Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 24.10.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Rivalry between state services: the fight for control over combating corruption in Ukraine

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President Volodymyr Zelensky's inner circle continues its efforts to discredit and undermine the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAP). The objective is to prevent these institutions from conducting investigations into individuals linked to the head of state, the Presidential Office (PO), or the government. The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which is controlled by the PO, has been harassing NABU detectives by accusing them of financial misconduct or of collaboration with Russia. The authorities have also taken steps to restrict access to public information, including property registers, and are seeking to prohibit the media from publishing any materials concerning ongoing corruption investigations.

This has raised concerns among civil society organisations and investigative journalists about a potential rollback of anti-corruption reforms and has hindered the supervision of activities carried out by law enforcement bodies. Western countries and the European Union have also expressed criticism, making it clear that the absence of strong and independent anti-corruption institutions in Ukraine could delay the payment of future financial assistance tranches or reduce their value, and could negatively affect Kyiv's progress towards European integration.

The Gordian knot of corruption

Despite the government's withdrawal in July 2025 – under public pressure – of the controversial legal amendments that would have abolished the independence of NABU and SAP (see '*Ukraine: Verkhovna Rada restores independence of anti-corruption bodies*'), the presidential camp has not ceased its attempts to neutralise both institutions. This is not a wartime phenomenon; rather, it forms part of a broader pattern of attempts to restrict their independence since their establishment – NABU in 2014 and SAP in 2015. Such actions were undertaken by President Petro Poroshenko between 2014 and 2019 and were later continued under President Zelensky prior to Russia's full-scale invasion.

At present, direct supervision of these services is aimed at shielding individuals associated with President Zelensky's circle from criminal liability. In targeting NABU detectives, the SBU identified those involved in anti-corruption investigations concerning Timur Mindich, a close associate of the president and co-owner of the Kvartal 95 studio. He was suspected of inflating prices and exploiting his connections within government circles to manipulate public tenders related to drone supplies (through the company Fire Point). Mindich left Ukraine in June 2025 and is believed to be residing in Vienna.

The case of former Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Chernyshov, who is suspected of financial misconduct connected with his real estate development activities, exemplifies interference in proceedings conducted by NABU. At the end of June 2025, he returned to Ukraine from a trip abroad. Fearing possible arrest by NABU, he crossed the border under the protection of military intelligence operatives and SBU officers. Following a court decision and the payment of bail, he was allowed to participate in the proceedings as a suspect, without being taken into custody. According to media outlets critical of President Zelensky, the Chernyshov case prompted the PO to convene a meeting with the leadership of the security and law enforcement agencies, during which possible measures to restrict NABU's independence were reportedly discussed.

The governing camp has largely ignored public criticism. Sociological studies indicate that the public views corruption as the second greatest threat to the stability of the state, after Russian aggression. At the beginning of October, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology released a poll indicating that 71% of Ukrainians believe corruption has increased during the ongoing war. Likewise, an October survey conducted by the SOCIS polling company revealed that 61.5% of respondents hold a negative view of the authorities' management of public funds, identifying the embezzlement of budgetary resources as the government's most serious failing. Nearly half of those surveyed (49.2%) place responsibility for this situation on President Zelensky himself.

The authorities' tactics – characterised by informal pressure and increasingly damaging to the president's public image – stem from unique features of Ukraine's political culture. Direct, often informal and manipulative interference in the functioning of state institutions, and even in the media, is regarded within the PO as justified. In 2024, the SBU, acting on the initiative of presidential adviser Oleh Tatarov, attempted to discredit media outlets critical of President Zelensky and his aides (see '*Ukrainian media in the crosshairs of the secret services*').

Another method, same goal

The SBU has been undermining the credibility of NABU and SAP by initiating proceedings against their officers, using biased interpretations of legal provisions as a pretext. In July 2025, operational measures, including searches, targeted 15 NABU detectives, while inspections were initiated within SAP to verify compliance with regulations on official secrecy. The goal is to obstruct the work of these institutions and exert pressure on their personnel.

On 25 September, the SBU launched investigations against former NABU detectives employed in the state railway sector. The service suspects them of misconduct in the rail transport sector, particularly in freight operations. In response, NABU stated that the SBU's actions were linked to its detectives' participation in investigative teams that had uncovered organised criminal groups operating within state enterprise, and even within the SBU itself. In retaliation, NABU and SAP, on the same day, filed an indictment with the court against the head of one of the SBU's departments, accusing him of soliciting a bribe of $300,000 in exchange for closing a case related to the smuggling of individuals evading military service.

NABU and SAP are developing contingency plans in anticipation of a potential new wave of attacks on both institutions. Their primary objective is to prevent any suspension of NABU's investigations. At the same time, anti-corruption detectives are instructed to inform the

public and international partners of any incidents that compromise the independence of these bodies. NABU Director Semen Kryvonos has warned that the parliament is currently drafting bills which, if adopted, would permit biased treatment of corruption offences. One example is draft law no. 11228-1, which would exempt individuals from liability for corruption if they had participated in counterintelligence activities. This provision would enable the SBU to use such exemptions as a loophole to shield members of the political and business elite from criminal liability, effectively legitimising corrupt practices under the pretext of countering the aggressor.

By exploiting the SBU, the Presidential Office continues its efforts to discredit the independent NABU and SAP, thereby seeking to strengthen the SBU's position. The service's leadership is eager to retain within its remit the authority to combat corruption and to continue handling cases involving financial misconduct. To this end, it has invoked its counterintelligence mandate for the protection of the economy – an approach that enables it to paralyse the activities of its institutional rivals.

The inertia of the judiciary is another factor contributing to the diminishing effectiveness of institutions tasked with combating corruption. This situation arises from years of deliberate neglect by the authorities, who have sought to maintain informal control over judges. The process of judicial vetting has not been completed, and the functioning of the High Council of Justice, which is responsible for appointing judges, has been criticised for its lack of transparency. Many criminal proceedings concerning corruption involving senior officials have been pending for years, while some have been discontinued due to the expiry of statutory limitation periods.

The Head of SAP, Oleksandr Klymenko, supported Kryvonos and appealed to the authorities to abolish the so-called Lozovyi amendment, which permits the automatic dismissal of corruption cases due to protracted investigations or judicial delays, under the pretext of preventing excessively lengthy proceedings. He also described as detrimental the absence of a mechanism to sanction judges who deliberately delay proceedings or dismiss cases without justification. The firm responses of the heads of NABU and SAP indicate that they intend to continue denouncing the manipulations undermining Ukraine's anti-corruption system and exposing flaws in the legal framework. They hope that, by doing so, the issue will remain in the focus of Western partners, thereby helping to restrain legally questionable actions by the authorities.

Waiting for better times

NABU, which continues to resist the attacks of the SBU, enjoys the support of Western partners, anti-corruption organisations, and investigative journalists. Vitaliy Shabunin, head of the Anti-Corruption Action Centre, has consistently emphasised that the SBU's aggressive actions against NABU are directed by the PO, which aims to gradually but systematically dismantle the independent anti-corruption institutions. He recalled that the campaign of discredit intensified immediately before the July vote in the Verkhovna Rada on the bill intended to curtail the independence of NABU and SAP (see '*Ukraine: the independence of anti-corruption bodies is being dismantled amid scandals involving top politicians*'), when fabricated reports about alleged 'Russian influence within NABU' emerged, intended to discredit its investigators. According to him, investigations involving individuals connected with the ruling camp are to be transferred to other bodies (the SBU may assume jurisdiction

under the pretext that the cases concern, for instance, defence or counterintelligence matters) and subsequently discontinued following protracted procedural delays. Consequently, this could undermine public trust in the institutions that have served as symbols of the reforms introduced after 2014, while also reducing citizens' willingness to cooperate with law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.

The factors mitigating the risk of a swift materialisation of this 'worst-case scenario' include the threat of losing or curtailing international financial support – particularly from the EU, G7, and IMF – and fears of a renewed wave of public protests. The PO has largely dismissed criticism from Western partners, even though such behaviour gives some EU member states a pretext to block the opening of the first negotiation cluster with the EU, which concerns the rule of law. It cannot be ruled out that within the president's circle there prevails a belief that, given the ongoing Russian aggression and the threat to Ukraine's sovereignty, Western countries will not strictly enforce the conditions for disbursing subsequent tranches of macro-financial assistance.