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Impact of World War I on the Division of Slovene Territory and on the Fate of the Slovene Nation

(Special session of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation, Hofburg, Vienna, May 30, 2018)

Your Excellencies,

Allow me to begin by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to speak at this high-level meeting. I would like to remind you that I am not a diplomat but a historian, and that as such I am committed to greater criticism and directness than is usually seen in diplomacy.

What I am about to say are my own assessments and opinions, and not the opinions of my country. Please, see them as a starting point for a constructive debate, which Europe and the world need now more than ever.

World War I affected Slovenes as individuals and as a nation. They died at the fronts, and in the rear, in exile, and in internment on a massive scale. The front ran through a part of Slovene territory, leaving devastation in its wake. War, famine, infectious diseases, calls for mobilisation, and news of death were part of the wartime daily routine. Tens of thousands of people on both sides of the Isonzo Front were displaced to various camps throughout Italy, Austria and Hungary. A few ten thousand Slovene soldiers fell for a country in which they were unequal, but they defended it because by doing so – at least at the Isonzo Front – they were also defending Slovene territory. Nationally conscious Slovenes were arrested by Austrian authorities, sent to confinement or prison, while several tens of them were sentenced to death and shot.

On the other hand, the war led to the unstoppable growth of woman's emancipation in a conservative Slovene Society.

International circumstances offered Slovenes a choice between two extremes: the London Pact, concluded between Italy and the Entente Powers on 26 April 1915, which, in addition to the territories of other nations and states, left a third of the ethnically mixed or entirely Slovene territory and almost a quarter of the population to Italy; and the idealist points written by the President of the USA Wilson in January 1918, which promised Austro-Hungarian nations the right to autonomous development. After the failed attempts to save the Habsburg Monarchy, at the end of the war Slovene politicians chose the Yugoslav option.

The large states, which were, directly or indirectly, deciding the fate of Slovenes did not know much about them. The French were the most informed, as they had retained a bit of diplomatic memory from the time of Napoleon's Illyrian Provinces. French diplomatic sources show that they recognised Slovenes as a special nation, especially in the places where they had men in the field due to demarcation issues. Reports from the French embassy in Vienna, from the consulate in Trieste, and from their representatives in international commissions show good familiarisation with the situation and with the special characteristics of Slovenes. Nevertheless, they considered Slovenes a peasant nation and the Germans the ruling nation, which was culturally and economically more developed. The Yugoslav political elite and diplomacy saw the French as the only true allies in international relations, especially when it came to resolving border problems. Even though the course of events and the Treaty of Versailles prevented the realisation of the London Pact, the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was pressured by British and French diplomacy to adopt most of its provisions in the so-called Treaty of Rapallo which proved to be devastating for Slovenes.

During World War I and at its end, the USA for the first time became involved in international politics, which were dominated by old imperial powers. It did so in a very idealistic way, which turned out to be to the detriment of Slovenes. President Wilson, a university professor, relied on a young and inexperienced group, formed *ad hoc* – The Inquiry, which came to the Paris Peace Conference with opinions already worked out. It had hardly any knowledge of Slovenes as a “non-historical nation”. Colonel Edward House, Wilson's closest confidant, was especially fond of Italians and fascinated by their culture. After learning a few things about Slovenes, Americans were of the opinion that they were merely complaining and were not ready to do anything on their own.

Russia, just as all other large states, was pursuing imperial goals. The defeats of the Central Powers on the Eastern Front briefly strengthened the diplomatic power of the then tsarist Russia, which started to actively intervene in the South Slavic situation within Austria-Hungary and outside it. On the other hand, it was under great pressure from the German army, which is why it was in Russia's best interest for Italy to join the war and unburden the Eastern Front. Therefore, the western part of Slovenia was mere change in a much larger bargain, which was to ensure Italy's entry into the war and in the end hand Bosphorus and the Dardanelles with Istanbul over to tsarist Russia.

The crucial role in the London Pact and the splitting up of Slovenes was probably held by Great Britain. The long-time liberal Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith (until 1916) strove to conclude the London Pact. His contemporaries viewed Asquith's conduct prior to and during the war as irresponsible and dangerous to the state, which has been corroborated by historical assessments. He, on the other hand, was imbued with an admiration for Italy, while living a luxurious life, completely severed from the reality of war and the situation of the common British person. In that time Slovenes as a nation were not yet visible on the horizon of British politics, even though it was using their territories for bargaining. The first political study on Slovenes by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office was prepared as late as in January 1919.

Thus, the fate of Slovenes after World War I was decided in the context of (secret) international treaties, various bargains in the context of the Paris Peace Conference, doubts in Slovene national vitality, and prejudice towards Slovenes. As one of the politicians of that time, the Croat Franjo Supilo, emotionally phrased, the Great Powers saw Slovenes as a “corpse”. The result was that they were divided among four countries; the only one in which they were able to strengthen themselves as a nation was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes or the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The unfavourable foreign policy, the powerlessness and ineptness of Slovene politicians, and the disinterest of the Serbian or new Yugoslav authorities resulted in the fact that Italy was given the western part of Slovene territory, namely the Littoral region, while its northern part, Carinthia, was lost at a plebiscite due to poor propaganda and other reasons. Slovenes were faced with a new reality: they were living in four countries with different political systems, all of them based on authoritarianism and not in favour of Slovenes, nationally speaking. Over one-third of Slovenes remained outside their motherland and Slovenia lost Trieste, which had an Italian majority but was also inhabited by 57,000 Slovenes and with a Slovene hinterland. With this it lost its strongest intellectual centre, which drew its power from multiculturalism, and simultaneously lost its only real industrial centre and access to the sea.

Your Excellencies! My lecture is, of course, not meant as a form of national self-pity and indignation at the conduct of the then Great Powers. In subsequent development, Slovenia won its place in the sun and joined the small circle of today’s sovereign nations.

The question arises as to which lessons and parallels we can – if we can – draw from World War I. Among the many, I will pick two or three, which I find the most important.

The war was not meant as a world war. Historians are unable to pinpoint where a conscious decision about it was made, because there wasn’t one. The world was drifting into war step by step, until it became unmanageable. It began with local wars over territories and geostrategic influence, which were the results of secret treaties and pacts between the Great Powers. Even today it is believed that the interests of individual countries can be controlled with local wars and *ad hoc* coalitions, past the existing international organisations that were created precisely because of the horrifying experience of the two world wars. And, of course, by possessing much more destructive weapons than were known back then. General headquarters plan wars, whereas politicians often strive to use the accumulated weapons, especially in chaotic circumstances and in the absence of effective international mechanisms. “The statesmen became the prisoners of their own weapons. The great armies, accumulated to provide security and preserve the peace, carried the nations to war by their own weight,” as the historian J. P. Taylor once said.

Since the atrocities of war had to be justified, modern propaganda was born. It was based on chauvinism, which had been transposed to the relations between European nations from the colonies, and on false and distorted data; today we would call it “fake news”. As interpreted by politicians, the war was fought to defend our democratic, “good”, higher civilisation against their “barbaric”, “primitive”, undemocratic one. Even today, international tensions and wars are started by giving false and distorted data, while the propaganda has been multiplied through social networks and other modern means.

Politics and diplomacy were utterly alienated from the real world, living in their own closed-off world and in their own notions. This is especially true to the crowned heads of that time. That triggered not only World War I, but also social revolts of great proportions, the biggest one being the Russian Revolution. Today, in an attempt to win votes, politicians try to relate to voters and shake their hands, communicate with them via Internet networks but in their *forma mentis* they resemble the politicians from the time of World War I. The present-day ruling political and economic elites are likewise alienated from the people.

World War I divided Europe into a multitude of nation-states with unfairly or poorly demarcated borders, which in itself carried the seeds of World War II. In the newly-formed states it created minorities of millions of people, who were unable to attain equality. Processes of ethnic cleansing began; in the next world war these processes led to ethnically pure states. Slovenia is a typical example of this: before World War I, at the time of Austria-Hungary, all of the provinces populated by Slovenes, except for one, that is Carniola, were ethnically mixed. Today, Slovenia is more than 80% ethnically homogeneous. In the Balkans, borders are still one of the worst problems; in the decades to come, they will continue to serve as grounds for countries in that area not being admitted to the EU. Two of the countries which have joined the EU, Slovenia and Croatia, brought their dispute along as baggage. On the other hand, the Slovenian-Italian border, which survived the dissolution of Yugoslavia, is the result of the formation and operation of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1972 or of the so-called Helsinki Accords of 1975. Namely, a result of the organisation you represent nowadays. According to Accords the borders since then should never be changed by force, and the Yugoslav-Italian arrangement was the first example to show this.

According to Christopher Clark in his influential book *Sleepwalkers*, the only difference between the situation prior to World War I and the situation today is that we now have international security organisations such as OSCE, which may prevent a new war catastrophe of unimaginable proportions. Millions of Europeans and other nations hope that you will succeed in doing just that. Thank you.