


Truth commissions as reconciliation roulette

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CM Guest Columnist

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By Christalla Yakinthou

Former Foreign Minister Erato Kozakou-Markoullis wrote an open message on Facebook on August 16 apologising for the murders of more than 200 Turkish Cypriots in the villages of Aloa, Maratha, Sandalaris and Tochni in August 1974 by EOKA B and the lack of accountability for these crimes even after 42 years. It was a response to the funerals the previous day of 33 people from Tochni who were murdered and 'disappeared', and which investigative journalist *Sevgül Uludağ* has bravely written about extensively, and for many years.

Kozakou-Markoullis has received both criticism and support for her apology. What she did, though, was to create another space for discussion in Greek Cypriot society about the open silences regarding the years between 1960 and 1974.

Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akıncı had also previously said that Greek Cypriots have their own suffering – and this acknowledgement was important for Greek Cypriots to hear. Many Greek Cypriots appreciated that gesture from Akıncı as the first real sign of a possible rapprochement between the victims of violence in both the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. It was one of the first times that many people outside of the existing bicomunal non-government organisation (NGO) framework had heard the 'other' acknowledge their suffering; Kozakou-Markoullis' apology builds on this.

But such apologies also create fear. People fear that if we apologise for our violence, it risks taking away our own legitimate suffering because the story may not be as clean as we have been telling it, or that our own suffering will be forgotten in the zero-sum game of politics. In reality though, war is not clean, and we will be reminded as we go along that extremists were also neighbours of the people killed, and we will have to learn, as a country regardless of the division, how to reconcile that. But the history of modern acknowledgement and apology for crimes of war (the German apology, the Australian apology, the South African apologies) has never made the community apologising smaller – in fact, it makes them braver, more open, more human.

Similarly, it can open a space for listening, which is important. Of understanding that my pain is not greater than your pain, and that right now at this moment you are suffering and I acknowledge it. That my loss is not undermined by your loss. We *both* suffer. What we have in Cyprus is a lack of feeling for the pain of others, and this is a result of the conflict, where people needed to protect themselves. It is an expected byproduct of trauma and violence.

But to build understanding is to build a safer society. And regardless of whether or not you agree with this (or any other) peace plan, don't we all want to live in a society where we feel safe?

Islandwide we have our open silences, our understandings that we don't like to talk about. Kozakou-Markoullis and others have been calling for a truth and reconciliation commission similar to the South African model in the hope that the truth of the past will bring reconciliation. While it's possible that a truth commission may well be beneficial in Cyprus, there is also a very real, and concerning, possibility that it won't. Most of the expertise on truth and reconciliation commissions – people who have worked in them in their own and other people's countries – are not sure that a truth and reconciliation commission solves a community's problems. If we look at Tunisia, the most recent truth commission and the one that has benefitted from the very best knowledge from all over the world, it is stumbling, and there is already a great deal of cynicism within society about it. It is on unsteady ground, and it came with the best learning, followed best practice, and with the most genuine will.

The thing is that truth commissions can become *performances* of truth, and they run a huge risk of bringing their own problems. In Tunisia, and in almost every other context, truth commissions have been divided by politics, and this has hurt victims and also discredited the work of the commission. Perhaps in Cyprus we will be able to get past the political and design flaws, and get it right. But this encourages a game of reconciliation roulette. It's also possible that there are other ways to tell our truths, ways that still get us to where we want to be, and that acknowledge and hold space open for suppressed stories to be heard, but that don't sink under the extraordinary pressure and expectations placed on them.

What is more important is that we first think about what our problems are, and *then* design solutions to meet these problems. The political leaders – and all people involved – need to listen first, and then propose. All stakeholders need to be included. Give space to families of the missing on all sides to say what they want – as individuals, quietly and in safety, without sensationalism. Be aware that not all families may want to disclose or hear such truths in this format. They may want or need other things as well, or instead. Give space to the displaced and victims of violence to say what they want. Listen to the journalists and activists who have been making sense of our schizophrenic histories, because they have decades behind them of asking themselves these questions. Don't propose, listen. The island's future should be a collaborative process.

Second, we need to know that truth doesn't always lead to reconciliation. In South Africa, some victims forgave, but others did not. Many victims felt forced to forgive their perpetrators, because it was a truth *and reconciliation* commission. The truth did not always set them free, and they felt that perpetrators did not receive justice. Though some felt closure, many more victims left feeling betrayed, not reconciled. We want to avoid this in Cyprus, and we can do this only if we are more honest with what we are trying to do.

While we can learn from the experiences of other countries, we should learn from their failures as well as from their successes. The field's best experts are talking about the importance of *multiperspectivity* – understanding the tapestry of stories that exist in our societies – rather than a final single truth, that will bring us “peace”.

We have to build something that works for our country and our shared *and* divided experiences. For this, we cannot just start with politicians proposing commissions alone. Instead we need to start with listening open-mindedly to what victims and survivors want – or don't want; to hear what people hope for, and what they fear. And we need to talk to, ask questions of, and listen to people who have been doing this work for years. To take their advice, instead of creating a format first, and then looking for support.

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