

Trump Signs Holocaust Property Law That Has Angered Poland

By The Associated Press

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WARSAW, Poland — U.S. President Donald Trump has signed an act that Jewish groups praise as helpful in their efforts to reclaim lost property in Poland but which the Polish government says is discriminatory.

The White House says Trump signed the Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today — or JUST — Act. It requires the State Department to report to Congress on what steps dozens of countries in Europe have taken to compensate Holocaust survivors or their heirs for assets seized under Nazi German and Communist rule.

The law does not give the U.S. any powers to act against any country and does not single out Poland. But Poland is the only country in Europe that has not passed legislation to compensate former owners for assets seized in the upheavals of 20th-century European history, and Warsaw sees itself as the target of the law.

A spokesman for Polish President Andrzej Duda reacted by saying that Poland should not be expected to pay compensation for losses and damages caused by Nazi Germany, which initiated World War II and brutally occupied Poland.

Krzysztof Lapinski said the U.S. act "can be dangerous in the sense that claims can be formulated" and that diplomatic talks should address the issue.

The Nazis' seizure of Jewish-owned property in Poland during the war and the murder of most of Poland's Jewish population was followed after the war by the Communist state's seizure of large amounts of property that was nationalized. Most of the original owners of that property were not Jewish.

Since the fall of communism, some claimants have regained lost property on a case-by-case basis through courts, but so far Poland has not passed comprehensive legislation regulating the process. That has created a situation that has been riddled by fraud.

Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz says he believes the U.S. pressure through the JUST Act unfairly sets Jewish claimants above non-Jewish ones, creating tensions in Poland. He argued that Polish law treats all Polish citizens equally.

"This position of the (U.S.) Congress is not good because it wants some privileges for the Jews, for the Jewish community, but not for the Poles. I think that the Poles who live in the U.S. may feel hurt by that," Czaputowicz told The Associated Press.

He said some non-Jewish Poles fought against Nazi Germany and then settled in the United States, leaving behind property that was seized by the Communist regime.

"Their property here remains without any settlement and nobody speaks on their behalf, only on the behalf of the Jews. That is not good because that divides our society," Czaputowicz added.

The World Jewish Restitution Organization said Thursday that Czaputowicz was wrong in describing the JUST Act as discriminatory, saying that it covers "both Holocaust victims and other victims of Nazi persecution."

Gideon Taylor, WJRO Chair of Operations, also argued that legislation Poland's ruling party presented last year promising some compensation to some victims would have "excluded the vast majority of Holocaust survivors and their families."

The legislation is being re-written.

"(We) have long advocated for the passage of legislation that would provide restitution to all property owners whose property was wrongfully taken — both Jewish and non-Jewish owners," Taylor said.