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Narratives of conflict

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When we talk about narratives, we define it as the spoken or written account of connected events, which could be real or imagined, that provide a chain of events that are recounted to others and especially to future generations.

In intractable conflicts, a certain narrative of the conflict is created, which nurtures a separate collective memory by each party to the conflict that tries to legitimize the cause of one side against the cause of the other side. Such collective memory is considered as the sole and undeniable truth, which is passed on to succeeding generations through history books, literature and other narratives.

In most cases such narratives are not telling the whole truth, they are biased and selective, thus distorting historical accounts, by omitting facts or past events, or by putting emphasis on other events which tend to justify the group's actions. Usually an image is created that each group is the victim, while the other is the oppressor, the culprit. There is also an effort to justify and glorify the actions of one group while vilifying and delegitimizing the actions of the other group.

Such separate narratives and selective memories tend to perpetuate a conflict situation, preventing healing of the wounds of past sufferings and serving as a barrier towards eventual reconciliation. This is why it is of utmost importance in situations of intractable conflicts, for the parties involved to move courageously towards uncovering and facing the truth in order to facilitate the process of reconciliation, which is built when both sides not only get to know but when they truly acknowledge what happen in the past and are able to acknowledge also the pain and the suffering of the other.

In Cyprus we have been suffering for too long from such selective amnesia. Speaking first about the Greek Cypriot community, despite certain sporadic admissions by a handful of Greek Cypriot politicians about crimes committed by extremists of our side against innocent civilians of the Turkish Cypriot community,

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especially during the period of the intercommunal conflict but in the summer of 1974, the overall narrative is characterized by the victimhood and the suffering of the Greek Cypriot community alone. A whole generation of Greek Cypriots has grown up without knowing either about these crimes that resulted in the disappearance of innocent civilians and the killing in cold blood of a score of others whose only fault was that they happened to belong in the other community, or about the displacement and the hardships suffered by so many of our Turkish Cypriot compatriots.

At the same time within the Turkish Cypriot community, the selective amnesia is all the more pronounced, by putting sole emphasis on the period of the intercommunal conflict and totally ignoring the suffering of the Greek Cypriot community as a result of the Turkish invasion and ongoing occupation. The labelling of the invasion as a “peace operation” and the celebrations surrounding that tragic anniversary, constitutes an insult to injury for the victims of the Turkish atrocities, for the families of the missing persons and those brutally killed by the invading forces or by Turkish Cypriot extremists, as well as for the thousands of displaced persons and dispossessed owners who were forcibly expelled from their ancestral homes.

These separate narratives continue to foster division and mistrust. Only through the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the recounting of verbal memories of violence and trauma on the part of the victims or their relatives, could the truth be revealed, which in turn would have healing effects and move the two communities towards reconciliation, fostering unity, forgiveness and building a lasting peace for our conflict ravaged common homeland and people.
