Over a period of many years, Federal Yugoslavia appeared to be the ideal model for the treatment of national questions in south-eastern Europe following the fall of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, which gave birth to several multinational successor states. For many years it made possible a peaceful coexistence between its peoples, especially between the Serbs and Croats.

Mutual relations between these two peoples would be decisive for the outcome of Yugoslavia, although they would be scarred until 1945 by two sources of antagonism. After 1918, two different approaches towards ‘Yugoslavism’ competed with each other; on the one hand, Croatian elites preached a decentralized federal state structure that would be respectful of national particularities, whilst, on the other, the Serbian monarchy strove to create a united and centralized ‘nation-state’ akin to the French model. The abolition of the Constitution in 1929, in favour of a royal dictatorship, left the Croatian elites with a feeling of deep frustration, despite the significant degree of autonomy that had been accorded to Croatia in 1939.

The other source of antagonism stemmed from the racist policies of the Ustaša in the ‘Independent State of Croatia’ (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska), created in 1941 in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion and occupation of Yugoslavia. This state would encompass approximately the whole of present-day...
Croatia, with the exception of Dalmatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Given that issues of national identity in Eastern and Central Europe have often resulted in either the displacements or expulsion of populations, all in the name of the desired and often compulsory homogenization of a territory, the Ustaša régime tragically resorted to the systematic massacre of Jews, Roma and above all Serbs.3

The federal system implemented in 1945 succeeded in soothing tensions between Serbs and Croats and assured the other peoples of Yugoslavia that they would enjoy rights which had been unknown in the previous Yugoslav monarchy. This was in part thanks to the monolithic nature of the communist régime and its capacity for repression, and also to its legitimacy, which had been acquired during the period of partisan resistance, whose ideology surpassed the antagonisms of all Yugoslav peoples.

Nevertheless, the first pluralistic elections, held separately in the different federal Republics in 1990, resulted in the coming to power of politicians who preached nationalism and even independence. Slovenia and Croatia both declared their independence in June 1991; this was ratified, first by Germany, then by the EU in January 1992. The recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia ensued respectively in April 1992 and in April 1993, with the dismemberment of Yugoslavia being brought about through armed conflict.

With hindsight the failure of the federal model seemed to have been inevitable. Pinpointing its reasons seems to be all the more important as it inevitably conditioned the political and institutional choices of the newly emerged successor states. It casts doubt upon the political exercise of citizenship, since this depends upon the institutional framework, the political attitudes of the communist régime and the standpoint of citizens themselves in the given context.