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THE ROLE OF FAITH- BASED MESSAGING IN KREMLIN FIMI OPERATIONS

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Executive Summary

During Moldova's 2024–2025 election cycle, religious institutions and faith-based messaging became a significant vector in Kremlin-aligned influence operations.

This report examines how this messaging - particularly within and around the Russian controlled Moldovan Orthodox Church - became a vector for Kremlin-aligned Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). It analyzes both domestic influence operations targeting Moldovan voters and externally facing campaigns aimed at audiences in the United States and Western Europe.

Inside Moldova, Kremlin-linked actors adapted traditional election manipulation tactics to the religious sphere. After early efforts reportedly focused on direct payments to clergy, the strategy evolved into a more structured network built around trusted religious intermediaries and lay activists. The “Salt and Light” ecosystem blended devotional content with anti-EU narratives, culture-war messaging, and explicit political cues. Its content framed European integration as moral decay, portrayed the Moldovan state as hostile to “canonical Orthodoxy,” and embedded pro-Kremlin electoral guidance within religious language. The result was not simply disinformation, but a hybrid ecosystem combining online infrastructure, printed materials, and parish-level influence.

Simultaneously, these themes were repackaged for foreign audiences. A delegation of Western far-right commentators, organized in coordination with structures of the Russian Orthodox Church, amplified narratives of religious persecution in Moldova. Through long-form articles and multi-hour podcasts, they presented Moldova as a “gangster state,” a persecutor of Christians, and a warning example of EU “globalist” control. These narratives were calibrated for specific audiences: MAGA-aligned political figures (particularly Vice President JD Vance), culture-war communities, and recent converts to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR).

This dual-track strategy illustrates a broader Kremlin approach: align domestic influence operations with existing ideological currents in Western politics. Rather than inventing new language, Russian actors adopt and adapt culture-war terminology already circulating in the United States and Europe. In doing so, Moldova becomes both a battleground and a symbol - portrayed alternately as a frontline against “traditional values” or as proof of Western authoritarianism.

The religious dimension of these campaigns is strategically useful for Moscow. Faith communities offer pre-existing trust networks, moral authority, and emotional resonance. But the narratives deployed around them - particularly claims of systematic religious persecution - do not withstand scrutiny. Interviews with minority religious communities in Moldova, as well as observable legal and political realities, sharply contradict allegations that the country is suppressing religious freedom.

The Kremlin’s faith-based FIMI in Moldova is not an isolated phenomenon. It reflects a widening pattern of ideological convergence between Russian geopolitical messaging and segments of the Western far right. As Moldova continues its EU accession path, religious narratives are likely to remain a key vector of influence - both domestically and internationally.

Understanding this intersection between church structures, culture-war politics, and geopolitical influence is essential not only for Moldova, but for policymakers across Europe and North America confronting similar hybrid tactics.

Introduction

In the 2024 - 2025 Moldovan elections Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) operations specifically targeted religious adherents inside and outside Moldova. These campaigns leveraged two main ideas: the supposed incompatibility of “traditional values” with European integration, and alleged religious oppression of Moldova’s embattled “canonical” Orthodox Church.

Much of the FIMI produced in these campaigns involved the long-standing Church schism between the Russian controlled Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Romanian controlled Metropolis of Bessarabia. Since the full scale invasion in 2022 the historical, linguistic and geopolitical tensions between these two churches have grown and been weaponized by Russian messaging.

This report analyzes how Kremlin aligned actors leveraged this religious landscape during the elections for FIMI both inside Moldova and targeted at Western audiences - including explicitly at policymakers. It seeks to understand the messaging and examine the practical and historical facts underpinning these narratives.

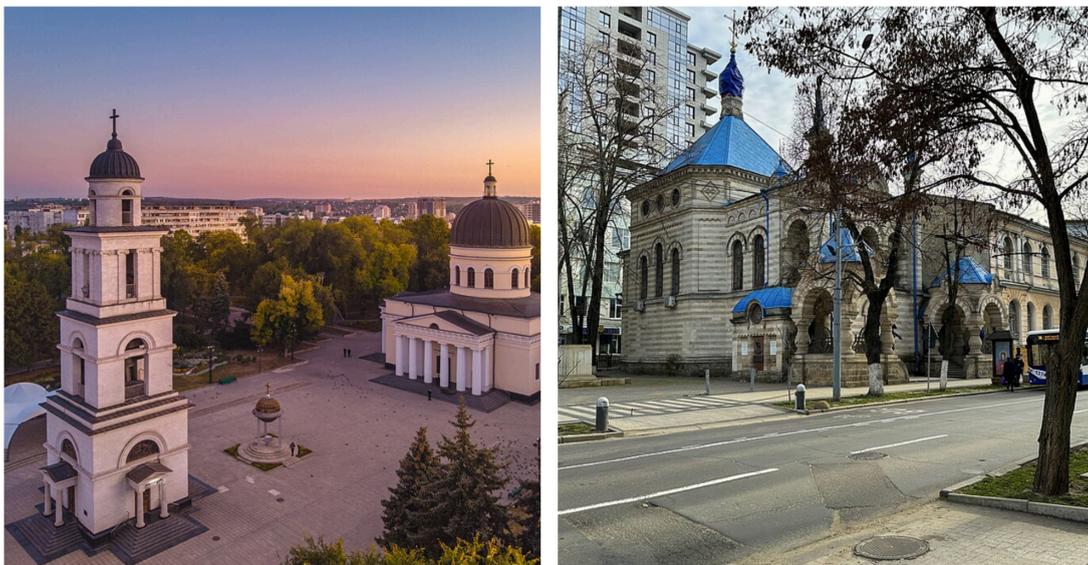
In Section 1 we will look at the history of the two branches of the Orthodox Church operating in Moldova and how the schism between them compares to the ongoing schism in Ukraine. In Section 2 we will look at how religious messaging was used in the 2024 elections and then adapted into complex messaging infrastructure in 2025. We'll then track this messaging in Section 3 as we look at how these efforts in Moldova were also used to launch FIMI campaigns in the US, UK and Canada. Finally, in Section 4 we will examine how these efforts are not simply tactical wedge issues but part of a broader cross-border ideological alignment being pursued by the Kremlin in order to appeal to religious groups around Europe and the US.

Section 1: Understanding the Church Schism

In terms of self-identification, Moldova is among the most religious countries in Europe with around 95% of the population self-identifying as Orthodox in the [2024 census](#). While the census does not break down affiliation within the Orthodox faith, Moldova has 2 different churches that represent different cultural and historical affiliations for believers. They are:

1. **Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova** - Often called the Moldovan Orthodox Church, this branch is an autonomous self-governing church within the Russian Orthodox Church that is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. The Moldovan Orthodox Church governs day to day operations locally but is canonically subordinate to Moscow and the head of the church, currently Metropolitan Vladimir, is officially confirmed by the Moscow Patriarch.
2. **Metropolis of Bessarabia** - This church is directly subordinate to the Romanian Orthodox Church under the Romanian Patriarchate. The church is headed by a Metropolitan, currently Metropolitan Petru, who is appointed and confirmed by the Romanian Holy Synod. Unlike the Moldovan Orthodox Church, the Metropolis of Bessarabia is not autonomous and is an integral part of the Romanian Patriarchate.

There are no firm estimates of membership in the 2 churches, sources generally cite 80% of believers belonging to the Moldovan Orthodox Church and 20% to the Metropolis of Bessarabia.



Caption: Left: the Nativity of Christ Cathedral, seat of the Moldovan Orthodox Church (Photo [source](#)). Right: St. Teodora de la Sihla Church, cathedral of the Metropolis of Bessarabia (Photo [source](#)).

A Brief History of the 2 Churches

Prior to the Annexation of Bessarabia by the Russian Empire in 1812, the local Orthodox Church was integrated into the Principality of Moldavia which was under Ottoman suzerainty. The church was under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople but was locally integrated with Romanian as the primary language of daily life and Romanian operating alongside Old Church Slavonic for church functions.

Following the Russian Annexation in 1812 the Diocese of Chişinău was created under the Russian Orthodox Church and administration shifted to St. Petersburg which began a process of Russification. The Romanian language was sometimes tolerated, sometimes sidelined, but the church was consistently used as a tool of imperial control and integration.

In 1918 the Moldavian Democratic Republic was created and then quickly voted to form a union with Romania. Following this, in 1925, [the Metropolis of Bessarabia was formally established](#) to govern the church in the region under the control of Bucharest. Throughout the period of Romanian control (1918 - 1940) church life was re-Romanianized.

Following the Soviet Annexation of Bessarabia (1940) and then during Soviet control after WW2 the Orthodox Church entered the turbulent world of Soviet state-church politics. After initial waves of suppression, Stalin introduced limited toleration during the Second World War and following the war the church was allowed to function within strict state control, [including KGB infiltration](#) of the clergy.

The modern church schism dates from Moldovan independence in 1991 when the Metropolis of Bessarabia once again became active and began contesting legitimacy with the Moldovan Orthodox Church. Both churches claimed historical legitimacy by leaning on different historical interpretations and political traditions. The Moldovan Orthodox Church attempted to ban the Metropolis of Bessarabia with state support from successive governments in the 1990s, but lost in the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia v. Moldova*

which forced legal recognition of the Romanian church in Moldova in 2001. Since then both churches have legally operated in the same territory.

Linguistically, the Metropolis of Bessarabia operates exclusively in Romanian. The Moldovan Orthodox Church also primarily operates in Romanian (which it calls "Moldovan") but also operates Russian speaking parishes in parts of the country with majority Russian populations.

Growing Schism (2023 - Present)

While geopolitics began to fuel the schism with the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2014, the full scale invasion in 2022 acted as a major shock to the status quo. In Moscow, Patriarch Kirill has framed the war as a civilizational struggle and has openly supported Russia's war of aggression and conquest in Ukraine. This left the semi-autonomous Moldovan Orthodox Church institutionally tied to a war of aggression and believers and church leadership struggled to manage these geopolitical challenges.

Beginning in 2022 and accelerating in the following years, parishes began transferring from the Moldovan Orthodox Church to the Metropolis of Bessarabia. The growing schism burst into public attention in October 2023 when Metropolitan Vladimir, leader of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, [wrote a letter](#) to Patriarch Kirill which leaked to the press. In this remarkably frank letter, he laid out the challenges facing the Moldovan Orthodox Church and specifically cited the political pressure caused by the war. Metropolitan Vladimir noted an increasing exodus towards the Metropolis of Bessarabia and how the actions of the church in Moscow are forcing people to decide between their "Latin roots" and the clear ambitions to reincorporate the country into the "Russian World." In the letter he pleads for additional funding and resources to offset growing costs associated with energy prices and competition with the Metropolis of Bessarabia who, he claims, pay priests €800 - €900 euros / month in addition to healthcare and a pension.

While the hierarchy of the Moldovan Orthodox Church remains opaque, there are publicly 2 competing factions with different approaches to politics and geopolitics. Metropolitan Vladimir has publicly tried to chart a pragmatic course while remaining closely tied to Moscow¹. More aggressive is the Bishop Markell of Bălți and Fălești, who pushes aggressive Russian talking points and appears frequently in Kremlin organized Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) campaigns (as we will see below).

¹ Various local [news outlets have reported](#) without definitive proof that he was himself a product of the KGB, or in some [telling a KGB Colonel](#).



Caption: Left: Metropolitan Vladimir (Photo [source](#), copyright "Presidency" of Transnistria)), Right: Bishop Markell (Photo [source](#))

Factors Driving the Schism

Here are some key factors driving parish-level decisions on defections to the Metropolis of Bessarabia:

- **History & Proximity** - Parishes in communities with stronger Romanian identity ties - particularly along the Prut river - were among the first to switch.
- **Geopolitics** - Russia's war in Ukraine and the bellicose rhetoric from the Patriarch has caused both priests and parishioners to switch allegiance due to a crisis of conscience.
- **Politics** - The Moldovan Orthodox Church has repeatedly been drawn into schemes by the Kremlin and Shor-network to become involved in Moldovan elections. Political speeches from the pulpit have anecdotally driven away parishioners who are uncomfortable mixing politics and spirituality.
- **Money** - The Metropolis of Bessarabia is a direct funder of their parishes in Moldova. According to expert Andrei Curararu, salaries for priests are closer to €300 euros / month, rather than the propaganda claim of ~€900 (or much higher as we'll see below). But this number disguises a different relationship with the church organization. In the Metropolis of Bessarabia resources flow downward from the center through the bishoprics and to the parishes. In the Moldovan Orthodox Church funds flow upward with a portion of the "fees" gathered for church services being directed towards the upper echelons. Thus, regardless of monthly salaries, it may be more lucrative for a priest and local parish to be part of the Metropolis of Bessarabia as they are more able to keep their "earnings."
- **Opportunity** - The hierarchy of the Moldovan Orthodox Church is opaque and many priests feel that they do not have opportunities for advancement. Some switch to the Metropolis of Bessarabia because they feel that their own careers will advance more quickly.

Of these factors, Andrei Curararu says that top-down motivations of priests are more common in the decision to switch allegiance than bottom-up movements of parishioners. Motivations are complex, but neither church is "reformed" in the western parlance and parishioners exercise limited democratic functions within church decision making.

Opposition to switching churches is often rooted in tradition and the calendar. While a majority of Moldovans self-identify as Orthodox there are no solid numbers as to how many go to church regularly. Many, likely a large majority, are culturally orthodox and primarily interact with the church through family milestones (births, deaths, marriages) or through holidays such as Christmas and Easter. The Moldovan Orthodox Church uses the Julian Calendar while the Metropolis of Bessarabia uses the Georgian Calendar. As such, a change between the churches requires people to re-order their holiday calendar and change traditions that they have often celebrated all their lives.

Role of the Church in the Community

For western readers, it is important to note that the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Metropolis of Bessarabia have a lot in common both structurally and theologically. On the question of EU accession, the Metropolis of Bessarabia is considerably more pro-EU than the Moldovan Orthodox Church which largely aligns with the Kremlin's anti-EU position. But that is not because they differ on key issues - e.g. LGBTQ+ rights, "traditional values," etc. The Romanian Orthodox Church has many of the same anxieties but has seen the process of EU integration firsthand and knows that it is not directly threatening to their church. They may pursue many of the same culture wars but they do so within the EU's infrastructure.

Both churches draw on the same elite and same seminaries and schools. Both churches see their role in their communities as the keepers of tradition and ritual and as enforcers of community rules. Neither church shows aspects of the reformed traditions of Western Europe, including democratization of parish governance or a role in the community's social welfare. It is worth stressing that during the great crises of these past years - COVID lockdowns and the 2022 Ukraine Refugee Crisis - neither church played an organized role in providing supplies, donations or aid to those in need. The schism is about hierarchy, language and history - but not about theology, or the role of the church in community life.

Comparison with Ukraine

Many Kremlin FIMI narratives compare the church schism in Moldova with the parallel upheaval in the orthodox church in Ukraine. They are not similar and it is important to quickly explain why. Here is a short comparison:

	Ukraine	Moldova
Pre-war situation	Prior to 2014 Ukraine's church was fully under Moscow's control. The outbreak of war led to, in 2019 the Ecumenical Patriarch granting a Tomos of autocephaly to create the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).	Moldova has had 2 canonical church jurisdictions since 2001-2002
Role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	The active intervention of Constantinople created a rupture with Moscow and a broader schism in the entire orthodox world.	The schism is a struggle between the Russian and Romanian Orthodox churches and has not drawn in the authorities in Constantinople or the rest of the Orthodox world.
State	The Ukrainian government actively	The Moldovan government has taken

Involvement	backed the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and at times has framed it as a national security priority.	no stance on the church schism and acts as a mediator in church disputes - relying on the courts and the law, not politics or policy.
Scale of Rupture	Massive. More than 1000 parishes though numbers are unclear.	Gradual - dozens of parishes so far but no wave of defections.
National Identity	This is a story of a national, Ukrainian church breaking away from Russia. It mirrors the broader national story unfolding in Ukraine as a result of the war.	Complex. The struggle is between a Russian and a Romanian church operating in Moldova and both claiming to represent Moldova and Moldovans.

Section 2: The Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Elections

In addition to in-line links to investigations in the local press, this section draws heavily from the October 1, 2025 DFL report titled [Targeting the faithful: Pro-Russia campaign engages Moldova's Christian voters²](#) which is worth reading in full.

In May 2025 [Journal TV exposed](#) a Kremlin operation called "Matushka" which sought to use clergy members of the Moldovan Orthodox Church to influence the September parliamentary elections. This was really an extension and adaptation of existing operations targeting the EU referendum and presidential elections in 2024. In all cases, the goal was the same - to defeat President Maia Sandu and the PAS party and to turn the country away from the path of EU integration.

In 2024 the operation worked as follows:

- Priests and lay church associates traveled to Russia ostensibly to participate in religious pilgrimages. Once there, they were trained by Russian agents and members of the Shor-network in how to influence their parishioners' political views.
- Around 900 priests and 200 lay associates received Russian MIR bank cards in this process. Ilan Shor's organization Evrazia paid them \$300 - \$1000 / month via these cards as compensation for their political work.
- Shor-network handlers and Russian political operatives [arranged followup calls](#) with the priests to instruct them as to which politicians to support. Initially they were told to promote Shor's candidate Victoria Furtună, then support was switched to Alexandr Stoianoglo in the second round.

The results of this scheme appear to have been mixed. Many priests happily pocketed the money, enjoyed their pilgrimage and then never spoke about politics from the pulpit. In essence, Moscow spent a lot of money but did not have tools to verify the results.

² Full citation: Victoria Olari, Givi Gigitashvili, Sopo Gelava, "Targeting the faithful: Moldovan Christians caught in pre-election campaign," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), September 30, 2025, <https://dfrlab.org/2025/09/30/targeting-the-faithful-moldovan-Christians-caught-in-pre-election-campaign/>

They changed tactics in 2025. Journal TV reported that 19 archpriests (Protopop) were invited to a pilgrimage in the Holy Land between March 30th and April 3rd 2025. There the Kremlin political organizers announced a new strategy. Instead of focusing on ordinary priests they created a grassroots network organized around trusted nodes at the archpriest level. This network was mostly laymen and laywomen and operated on a pay-for-results model. "Activists" would organize social projects and events and would distribute a new newspaper called "Salt and Light" (Sare și Lumină).

This network spread information online via various religious affiliated facebook pages and Telegram groups (including the official Salt and Light page) and offline with their newspaper and events.



Caption: from the Salt and Light facebook group, Ștefan cel Mare calls on users to sign up for their chatbot to win a prize, so does Al lady with a hair dryer. Messages are these are interspersed with religious messages such as the one with the boy calling on young people to pray during their summer holidays.

Whether distributed as a newspaper, via social media or from the pulpit, the messages from this network were consistent. They [consisted of a blend of inoffensive religious](#) content and cloaked election messaging with a series of recurring themes. These included:

- **"Moldova with Faith" versus "Moldova with Europe"** - One campaign presented side by side pictures of orthodox weddings vs gay weddings, happy families vs promiscuous hippies and similar themes. In each case true orthodoxy was pitted against European integration which was presented as "moral decay."
- **Church Schism & Anti-Romania Messaging** - The Metropolis of Bessarabia was consistently painted as a threat to believers' religious rights. It was framed as a tool of Romanian nationalism, EU integration and western degradation (sometimes even presented as a slippery slope to protestantism or catholicism).
- **Church "under siege"** - They said that the Moldovan authorities are waging war on the Church. In this narrative Maia Sandu and PAS are trying to destroy true orthodoxy, take church property and lead believers into a godless and degraded EU. They suggest that the authorities are promoting the Metropolis of Bessarabia and attacking the Moldovan Orthodox Church to create a "Ukrainian scenario" whereby the state would play an active hand in fully driving out the Russian Orthodox Church and its subsidiaries.
- **Direct Political Messaging** - Readers were told that PAS was preparing anti-church laws for when they were re-elected and messages and videos openly promoted pro-Kremlin candidates. In one video, Archbishop Markell defended Bashkan Evgenia Gutsul and framed her imprisonment as a political attack on innocent religious people. This video was heavily promoted in their network. Other posts promoted Shor-network candidate Victoria Furtuna before her party was removed from the elections. On September 26 on the final day of the

electoral campaign readers were told to “follow the star” with a picture of a ballot voted for the Patriotic Bloc.

Many of the posts involved pictures or graphics that were clearly developed with AI. The Salt and Light network extended onto TikTok, YouTube, OK, VK, Facebook and Telegram. Its content was further promoted by other pages, including regional church pages for various dioceses around Moldova.

In addition to FIMI, these pages also included calls to action - usually asking readers to click a link and interact with a Telegram bot in exchange for “prizes.” These tactics were used to gather personal information on readers and watchers.

Posts gathered millions of views and tens of thousands of followers across the online social networks. It's unclear how many Salt and Light newspapers were distributed, but photos and stories posted online show mass distribution in Chişinău apartment buildings as well as across villages. In one instance alone, Police seized 200,000 newspapers from a clandestine print house. Of those nearly 100,000 were religious papers, mostly Salt and Light in Romanian and Russian.

As of February 2026 this network is still operational. While many websites have since been blocked, and follower counts on social media have fallen, the pages are still actively posting content. Now most posts are religious and non-political in nature, but the network is active and capable of reactivating in future elections.

Church "Seizure" Provocations

In parallel with the FIMI propaganda operations, pro-Russian groups have staged a series of occupations and attacks related to churches and priests that have switched to the Metropolis of Bessarabia. This can involve a mob physically expelling a Metropolis of Bessarabia priest and his family from a church and occupying it. Violent issues like these generally stem from a dispute over property rights, with the mob claiming that the church building belongs to the Moldovan Orthodox Church and therefore cannot defect. As many churches are the property of the local governments or the Ministry of Culture, this is a more complex legal issue. The Moldovan government has sought not to take sides in these religious disputes, but the police are often pulled in to maintain order and ultimately side with whichever side the courts rule has the right to use the property.

This leads to scenes of violent confrontations with the police in the middle. Nuance about court orders and multi-year EU-level lawsuits are cast aside in favor of narratives spinning these confrontations as police organized church seizures. These incidents fuel local propaganda and are the nexus of a separate FIMI campaign focused on western audiences.

Section 3: Externally Facing Religious Themed FIMI

In January 2026 I authored a report for Watchdog titled “[Externally Facing Influence Campaigns](#)” that looked at case studies of Russian FIMI campaigns targeting western audiences. In it, [Case 3: Bausman's Bloggers](#), involved a previously unreported campaign organized by the Russian Orthodox Church to spread FIMI about Moldova in publications across the English speaking world.

Exposure of this campaign began on September 18th, when [context.ro reported](#) on the visit of American, Canadian and British “bloggers” who were being featured in Salt and Light publications. This delegation was organized by the Moscow Patriarch Department for the Church's Society and

Mass Media Relations so that [participants could](#) "get firsthand experience of our [Russian Orthodox] Church life—in Moscow, Moldova, and the Donbas."

Here is a list of the participants listed by Salt and Light in their posts:

- **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 Mar-a-Lago](#) in March 2025.
- **Thomas Herman Ertl Jr.** - Unknown. I have been unable to find any writer operating under this name.

I reached out to all of those listed above for comment (except for Thomas Herman Ertl Jr) but none answered. Buck Johnson did not actually travel to Moldova because he dropped out last minute for unspecified personal reasons. He did interview other members of the group when they returned for his podcast "Counterflow."

Claims and Narratives

Following the trip these men produced a series of podcasts, articles and interviews about what they saw in Moldova. You can find a list of the [articles in the last report](#), today we're going to look at the common themes and narratives and how they tie to wider messaging from the Kremlin. Different publications emphasized different narratives, but most included some version of the following:

- **Moldovan elections were rigged.** Maia Sandu came to power via fraudulent mail-in ballots. PAS engages in voter suppression - i.e. Moldovans living in Russia had only 2 polling stations to go to.
- **PAS and the EU promote an LGBTQ+ agenda.** The EU is forcing Moldova to legalize same-sex marriage. Government benefits are being unfairly given to "LGBT teenagers" for political reasons - excluding more qualified straight children. Illegal methods are being used to force pro-LGBT policies on the population. The EU is forcing Moldova to legalize adoption

by same-sex couples. The Ministry of Culture and Minister of Education have plans for "incremental integration" of LGBTQ ideology into curriculums. Etc.

- **There is no religious freedom in Moldova.** EU claims about religious freedom are lies. Moldova and the EU are purging the true church (often called the "canonical" church). Ordinary Moldovans are 95% orthodox but this foreign "globalist" ideology is being forced on them. PAS will ban the church within months if they win the elections, etc.
- **Moldova is a police state that oppresses Christians.** Priests told the bloggers about how their phones were bugged and they are followed by the "secret police." Priests sitting in churches would make a shushing motion and point to the supposed locations of hidden listening devices. They claimed that police cut the electrical cables to churches in the middle of the night if they refuse to defect to the Metropolis of Bessarabia. The secret police threaten to beat priests. In one interview Conrad Franz states:

"you start to realize this is like a gangster state. Many priests told us that what they are experiencing right now is worse than some of the worst Soviet times—which is shocking to hear"

- **There is no free speech in Moldova.** Russian media is banned even when the "vast majority" of the population speaks Russian. Opposition media is banned and people are under physical and electronic surveillance. State security agencies blackmail opposition and priests and they are subject to arbitrary fines, travel restrictions and threats of physical violence constantly.
- **The EU is interfering in Moldovan elections through the church.** Romanian funding for priests in the Metropolis of Bessarabia (referred to as "EU funding") limits their abilities to speak out on LGBTQ+ issues or abortion. Conrad Franz claims that priests are paid "60, \$70,000 yearly salaries, which like that makes you like one of the richest people in Moldova" to defect. They state that Moldova is too small and poor to stand up to the massive financial interference coming from... the EU.
- **Russia vs the EU globalists - a war of civilizations.** The war, elections and all politics in Moldova and Ukraine is explained as ecclesiastical and civilizational with no concern for differing political systems, ideology, ethnic or linguistic differences, etc.
- **Moldova is Ukraine 2.0.** The church schism in Moldova is just like Ukraine but worse in terms of government attacks on Christians.
- **Russia is awesome. Transnistria is awesome. Moldova is hell.** Tiraspol is much nicer than Chişinău, there is no church oppression there and all experience freedom of speech and religion. Many participants traveled on to the Donbas and to Moscow leading to articles like James Delingpole's "Believe it or not, Russia is great," published in the Spectator. Speaking in a podcast Conrad Franz explained:

"If they [Moldovans] could only get good info they would see that staying in the Russian sphere of influence does not doom them to worse quality of life" (Franz was referring to how much nicer Tiraspol was than Chişinău and the need for all Moldovans to spend time in Transnistria in order to better understand the benefits of the Russian world).

Longform - Not Social Media

Within Moldova, Russian FIMI focuses heavily on short-attention span scrolling platforms. TikTok, Facebook, Telegram - all rely on a compelling picture, short video and / or short text. The goal is to target a mass market audience that is already on these platforms with narratives and arguments tailored to make them stop scrolling and dive a bit deeper. The foreign facing FIMI from the Bausman's Bloggers trip is structurally different. The output of this trip came in the form of

articles in LifeSiteNews, the Spectator and other sites that dive much more deeply into these issues. The content and positioning differs based on the target audience but the assumption is that the readers are open to long-form arguments diving into issues of attacks on religious freedom or free speech, rigged elections or COVID / vaccine conspiracy theories. Moldova is slotted into this space as an example of the worst of the worst offender.

This is even more clear in the podcasts that came out of this trip. Many of these podcasts are very long - up to 3 hours in length. Moldova may not come up until 1-2 hours into the discussions or interviews. This content is targeting people who are already very much part of the community in question and inserting the idea that Christians in Moldova are under attack and that the Moldovan government is an arch example of their brand of political enemy.

Audience Analysis

While we don't have listener or readership numbers or demographics from these publications, an analysis of the publications themselves and the arguments deployed in different places indicates that there are 3 main audience groupings for this FIMI:

1. **MAGA Leaders** - specifically JD Vance
2. **MAGA base voters and fellow travelers outside the US** - specifically people focused on culture wars and former libertarians
3. **Converts to the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia** (ROCOR) and people in their media ecosystem

Articles such as Charles Bausman's "[EU's Shocking Push for LGBT in Europe's Most Conservative Christian Country – Moldova](#)" in LifeSiteNews frame Moldova in a political context designed to appeal to religious MAGA voters in the US. Narratives focus on globalism and promotion of LGBTQ+ "ideology." Bausman writes of "*widespread electoral fraud using mail-in ballots*" in a clear callback to the Stop the Steal movement that led him into the US Capitol on January 6th and led to LifeSiteNews being banned platforms like YouTube.

While narratives like this exist in all of the produced content, it's worth zooming in on appeals to MAGA leadership and to ROCOR.

"Get this to the desk of J.D. Vance"

A major figure in the delegation's trip to Moldova was Archbishop Markell of Bălți. He met with the delegation while they were in Moldova and across their many podcast discussions he appears to be one of the key sources for many of the "facts" that they are sharing. On September 22nd, 2025 Markell [shared a video on X](#) where he makes a direct appeal to Vice President JD Vance saying:

"The whole world knows that you advocate for traditional values, the traditional family and traditional Christian upbringing (...) In that sense, we are absolutely identical to you. We advocate for the same values which is precisely why the Orthodox Church in Moldova is persecuted."

The video then pans away from his direct appeal to show Charles Bausman, Conrad Franz, James Delingpole and others sitting in his office reviewing papers of some kind. They don't seem to have been told that they are part of some appeal video and have likely been included simply as props - showing known American "journalists" and bloggers with Markell.



Caption: Left: Bishop Markell appeals to JD Vance, speaking in Russian but with English subtitles. Right: Members of the delegation shuffle papers in the background of the video. From foreground to background: Charles Bausman, Conrad Franz, James Delingpole, unknown 4th man. Both photos are screenshots from Bishop Markell's X post referenced above.

In subsequent podcasts the members of this delegation frequently refer to the need to educate JD Vance on what is happening in Moldova. In episode 95 of his World War Now podcast, Franz says:

"He's [Archbishop Markell] been doing his best to raise awareness, and he himself even told me he really thinks that if word about this can get to J.D. Vance, specifically, who we know J.D. in the past Vice President has spoken out against the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is a good sign that if we can potentially raise some awareness, get this to the desk of J.D. Vance, maybe even get this on J.D. Vance's timeline. We know he follows a lot of people on X that we are familiar with. So if we could get eyes on this, make sure we spread this around, it would really do a service to suffering Orthodox Christian brothers that are never going to get their day in court, both physically in their country illegally or in the media that of course is going to side with their oppressors."

In April of 2024 Vice Presidential Candidate JD Vance [gave a speech calling](#) out the "assault on traditional Christian communities" in Ukraine. He stated:

"That will be ... our shame for refusing to use the hundreds of billions of dollars that we send to Ukraine as leverage to ensure and guarantee real religious freedom,"

His remarks in the context of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Schism drew the attention of church authorities and clearly made him a main target of efforts by Conrad Franz and others. In the same podcast Conrad Franz called on his listeners to "local and federal representatives" to put pressure on Moldova, Romania and the EU.

Understanding ROCOR

Of all the participants of this delegation, the one who produced the most content before and after the trip was Conrad Franz. Following the full delegation's trip to Moldova, he is the only one to speak or write about visiting Transnistria. He then traveled to visit churches in Russian-occupied Ukraine near the frontlines in Donbas, and then on to Moscow.

Franz and Buck Johnson are both recent converts to ROCOR. They are part of a huge wave of conversions to ROCOR taking place in the United States in the years since 2020 - particularly in Texas. Converts are overwhelmingly male and were initially drawn by ROCOR's staunch anti-vax views. The phenomenon has been reported on by [NPR](#), the [BBC](#) and the [New York Times](#) which wrote:

"Many of the young Americans new to the pews have been introduced to Orthodoxy by hard-edge influencers on YouTube and other social media platforms. Critics call the enthusiastic young converts "Orthobros."

The "orthobros" are a growing part of the wider "manosphere" that drive their message with slick looking YouTube videos of priests pumping iron and discussing how converts can *"increase their manliness to absurd levels?"*

Orthodoxy in the United States has typically been limited to immigrant communities who build churches around their communities - for example, Greeks, Ukrainians and Russians. These new converts are massively swelling the number of Orthodox believers in the United States and bringing a very different flavor to the church. Even before this current wave, Orthodoxy drew a disproportionate [number of White Nationalists](#) including high profile figures such as Matthew Heimbach, the organizer of the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville Virginia. Heimbach converted to Antiochian Orthodoxy in 2014 [but was excommunicated](#) only a week later after he beat an anti-fascist counterprotestor with a large wooden Orthodox cross. He has since [found a Romanian Orthodox group](#) that accepted him.

It is worth noting that while ROCOR is not inherently antisemitic, more fundamentalist Orthodox converts in the US have a high level of overlap with antisemitic

and Neo Nazi groups. That includes Charles Bausman (called a publisher of "Fascist" and "antisemitic" material [by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#)) and much of the content created following the blogger delegation in Moldova. Antisemitism, millenarian prophecy, talk of Satan (often as Maia Sandu) and similar themes run through many of the podcasts produced following this trip.

It is also worth noting that many of the ideas prevalent in this wing of ROCOR - including the slogan "Orthodoxy or Death" - are banned in Russia as extremist. Conrad Franz and many in this movement are monarchists who hope to see the return of a Russian Tsar after Vladimir Putin. It is ironic to note that some of their content, if produced in Russia and in Russian, would likely result in a close encounter with actual political, religious and speech persecution.

Section 4: Cross-Border Ideological Synchronization

The narratives and FIMI campaigns discussed in this report represent both tactical efforts at political manipulation and strategic efforts to align with Kremlin-allies across the west. Putin's Russia did not begin a conversation about "traditional values" vs "globalists" / "Sorosists." This is

language that they have adopted and adapted from existing western discourse. Figures like Brian Brown, who spoke at the Make Europe Great Again (MEGA) conference in Chişinău in July 2025, embody the long history of these connections. Brown is the President of the [World Congress of Families](#), an organization that was co-founded by American and Russian intellectuals in 1997 to promote the "traditional family." His involvement in [influence campaigns](#) around the Moldovan election, and much deeper involvement in support of George Simion in Romania's elections, show the increasing ties between the religious right in the US, Romania, Moldova and Russia.

In spite of all of these connections, the strategy of aligning all of these groups with Russia's geopolitical aims suffers from 2 major inconsistencies:

1. A deep aversion to Socialism / Communism amongst the religious right.
2. The complete lack of truth in the claims of "religious oppression" and the Orthodox-centric character of the allegations.

The Problem for the Socialists and People's Republics

The narratives and campaigns discussed here are part of a broader re-alignment of politics across the region. Moldova's Soviet-legacy Communist and Socialist parties have never been left wing and always [took a center-right position](#) in Moldova's vague left-right spectrum. With the larger regional / global conversation about ideological politics and the era of power blocs over, this was a useful fudge. They could be both conservative and nostalgic for the (mostly) elderly voters who supported them.

In 2025 this ambiguity became a liability and Socialist leader Igor Dodon openly floated the idea of renaming the party the "Party of Sovereignists of Moldova." This potential move [was calculated to align his party](#) with Romania's George Simion and the growing MEGA / sovereignist movement in Europe. As recently as 2018 Dodon was calling Simion a "fascist," but in May 2025 he had endorsed Simion's presidential run and was musing about renaming his own party. Ultimately Dodon did not make the change, either due to party opposition, worries about giving up the Soviet nostalgia that they rely on, or simply due to a lack of time before the elections.

This exposed them internationally and opened up opportunities for PAS and pro-EU groups to message in ways designed to divide right wing talking points about Moldova. Moldova's Ambassador to the United States, Vlad Kulminski, [gave an interview to Fox News](#) following the election where he stated:

"Essentially Russia tried to keep the Republic of Moldova within its orbit, and, in order to do that, it interfered massively in the recent parliamentary elections in the country. And Russia was backing a coalition of Communists, Socialists and Antifa against a center right government party."

The false inclusion of "Antifa" in this mix only underlines how much electoral messaging is being framed in MAGA terms globally. This analysis about the Communists and Socialists made little sense in Moldova, but drove a wedge into arguments being made in these FIMI campaigns.

Another example of this comes from Conrad Franz's trip to Transnistria. There he quickly absorbed his host's propaganda about how there is perfect religious freedom in Transnistria and their portrayal of the region as an Orthodox paradise. At the same time, he noticed a major contradiction - **statues of Lenin and Marx everywhere**. In subsequent podcasts he explained how he sought to

square that circle by putting the question directly to Transnistrian "President" Vadim Krasnoselsky. On the Counterflow Podcast Episode 383 Conrad Franz explained:

*"But if you talk to the president, Vadim Krasnoselsky, he would say, and it's like one of my favorite quotes of any politician and recently he said, **"People accuse us of being a sliver of the Soviet Union. I say no. I say we're actually a sliver of the Russian Empire."** And he's like a huge imperial historian. And you look at all the new statues that have been built as opposed to the ones that were built under the Soviet times, and they're all imperial. The biggest statue in Tiraspol is of Suvorov. One of the biggest statues they have is of Catherine the Great, who obviously is the one that initially brought all of this part of the world under Russia. The church is very prominent in town."*

Emphasis mine.

These contradictions create problems for their messaging campaigns and opportunities for those seeking to counter their message even in their own target demographics. But they are adapting and it is very possible that the Party of Socialists does rebrand, or is replaced as the primary Russian proxy by a "sovereignists" party before the next elections.

The Real State of Religious Tolerance in Moldova

On its face the message that Christians are being persecuted in Moldova by the government and at the behest of the EU holds no water. The specific claim that the Orthodox Church, which claims 95% of the population as adherents is under assault by a secular, globalist, "satanic" government does not add up. If such a crime were happening it is clear that more people than Bishop Markell would be speaking about it. At the same time it is worth taking a look at the people who would be feeling religious persecution, if such a thing existed, those who follow minority religious groups.

To get this perspective I spoke to multiple people in the Evangelical Christian community who agreed to be quoted as "missionaries serving in Moldova." These groups, representing Baptists, Pentecostals and other protestant denominations make up between 2% and 3% of the population. This community knows quite a bit about state oppression as many of the church elders got their start as bible smugglers or running covert churches during the Soviet period. Many of these churches began as household gatherings forced to hide from the authorities.

Modernly, the Evangelical community has many political differences but largely shares the concerns of the Orthodox church related to the EU. They worry about LGBTQ+ freedoms, abortion and see the moral perspectives of Western Europe as alien to their way of life. Some segments of the community also adhere to conspiracy theories around COVID and vaccines that are highly prevalent in the Orthodox community. Where these agreements part sharply however is on Ukraine³.

³ At the beginning of the war the Evangelical Community in Moldova came together and created a highly coordinated and effective support network for Ukrainian refugees. They brought refugee families into their homes, opened their churches and many of them used private and church vehicles to pick people up from the border and bring them to shelter as early as the first night of the war. The community also coordinated closely with churches in Ukraine and around Western Europe to create highly sophisticated and well financed supply chains for food, medical supplies and other types of aid. These efforts are still ongoing to this day. This departed markedly from both the political position of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, as well as the lack of almost any social support for refugees from either Orthodox Church.

The New Iron Curtain for Believers

One missionary I spoke with had knowledge of the religious situation across what he called the "New Iron Curtain" and explained it as follows: there are 3 levels of religious oppression in our region radiating out from Russia.

1. **The Russian Federation** - The 2016 "[Yarovaya](#)" law and its subsequent implementation has effectively banned religious freedoms. Churches have been closed, pastors have been arrested and currently sit in jail. Religious organizations outside of the Russian Orthodox Church are denied registration, and unregistered religious activity is equated with terrorism.
2. **Belarus** - Officially they mirror Russian law, but enforcement is less strict. Oppression is bureaucratic and legal and Evangelical churches are denied licenses. Pastors are sitting in jail but the oppression is not absolute and the church exists in the shadows.
3. **Transnistria** - The region's "laws" also mimic Russia's but the oppression is less than Belarus. The missionary I spoke with was not aware of church leaders currently being imprisoned, but noted that there is no official freedom to operate there. No evangelism is allowed and bureaucratic rules prevent gatherings and any official registration.

Asked to characterize the situation in Moldova he stated:

"Ukraine has the most religious freedom in Europe, after Ukraine is Moldova"

Asked to explain that assertion he cited examples of political correctness and what he viewed as limits on speech in various countries in Western Europe. He stated that Moldova and Ukraine are not like that, saying that the countries aren't "anti-woke" because they never became "woke" in the first place. Asked about assertions by the bloggers and podcasters from this report about how Moldova is more oppressive of religious freedom than the Soviet Union he became apoplectic and did not feel that this statement even deserved response.

One of the missionaries I spoke to explained that the only persecution he had ever witnessed in Moldova was carried out by local priests of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. He explained that in the past these priests might hire local drunken brawlers to assault missionaries with the goal of drawing the police in and getting the missionaries removed from the town. But even that was more than 10 years ago. For him, his church community was extremely cognizant of how their rights stand now. He said that during open prayer at his church...

"At least once every 2 weeks someone at our church will pray and give thanks for their freedom. They do not mean political freedom, they mean religious freedom."

Narratives a Mile Wide and an Inch Deep

The contradictions in the messaging around religion in Moldovan politics present serious challenges for Russian FIMI as they continue to push a strategy of aligning and integrating messaging with European far-right and American far-right groups. Their attempts to target messages at a figure like JD Vance rely on carefully phrased arguments in articles like the one in LifeSiteNews that mostly elide the tougher questions of religious freedom in a country and fully avoid the words "Socialist" and "Communist." Messaging directed at ROCOR is much more explicit, but is aimed at a small (if highly mobilized) group within the US.

Speaking to Evangelical groups none felt that their churches had been targeted specifically with messaging around the elections. Most of those I spoke to felt that the majority of their community under 50 supported Moldova's EU integration - though many had reservations. None knew of widespread support for the Russian war in Ukraine or for Moldova returning to the Russian world. None at all knew of a single instance of their community showing anything but open arms to Ukrainian refugees. This mirrored actions early in the war by other religious minorities - including Catholics, Muslims and the Jewish Community, which all played outsized roles in refugee relief efforts relative to their community size.

It is plausible that this is the reason that figures like Brian Brown and Bausman's Bloggers did not appear to engage with minority religious groups as part of their campaigns.

Conclusion

In the 2024 and 2025 elections Russia has run active FIMI campaigns targeting religious messaging inside and outside Moldova. They used sophisticated and evolving campaigns that were not simply tactical but were aligned with broader political narratives in Moldova, Europe and the US that Russia sees as sympathetic to their cause.

In Moldova, Shor-network actors adapted 2024 efforts at simple bribery of priests to create a complex network of paid "activists" and online infrastructure organized around the "Salt and Light" newspaper. This network mixed traditional religious content with covert religious messaging and overt calls to action - largely with AI developed pictures. They gathered millions of views and built infrastructure that mostly remains intact and ready for reactivation in future campaigns.

Outside Moldova these narratives were retooled to appeal to MAGA and MEGA figures with the apparent primary hope of triggering statements or social media posts by JD Vance or other senior American figures. Failing that, they spread anti-PAS, anti-Maia Sandu and anti-EU messaging through both main-stream right-wing media outlets and into niche but highly engaged groups like ROCOR. Much of the content produced in this campaign took place in the months after the elections with the most recent content about the trip coming in December 2025.

Strategically, religious messaging is one component of a larger Russian strategy of ideological alignment across right wing groups in the US and Europe. Activists and organizations such as the World Congress of Families have worked towards this goal for years and are now playing a role working to bring these politicians and communities together. Political culture war issues, LGBTQ+ rights and other "traditional family" topics provide fertile common ground for discussion or cooperation. At the same time, much Kremlin FIMI around Moldova seeks to extend this common ground to objectively untrue claims about religious persecution and lack of free speech. The experience of actual religious minorities, as well as the continued use of Soviet nostalgia, provide fertile soil for counter narratives and debunking of claims.

Looking forward, these networks - inside and outside Moldova - are likely to play an ever more key role in Kremlin FIMI. In a hybrid war of disinformation and propaganda that is increasingly targeted by population segments but unconstrained by borders it will be important not only to be aware of these campaigns, but to counterprogram and to actively exploit the weaknesses of their narratives.