



Written by [Paul Dragu](#) on July 31, 2025

Zelensky Backtracks, Ukraine Restores Anti-corruption Agencies' Autonomy

The Ukrainian government backtracked on a move that would've given the president and his party yet more power. Ukraine's Parliament voted on Thursday to restore the autonomy of anti-corruption agencies that were stood up 10 years ago at the behest of the European Union to address the country's endemic corruption problem. Ukraine consistently ranks among the most corrupt countries in Europe. President Volodymyr Zelensky signed the bill on Thursday.



AP Images
Volodymyr Zelensky

The reversal is seen as a response to the intense domestic protests and international scolding the Zelensky government incurred for trying to take control of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) on July 22. Thousands of Ukrainians turned out to demonstrate in the capital, Kyiv, as well as in Lviv, Dnipro, and Odesa, over the matter.

But perhaps more influential than the disapproval of the masses was the European Union's threat to withhold money. *The New York Times* [reported](#):

The European Union announced last Friday that it would withhold 1.5 billion euros, or \$1.7 billion, from a 4.5-billion euro fund, the disbursement of which is dependent on achieving good governance standards. While not directly tied to the anticorruption law, but to other benchmarks, it was a reminder of Kyiv's reliance on international support to keep the state functioning.

After he signed the new bill restoring autonomy to the agencies, Zelensky tried to convince the public that his government is not the autocracy many accuse it of being. "It is very important that the state listens to public opinion. Ukraine is a democracy — without any doubt," he said in a social media post.

I want to thank all members of parliament for passing my bill - now officially a law, as I have just signed the document. The text will be published immediately.

This is a guarantee of the proper independent functioning of Ukraine's anti-corruption bodies and all law enforcement... pic.twitter.com/83SgkcoEPH

— Volodymyr Zelenskyy / Володимир Зеленський (@ZelenskyyUa) [July 31, 2025](#)



Long-standing Authoritarianism

As we pointed out in our [previous report](#) on this matter, what Zelensky attempted to do was in line with his long-standing pattern of authoritarianism. After Russia invaded in 2022, the government declared martial law and essentially outlawed dissent and opposition. They banned independent media, other political parties, elections, and free speech by religious leaders. Even if they want major change, Ukrainians will have a difficult time getting it because presidential and parliamentary elections are not allowed. These policies continue to this day.

Zelensky's excuse for trying to take control of the agencies was to rid them of Russian influence. Curbing Russian influence, which is almost certainly a factor, has been the justification for every authoritarian move the Zelensky government has taken.

The president said this new bill to restore the agencies' autonomy will include anti-Russian safeguards. It "ensures the absence of any external influence or interference, including through regular polygraph checks for all law enforcement personnel who have access to state secrets or have relatives in Russia."

It turns out the National Anti-Corruption Bureau and Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office have actually performed some semblance of their duties. [According](#) to reports:

The anticorruption bureau has charged 42 lawmakers since 2022, and 71 in all since 2016, it said in a statement on Wednesday. More than 30 of those lawmakers currently serve in Parliament, the bureau said. The most common charges, it said, were misappropriation or embezzlement of property, accepting undue benefits, abuse of power or official position, false asset declarations and illicit enrichment.

EU Motives

A European Union commission spokesman, Guillaume Mercier, suggested that Ukrainian entry into the supranational body would require signs that the Ukrainian government harbored some semblance of legitimacy. "Ukraine's E.U. accession will require continuous efforts to guarantee a strong capacity to combat corruption and the respect for the rule of law," he said.

Ukraine is notorious for institutional corruption. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index [from 2019](#) shows that Ukraine and Russia had nearly identical corruption scores, lower than every other country in the region at the time. According to the index, Ukrainian corruption eased a bit after 2019. Nevertheless, [in 2023](#), the country still rated equal to or slightly lower than every bordering nation but Russia and Turkey.

But while EU elites purport to be concerned over Ukraine's corruption, they express no such disapproval of its authoritarian policies. This prompts the question of whether they are concerned with internal corruption only because it would make it more difficult to exert control over a potential EU member state.



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