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GUIDELINES ON THE COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS

The monitorings of the coverage of national elections held in Armenia in recent years have revealed a number of issues. In particular, the monitoring conducted by Yerevan Press Club before and during the 2017 parliamentary elections' official pre-election promotion showed that while media are mostly compliant with the legislative requirements, there are still some problems related to the compliance with the ethical norms.

Thus, there have been recorded cases when political party symbols have been used as background during the working meetings of high-ranking officials, biased approach has been applied when analyzing pre-election programmes, airtime has been incomprehensibly allocated to several "territorial candidates" neglecting their rivals, during the interviews "favorite" and "unwanted" candidates have been treated differently, etc.

Taking into consideration these issues, Media Ethics Observatory has developed guidelines taking as a basis also the provisions of Part 7 ("Integrity in Covering Elections and Referendums") of the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists.

The guidelines are of recommendatory nature.

1. The behavior of media from the day of calling elections until the start of the pre-election promotion

In this period the parties and candidates, carrying out preparatory work, strive to appear to the public as much as possible using also the possibilities provided by media.

Although Article 19 of the RA Electoral Code states that **"The fact that the period of election campaign is fixed, shall not restrict the conduct of election campaign during other periods not prohibited by this Code"**, we recommend the media in this period:

- to be guided by the commonly accepted principles of objectivity and impartiality, distinguishing facts from opinion, and other ethical norms when reporting on the parties, emerging blocs and candidates;

- to seek that the information on the parties, possible blocs and future candidates does not turn into hidden political promotion;
- to limit to the extent possible the dissemination of information on the non-political, i.e. professional activities or the exercise of official duties of party officials, unless such information is of public concern.

2. The behavior of media during the pre-election promotion

In this period the activities of the media are regulated under Article 20 “**Election Campaign through the Media**” of the RA Electoral Code.

Part 7 of the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists mostly relates to this period and entails the following obligations:

7.1. to be tolerant in respect of all parties and candidates;

7.2. not to insult the candidate personally and not to ridicule a candidate’s views and opinions;

7.3. not to publish materials containing defamation, blackmail, and threats aimed at candidates;

7.4. to give all candidates equal possibilities for presenting their platforms and views in the media, and to apply single tariffs when allocating paid space or air time in media;

7.5. not to publish materials containing hidden political advertising, and to separate materials presented for (free or paid) publication by groups supporting any party or candidate or produced at their request from other materials, or to make mention about it;

7.6. broadcast media must refrain from supporting any specific candidate or party, and the print and online media must provide clear advance announcement of their intent to do so.

It should be clarified that point 7.2 of this part of the Code refers to news pieces. The rest of the mentioned in the point (with the exception of insult) can be used in comments and analyses.

It should be noted that both Article 20 of the RA Electoral Code and Article 10 of the RA Law “On Television and Radio” set requirements for impartial and non-judgmental information only for news programmes.

Print and online media must periodically repeat the announcement of supporting a specific candidate or a party.

Tips:

- when conducting interviews to demonstrate equal, similar and unbiased treatment towards all the guests;
- during TV programmes (reportage, interview, debate, talk-show, etc.) to also demonstrate equal, similar and unbiased approach when applying technical tools, visual

tricks: not to highlight through the camera and lighting effects the bad or good sides of the candidate's appearance, possible defects, not to choose frames containing mimics and gestures, which could put one candidate in an unfavorable condition and, on the contrary, present the other as likeable;

- to also remember the requirement of Point 1.6 of the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists: "Not to distort the content of photo or video materials, to mention about technical tricks in photos and video materials if any";

- when analyzing pre-election programmes not to be guided by sympathy and antipathy and not to be biased;

- when covering the working visits of officials to choose such frames and photos, in which banners containing party symbols are not visible;

- it is necessary that TV companies mention the initial source when taking news stories from each other, and seek to prepare the accompanying text themselves;

- in order to ensure the equality of coverage to avoid broadcasting previously prepared films and reportages, which contain reference to the parties, or where politicians on the ballots appear in the frames even with non-political activity. This approach should be applied also on the days of silence and voting;

- during national elections editorial coverage of territorial candidates is acceptable only in cases, when the editorial office has a chance to cover the campaign of the other territorial candidates as well.

3. Tips on the day of silence

Print media usually are not issued on that day avoiding even the coverage of the political events of the previous day. Nevertheless, the below proposed tips also relate to them, in case they are issued on the day of silence:

- TV companies and online media are not recommended to broadcast materials on party figures or state officials on the ballot, unless the information is of public concern. And in this case the coverage should be of bare informative style.

4. Tips on the voting day

Taking into consideration that the RA Law prohibits the conduct of election campaign on the voting day, it is recommended:

- whenever possible to avoid live-broadcasted programmes on the voting day: any expression of an interlocutor, a word uttered unintentionally or a slip made can be viewed as campaigning, and consequently as violation of law;

- when covering the voting of high-ranking officials it is necessary to present them both in the text and headlines with their posts held and not their party affiliation or number on the party's electoral list, and to choose such frames and images, in which no banners of parties, blocs and candidates participating in the voting are visible;

- in the interview with an observer to clearly mention from what organization he/she is accredited;
- not to get into argument at the polling station with the chairman and members of the electoral commission, observers, proxies and voters;
- prior to alarming or disseminating information on any violation to check it from several available sources;
- to immediately inform the chairman of the commission, law-enforcement bodies, Central Electoral Commission and public on obstructions to his/her legitimate professional activities or those of fellow journalists.

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