

The Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence, and Non-repetition, also known as the Colombian Truth Commission (the 'Commission' hereafter), was established by presidential decree in 2017 as a component of a peace treaty that ended more than fifty years of armed conflict between the state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Juan Manuel Santos, who served as defence minister during the escalation of conflicts in the 2000s, had a sudden change of heart after being elected president in 2012, dedicating his political career to building peace in the country. This was unquestionably the first and most important decision on the long road to the Commission. The Commission was initially supported by the executive branch, but things did not go so well when Iván Duque, an opponent of the peace process, was elected president in 2018. The Commission, which has been operating under extremely difficult conditions, is likely to be accorded the prominence and credit it deserves only after the election of leftist candidate Gustavo Petro as president in the summer of 2022.

Fernando de Roux, the chairman of the 11-member group, was a Jesuit priest noted for his efforts in peace and development in conflict-affected areas. The Commission includes representatives from law, medicine, architecture, and academia, in addition to human rights defenders. While the Commission consisted of six men and five women, two members died while the group was working, prompting the appointment of additional members. One of the Commission's members, retired Major Carlos Ospina, resigned two months before the final report was released, claiming that the Commission was harsher on state security forces than on FARC members – an assertion that is not supported by the fact that the Commission's final report describes the FARC's human rights violations in extraordinary detail. Between 2018 and 2021, the Commission worked actively, listening to almost 30,000 persons. It had to deal with state officials' attempts to impede its work, as well as a disinformation campaign on social media by former politicians.

### The Main Goal of the Commission was to Reveal the Truth

The Commission's primary goals, as its name implies, were to uncover the truth about human rights abuses that occurred during the internal conflict and to contribute to the political and cultural reconciliation necessary to prevent similar violations in the future. The special jurisdiction system, which outlined the criteria under which members of the security forces and armed organizations may be tried, was another component of the peace deal that

permitted the commission to operate completely independently of the judiciary.<sup>[1]</sup> In other words, it was clear from the start that the Commission's findings would not be admissible in court. While this severed the connection between the findings and the criminal justice system, it also eliminated the potential legal issues that other commissions had faced, such as violation of the principle of presumption of innocence or self-incrimination by confessors. In this way, the Commission completed its task of uncovering the truth without regard to legal issues or expectations.<sup>[2]</sup>

The first three chapters of the Commission's final report were presented at a ceremony with the theme "There is Future if There is Truth" on June 28, 2022, in Bogotá. Interestingly, while the head of the Commission handed the report to Petro, who had been elected president nine days before the ceremony, Duque, who was still in office at the time, did not even attend the ceremony. In some ways, with less than a month until his inauguration, Petro used the ceremony to demonstrate his commitment to confronting the past, which reinforced the belief that the Commission's findings and recommendations would be taken seriously by the executive power in the future.

An often repeated joke in the media in the days leading up to the report's presentation ceremony was that no one who praised or criticized the report had read it in full. The most important reason for this is that the report is extremely detailed and, therefore, long. The three chapters presented at the ceremony amount to about 1,475 pages of reading. The entire report has ten thematic issues. The stories of those who witnessed the violence are given in "When the Birds Didn't Sing". "My Body is My Truth" focuses on the experiences of women and LGBTQ+. Other chapters discuss the historical dimension of the armed conflict, violations of human rights and international conflict law, means of resistance during the conflict, ethnic minorities' experiences, regional experiences during the internal conflict, exiles, and children. The final chapter summarizes the Commission's findings and makes a number of recommendations for rebuilding society. Another volume published by the Commission is named "Call for Proposals for Big Peace", which also has an English version.

The Commission's key recommendations include the establishment of a ministry of peace and reconciliation, the establishment of an independent museum of collective memory, the government's respect for the right to peaceful protest, and the implementation of political reforms, particularly in the justice system. In essence, the Commission's recommendations

are not dissimilar to both the experience of past commissions and the recommendations for long-term peace made in Colombia since the peace process began in 2012. In the case of Colombia, one notable recommendation is to shift the fight against drugs away from the politics of prohibition and security.

### Effective Use of Social Media in an Unprecedented Manner

The Commission recognized that a final report of thousands of pages would be difficult for society to respond to, and it generated alternative content. The Commission's ability to reach out to young people, in particular, is truly remarkable. First of all, it should be noted that perhaps the most significant feature that distinguishes this Commission from the previous ones is its very effective use of digital technologies and social media. Since the early days, it has had a YouTube channel and official Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok accounts. These accounts mainly promote the work of the Commission, but they also provide a platform for wider discussion through user comments. Particularly the TikTok account reflects the creativity of the young people supporting the work of the Commission. A television station broadcasting in and around Bogotá has a program called *In the Mirror*, which presents news about the Commission. The program, which presents highly serious and solemn themes in a casual and sometimes even humorous manner in order to catch the attention of young people, is also available on YouTube. The Commission is also active in formal education. Educational modules explaining the findings and recommendations to children were promoted through the 'School Embraces Truth' campaign spearheaded by the new education minister Alejandro Gaviria. More than 4,300 schools participated in the campaign, which started in mid-August.

The fact that foreign parties were pivotal in both the war and peace processes informed the Commission's public relations strategy. Two weeks after the report was presented in Colombia, Commission President De Roux presented the final report, this time to the United Nations Security Council plenary session. In his speech, De Roux pointed to the problematic security approach of the United States of America (USA), which has provided decades of military aid to the Colombian state, particularly in the fight against drugs, and stated that he would like to see Colombia no longer as a place warmongers profit, but as a country recognized around the world for peace and reconciliation. The Commission presented its findings and recommendations three weeks later in Mexico, where a truth commission may

also be established. To summarize, the Commission worked closely with civil society organizations and, at times, government officials in Latin America, Europe, and the United States both when it was actively gathering information and presenting its final report.

The future of the Commission will largely be determined by political processes. The Petro administration's vision of 'full peace', which has been articulated from day one, is being realized through peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), the last major anti-state armed organization active in the country, and is also closely linked to the acceptance of the Commission's findings and recommendations at the highest level. The aim is to eliminate not only violence but also the economic, political, and social inequalities that enable it. On the other hand, the right-wing opposition, which is opposed to the peace process and, of course, the Commission, is not idling: while the electoral defeat appears to have shaken the right-wing parties, which have been trying to hold together under the leadership of former president Álvaro Uribe, the same old talking points – that peace is a concession to terrorists, that the commission imposes gender ideology, that the commission's findings will poison children – are already being repeated. Another factor complicating the goal of full peace is the violence itself: despite seven years of non-conflict between the state and the FARC, and the presumed end of large-scale violence, paramilitary groups, and criminal networks continue to kill civil society leaders who stand in their way and are rewarded with impunity. This is why one of Petro's election promises was to reduce these killings to zero, and the new government's discomfort with the close ties between paramilitarism and the security forces has become quite evident when Petro insinuated that he would not promote officers who were involved in human rights abuses in their line of duty. The fate of the truth commission, as well as the overall Petro-led reform process, is determined by how much non-state and state-related violence is decreased.

### What Does Colombia's Experience Mean for Turkey?

Where does the Colombian commission fit into the global picture, and what lessons can it teach us about future confrontation efforts (which we may see in Turkey one day)? The distinguishing approach of the Commission's work, as evidenced by the length and complexity of the final report, was that transformative peace is only conceivable if the truth is completely revealed and told in its historical context. In this regard, the Commission is more akin to Peru (2003), which has engaged in comprehensive historiography, than to

Argentina (1984) and Chile (1991), which enumerate human rights violations without taking into account their political, economic, social, and cultural context. What makes the Colombian commission special, however, is that it places at the heart of its narrative the issues that were either absent or brushed over by previous truth commissions. The Commission's discussion of how identities and experiences such as gender, ethnic minorities, and exile are changed, transformed and reproduced over the course of an armed conflict involving conflict actors and the rest of society will undoubtedly be hotly debated both within and outside Colombia for years to come.

In many ways, the Colombian experience resembles its counterparts around the world: political processes outside the commission are often more decisive than the commission's own actions, but commissions that do their job well, avoid scandals, and maintain good relations with civil society organizations that support human rights are able to create an impact in the society. The advantage of the Commission in Colombia was to have been established as a result of a well-planned peace process, but this has also led to organized and professional animosity towards the Commission. In the instance of Colombia, it is important to note the role that social media played in promoting the Commission and garnering support for it as well as in defamation attacks against it. In the last decade, truth commissions in countries such as Canada, Gambia, and Tunisia have received some social media coverage, but none have come close to the social media popularity of Colombia. Faced with social media slander, especially in the early stages, the Commission appears to have managed to run a strategic campaign and deliver its message to the masses, especially young people, who frequently use social media. The takeaway from this is that organizations working for truth, justice, and peace will inevitably need to use social media efficiently in the modern world, where political fights over information access are increasingly shifting to digital platforms.

In conclusion, Colombia's truth commission was founded as a result of a relatively successful peace process, worked under extremely adverse political circumstances, and produced its final report in a setting where, thanks to the change of government, its work could be acknowledged. Despite all the progress made since the FARC put down its weapons, neither the violence nor the circumstances that gave rise to it have vanished. This is a challenge not only for the Commission's organizers but for everyone who wants to see permanent peace in Colombia. The first leftist government in over two centuries of multi-party politics must

accomplish its goal of a more equitable society precisely under these conditions. The Commission will play a significant role in achieving this objective by developing the nation's largest social memory project while remaining true to its research, findings, and transformative message of peace.

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[1] For more details on this special jurisdiction system, see this blog post in Turkish: <https://www.failibelli.org/kolombiyada-silahlar-susarken-baris-icin-ozel-yargi-onur-bakiner/>

[2]The relationship between truth commissions and judicial processes has been controversial. Although many Latin American countries allowed for the transmission of commission findings to prosecutors' offices or for prosecutors to open investigations based on commission archives, commission findings have not been used as evidence in courts, and the events described in the commissions' final reports have only been cited as contextual information in a few court decisions in exceptional cases, such as in Peru and Argentina. The most significant procedural factor contributing to this disconnection is considered to be the absence of an oath and the presence of a prosecutor when testifying before truth commissions.