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# Ukraine's Fight Against Corruption During Wartime and Its Future



Ukraine's anti-corruption infrastructure, backed by the West, is not particularly effective, not entirely reliable, and constantly under political pressure.

But it has one crucial distinction: its leadership is not appointed by the president himself. Or rather, it wasn't until recently.

Last week, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law that officially stripped the anti-corruption agencies of this right. The new Prime Minister, Yuliia Svyrydenko, immediately **claimed** that "[corruption] is being amplified and overemphasised," though investigative journalists continue to **expose** illegal income, luxury homes, and apartments purchased by members of the Ukrainian elite.

This law sent a clear and simple signal to both the West and Ukrainian voters: the leadership in Kyiv wants the freedom to steal.

The official justification, of course, had nothing to do with this. Instead, it was based on alleged links between some anti-corruption agency employees and Russia—as if bringing these agencies under direct political control would somehow prevent such connections.

Ukraine's security service, the SBU—whose head is appointed by the President—conducted 70 searches to substantiate these claims.

In one case, however, it confused the Russian republic of Dagestan with the independent country of Uzbekistan and conveniently failed to mention that the SBU itself had previously employed individuals holding Russian passports or having links with Russia.

Political will can work both ways: to root out Russian influence or to enable it. This is why having even an assumingly independent infrastructure was so vital.

## Ukraine risks its EU path

Not long after the law passed, protests **erupted** in Ukraine's major cities—the first

mass demonstrations since the start of the full-scale invasion.

The European Union questioned Ukraine's path to membership and **cut** €1.7 billion in agreed aid due to unfulfilled reform benchmarks.

Now, President Zelenskyy is **promising** to revisit the law, attempting to fix a problem that was avoidable—and that was not caused by Russia.

Some MPs admitted privately that they voted under pressure, others walked out of the session, and a few even joined the protests. Still, the majority of parliament were all too happy to support legislation that dismantled the anti-corruption system.

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Zelenskyy now says he will propose a new law to "guarantee the independence" of these institutions. But rumours suggest it may not receive enough votes.

Will pressure again be used, this time to undo the damage? Something suggests that the new law won't work unless it is cleared with the Western partners.

Ironically, the original draft law wasn't even meant to touch anti-corruption matters. Submitted to parliament in mid-January, it was designed to amend procedures for the pre-trial investigation of crimes involving individuals who went missing under special circumstances during martial law.

In other words, it had nothing to do with corruption. The amendments that outraged the EU—and a significant portion of Ukrainian society—were introduced only on the day of the vote.

## System built on constant suspicion

But a bigger question looms: why does the Western-backed anti-corruption infrastructure have so many enemies in Ukraine? Are all, absolutely all, Ukrainian politicians corrupt?

This architecture consists of four agencies.

The **NAPC**, the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption, is tasked with verifying asset declarations of public officials. However, it has at times bowed to political pressure and struggles to manage the massive flow of annual submissions. Each year, the NAPC **receives** over 600,000 declarations from public officials.

On top of that, it processes late submissions and declarations from previous years that are under audit. For example, in 2024 alone, the agency **received** more than 1.3 million declarations for 2021 and 2022.

In practice, its role is largely limited to collecting these documents and pointing out irregularities where possible. Whether the selection of individuals flagged is truly impartial remains questionable.

The **NABU** and SAPO—the National Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office—work closely together. Their mandate is to investigate crimes and bring cases before the High Anti-Corruption Court.

The current head of NABU, Semen Kryvonos, appointed in 2023, has raised concerns over his ties to the head of the Presidential Office.

Some of his actions have reinforced these concerns, particularly when Kryvonos secretly met with the then-head of Naftogaz, who later became deputy prime minister and was accused of enriching himself by \$24 million.

## Officials must declare even minor purchases, like earrings, and gifts worth more than \$100 are prohibited

The final body in this framework is the High Anti-Corruption Court—the key institution responsible for issuing verdicts. Under the previous president, its work was obstructed.

However, it finally received the necessary resources in 2019 and began operating. From then until 2025, the court reviewed 339 cases.

In 30 instances, it ordered the confiscation of illicit assets worth more than \$17 million. The court recently imposed pre-trial measures on Oleksii Chernyshov, the Minister for National Unity, who is closely linked to President Zelenskyy. Yet the court declined to suspend Chernyshov from his government position.

Over the years, the court has issued rulings against other high-ranking officials, though such cases remain relatively few.

The anti-corruption infrastructure has constantly faced political pressure but has also made serious mistakes of its own. Ukraine's anti-corruption fight has relied on an extensive web of regulations—often stricter than in many Western democracies.

Officials must declare even minor purchases, like earrings, and gifts worth more than \$100 are prohibited. Yet official salaries **remain** low, capped at €1,000–2,000 per month. Even the president earns less than €12,000 a year.

This system, built on constant suspicion and offering no real incentives, has pushed competent professionals out of public service while attracting those willing to exploit it. The real question is, what motivation exists for honest, skilled people to enter government?

## How can integrity be made more appealing than theft?

Western-backed anti-corruption institutions, though meant to be independent, have major flaws. Many lack economic literacy, treating regulation as an end in itself—and at times investigating reforms with the same vigour as corruption cases.

Others have caved under political pressure—an issue that has only intensified during the large-scale war.



*Ukraine's challenge today is not just to eradicate corruption but to create a system that rewards integrity*

One of the most glaring examples was the case against former reformist Minister of Infrastructure Andrii Pyvovarskyi, who was essentially accused of implementing the then-recently passed reform legislation on the management of ports.

New legislation, replacing the old Soviet-style state-centric model, allowed for the port duties to be shared between the state-owned and private players—which was clearly intended to attract private-sector investment and participation into the nation's ageing maritime infrastructure.

The law itself was passed by the Parliament, with Pyvovarskyi's role limited to proposing to the Cabinet the decree implementing the new legislation in the port of Yuzhnyi, one of the largest in Ukraine. In a very crude Soviet-style approach, NABU and SAPO still treated this as an attempt to “cause damage to state revenue” and started to prosecute the minister.

Ukraine's challenge today is not just to eradicate corruption but to create a system that rewards integrity. With Western backing,

some state-owned companies like **Naftogaz** and **Ukrenergo** introduced performance-based incentives, allowing executives to earn bonuses for securing major contracts.

Yet former CEOs now face criminal charges, largely driven by populist backlash. What Ukraine needs is a smarter strategy: clear, legal incentives to attract investment, foster public-private partnerships, and reward competence. Ethical leadership should open opportunities—not result in exile or suspicion.

Ukraine must stop assuming that every official is corrupt by default. Instead, the question should be: how can integrity be made more appealing than theft?