

## **Table of Contents**

- ***[Minority wing of Moldovan Orthodox church accuses priests of lobbying against Europe vote](#)***
  - ***[Three hundred Moldovan priests went on a "free pilgrimage" to Russia](#)***
- 

## **Minority wing of Moldovan Orthodox church accuses priests of lobbying against Europe vote**

By [Alexander Tanas](#)

[Reuters](#) (26.09.2024) - - The minority pro-Romanian branch of Moldova's Orthodox Church accused clergy from the rival Moscow-linked branch of the church of campaigning against a referendum asking voters whether they back [the government's drive to join the European Union](#).

The minority Metropolis of Bessarabia said rival priests were lobbying against pro-European President Maia Sandu's campaign to join the 27-nation bloc in "profoundly offensive acts ... clearly directed against the spiritual and national unity" of Moldova.

### ***Why it is important***

Religion, like politics, is deeply polarised in ex-Soviet Moldova, split between liberals advocating for closer ties with the EU and neighbouring Romania and conservatives seeking to retain longstanding links with Russia.

The majority Moldova Metropolis is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, though the number of priests switching to the minority branch has increased because of the Russian church's backing for [Moscow's invasion of Ukraine](#), Moldova's eastern neighbour.

With more than 90% of Moldovans adhering to Orthodox Christianity, church actions could have a major effect on the Oct. 20 referendum - held alongside a presidential election in which [Sandu is seeking a second term](#).

### ***Key Quotes***

Statement by the minority Metropolis of Bessarabia:

"Priests are openly involved in election political propaganda ... The Bessarabia Metropolis firmly supports Moldova's Europe policy which reflects Democratic values and respect for the Church and Christianity."

A win for the Freedom Party, or FPO, comes seven decades after its founding under a lawmaker who was a former Nazi.

President Sandu, earlier in September:

"Clergy must not permit themselves to be used to destabilise the country. They must in all things work for peace in our society ... My appeal to clergy is not to get involved in

politics and leave citizens to choose what they believe in. Let them teach Christian morals."

### **Context**

The latest opinion poll puts support for EU membership at 56%, with 34% opposed. Two of 15 parties registered in the referendum campaign are calling for a "no" vote.

---

## **Three hundred Moldovan priests went on a "free pilgrimage" to Russia**

[The European Times](#) (10.09.2024) - More than three hundred Moldovan priests went on a "pilgrimage" to Moscow, with all their expenses covered. The organization of the clergy took place on Viber, and as the sponsor of the entire event, Moldovan media named Ilon Shor – a former Moldovan politician and banker, sentenced to fifteen years in prison for major fraud, who fled to Russia in 2023, and this year received a Russian citizenship. In each diocese of the small Moldovan Metropolitanate (MP), there were several trusted persons – from metropolitan to deacons, who gathered participants.

The priests [travel](#) with their wives and parishioners in three groups – in the months of August and September, with the first of one hundred and twenty people leaving at the end of August. The first group of over a hundred people was photographed by Moldovan television at the airport in Chisinau and thus it becomes clear about the event organized by the Moscow Patriarchate.

In Moscow, the priests participated in "several religious conferences and had a meeting with high-ranking officials of the Moscow Patriarchate." The center of the conversations were the problems of the Russian Orthodox Church and the "persecution against the Ukrainian Church". Guests from Moldova were impressed with "royal receptions" and rich meals. They also visited the largest plant for church utensils "Sofrino", where they received gifts for their parishes.

Finally, many of the clerics received MIR bank cards from the sanctioned Promsvyazbank for supporting the Russian war in [Ukraine](#). The priests received the bank cards at a ceremony at the Theological Academy in Moscow. Each priest has signed a contract with the bank, and the card does not have his name on it, but the bank account is his. They were promised that they would receive 1,000 euros in "temple aid" each month.

Moscow Patriarchate spokesman Vladimir Legoida said "pilgrimages can have a very big impact."

Hundreds of priests have agreed to the "free pilgrimage", although they admit that the very procedure and form of the organization is strange. "Many priests are confused about the program and purpose of the visit, as the pilgrimage does not fit into any festive or religious context," noted a source from the Chisinau Metropolitanate, which denied being the organizer.

The purpose of the venture is to buy the clerics under a good pretext to influence public opinion in the upcoming presidential elections in Moldova, in which Ilon Shor is

participating through a party from Moscow, and for the October 20 referendum on the country's accession to the European Union.

The visits of the priests were not supposed to become public, but after local media revealed that the hundreds of tickets were bought at once by a Russian agency, and the clerics are expected to exert political influence after their return at a critical moment for the state, the press office of Chisinau The Metropolitanate stated that "the visits have no pre-election or political goals, but aim to acquaint the Moldovan clergy with the spiritual and historical heritage of Orthodox Russia, strengthening the fraternal ties between the two Orthodox churches."

The press service of the Metropolitanate of Moldova also stated that "the pilgrimages are organized for priests with limited resources, especially from the poor rural areas of Moldova, and do not pursue political goals."

"The priests who returned from Moscow denied any form of financial support from their hosts. The Metropolitan will closely monitor this case and will take all necessary measures to prevent the participation of clergy in political or pre-election activities" – this is stated in a press release of the Metropolitan of Chisinau.

---