

JUDGMENT OF THE MEDIA ETHICS OBSERVATORY REGARDING THE ARMENIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2007

The Media Ethics Observatory, elected on March 10 at the meeting of the heads of media and journalistic associations, who joined the YPC self-regulation initiative, having discussed the activities of Armenian media during parliamentary elections of 2007, arrived at the following conclusions:

1. During the parliamentary elections of 2007 the media work displayed both positive and negative trends. It is noted as positive that during the coverage of this promotion campaign the media made fewer insulting remarks to the address of candidates and parties and were less engaged in political labeling. The negative trend was the lack of regulated approach to provision of airtime/newspaper space to election participants, i.e., in most media one candidate or party received several times more coverage than others, with no due reasoning behind that. This is primarily true to the broadcast media that did not develop and were not guided by transparent democratic principles of inviting representatives of different parties to take part in the programs.
2. On March 10, 2007 18 media (who were later joined by two other media) signed a common Code of Conduct and appendix to it, the Declaration on Election and Referendum Coverage Principles. The media, who signed the Code of Conduct, strove to follow the requirements of the Declaration, as well as the election reporting legislation.
3. At the same time none of the Armenian media developed its own open policy to cover the elections. This refers primarily to the TV companies that failed to define the norms of reporting the pre-election events, official meetings during the election run-up, the activities of officials, running for seats at the NA, the access to the air of the media owners, heads and journalists running in elections. At the same time there are grounds to suppose that many broadcast media were guided by hidden agenda that conditioned in some cases the biased coverage and unequal opportunities for candidates and parties. In essence, only the Public TV and Radio Company of Armenia had a schedule of provision of free and paid airtime, approved by the RA Central Election Commission in accordance with the requirements of the RA Election Code.
4. None of the TV companies made restrictions on the production and broadcasting of entertaining TV shows with the participation of politicians. Thus, some politicians, taking part in entertaining shows, received an additional opportunities to gain the likes of the voters during the campaign, and hence - enjoyed an advantage over their rivals.
5. For the reasons, described in the two preceding clauses, the principle of equal opportunities for all candidates and parties was breached, situations arose that give serious reasons to speak about the use of administrative resource.
6. In late June 2007 on the initiative of the MEO a poll was made among all 23 parties/bloc running in elections to find out their opinions and assessments regarding the election campaign coverage in Armenian media.

According to the findings of the survey, only one party assessed the work of the media as "excellent", 5 - as "good", 11 - as "mediocre", 6 - as "unsatisfactory". The respondents were also offered to name three media that were most successful in

providing objective information about the election participants to their audience. Here the list was headed by “Aravot” daily (12 votes) and the Armenian Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (10 votes). The third place was shared by the First Channel of the Public Television of Armenia, the Public Radio of Armenia and “Yerkir Media” TV company (6 votes). The respondents were also asked to name three media that were most biased in covering the campaign. Most negative assessments were received by “ALM” TV company (9 parties), followed by “Haykakan Zhamanak” daily (6). The third ranking was taken by “Golos Armenii” newspaper and the PTA First Channel (5 votes each). Out of the media, involved in the self-regulation initiative, three negative assessments were received by the Second Armenian TV channels and “Aravot” daily each. In the course of the survey representatives of 5 parties quoted one example each of journalistic ethics violation by media in pieces dealing with elections. Two of them referred to the media involved in the self-regulation initiative, the Lragir.am web-site and “Azg” daily. In both cases the MEO, having studied the appeals, did not reveal violations of the Code of Conduct and the Declaration.

7. Proceeding from the fact that in just a few months presidential elections await Armenia, the MEO - as a step ahead towards to the formation of an effective self-regulation system - calls on all media to develop their own transparent rules and in the process of elections coverage to be guided by the principles of objectiveness and impartiality.

Adopted at the MEO session of 12 September, 2007