

The question of how to redress the wrongful confiscation of property by the Nazi and communist regimes is one of the most complex issues the Helsinki Commission has ever examined. These seizures took place over decades; they were part of the modus operandi of repressive, totalitarian regimes; and they affected millions of people. The passage of time, border changes, and population shifts are only a few of the things that make the wrongful property seizures of the past such difficult problems to address today.

But, while I recognize that many obstacles stand in the way of righting these past wrongs, I do not believe that these challenges make property restitution or compensation impossible. On the contrary, I believe much more should have been done--and can still be done now.

The Czech Republic continues to have an anti-American restitution framework that singles out for exclusion all those who found refuge from Nazism or communism in this country. Romania's effort to pass and implement property restitution laws has revealed nothing less than a rule-of-law crisis in that country. And Poland's inability even to pass a law that provides for private property restitution or compensation stands out as a singular failure. I hope today's briefing will not only shed light on these problem areas, but help point the way towards a resolution of them.

Thus far, the Helsinki Commission has convened three hearings on property restitution and compensation issues, most recently in July of last year. Today's briefing will give us an opportunity to revisit this important subject and hear about the progress in the various countries--or lack thereof--since we received last year's testimony.

Finally, I want to give special thanks to the Department of State's Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, Ambassador Randolph M. Bell, for his contribution to this briefing. I was privileged to be with him in June at the OSCE's Conference on Anti-Semitism and can bear testimony to his deep personal dedication to these issues. The Commission benefits tremendously from his command of this complex issue, his sensitivity to specific nature and dimension of the problems in various countries, and his perspective on these issues.