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**MONITORING OF ARMENIAN
REGIONAL BROADCAST MEDIA COVERAGE
OF THE DECEMBER 9, 2018 SNAP ELECTIONS
TO THE RA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

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REPORT
ON MONITORING OF ARMENIAN
REGIONAL BROADCAST MEDIA COVERAGE
OF THE DECEMBER 9, 2018 SNAP ELECTIONS
TO THE RA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY
(NOVEMBER 26 - DECEMBER 7, 2018)

THE MONITORING OF REGIONAL TV COMPANIES coverage of snap elections to the National Assembly of Armenia was carried out during the period of official pre-election promotion (November 26 - December 7, 2018). The object of the monitoring were the programmes of the evening prime-time (18.00-00.00) of seven TV companies broadcasted in digital format via the National Broadcasting Network: “Ararat”, “Geghama”, “Zangezur”, “Luys”, “Kotayk”, “Tsayg”, “Fortuna”.

The choice was conditioned by the fact that these TV companies use the public re-broadcasting resource, remaining, in accordance with the RA Law “On Television and Radio”, the only holders of conditionally called “digital” license for television broadcasting in their marzes (regions). In this regard, they are expected to have their particular responsibility for the compliance with the principle of equal opportunities for elections participants, enshrined in the election and broadcast legislation of the Republic of Armenia.

Thus, the main task of the monitoring was to determine the degree of balance in coverage and provision of equal opportunities both the parties/blocs as a whole, and to the individual candidates included in territorial (“rating”) open lists of their parties/blocs. To this end, the monitoring team used quantitative and qualitative study methods (*see the section “General Information on Monitoring”*).

RESULTS OF THE DECEMBER 9, 2018 SNAP ELECTIONS TO
THE RA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

FOR THE CONCLUSIONS regarding the monitoring results it is important to take into consideration the outcome of the elections to the RA National Assembly.

“My Step” parties bloc won with 70.42% of votes.

The threshold to enter the National Assembly was also passed by:

“Prosperous Armenia” party - 8.26%

“Bright Armenia” party - 6.37%.

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Former ruling **Republican Party of Armenia (RPA)** got 4.70% and will not be represented in the new parliament.

Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaktsutyun (ARF-Dashnaktsutyun) was the fifth - 3.88%.

The results of the other political forces are the following:

“We” parties bloc - 2%

“Sasna Tsrer” All-Armenian party - 1.82%

“Orinats Yerkir” party - 0.99%

“Citizen’s Decision” social-democratic party - 0.68%

“Christian-Popular Renaissance” party - 0.51%

“National Progress” party - 0.33%.

BY SUMMARIZING AND ANALYZING THE MONITORING DATA, the following picture of the coverage of the election campaign by the studied TV channels was observed.

“TSAYG”, SHIRAK REGION

“TSAYG” TV CHANNEL aired on a daily basis “Elections Points of View” and “Actually” programmes, in which one or two candidates for deputy took part as guests. In doing so, even when there were two participants, the programme format did not provide for debates, and the candidates basically introduced themselves and their positions on various topics. This was the reason for the prevalence of references to elections participants in a positive context. At the same time, the newscast of the TV channel very rarely touched upon the election campaign.

“Tsayg” turned out to be the only one among all the studied regional TV companies that demonstrated certain commitment towards balanced coverage and provision of equal opportunities for campaigning. The airtime of the TV channel was quite evenly distributed among the four political forces that carried out the most active campaign in Shirak region: “My Step” bloc, ARF-Dashnaktsutyun, “Prosperous Armenia” and RPA. Other political forces also received the opportunity to present to the audience their electoral agendas. Exceptions were “National Progress”, which received minimal coverage, and “Citizen's Decision”, which did not receive coverage at all. However, this was most likely due to passive campaign and poor representation of these newly established parties in the region.

The relative impartiality of “Tsayg” was also illustrated by the fact that the candidate Nazeli Baghdasaryan, included in the territorial list of “My Step” bloc, being the director’s daughter and a leading journalist of the TV company, did not get apparent advantages in coverage. Four of her competitors on the same territorial list received more airtime.

At the same time, if we evaluate the coverage by “Tsayg” of individual candidates represented in territorial lists and competing with each other (including within the same

party/bloc list) in the region with equal intensity as the political forces that nominated them, speaking of provision of equal opportunities would be a great exaggeration.

Thus, out of 13 candidates, included in the RPA territorial list, only three received coverage, two of them being guests of the above-mentioned TV programmes twice, thus gaining a significant advantage over their competitors. Out of the 15 territorial candidates from ARF-Dashnaktsutyun, airtime was allocated to five, and out of a similar number of candidates from “My Step” - to six. Only three from the list of “Prosperous Armenia” consisting of 14 persons, one out of five from “Christian-Popular Renaissance”, two out of 8 from “We” bloc, three out of 13 from “Orinats Yerkir”, two out of 12 from “Sasna Tsrer” were presented on the air of “Tsayg”.

Objectively, regional TV channels could not provide air to all territorial candidates, however, there were reasons to expect that regional broadcasters would show the utmost desire to ensure equal information opportunities. Judging by the results of the monitoring, “Tsayg” gave preferences to the most well-known politicians in the region. At the same time, the situation when two of the territorial candidates from “Prosperous Armenia” participate twice each in the programmes of the TV channel and receive more than half an hour of airtime each, while the 11 candidates from the list of the same party were never even mentioned within the 12 days of the campaign, does not speak of a balanced coverage. These two, former Mayor of Gyumri Vardan Ghukasyan and Chairman of one of the parliamentary standing committees Vardevan Grigoryan, significantly surpassed their party members in terms of the number of votes received, and it cannot be excluded that this was also due to their advantage on TV air.

“FORTUNA”, LORI REGION

“FORTUNA” TV CHANNEL, in contrast to “Tsayg”, paid much attention to the coverage of the election campaign in news format, in particular, through “Planet” news programme. In its issues election campaign events of political forces and individual candidates were widely covered, as well as materials from other media were also used. The political forces running in the elections were mainly covered in positive context. At the same time, it cannot be said that the principles of balance and equal opportunities were respected.

Most attention was paid to the ruling political force - “My Step” bloc, and as a result the volume of coverage of the latter surpassed, and in terms of frequency of coverage, amounted to almost half of the relevant aggregate indicators of all its competitors combined. The election campaign of the territorial candidate from “My Step”, Deputy Head of Lori regional administration (Vice-Marzpet) Aram Khachatryan, was covered almost daily: references to him were recorded in 8 pieces of “Planet” programme.

In “Annex” programme within “Planet” the candidates included in the territorial lists of political forces took part as guests. Such programmes once again reflected the ambiguity of the RA legislation regarding the distinction of campaign materials (political advertisement) and editorial coverage of the election campaign. On the one hand, they went on the air marked as “pre-election promotion”, which implied certain payment by parties/blocs, but on the other hand, they were part of the editorial programming and their hosts were employees of the TV company.

The majority of the guests represented “My step” bloc. In terms of frequency of coverage they were followed by the territorial candidates from “Bright Armenia” and ARF-Dashnaktsutyun. It was these two parties that, due to their participation in “Annex”

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programme, along with the ruling political force, received the volume of coverage (more than 50 minutes each, while “My Step” - more than three and a half hours), which allowed the voter to more or less learn about their electoral programmes. The volume of coverage of the remaining political forces during the 12 days of pre-election promotion did not reach even 30 minutes, which could hardly contribute to the formation of opinions about their agenda.

This tendency was further deepened by the choice of guests of “Sincere Talk” programme. In the vast majority of cases they were representatives of “My Step” and only once a candidate from “Bright Armenia”. Moreover, both in “Sincere Talk” and in “Annex” the length of various guests’ stay on the air varied significantly - from 10 to 30 or even more minutes.

The obvious imbalance in the coverage was recorded not only among the political forces, but also individual candidates on territorial lists. In particular, the former Head of Lori regional administration (Marzpet) Arthur Nalbandyan during the pre-election promotion most often out of all the candidates (11 times) appeared on the air of “Fortuna”. He was the only one from the territorial list of RPA, who received coverage by the TV channel, but in none of the cases was he identified with RPA. This circumstance makes it possible to speak of the manipulative nature of the campaign of some candidates, who in the elections by a proportional system counted not on the political capital of the forces they represented, but on personal levers of influence in regions.

Out of the 11 candidates included in the territorial list of ARF-Dashnaktsutyun, “Fortuna” covered only one. Whereas out of the 15 candidates of “My Step”, seven received coverage. Moreover, besides the above-mentioned Aram Khachatryan, another four candidates appeared on the air more than once.

And in the case of “Fortuna”, a certain correlation between the attention by the broadcaster and the results of the elections was recorded. Thus, the largest number of Lori votes from the candidates of “Bright Armenia” party were obtained by the brother of the leader of that party (Edmond Marukyan) Krist Marukyan, who received the greatest airtime volume, and Taron Simonyan, covered by the TV channel’s programmes more often than others.

Territorial candidates of 7 out of 11 political forces did not appear at all on “Fortuna”, which is an additional confirmation of the imbalanced coverage of the election campaign by this channel. At the same time, it should be taken into consideration that some territorial candidates from Lori region in media campaigning opted for their influence and links with other regional TV companies that are not part of the national digital network and broadcast in analogue format or via cable networks. This circumstance, to a somewhat lesser extent, played a role also in Shirak, Armavir and Kotayk regions.

“GEGHAMA”, GEGHARKUNIK REGION

“GEGHAMA” TV CHANNEL COVERAGE of the election campaign of the parties/blocs, as well as territorial candidates running in the parliamentary elections was carried out mainly through the programmes “Vector”, “Day of Geghama”, “Panorama”, “Face to Face” and pre-election promotion slots (the latter were not the object of the current monitoring).

Of the political forces, “My Step” bloc received most coverage. “Bright Armenia” slightly lagged behind. Almost two times less airtime was allocated to “Prosperous Armenia” and “Sasna Tsrer”. ARF-Dashnaktsutyun, “We” bloc and “Citizen’s Decision” significantly

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lagged behind. The latter two received their airtime at the expense of lengthy programmes with the participation of two territorial candidates - Hovhannes Gevorgyan and Irina Hovhannisyanyan, respectively. Three parties - "Christian-Popular Renaissance", "Orinats Yerkir" and "National Progress" were not covered at all, while RPA received only one mentioning.

The attention of this broadcaster was most evenly distributed towards the representatives of the parties "Bright Armenia" (6 out of 10 of its candidates included in the territorial list received coverage) and "Sasna Tsrer" (5 out of 12). Of the 9 territorial candidates from the ruling "My Step" only three were covered: it is to note that references to one of them, Taguhi Tovmasyan, Editor-in-Chief of "Zhoghovurd" national daily, were contained in four pieces of the TV channel, while the other two, including the Head of Gegharkunik regional administration (Marzpet) Gnel Sanosyan - in only one.

Greater volume of airtime than that of Taguhi Tovmasyan was received only by Hrant Madatyan, Deputy of the RA National Assembly, included in the territorial list of "Prosperous Armenia". He was among the only two (out of 12 on the list) candidates from that party covered by "Geghama" channel, and appeared in two lengthy programmes, but was never identified with "Prosperous Armenia". In his case as well, it can be said that by participating in elections by the proportional system, Madatyan did not rely on the capital of the political force he represented, but on his own levers of influence in his region. The special position of this candidate was evidenced by the fact that he received positive coverage in both pieces, which was not the case with any other candidate on "Geghama".

"ZANGEZUR", SYUNIK REGION

"ZANGEZUR" TV CHANNEL covered the election campaign on the one hand extremely passively and on the other hand with hidden ill-will towards the new authorities. There were practically no stories in the news editions on the electoral events of the political forces and candidates participating in the campaign, with the exception of brief information that "Bright Armenia" party was the first to hold such an event in the region. There was no mentioning even about the campaign actions in the region with the participation of acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. References to political forces were recorded mainly in "Press Review" special news section, which was dominated by references to national media pieces criticizing the new Government of Armenia.

On the last day of the election campaign, December 7, 2018, a two-minute report went on the air with citizen survey regarding their expectations from the elections. Taking into account the convincing advantage of "My Step" bloc, according to the official voting results and Nikol Pashinyan's immense popularity in society, it is difficult to assume that none of the respondents mentioned his name. The absence of such mentioning allows to make an assumption about a biased coverage by the television company.

In total, four political forces out of 11 were mentioned on the air of "Zangezur" TV channel. Only "My Step" received substantial coverage, but, as noted above, more often in a negative context.

In "Zangezur" TV channel paid pre-election promotion slots, which were not the object of the current monitoring as not related to the editorial coverage of the elections by the media studied, only the videos of two parties were shown - RPA and "Prosperous Armenia". This circumstance is worth mentioning as further proof of the extremely limited role of the TV channel in ensuring the informed choice of the voters of Syunik region.

“KOTAYK”, KOTAYK REGION

ON “KOTAYK” TV CHANNEL the largest amount of airtime was received by "Prosperous Armenia" party, whose leader Gagik Tsarukyan, a tycoon, retains significant influence in the region. At the same time, “My Step” bloc turned out to be ahead in terms of frequency of references. At the same time, in all the studied pieces that were fully dealing with "Prosperous Armenia", the party appeared in an exceptionally positive context, and the references to “My Step” were both positive and neutral, but in the vast majority of cases - neutral.

The remaining political forces were covered less intensively and, mainly, in reports about their election campaign events, as well as in the general pieces devoted to the election campaign. Thus, their coverage was of purely informative nature and had a neutral context.

Out of the candidates included in the territorial lists of parties/blocs running in the elections, only one person received coverage - representative of “Prosperous Armenia” Eduard Babayan, head of security of Gagik Tsarukyan. In both cases the context was positive.

“LUYS”, ARMAVIR REGION

“LUYS” WAS THE ONLY regional TV channel studied that announced that it would not place political advertisement during the election campaign. As the experience of previous years has shown, such announcement indicates plans to cover the elections in a passive mode. In the news programmes of the TV channel there was not a single story, where the political forces and candidates running in the elections were mentioned.

The topic of elections was reflected in “Press Review” programme, aired three times a day. As in the case of “Zangezur” TV company, it was dominated by references to national media pieces containing criticism towards the new Government of Armenia, acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and “My Step” bloc. Behind these two examples there is a tendency: such an editorial policy is carried out by broadcasters, whose owners oppose the new Government, but do not dare to show their opposition through their own content or do not have (do not want to allocate) resources for producing such content.

Since in general the media coverage of the election campaign was dominated by mutual sharp criticism of “My Step” and the Republican Party of Armenia, this peculiarity was also reflected in “Press Review” programme of “Luys” TV channel. These very two political forces received the greatest coverage, and more often in a negative context. But taking into consideration the above-mentioned oppositional approach to the selection of the quoted pieces, the balance of connotational references to the ruling bloc turned out to be more unfavorable.

The remaining political forces received much less attention or were not covered at all (“Citizen's Decision”, “National Progress” and “We” bloc).

Since “Press Review” turned out to be the only programme of “Luys”, which touched upon the topic of elections, and in the quoted pieces of the national media the candidates

included in the territorial lists in Armavir region were not mentioned, they appeared to have been overlooked on the air of this TV channel.

“ARARAT”, ARARAT REGION

ON “ARARAT” TV CHANNEL only two political forces - “My Step” bloc (most often) and the Republican Party of Armenia (the largest volume of airtime) - received more or less intensive coverage. Significantly less attention was paid to ARF-Dashnaktsutyun and “Bright Armenia” parties. The other political forces, at best, were simply mentioned.

During the 12 days of the pre-election promotion, only two news editions were aired on “Ararat”, but even in them the topic of election campaign was touched upon only once - in a report about a meeting of one of the candidates with citizens.

However, interviews and programmes with biographical information of candidates nominated by political forces on territorial lists regularly went on the air. And only on the last day of the pre-election promotion, these programmes were aired marked as “political advertisement”, which once again demonstrates the unclear regulations both in the Armenian legislation and in the law implementation practice of “pre-election promotion” and “political advertising” concepts, as well as their distinction from editorial coverage of electoral processes.

The attention of the TV channel towards territorial candidates was extremely unevenly distributed. Garik Sargsyan, Head of Ararat regional administration, gained an overwhelming advantage over competitors both from his “My Step” bloc and from other political forces, having received coverage in 18 pieces of the TV channel. And in all cases the references to him had a positive context. Only another one of his party members from those included in the territorial list of the ruling bloc received coverage, but only once. It is difficult to admit that such attention to the Head of the region did not affect the number of votes he received - one of the highest in the country. From the representatives of “Bright Armenia” only one candidate received coverage, but he appeared on the air of “Ararat” 7 times. Also, only one candidate from “Prosperous Armenia” was covered in one, but relatively large piece. Another piece was devoted to the territorial candidate of ARF-Dashnaktsutyun. Thus, out of 99 candidates nominated in Ararat region on territorial lists, only five candidates, representing 4 political forces, gained the attention of the regional TV channel.

MAIN FINDINGS

IMBALANCED COVERAGE. The snap parliamentary elections in Armenia took place in a new political environment providing for higher independence and quality performance of the media. There was no evidence of pressure on broadcasters from the authorities regulating the electoral processes, which was common during previous campaigns. At the same time, in contrast to the majority of national broadcast media the new reality was not respectively reflected in the operation of regional TV companies.

This was a consequence of the fact that several problems in the sphere of media, especially related to the regional broadcasters, remained unresolved. Neither legislative framework has improved, nor the transparency of ownership has been ensured, nor the TV companies have got rid of bias caused by the interests and political orientation of their owners. Added to that the habit of using administrative resource by some representatives

of local authorities in the regions of Armenia has not disappeared either. As a result, certain political forces received huge advantage over the others on the air of specific regional broadcasters.

“RATING” CANDIDATES: FOCUS ON THE PERSON. In particular, the main problem identified yet during the parliamentary elections of 2017 and manifested also in 2018 was the introduction in the electoral legislation of territorial (so called “rating”) lists. Despite the transition of the parliamentary elections to 100% proportional system this provision increased the importance of competition among individual candidates representing the political forces in the regions of the country. Thus, the personalities having special leverages - administrative, financial, etc. - in their regions and running for the parliament could ensure beneficial attitude of the local media. National Assembly failed to adopt amendments to the RA Electoral Code in October 2018, and the whole process, including media coverage, during the last parliamentary elections was regulated by the old/acting Electoral Code. Absence of any specific regulation on equal opportunities for the individual candidates included in the territorial lists, and tough competition between them, especially in the regions of Armenia, resulted in non-balanced coverage, which could give certain advantage for obtaining the votes.

Objectively, regional TV channels could provide due attention to all territorial candidates, whose number in some marzes (regions) exceeded 100. At the same time, it was to be expected that the broadcasters would develop certain editorial policies, minimizing disbalance in coverage, and taking into account the proportional principle of parliamentary elections would make emphasis not on the personalities of the candidates, but on the agendas of the parties and blocs, represented by them. Meanwhile, the monitoring group in the most of the cases witnessed opposite picture, when the candidates were rather promoting themselves than the political forces standing behind them. This widespread problem was aggravated by many cases, when the same candidate was appearing on the air almost twenty times, while the overwhelming majority of his competitors never received a single chance.

Moreover, several precedents were recorded, when during the introduction of a candidate the broadcasters were not identifying him/her with respective parties or blocs. This circumstance allows to speak in a certain sense about manipulative nature of some candidates’ promotion campaigns, who in the context of proportional electoral system counted not on the political capital of their forces, but on personal levers of influence in the respective regions.

NON-COMPLIANCE WITH LICENSE TERMS. Despite the fact, that all the studied TV companies are holders of the same type of licenses, which envisage similar obligations towards the audience, and similar profiles of broadcasters, there are substantial differences among them. In their approaches towards the coverage of the electoral campaign some made emphasis on the “guest-in- studio” formats, the others - on the news coverage or demonstrated passive interest towards the elections. This also indicates lack of consistency in the operation of the national regulator, RA Commission on Television and Radio, in ensuring that the broadcasters meet the commitments envisaged by their licenses.

ABSENCE OF DEBATES. Contrary to the national broadcasters, which introduced for the first time in the history of Armenia real debates with equal opportunities for all 11 political forces, the regional TV companies did not attempt to organize similar programmes at the local level. Only one of them (“Tsayg”) was close to the format of debates practicing invitation to the studio of two candidates included in different territorial lists. However, the guests were rather presenting their views separately than disputing with each other.

NON-DISTINCTION BETWEEN POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT AND EDITORIAL

COVERAGE. The monitoring of regional TV channels yet another time stressed lack of clarity in the Armenian regulation by both the legislation and law implementation practices of “pre-election promotion” and “political advertisement” concepts, as well as their distinction from the editorial coverage of electoral processes. Apart from pre-election promotion slots, for which the TV companies, in accordance with the provisions of the legislation, announce similar prices for all political forces in advance, some TV channels broadcasted other programmes (usually in the format of interview), where territorial candidates participated as guests. These programmes were aired marked as “pre-election promotion” or “political advertisement” and without such notifications. There are grounds to assume that the conditions for payment for them differed from the announced prices for videos placed in the special slots. Those programmes, as a rule, were part of the regular editorial programming, and their hosts were the journalists of the TV companies. On the one hand, absence of publicly announced conditions for appearing in such programmes potentially violated the principle of equal access by the participants of the electoral process, and on the other hand, it might be misleading for the audience to understand whether it was paid promotion or editorial coverage.

SELECTIVITY IN INFORMING. The coverage of the election campaign by different regional TV channels demonstrated their controversial political stance. While the studied broadcasters in Syunik and Armavir regions displayed opposition attitude towards the new Government, loyalty to the authorities was common for most of the other TV channels. And this takes place in the situation when, according to the broadcasting legislation of Armenia, as well as due to the absence of an alternative multiplex operator, only one digital TV channel may broadcast in each marz (region). Furthermore, if we add to the above-mentioned that no digital broadcaster sustained in three out of 10 regions of Armenia, it will become evident that the population of Armenian regions was making its political choice in significantly different information environments. In other words, the election campaign held revealed again a number of problems requiring principled changes in the policy vis-à-vis the broadcasting sphere.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON MONITORING

THE MONITORING OF ARMENIAN REGIONAL MEDIA COVERAGE of the December 9, 2018 Snap Elections to the RA National Assembly was carried out by Yerevan Press Club under the Council of Europe Action Plan for Armenia 2015-2018 and funded by Norway and Sweden as donors to the Action Plan.

The monitoring was conducted on November 26 - December 7, 2018 (pre-election promotion period).

Objectives of the monitoring were to define and determine through analyzing quantitative and qualitative data:

- the level of attention of the regional broadcast media of Armenia to the December 9, 2018 snap elections to RA National Assembly;
- how impartial the Armenian regional broadcast media were in informing the voters of the parties/blocs running in elections to the RA National Assembly by national electoral lists, as well as candidates included in territorial lists, ensuring their access to media to express their views and opinions, thus assisting the voters in making an independent and conscious choice;
- how compliant the media are with the legislative provisions, regulating the coverage of the pre-election promotion.

The quantitative measuring was limited to purely arithmetical calculations of units and volume of television content. Quantitative-qualitative measuring was based on the calculations of content units, subjected to certain analysis by monitors.

The record of data in the framework of the monitoring was carried out on two levels: form and nature of references in TV pieces to parties/blocs running in the elections to the RA NA by national electoral lists, as well as to candidates included in territorial lists; airtime volume allocated in TV pieces to a party/bloc, as well as to candidates included in territorial lists.

Monitoring included 7 regional TV channels: **“Ararat”, “Geghama”, “Zangezur”, “Luys”, “Kotayk”, “Tsayg”, “Fortuna”**.

On the above-mentioned TV channels the study covered the programmes aired in the evening prime time (**18.00-00.00**). Monitoring does not include pre-election promotion slots, commercial/social advertisement as well as TV tickers.

The object of the monitoring were all TV pieces, which contained references to parties/blocs running in elections to the RA NA by national electoral lists, as well as to candidates running by territorial lists.