



## Ukraine's Struggle For EU Integration

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#### I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ukraine's bid for EU membership faces major internal hurdles, chiefly systemic corruption and oligarchic influence. These forces undermine democratic institutions, judicial independence, and fair competition – core EU accession requirements. Despite reforms and the creation of bodies like NABU, enforcement is weak and elite interests often obstruct progress. As the EU emphasizes rule of law and institutional integrity, dismantling oligarchic power structures is essential. This brief proposes targeted policies to help Ukraine meet EU standards and advance its integration.

#### II. OVERVIEW

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has struggled with a legacy of weak institutions, patronage networks, and pervasive corruption. Oligarchic capture – where a small group of wealthy elites exerts disproportionate influence over political and economic systems – has become a defining feature of the country's post-Soviet development. These oligarchs control major sectors of the economy, media, and political parties, enabling them to shape policy in their favor and block reform efforts.

The consequences of this system are far-reaching: public trust in governance erodes and Ukraine's

Euro-Atlantic aspirations are jeopardized. Despite several reform waves – particularly after the 2014 Revolution of Dignity – progress has been uneven. While public support for anti-corruption efforts remains strong, reforms often stall due to political resistance or are watered down in implementation. For Ukraine to meaningfully integrate with the EU, breaking the cycle of oligarchic capture is essential.

#### *A. Relevance*

The relevance of this issue has intensified following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In response, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, tying future membership to progress on key reforms, especially judicial independence, anti-corruption, and de-oligarchization. The European Commission's enlargement report in 2023 recognized Ukraine's wartime resilience but underscored that corruption remains a "serious concern" and that "more work is needed" to align with EU standards.

This policy problem is also central to broader European and global stability. A democratic, transparent, and EU-integrated Ukraine would serve as a bulwark against authoritarian influence and strengthen the rule-of-law-based international order. Conversely, failure to uproot corruption risks not only derailing accession talks but also enabling renewed cycles of domestic

instability and foreign manipulation.

### III. HISTORY

#### *A. Current Stances*

Ukraine's struggle with corruption can be traced back to the chaotic rapid privatization of state assets in the 1990s, which allowed a handful of individuals to amass immense wealth and political leverage. This oligarchic elite – many of whom remain influential today – used their resources to entrench themselves within government structures, effectively capturing regulatory bodies, courts, and legislative processes.

Successive Ukrainian governments have pledged to fight corruption, but with mixed results. President Zelenskyy's administration launched the National Anti-Corruption Strategy (2021–2025) and passed a landmark “de-oligarchization” law in 2021 aimed at limiting the political influence of oligarchs. However, critics argue that enforcement has been selective and vulnerable to political manipulation.

International actors, including the EU, IMF, and USAID, have played a crucial role in supporting reform, conditioning aid on progress in transparency, judicial reform, and corporate governance. Yet, Ukraine's recent moves – such as delayed judicial appointments or perceived attacks on independent institutions – have drawn concern from Brussels and civil society watchdogs. As of early 2025, Ukraine continues to implement reforms under EU guidance, but significant structural obstacles remain, particularly in depoliticizing law enforcement and judiciary bodies

### IV. POLICY PROBLEM

#### *A. Stakeholders*

The key stakeholders in Ukraine's anti-corruption and de-oligarchization efforts include the general public, civil society organizations, reform-minded politicians, independent media, and international partners such as the EU, IMF, and USAID. Ordinary citizens suffer most from weak rule of law, unreliable services, and a lack of economic opportunity due to elite-driven monopolies. Civil society and investigative journalists play a critical role in exposing corruption but often face legal retaliation or threats. Reformist leaders seek to challenge entrenched systems but face pushback from oligarch-affiliated power networks. International stakeholders support Ukraine through funding and technical assistance, but their influence is limited when domestic political will is weak.

#### *B. Risks of Indifference*

Failing to address corruption and oligarchic influence risks derailing Ukraine's EU accession, undermining national resilience, and perpetuating cycles of instability. If oligarchs continue to capture political and economic institutions, democratic reforms may stall, judicial independence will remain fragile, and public trust in governance will erode further. This creates openings for foreign influence – particularly from Russia – and weakens Ukraine's global partnerships. At the local level, indifference allows corruption to flourish in procurement, law enforcement, and court systems, reinforcing inequality and disillusionment with reform. Inaction also jeopardizes the effectiveness of international aid, much of which is contingent on

demonstrable progress in transparency and institutional reform.

### *C. Nonpartisan Reasoning*

Combating corruption and dismantling oligarchic networks is not a partisan agenda but a structural imperative for state-building and democratic integrity. Transparency, judicial independence, and fair economic competition are foundational EU values shared across political lines. Regardless of political affiliation, citizens benefit from a justice system that operates independently, an economy not rigged by monopolies, and governance that reflects public interest over private gain. Reforms that promote accountability strengthen Ukraine's resilience, support national security, and ensure that public institutions serve the people rather than elite interests. These are goals that transcend party politics and align with both Ukrainian and EU democratic ideals.

### V. TRIED POLICY

Ukraine has launched multiple reforms aimed at curbing corruption and limiting oligarchic control, especially since the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. The creation of specialized institutions—including the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) in 2015, the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC) in 2019—marked a major shift in institutional design. Ukraine also introduced a public asset declaration system for public officials and passed a “de-oligarchization” law in 2021 to curb oligarchs' political and media influence.

Despite these reforms, progress has been limited. Conviction rates for high-level corruption remain low: NABU and SAPO have launched over 1,100 investigations, but only a fraction have led to final judgments. Judicial appointments are often delayed or politicized, undermining the independence of the courts. The de-oligarchization law has been criticized for vague criteria and selective enforcement, enabling oligarchs to avoid scrutiny by shifting ownership to associates or using proxies. While these steps represent institutional progress, inconsistent application and political interference continue to limit their effectiveness.

### VI. POLICY OPTIONS

One option is to strengthen the independence and effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions and the judiciary by ensuring merit-based appointments and providing international oversight during selection processes. This would help depoliticize key bodies like NABU and SAPO and restore public trust in their autonomy. At the local level, reforms should prioritize training judges and prosecutors in regions such as Kharkiv or Dnipro, where enforcement gaps are most apparent. A second option is to improve the transparency and enforcement of the de-oligarchization framework. This includes maintaining a clear public registry of individuals classified as oligarchs and strictly enforcing limits on their political financing and media ownership. Local governments could pilot initiatives in cities like Odesa to increase oversight of public procurement processes, which are often linked to oligarch-affiliated firms. A third option is to link future EU aid and funding to measurable reform outcomes, such as successful judicial vetting, corporate transparency, and prosecution rates for

high-level corruption. Aid could also be directed toward digitizing local court systems and improving access to legal resources for ordinary citizens. While these policies face challenges – including elite resistance, bureaucratic inertia, and public cynicism – incremental but consistent progress would help realign Ukraine’s governance with EU standards and show clear political commitment to reform.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

For Ukraine to successfully join the European Union, it must address the deep-rooted issues of corruption and oligarchic capture that threaten both domestic stability and international credibility. While important reforms have been introduced, their uneven implementation reveals the resilience of elite power networks and the fragility of institutional independence. Sustainable progress requires a combination of strengthened oversight, targeted enforcement, and conditional international support—applied consistently at both national and local levels. These efforts must be framed not only as a means to satisfy EU requirements, but as a transformative process essential for rebuilding public trust and creating a more just, accountable, and democratic society. If Ukraine can break the cycle of elite capture, it will not only secure its European future but also serve as a model of democratic resilience in the face of war, corruption, and external pressure.

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