Ukraine: The adoption of the July 22 law became a breaking point – Interview with Olena Halushka

Description

On 22 July, the Ukrainian Parliament adopted in second reading (with 263 votes in favour, 13 against, and 13 abstentions) Draft Law n° 12414, which included a last-minute amendment that would *de facto* dismantle the independence of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO). Interview with Olena Halushka, head of International Relations at Kyiv Anti-Corruption Action Centre (AntAC).



Surprisingly, President Volodymyr Zelensky signed the bill that same evening, ignoring the massive protests organised in Ukraine's major cities. Two days later, on 24 July, the President submitted a new Draft Law n° 13533 that restores NABU and SAPO independence.

Olena Halushka is the head of International Relations at Kyiv Anti-Corruption Action Centre (AntAC), who has been fighting corruption and promoting reforms in Ukraine since 2012. She agreed to answer questions from *Regard sur l'Est*.

How can we explain why V. Zelensky signed this law, passed on 22 July, with such urgency, placing anti-corruption bodies under the control of the Prosecutor's Office, and therefore the Office of the President?

Olena Halushka: Over the past months, we've witnessed several alarming attempts to undermine Ukraine's anti-corruption infrastructure: the government's unlawful refusal to appoint the winner of the competition for the head of the Bureau of Economic Security — a key economic law enforcement body; politically motivated pressure on activists, including a criminal case against my colleague Vitaliy Shabunin *[head of AntAC]*; and a coordinated smear campaign across anonymous Telegram channels targeting reforms and reformers.

The adoption of the July 22 law became a breaking point, sparking public protests — primarily led by young people — who took to the streets to say: enough is enough. We strongly believe this crackdown was triggered by one thing: NABU and SAPO got dangerously close to people within the President's circle. That only proves that for these bodies there are no untouchables.

V. Zelensky initially justified his decision to sign the law by citing the need to '*free these bodies from Russian influence*': Is this a real threat? Or did the prosecutions brought by NABU and SAPO against corrupt officials scare the political elite?

Following the sweeping searches at over 70 locations linked to NABU detectives on July 21 and the rushed adoption of the July 22 law, neither the Prosecutor General, nor the Security Service (SBU), nor the President has presented any credible evidence to support claims of Russian infiltration into Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions. At this point, such allegations appear to be a convenient pretext for politically motivated attacks. Alarmingly, if this trend continues, we fear that vague accusations of "state treason" may be increasingly weaponized against reform-minded officials, civil society activists, and independent media — all to disrupt our work and suppress dissent.

When proposing a new bill, V.Zelensky stated, '*It is important that we remain united*.' How can such a political error on his part be explained, given that he has always demonstrated been tactical sense over the past three and a half years? Will this misstep leave a lasting impact on the country, especially since the ongoing war makes it impossible to hold elections?

Indeed, the July 22 law has sown disunity within Ukrainian society and damaged the trust of Ukraine's international partners. Ukrainians value our EU integration, perceiving it as a lighthouse in these dark days. Now it's in jeopardy. Fixing this won't be easy. Submitting a new bill to parliament is only a first step — not a solution. Will there be enough votes? Many MPs under NABU and SAPO investigations eagerly voted to dismantle these institutions and are unlikely to wish to restore their independence now.

Moreover, to prevent the bill from being watered down or amended with harmful provisions, it must be passed swiftly and in full, without endless consultations, just as the previous one. Responsibility now lies with President Zelensky to secure the necessary votes. He could have avoided this crisis altogether by hearing warnings from President Macron and other international leaders — and vetoing the original law. Yet he has chosen not to.

The Speaker of the Parliament announced that the plenary hearing to consider the President's bill will be on July 31.



Kyiv, July 2025 (© Valeriy Pekar)

How many bodies are there in Ukraine responsible for fighting corruption? How did they come into being, and would they all have been affected by this law?

After the Revolution of Dignity *[February 2014]*, Ukraine built a comprehensive anti-corruption system from scratch. This system is grounded in principles of transparency, open competition for leadership, internal accountability, and adoption of international best practices. It includes:

- The National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) — an independent law enforcement and investigative body;
- The Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) — which oversees NABU's work and represents cases in court;
- The High Anti-Corruption Court — dedicated to adjudicating high-level corruption cases.

These three institutions have exclusive jurisdiction over high-profile corruption case. Also, there's the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) — responsible for maintaining the electronic asset declaration system and designing anti-corruption policy.

These institutions are central to Ukraine's reform path and democratic resilience.

What about AntAC?

AntAC is currently under significant pressure as well. The Office of the President, using the old-style State Bureau of Investigation and anonymous *Telegram* channels, are trying to turn Vitaliy Shabunin into a 'draft dodger' and a 'fraudster', despite he voluntarily joined military at the start of the full-scale war, took part in the defense of the Kyiv region, was also deployed in the east and the south.

The SBI (State Bureau of Investigation) served V.Shabunin with a notice of suspicion for 'dodging military service' and 'fraud'. At the same time, they searched Vitaliy's place of service in the Kharkiv regions, the house where his family

currently lives in Kyiv, and even the apartment of the mother of the Hero of Ukraine, late fighter pilot Andriy Juice Pilshchykov, in which V.Shabunin temporarily stayed during his service in Kharkiv. All these searches took place without a court order, with numerous violations and no attorney involvement. Investigators seized Vitaliy's phone, his wife's phone, and even the phones and tablets of his minor children.

The pressure is accompanied by a huge discreditation campaign, mostly *via* pro-President's office *Telegram* channels.

These attacks are aimed at discrediting Shabunin and AntAC and disrupting our core advocacy and watchdogging activities.

Can a connection be established between these events and the major cabinet reshuffle that took place on July 17?

Only as another puzzle in the broader pattern of the President's office attempting to exert more control over the country.

Link to the French version of the article

To cite this article: Céline BAYOU (2025), "Ukraine: The adoption of the July 22 law became a breaking point – Interview with Olena Halushka," *Regard sur l'Est*, 26 July.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.16450946

Back to the top of the page

date créée
26/07/2025
Champs de Méta
Auteur-article : Céline Bayou