April 2025 placing Brown's WCF as one of the key players in the current Russian-alignment of the MAGA movement going back to the founding of the WCF by American and Russian religious right figures in Moscow in 1995.

The Conference

From [Moldovan politics](#), the conference was attended by Vasile Costiuc, leader of the Democracy at Home party, Victoria Furtună of the Moldova Mare party, former Prime Minister Vlad Filat and various AUR representatives attended, MP Gaik Vartanean of the MAN party and others.

At the conference, presentations focused on criticism of the EU, promotion of Donald Trump, and talks on the theme of "Trump's World versus George Soros's World." Organizers said that the conference aimed to promote values such as Christianity, traditional family and freedom of speech.

Speeches attacked the Moldovan government for banning MEPs and attempting to ban Brian Brown, who claimed that he was being discriminated against for being a conservative.

[ZdG attended the second day](#) of the conference and was unable to find a single person who would name the organizer - either individual or entity - or explain how the conference was financed.

FIMI From the Event

The event appeared to have a clear audience - the MAGA movement and senior politicians in the United States. It sought to align anti-EU political forces in Moldova with broader anti-EU populist forces in Europe. It also sought to malign PAS and Maia Sandu. The key themes were as follows:

- The PAS government opposes free speech and censors the opposition
- Moldova's embrace of European values is a facade and the government is authoritarian and oppresses political enemies
- Maia Sandu, PAS and others are part of a globalist, Sorosist plot to deprive the country of its sovereignty
- Bans on right wing politicians prove that Moldova oppresses conservatives and supporters of traditional values
- JD Vance was right in his Munich speech and Moldova is an example of what he was speaking about

Post-event media was entirely in English and clearly had no focus on Moldova's domestic audience. This included [George Simion's post event X stating](#) "Soros/Maia Sandu regime can be defeated" with a video

of Brian Brown talking about how he was almost not let in the country. There was also a cluster of articles in familiar pseudo-media outlets that had clearly been placed by a PR company. They included:

- EU Reporter, "[MOLDOVAMEGA conference in Chișinău held amid travel disputes and political tensions](#)," by Colin Stevens, (July 29, 2025)
- Brussels Standard, "[FEATURED MEGA Conference In Chișinău Held Amid Travel Disputes And Political Tensions](#)," by Editor (July 29, 2025) - this is an exact copy of the EU reporter article
- Brussels Standard "[FEATURED Moldova: Authorities Deny Entry To "MEGA" European Politicians](#)," by Editor (July 29, 2025)
- European Interest, "[Moldova locks foreign politicians attending "MEGA" forum from entering country](#)," by Beata Stur (July 30, 2025). Beata Stur's (journalist or persona) only previous article on Moldova [was a hagiographic interview](#) of Bashkan Gutsul in 2023.
- EU Today, "[MOLDOVA'S CRACKDOWN ON CONSERVATIVE VOICES DRAWS FIRE AT MEGA CONFERENCE](#)," by EU Today Correspondents (July 29, 2025)
- New York Globe, "[EU-Moldova Crisis: European And American Politicians Barred From MEGA Conference](#)," by Editor (July 31, 2025)

The story largely didn't jump into the mainstream news, but it did get niche coverage by various right wing outlets including the Fratelli d'Italia paper La Voce del Patriota which published an article titled "[MEGA in Chisinau: A victory for the freedom of speech](#)" on August 2, 2025.

Section 2: Tactics and Allies

Considering the above case studies we are going to take a look at what tactics are being used in these external influence campaigns as well as the allies, partners, contractors, useful idiots and fellow travelers are being leveraged by the Kremlin for their online and offline FIMI campaigns.

Section 2.1 Astroturfing

Kremlin backed FIMI campaigns targeting decision makers - including politicians, think tanks, news outlets, commentators and others often rely on fake grassroots organizations to add the patina of legitimacy. In the above case studies we saw 3 clear examples of this:

1. International Center for the Protection of Human Rights and Democracy (ICPHRD)
2. Stop Media Ban
3. American Charity Fund for Helping Children of Ukraine and Moldova Inc (ACFHCUM)

These organizations served different functions. ICPHRD was designed as a mechanism to organize conferences, place articles and position supposed thought leaders such as Stanislav Pavlovski such that the targets of the campaign would feel their positions on Moldovan democracy were legitimate and authoritative.

Stop Media Ban was designed to show grassroots support for these same arguments - allegedly driven by activists, flash mobs and exiled journalists who feared for their freedoms in Moldova.

The New York registered ACFHCUM was somewhat different as it was primarily a vehicle to hire a respectable lobbying firm while disguising the origin of the funds in question. In the case of ACFHCUM, there is no indication that the organization itself or its leadership have ties to Ilan Shor. As early as 2021 they were [sponsoring US Congressional Delegations](#) to Ukraine. In this case though they were also being used to disguise the ultimate origins of the funding as they appeared on official Congressional Ethics Committee reports but did not actually fund the trip according to their tax returns.

All 3 of these organizations were designed to stand up to only the most casual scrutiny by people who were not at all familiar with Moldovan politics. Here are some common characteristics of these efforts:

- **Terrible websites and online presence.** Online these organizations were skin deep if they existed at all. Websites with missing pages and broken links, brand new social media without much history. Poorly written text or unrelated placeholder text.
- **Direct links to Ilan Shor.** Whether it was quoting his lawyers, crosslinking to his website or overtly sponsoring politicians known (and reported exhaustively) to be part of Shor's network, these organizations' affiliations were clear to Moldovans.
- **Missing infrastructure and data.** The ICPHRD's New York office phone number was unregistered, and previously belonged to a daycare center. Their actual infrastructure pointed to a PR company in Dubai. Emails go unanswered (or bounce). Tax returns often show no activity as they sign expensive contracts and host conferences.

Just as with the MEGA conference website in Chisinau, many of these efforts show signs of being set up for a short term operation and then abandoned. Right now these are easy to detect for those who go looking - and there is some evidence that people did by the fact that very few US or EU politicians met with these organizations publicly. But with the advent of better and better AI tools, efforts at astroturfing will soon get cheaper and harder to detect.

Section 2.2 Utilizing Existing US / EU Infrastructure to Make and Spread FIMI

The campaigns outlined in these case studies relied on existing infrastructure and a lack of regulations within the target countries. Lobbying firms, PR companies and a large network of pseudo-media outlets such as EU Reporter were leveraged to spread these messages. None of this infrastructure is inherently part of Kremlin disinformation efforts. Lobbying firms could credibly state that they were hired by an innocent sounding NGO or claim (rightly) that regulation often does not require any Know-Your-Customer due diligence at all. EU Reporter advertised itself saying "*Use EU Reporter to influence.*" They happily took Chinese money and, in at least one case, a PR placement that was part of an [influence campaign that supported Maia Sandu's reelection](#).

Some organizations such as Fortius Consulting show signs of being more than hired guns - they are ideologically aligned as well. But none of that makes what they are doing abnormal, illegal or subject to much of any regulation at all.

PR and lobbying firms represent one of the key tools used in these campaigns that underpin other efforts. Take the [example of Fortius Consulting](#). In addition to their lobbying efforts in DC, they organized a separate astroturfing campaign in October 2024 when 4 EU based NGOs affiliated with Fortius founder Juan Angel Soto Gomez filed late and incomplete applications with Moldova's Central Election Commission (CEC) to be observers in the EU Referendum and Presidential Election. Their applications did not pass the verification stage because they were incomplete. Fortius then used it to pen articles questioning the legitimacy of Moldova's elections due to EU observers being blocked. Unstated what the relationship between the organizations. These articles, and ones with the same message, then spread through the EU Reporter, EU Today, etc network of pseudo-media outlets.

These cases highlight the [massive gaps in the EU's lobbying and transparency rules](#). They also argue for Know-Your-Customer and transparency regulations for totally unregulated industries like PR. It's questionable whether websites like EU Reporter serve any legitimate purpose in a democracy but it would be impossible to imagine shutting them down without serious questions about freedom of speech and the press. With that said, strict rules about labeling articles as "sponsored" with transparency about who paid for them would allow for legitimate purposes while also blocking hidden influence campaigns.

Without reforms such as these, the Kremlin FIMI project's greatest allies will continue to be western experts operating agnostically for a profit motive.

Section 2.3 Agents, Allies, Fellow Travelers and Useful Idiots

In order to execute the campaigns outlined here in these case studies a large number of people were involved. Some of them were clearly agents of the Shor network or working on behalf of the Kremlin in some fashion. Many others were not and had complex and sometimes contradictory motivations. It's beyond the scope of this paper to sort out who was who, but it's worth noting that these FIMI operations relied on utilizing people's prior ideas and concerns and did not largely make attempts at persuading them.

Journalists and commenters invited to speak at the ICPHRD conference in Chisinau did so in good faith with an understanding that they were there as an authority on a free press and human rights. The point was not to convince them of anything, but to use them as props in service of a broader campaign.

Similarly, while Charles Bausman has been labeled a Kremlin propagandist, many on his trip to Chisinau did not previously have any clear Russia affiliation. They had prior connections to the topic at hand - whether that was through ROCOR, anti-VAX COVID stances or US 2020 election denialism. The purpose of the trip was to present them with narratives and "evidence" that reinforced these priors and gave them something to talk about in their work. Many of the podcasts referenced above were multiple hours long and stories about Moldova didn't surface until half way through or later.

Another category involves those who are simply operating for money. PR firms clearly fit this bill but so do people who join conferences and delegations without looking too closely at the sponsor.

Finally, the MEGA conference and MEGA "movement" overall shows clear connections to Ilan Shor. But he and his proxies are not organizers of it so much as fellow travelers. Messages about Moldova are being shaped for various grassroots audiences and once they are packed correctly they are portrayed to an audience open to confirming their priors.

Section 3: Shifting Grassroots Targeting

Looking at the case studies presented above we can see a clear shift in targeting from early 2024 through late 2025. In the beginning, efforts targeted a wide swath of decision makers and relied mostly on values considered either universal or generally Western. Stop Media Ban focused on freedom of speech issues and couched their complaints in terms of European rights and the expectations of the EU.

Stanislav Pavlovski's ICPHRD also couched their language in human rights and freedoms. They targeted academics and journalists from a wide political spectrum and from many nations as they tried to convince people that when compared to the EU's own values and standards - Moldova was failing.

Meanwhile, Mr. Tarlev's failed lobbying push in Washington DC was [seeking meetings with a fairly bipartisan](#) cross section of Congress. Qorvis attempted to set up meetings with members of the Congressional Moldova Caucus, Helsinki Commission and Congressional Ukraine Caucus. They also reached out to 3 representatives from the MAGA wing of the party, but the majority of the contacts were mainstream.

This focus shifted rightward in 2025, likely driven partly by the reelection of Donald Trump. The shift from lobbying with Qorvis for Mr. Tarlev to Fortius for Victoria Šapa followed this trend. The founder of Fortius, and its main actor, Juan Ángel Soto Gómez, [has deep ties with the American and European](#) far right. He

has spoken at multiple Conservative Political Action Conferences (CPAC) as well as the second edition of the MEGA conference. Mr. Soto also traveled to Washington DC for Trump's inauguration and attended the Hispanic Inaugural Ball.

The shift in focus to the populist right / far-right is even more apparent in both the MEGA conference and the Bausman Blogger case presented above. In particular, the church-organized delegation of bloggers, podcasters and journalists showed a new trend - targeting influencers in niche far right communities in order to spread messages outside of the mainstream media. None of the podcasts or articles produced from this trip showed up in the many google alerts I have set for news about Moldova. Google would not consider these sites or people to be trustworthy sources. But they have huge audiences. The repeating message there was also clear - **JD Vance needs to hear more about church persecution in Moldova.** These information operations are embedding themselves into the MEGA and MAGA-adjacent worlds in an attempt to engender Kremlin views of Moldova. Through these niche communities they seek to target decision makers as well as the rank and file.

This is not simply an opportunistic pivot based on the outcome of the last US elections. Russia's long term engagement with, and investment in, far-right political forces represented a recognition of a partially shared worldview. Now, they believe the time has come for these political forces to dominate in Europe.

Russian political strategist Denis Mikhulya works³ as an advisor to Ilan Shor's Evrasia organization in Kyrgyzstan. In April of 2025 he published an analysis of Moldova's political spectrum arguing for a strong right-wing party. In it [he wrote](#):

"Europe's Right Turn: An Unstoppable Trend

Today, Europe is demonstrating a confident right-wing trend. People are tired of meaningless ideological slogans about "democracy" and "European values," which in reality only mean a loss of national control and a worsening of citizens' lives."

Mikhulya argues for a new sovereigntist political force in Moldova that would essentially replace Russia's historical proxies - the Socialist and Communist parties. He argues that there is a gap in Moldova's political spectrum and that a far-right party would mobilize people who are not persuaded of the nostalgia policies of the Socialists and Communists. Unstated, but implicit, is that these party names are themselves problems given the right wing allies that the Kremlin is seeking to cultivate in MEGA and MAGA. Igor Dodon's Socialist party flirted with a rebranding as sovereigntists this summer but backed off - presumably because there wasn't enough time for such a major change. Given the external focus of these influence campaigns we should assume that the Kremlin will continue to seek to cultivate a political force in Moldova that can draw the attention and sympathy of the actors they are targeting in the West.

Conclusion

Russian FIMI campaigns do not only rely on troll farms inside of Russia or social media bots. They also conduct sophisticated campaigns in the West that rely on existing infrastructure such as PR companies, lobbyists and pseudo-media outlets to spread their messages to a grassroots audience - aka politicians, think tanks, journalists, academics and other elite influence groups. They use reputation laundering mechanisms such as astroturfed NGOs in order to contract these companies and to disguise their broader intentions. At the same time, these organizations are often created or activated for specific purposes and do not have long histories or sophisticated backstories. They rely on an audience that

³ As of July 2025 [document leaks of Shor network employees](#) and their salaries

either does not look too closely or is comfortable that this thin cover provides their company (PR, lobby, etc) plausible deniability.

Most critically, a lack of transparency regulation in the EU around foreign paid lobbying efforts and know-your-customer requirements for PR firms makes hiding these campaigns trivial. Similarly, the February 5, 2025 Bondi memo deprioritizing criminal FARA enforcement, narrowing it to espionage-like conduct, and disbanding the Foreign Influence Task Force means that most transparency tools in the US are also unavailable now.

Finally, when analysing these efforts across 2024 and 2025 we can clearly see a pivot away from a broad political targeting of politicians, think tanks and decision makers “across the aisle” to a clear focus on far-right MEGA / MAGA groups. This pivot is both opportunistic due to the new Trump administration but also targeted to communities of fellow travelers that share aspects of the Kremlin worldview. Through many of these campaigns we can see concerted efforts to leverage these communities and niche audiences to bring FIMI about Moldova up to decision makers.