

The Law of Goodwill reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia

Some Questions and Answers

General information

- On February 10, 2022, Latvian Saeima passed the law "On Goodwill Reimbursement to the Jewish Community of Latvia"
- Now the Law has to be signed and published by the President of Latvia.
- The Law envisages disbursement of 40 million Euros to the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund (Latvijas ebreju kopienas restitūcijas fonds – LEKOREF) over a period of 10 years, starting from 2023.

Some historical background

- Unlike in countries of Western and Central Europe, private property in Latvia was nationalized by Soviet Union after occupation of Latvia in June 1940, a year before Nazi invasion.
- After Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany in July 1941 the Nazis didn't have to nationalize any property – it was already done.
- Of the 93,000 Jews that lived in Latvia before World War II, 73,000 perished in the Holocaust.
- Because of the Holocaust many Jewish communities in Latvian could not be reestablished after Latvia regained independence in 1991.
- Today, there are Jewish communities in 9 cities in Latvia, while in 1940 there were Jewish communities on more than 40 localities in Latvia.

Restoration of independence and restitution

- Latvia regained independence in August 1991.
- After restoration of independence a number of laws were passed to restore nationalized property to their rightful owners and their heirs. These laws were very liberal and were meant to facilitate and maximize restitution of properties to their owners and their heirs.
- Application for restitution had to be submitted till 1996 and all cases were resolved by early 2000s.
- Special laws were passed regarding the restitution of properties of religious denominations. Some 35 religious and communal properties were returned to the Jewish community under these laws.
- However, because of the Holocaust, a large number of religious and communal property could not be reclaimed in places where there now are no more Jewish communities.

What is this Law about?

- The Law reimburses the Jewish Community of Latvia for the religious, communal and heirless properties that could not be reclaimed because of the Holocaust.
- Based on information available in Latvian archives, the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities compiled a list of communal and religious properties in more than 30 cities in Latvia that were not returned to the community during restitution process.
- Also, based on archival data, was identified heirless properties in Riga and Jurmala.
- Based on the tax value of €47 million of these properties Latvian Council of Jewish Communities submitted a request to receive €40 million as a goodwill reimbursement.

What can we spend the monies on?

Article 6 of the Law stipulates purposes the monies can be used on:

(1) The financial resources allocated to the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund by the annual State budget law shall be used for the implementation of measures and projects of the Jewish Community in Latvia, including:

- restoration and preservation of the Latvian Jewish cultural and historical heritage;
- support for the Latvian Council of Jewish Communities and other organizations of the Jewish community in Latvia;
- for the management of the property of the Jewish Community of Latvia;
- to support those museums in Latvia, whose work is aimed at researching the Jewish community of Latvia in all its aspects and the history of the Holocaust at the territory of Latvia (Museum “Jews in Latvia”, Riga Ghetto and Latvian Holocaust Museum, Žanis Lipke Memorial, Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, etc.);
- for the financing of events and projects related to religion, culture, education, science, health care, history, sport, charity;
- for the maintenance and improvement of Holocaust memorial sites;
- to promote cohesion, unity and development of civil society of Latvia.

(2) The monies may also be used for the provision of social and material assistance to survivors of the Holocaust in Latvia who now live outside of Latvia.

How will the monies be distributed?

- The monies will be allocated in annual state budgets starting from 2023.
- All monies will be deposited at the State Treasury of Latvia.
- All decisions about allocation of financing will be made the Council of the Latvian Jewish Community Restitution Fund (Foundation).
- The Council will have 5 members representing international Jewish organizations - American Jewish Committee (AJC), World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO), American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), European Jewish Congress (EJC), Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, and 6 members from the Latvian Jewish community, as well as a representative from the Ministry of Finances, controlling the transparency of all allocations.

- As mandated by the Law, before monies can be spent, the Foundation has to establish procedures for:
 - Informing about the availability of funds;
 - Processes of submitting applications for funding;
 - Process for decision on allocation of funding for various purposes;
 - Requirements for reporting on the use of funding provided;
 - On top of usual accounting and reporting the Foundation will have to inform the public and Ministry of Finance about the projects that support has been provided for.

Some questions and answers

- Will any of the monies be distributed to individuals?

Yes, the monies can be used to support former Latvian citizens, who survived the Holocaust in Latvia and today live in Latvia or outside of Latvia.

- Can this be seen as a compensation to the Holocaust survivors and the Jewish community for their suffering under Nazis?

No, this is the part of restitution/denationalization process, and has to do with the issue of property, not the issue of fate during the Holocaust.

- Will the monies be used to reimburse individuals for properties that were not claimed under the laws of restitution?

The calculation of the reimbursement is based on unreturned religious, communal, and heirless properties, and does not include properties that were not claimed or that were returned during restitution – so the answer is ‘No’.

This Law once and for all settles the issue of unreturned and unclaimed Jewish property in Latvia.

- Will the monies be used only for the benefit of the Jewish community of Latvia?

Anyone, researching Jewish community, or the history of the Holocaust at the territory of Latvia (including the genocide of the Roma and other Nazi crimes), or implementing within the Jewish community the projects related to religion, culture, education, science, health care, history, sport, charity, would be able to apply.

We plan to work with public organizations, institutions and individuals of all ethnic and religious backgrounds to support activities that consolidate Latvian society.