Human Rights First

Attacking The Watchdogs

UKRAINE'S ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTIVISTS AND INSTITUTIONS FACE NEW WAVE OF ASSAULTS

Protests in Kharkiv against Law 12414 stripping independence of NABU and SAPO; Photo: Liubov Yemets, Gwara Media.

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Introduction

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), journalists, and others in Ukraine working to counter corruption say they are facing an increased wave of targeting by the authorities and are calling on western allies to help protect Ukraine's democracy, not only from Russian attack but also from internal pressures. Some are even openly accusing President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's office of deliberately undermining anti-corruption institutions after some of those in his close political circle came under investigation.

This targeting of anti-corruption activists has included physical threats, raids on their homes, SLAPP suits, and criminal charges. As Russia's war on Ukraine enters its twelfth year — and the fourth since the full-scale invasion of February 2022 — anti-corruption activists are being attacked for exposing and opposing corruption by both local and national officials.

This is not a new phenomenon, but another assault on anti-corruption activists and institutions has begun. Human Rights First has worked closely with anti-corruption activists in Ukraine for many years. In 2017, we produced **Democracy in Danger**, a report detailing attacks on HRDs working on corruption issues. It included the cases of journalist Vasyl Muravytsky, and anti-corruption activist Dmytro Bulakh, who we visited in Kharkiv after he had been physically attacked. We presented the report in Kyiv at an event with prominent anti-corruption activist Vitaliy Shabunin. Both Bulakh and Shabunin are among those recently targeted again by the authorities.

Shabunin told Human Rights First in October 2025 that this targeting is "not an attack on just anticorruption activists from NGOs, but a broader strategy to undermine the whole anticorruption infrastructure created after the revolution of dignity."

In 2014, widespread protests against the corruption of President Viktor Yanukovych's government turned into a revolution that resulted in his fleeing the country. Fresh elections and a wave of reforms followed this "Revolution of Dignity." New institutions were created, including the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), designed to investigate and prosecute high-level corruption without political interference.

> "[This is] not an attack on just anticorruption activists from NGOs, but a broader strategy to undermine the whole anticorruption infrastructure created after the revolution of dignity."
>
> — VITALIY SHABUNIN

Human Rights First has closely monitored the work of these anti-corruption mechanisms, and since 2014 has visited Ukraine dozens of times to work with local activists, mostly in Kyiv and Kharkiv[1]. In 2023 we visited Kharkiv and, together with the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Centre (KhAC), researched and issued a report on the irregularities in wartime reconstruction contracts.

While international attention to institutional reform and the weakening of the NABU and SAPO is welcome, it is equally critical that international actors prioritize protections and support for local anti-corruption activists. In 2017, Human Rights First briefed the U.S. Helsinki Commission on attacks targeting HRDs in Ukraine working on anti-corruption. Since then, conditions for these activists have only deteriorated.

In September and October 2025, Human Rights First visited Kyiv and Kharkiv to meet with HRDs working on anti-corruption issues. They reported that corruption has undermined both the war effort and the democratic advances made over the last decade. For example, the failure of defenses in Vovchansk during the Russian offensive in May 2024 were widely blamed on corruption in military supply and command structures. Prior to that, in 2023, a widespread scandal in military recruitment led President Zelenskyy to dismiss all regional recruitment office heads. HRDs told Human Rights First that those who expose these abuses face retaliation, including direct targeting and judicial harassment.

[1] Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Human Rights First has made over 20 research trips to Ukraine. In May 2023, Human Rights First reported on how Tsyrkuny, a village north of Kharkiv, survived Russian occupation. Human Rights First released another report in June 2023 on the Russian occupation of the city of Izyum and surrounding villages in the Kharkiv Oblast. In August 2023, Human Rights First published a report from the frontline city of Kupiansk on how locals were holding out against the threat of a Russian re-occupation. In January 2024 Human Rights First reported from Kharkiv on the need for greater psychological support for civilians, including for those who had lived under Russian occupation, and in March 2024 returned to the region to report on demining efforts in the deoccupied area of Balakliia. In June, July, August, October and December 2024, and in February, March and May 2025, Human Rights First reported from Kharkiv on HRDs undertaking evacuations from villages under fire, and in January 2025 released a report detailing the killing of HRD Tigran Galustyan, a volunteer targeted and killed by a Russian drone while evacuating civilians from near Pokrovsk. Throughout 2025, Human Rights First has regularly returned to Kharkiv and assisted HRDs to evacuate people from communities under fire.

Protests in Kharkiv against Law 12414 stripping independence of NABU and SAPO; Photo: Liubov Yemets, Gwara Media.

Attacks on NABU and SAPO

Since 2014, Ukraine has made major strides in curbing corruption. The creation of NABU and SAPO has enabled significant investigations of high-level officials. Reforms in the Ministry of Health reduced medicine costs and improved access. The launch of the ProZorro digital procurement system brought transparency to public tenders. Earlier this year, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) began developing a comprehensive new Anti-Corruption Strategy. Throughout, an active civil society has remained central to exposing abuses and holding officials to account.

But this progress is now under threat. In mid-2025, the anti-corruption institutions NABU and SAPO came under sustained attack by the authorities. Olena Halushka of leading NGO the Anti-Corruption Action Center believes "this crackdown was triggered by one thing: NABU and SAPO got dangerously close to people within the President's circle."

On July 21, 2025, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) raided NABU's offices in sweeping operations — more than 70 searches were conducted, many without warrants, seizing case files and operational data. Two employees were placed under suspicion: Ruslan Magamedrasulov, head of a regional directorate, and undercover officer Viktor Husarov. Both were arrested the following day.

Magamedrasulov has been accused of preparing to assist the aggressor state and of planning to sell industrial hemp in Dagestan, and now faces additional accusations of tax fraud. His father faces similar accusations. Tetiana Pechonchyk, Head of the Board of NGO Human Rights Centre ZMINA, told Human Rights First, "65 -year-old Sentyabr Magamedrasulov was subjected to unnecessary checks to additionally humiliate him and put pressure on his son – he was stripped naked for inspection before the court session and was subjected to rectal examination. There were a number of searches with regard to other NABU detectives without an order of the investigating judge and numerous violations during the process. President Zelenskyy and his office are believed to be behind this persecution as NABU discovered alleged corruption in the close presidential circles."

Ruslan Magamedrasulov has been remanded in custody until at least late October. His supporters call the charges absurd and retaliatory, pointing to his investigations into individuals close to the president. In September, a Kyiv court upheld Husarov's detention.

The NABU raids came just one day before parliament passed Law No. 12414, shifting major control of NABU and SAPO to the Prosecutor General's Office. The move sparked immediate backlash. In the first major protests since Russia's full-scale invasion, citizens took to the streets in Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro, and frontline Kharkiv. The European Union and member states raised concerns, warning that EU financial aid to Ukraine depends on continued progress in transparency, judicial reform, and democratic governance. Under pressure from civil society and international partners, lawmakers reversed course within days, voting 331–0 to restore the agencies' independence. Anti-corruption activist Vitaliy Shabunin observed, "Only Ukrainians who came out with cardboard signs stopped the slide into kleptocratic authoritarianism," adding that public pressure also "forced European leaders to act."

Tetiana Pechonchyk of NGO Human Rights Centre ZMINA told Human Rights First, "Unfortunately attacks on the anti-corruption bodies and activists haven't stopped since the U-turn on the law about NABU and SAPO", adding that politically motivated cases against Shabunin, Husarov and Mahamedrasulov are ongoing. In September 2025, the SBU carried out searches targeting former NABU detectives at Ukrzaliznytsia, the state railway operator — widely seen as retribution for past corruption investigations involving state enterprises and the SBU itself. Prosecutors and investigators at the agencies describe a toxic climate: many whistleblowers have cut cooperation and detectives fear pursuing politically sensitive cases.

Highlighting the importance of the work of NABU and SAPO, Helen Hetnamenko of KhAC told Human Rights First, "There is no other law enforcement agency in Ukraine that is legally authorized to investigate high-level corruption. These are the only institutions whose creation demonstrated to top officials that, in event of violations, they would be held criminally accountable. This has strongly encouraged integrity among officials whose offences had, before the establishment of NABU, practically gone uninvestigated." The EU continues to reiterate that the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption agencies is critical for Ukraine's EU path.

The attacks on transparency persist. In August 2025, President Zelenskyy signed Bill No. 11533, restricting access to public digital registers, including real estate records long used by journalists to trace hidden assets. Civil society groups had urged him to veto the law, warning it would cripple oversight just as billions in reconstruction contracts are at stake.

HRDs also say a lack of transparency in parliamentary proceedings makes it difficult for them to monitor what legislation is being proposed, sometimes at the last minute.

Attacks on Anti-corruption Activists

In April 2024, dozens of Ukrainian NGOs and anti-corruption experts signed a call noting "a dangerous trend in the prosecution of anti-corruption activists and investigative journalists by law enforcement agencies in Ukraine, in particular, in the context of the activities of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the mobilisation campaign."

The statement, led by NGO Human Rights Centre ZMINA, noted too a "public campaign aimed at targeted discrediting of activists who expose corruption schemes, the presence of Russian citizenship of officials and their excessive enrichment also cause concern. In their rhetoric against anti-corruption officers and investigative journalists, law enforcement agencies violate the presumption of innocence and manipulate the topic of mobilization or service in the security and defense forces of Ukraine, which is particularly sensitive for society. Such rhetoric is unacceptable and deliberately shifts the focus of public attention from those involved in anti-corruption investigations to those who conduct these investigations, discrediting their activities and nullifying the results of the investigations."

IRYNA FEDORIV

Iryna Fedoriv is a prominent anti-corruption Woman Human Rights Defender (WHRD) and co-founder of NGO Holka (The Needle), based in Kyiv. She founded Holka to unite civil society, media, representatives from various branches of government, business and international partners to protect democratic values and strengthen Ukrainian statehood.

Since 2008 she has been widely known for her anti-corruption work, and has faced a series of threats, lawsuits and intimidation. For many years, she was prominent in a campaign to protect the Bilychansky forest in the suburbs of Kyiv from being sold off to developers.

In 2020, in a bizarre death threat, unknown persons affixed a memorial plaque with her photo at the entrance to the house where her apartment is located. The nameplate appeared the same day that she, together with other local activists, organized a protest called "Kotsiubynske is Kyiv" near the Parliament. She reports having received death threats and intimidating phone calls earlier; unknown persons cut the tires of her car and for some time she had armed, live-in security at her home to protect her.

She told Human Rights First that "Over the past five years, starting roughly with COVID-19 and then after the full-scale invasion, parliament has been closed to the public and to activists. Monitoring the work of MPs and carrying out advocacy campaigns has become difficult, especially now – when laws can be passed very quickly. The old tools of influencing the political system are not always effective: mass protests during wartime carry huge risks, and the president does not always respond to petitions, even when they gather 25,000 signatures."

Iryna Fedoriv with Senior Advisor Brian Dooley.

Activists such as Iryna concede that it is virtually impossible to hold elections when the country is under constant attack, but that the absence of elections contributes to a sense of unaccountability for officials.

"When the political system knows there are no elections it becomes harder to hold it accountable," said Fedoriv. "But while elections cannot be held during the war due to enormous security risks, parliament's openness can be restored – nothing prevents accrediting journalists from reputable outlets and representatives of civil society organizations and granting them access to the Verkhovna Rada [national parliament]."

DMYTRO BULAKH

Dmytro Bulakh is a well-known Ukrainian anti-corruption activist. After playing an active role in the Revolution of Dignity of 2014, he co-founded and now chairs the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center (KhAC), which investigates corruption in the region, including government officials' ties with Russia and public procurement abuses.

In 2023 KhAC and Human Rights First jointly issued a report on irregularities in wartime reconstruction contracts in Kharkiv. In 2024, KhAC along with the civic group Mezha released information on dubious contracts awarded for fortification works in Kharkiv —a story Human Rights First covered at the time. Bulakh's prominent work has made him both an influential civic figure and a frequent target of retaliation.

In August 2017, Bulakh was brutally attacked by two men near his home, leaving him with severe head trauma and broken ribs in what colleagues described as a clear attempt to intimidate him into silence. He has no doubt the attack was connected to his anti-corruption work. When Human Rights First visited him in Kharkiv in 2017, he said "I had credit cards, a phone, cash on me but they didn't try to steal anything. I reported it to the police, but there seems to be no progress in the investigation. My lawyer asked the authorities to provide protection for me but nothing's happened." Following the incident, Bulakh was visited in Kharkiv by Marie Yovanovitch, the then U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine. At the time, anti-corruption activists told Human Rights First they would welcome more visible support from the U.S. government, including regular visits by U.S. officials.

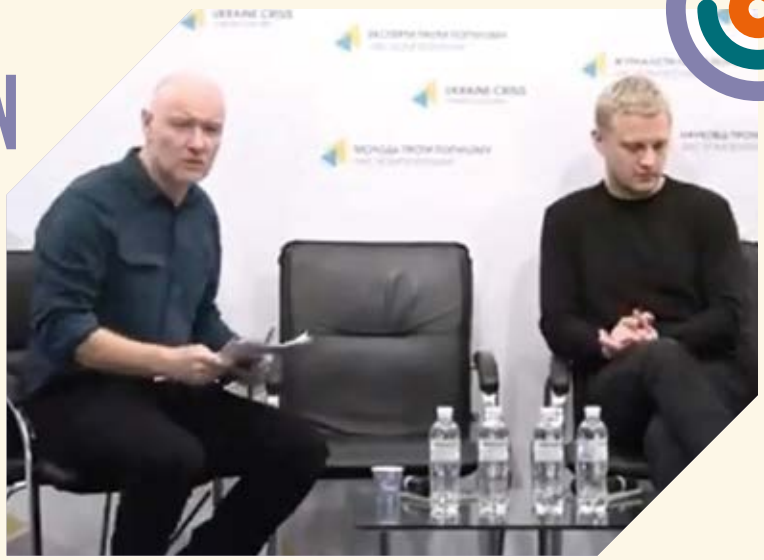
Dmytro Bulakh from the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center; Source: Gwara Media/Dmytro Bulakh's social media

In March 2024 KhAC issued a report on corruption surrounding military conscription in Kharkiv. The following month, Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) and the State Bureau of Investigations (SBI) searched Bulakh's home, car, and phone under the pretext of reviewing his military service. Bulakh had voluntarily mobilized into the ranks of the National Guard. Anti-corruption activist Daria Kaleniuk, denounced the searches as "shameful and harmful to Ukraine," warning they were intended to pressure and discredit anti-corruption activists. A coalition of civil society groups suggested the raids may have been revenge by pro-Russian forces or local corrupt officials, carried out through Ukrainian law enforcement.

In April 2024, Bulakh also discovered a video surveillance system installed across his Kharkiv apartment door.

VITALIY SHABUNIN

Vitaliy Shabunin is a leading Ukrainian anti-corruption activist and co-founder of the Anti-Corruption Action Center (AntAC). For more than a decade, he has been one of the country's most visible watchdogs, advocating for the independence of NABU and SAPO and exposing high-level graft. His prominence has made him a persistent target.



Vitaliy Shabunin from the Anti-Corruption Action Center with Senior Advisor Brian Dooley.

In 2018, Shabunin was assaulted during a rally when unknown assailants threw the caustic green antiseptic *zelyonka* into his face, causing chemical burns. Two years later, in July 2020, his Kyiv home was destroyed in an arson attack that AntAC described as an "assassination attempt". For a long time after the arson, the police did not recognize Shabunin as a victim. As of 2025, the investigation had not identified anyone involved in the arson.

Around the same time, explosive devices were placed under the apartment doors of his mother and wife's parents.

In 2025, the pressure intensified. On July 11, 2025, investigators from the State Bureau of Investigation raided the Kyiv home of Vitaliy Shabunin and his new military post in Kharkiv region, where he had been transferred only the day before. They placed him under suspicion, accusing him of evading military service, and fraud. Investigators seized Shabunin's phone, his wife's phone, and even the phones and tablets of his young children. According to his colleagues at AntAC, these searches took place without a court order, with numerous violations and no attorney involvement. A court has barred him from leaving his base.

"The context for this is a push to get Zelenskyy re-elected whenever elections come," Shabunin told Human Rights First. "Corruption before and during the war will be one of the main issues at the next elections, so it's a priority for him not to have all these corruption scandals brought up by anticorruption activists and journalists. This is why Zelenskyy would like to undermine the potential of NABU and SAPO to pursue investigations into those in his close political circle. and why he wants to target both the anti-corruption institutions and anti-corruption activists."

A group of 59 nongovernmental and civil society organizations, both inside Ukraine and abroad, have signed an open letter to Zelenskyy saying the action against Shabunin bears signs of political motivation, abuse of rights and either gross incompetence or a deliberate attack to pressure Shabunin.

Olena Halushka of AntAC explains "[t]he pressure is accompanied by a huge discreditation campaign, mostly via pro-President's office Telegram channel", adding that "[the] attacks are aimed at discrediting Shabunin and AntAC and disrupting [their] core advocacy and watchdogging activities."

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Shabunin told Human Rights First that "The authorities started targeting me and AntAC because we're the first ones to sound the alarm when the government attacks NABU and SAPO. We did it during Poroshenko's presidency, and now during Zelenskyy's. We immediately inform the public in Ukraine, and western allies, about attacks on these institutions, like we did in July. By prosecuting me and some others he's sending a message to other people - if we can pursue stupid accusations against Shabunin, imagine what we can do to any of you. My prosecution is just part of the picture."

slidstvo.info

Slidstvo.Info is an independent investigative journalism outlet, founded in 2012 and led by editor-in-chief Anna Babinets. Its reporters have worked on major cross-border investigations like the *Panama Papers* and *Pandora Papers*, tracing hidden assets of Ukrainian elites and Russian oligarchs. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the outlet has also been on the frontlines of documenting war crimes and exposing disinformation networks.

Slidstvo.Info and its journalists are frequent targets of intimidation. In April 2024, reporter Yevhen Shulhat published an investigation into the unexplained wealth of a senior SBU officer. Days later, military officers approached Shulhat in a supermarket and tried to hand him a notice to report to the enlistment office. Editor-in-chief Babinets told the Committee to Protect Journalists that she considered the incident to be in retaliation to Shulhat's work, adding that "Independent journalism is attacked by security services which must fight the enemy, not reporters."

The outlet has also been targeted through cyber-attacks and legal harassment. In September 2024, it was hit with a DDoS attack that disrupted operations immediately after releasing an investigation into the Agrarian Policy Minister. In October 2023, Serhiy Semeniuk filed a SLAPP-style lawsuit against Slidstvo.Info as a blatant attempt to chill reporting. Slidstvo won the case in August 2025. Babinets has described the constant pressure to censor reporting, explaining "every now and then we feel the pressure: 'Edit this out, it spoils the image of the Armed Forces.'"

Lisa Bykova is a journalist for Slidstvo, mostly covering relevant court cases and examining public procurements where corruption is suspected. "I analyze dossiers of officials suspected of corruption, and of ties to the Russian Federation, corruption-related legislation, the dismissal of corrupt judges and prosecutors and how these decisions were investigated and made."

"My fellow investigators periodically face lawsuits, so we very carefully always fact-check everything before we publish, because officials are very ready to sue," she told Human Rights First, "And given the history with NABU and SAPO, there is a certain tension about doing this work. When I was covering a hearing of one of the NABU employees, someone took a picture of me, and many of my colleagues have also been photographed. It's meant to intimidate us."

She added, "I think overall the situation for those of us doing this sort of work has gotten worse in the last year, considering the situation with NABU and SAPO."

Other Journalists

Other journalists based in Ukraine have faced a spate of threats and intimidation.

In January 2024, prominent investigative journalist Yurii Nikolov, who uncovered the public procurement wrongdoing in the Defense Ministry under prior leadership, reported that unidentified individuals came to his home, banged on his door and threatened him. According to him, just fifteen minutes after the incident, footage from the scene appeared on an anonymous Telegram channel Kartochnyy Ofis, allegedly linked to the Presidential Office.

In February 2024, Bihus.Info published an investigation revealing that 30 members of a branch of the SBU, the Department for the Protection of National Statehood, had spied on its journalists. According to the outlet, SBU operatives planted cameras inside a hotel ahead of a private party on December 27, secretly recording staff members and later leaking footage showing the use of recreational drugs. Bihus.Info reported that hotel security cameras also captured several SBU agents entering the building before the event.

In September 2025, an employee of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) visited the home of Kyiv Independent CEO Daryna Shevchenko in an apparent attempt to gather information. Although the SBU claimed this was unrelated to the work of the media outlet, editor-in-chief Olga Rudenko stressed: "Given that Ukraine has seen cases of pressure on the media and violence against journalists in the past, we can't take any potential threats lightly. Making them public remains our best defense."

Funding volatility has become another major obstacle for Ukraine's anti-corruption actors and independent media. In 2024, Slidstvo.Info lost more than 80 percent of its funding after a major donor freeze, forcing the newsroom to cut projects and downsize staff.

In February 2025, the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED) announced it was "currently unable to access its Congressionally appropriated funds," a blow to the Kharkiv Anti-Corruption Center (KhAC). Although some funds later resumed, the unpredictability remains destabilizing.

Conclusion

Human Rights First's 2017 report on Ukraine - **Democracy in Danger** concluded that if Ukraine were to realize the spirit of the Revolution of Dignity, "it urgently needs to redouble its efforts to achieve accountability for corruption, a free media environment, and reform of the security services."

These remain priorities for Ukraine's allies to support. Leading activist Shabunin told Human Rights First "We need help from allies to win the war against Russia, but we also need their help to protect Ukraine's democracy. Western governments should publicly say they're helping Ukraine as a democratic state, and they will not tolerate the use of authoritarian tactics by the Ukrainian government."

And the ZMINA-led statement of April 2014 rightly noted, attacks on anti-corruption activists and institutions "discredit Ukraine at the international level and plays into Russian propaganda in spreading the narrative of an authoritarian and undemocratic country."

Recommendations

1. The Government of Ukraine should immediately desist from attacks on anti-corruption HRDs, activists and journalists and ensure that all threats and incidents are promptly investigated.

2. Ukraine's allies should publicly state they support Ukraine's democracy, and will not support the use of authoritarian tactics by the Ukrainian authorities.

3. Donors should properly resource the work of HRDs, activists and journalists focusing on anti-corruption work.

4. Diplomats, international NGOs, and donors should regularly meet with and visit anti-corruption HRDs, activists and journalists to witness conditions first-hand and demonstrate visible international support.

5. The U.S. Congress and other parliaments should hold hearings on attacks against HRDs in Ukraine, ensuring sustained oversight and accountability.

6. The European Union should continue to condition Ukraine's accession progress `on demonstrable anti-corruption reforms

7. Ukrainian authorities should publicly recognize the value of anti-corruption activism and consistently denounce threats and attacks against HRDs.

Human Rights First

About Human Rights First: Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization founded in 1978 to address the lack of legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers. We work alongside human rights defenders, hold human rights abusers accountable, fight for the conditions that uphold democracy, and provide tools that bring the power of AI and advanced technologies to justice and human rights movements.

Human Rights First is based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

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