

*This is an excerpt from 'Institution Rebuilding and Strengthening: Imagining a Stronger Ukraine' by Justin Angelo, December 2022*

Issues with progress are expansive, with it impacting internal accountability as well as international achievement. As Ukraine looks to join the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), addressing anti-corruption is crucial. While Sweden and Finland have had a comparably easy path to NATO membership, Ms. Nuland, a State Department undersecretary, said on potential NATO membership, “That conversation would be slightly different than it is with countries that are making the transition to democratic systems and dealing with intensive problems of corruption and economic reform and democratic stability...” (Wong, Jakes 2022). If Ukraine wants to achieve membership in international organizations, increased anti-corruption measures are essential, and working toward international aspirations will also address those internal shortcomings. Putting anti-corruption measures into perspective, a recent report found that 2,565 people were investigated for criminal corruption offenses in Ukraine, and separately 3,650 cases resulted in indictments, but only 766 people were convicted. Of those 766, only 53 were imprisoned to serve a sentence (Shostko 2020, 231). These numbers reveal an institutional inability to punish corruption or remove corrupt actors from the political system.

The inability of institutions to uphold accountability, in conjunction with the court case that stripped power away from the anti-corruption agency, poses a threat to institutional strength. Some of the possible fixes to this issue are offered by the European Commission report; They explain that increasing investigative effectiveness and finally appointing the head of the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office are within the power of those in government. These actions will help address corruption and move Ukraine closer to EU membership which could provide further oversight and resources to increase anti-corruption efforts (Opinion on the EU Membership Application 2022).

Another avenue to combat corruption is to reform the primary source for its prevalence—the Ukrainian election system. While Ukraine can confidently have pride in an election system that generally reflects the will of the people and when supported, transparently counts votes, certain institutional processes can make it susceptible to abuse from authoritarian leaders and political parties who attempt to game the system in their favor. In addressing election shortcomings, it is important to note just how influential they are in Ukraine, with a focus on the presidential election. Yes—elections establish who governs, but the process can be co-opted to sway voters. According to recent numbers, the government provides 2.5 million jobs, 10 percent of the Ukrainian electorate. With such a sizable portion of the electorate dependent on the government, it can be assumed that a strategy to coerce these voters would have a monumental impact on elections. This fact only increases the need to reform the election system and implement anti-corruption strategies (D'Anieri 2011, 39). Additionally, public mistrust continues to be a substantial issue in Ukraine that election reform could resolve. A report from the Razumkov Centre for Economic and Political Studies described corruption as the biggest threat to Ukraine's democracy—corruption perpetuated by easily rig-able election systems, bribery, and party politics (Kuzio 2012, 430). This further promotes election reform to strengthen Ukrainian trust and the political system.