



YEREVAN PRESS CLUB

YEREVAN PRESS CLUB RECOMMENDATIONS

On Pre-Election TV Debates

The recent [amendments to the Electoral Code of the Republic of Armenia](#) oblige the Public Television to organize TV debates during the pre-election campaign, ensuring equal conditions of participation for all parties (blocs of parties). The topic of the pre-election debates, the format and the rules are determined by the Public Television of Armenia. The pre-election debates are broadcast live.

The same Law also stipulates: **“In the case of the National Assembly elections, the number of pre-election debates should not be less than three, each lasting at least 90 minutes, and at least for one debate only the first numbers on the electoral list of the parties (blocs of parties) should be invited. Each party (bloc of parties) participating in the National Assembly elections must have the opportunity to participate in an equal number of pre-election debates.”** This regulation is already applicable for the pre-election campaign of the 2021 RA NA elections.

During the campaign for the December 2018 snap elections, the Public TV has already organized a big debate with the participation of the first numbers of 11 political forces running in the elections at that time. That debate enjoyed quite positive reactions among TV viewers, as well as international and local observers and experts.

However now, two and a half years after the previous NA elections, the situation is a whole different. The relatively calm atmosphere of tolerance that existed then is now almost completely absent, the political forces do not discriminate in the means of criticizing, moreover, of discrediting each other.

The tension in the society, especially due to the defeat in the recent Artsakh war and the obvious decrease of the economic development of the country, has reached its peak. And in these circumstances, the best developed rules are needed so that the debates do not deepen the tension, but, on the contrary, alleviate it, giving the political forces an opportunity to present their views to the maximum.

In order for the debates to be successful, clear rules and an impartial and balanced approach to all participants, their equal opportunities and rights should be maintained.

Yerevan Press Club presents below its recommendations for organizing the debates and the rules of conducting them:

- 1.** As according to the Law, "the topic of the debates, the format and the rules are determined by the Public Television of Armenia" (PTA), so first of all the PTA management should hold consultations with the political forces with the participation of the Central Electoral Commission and the Commission on TV and Radio to agree on the format and topics of the debates. and the schedule.
- 2.** Taking into account the short-term period of the official campaign, the number of political forces (26 parties and blocs), as well as the experience of previous debates, it is expedient to organize 4-5 thematic debates, inviting all the political forces participating in the elections, dividing them into 4 groups through drawing lots (two with 7 representatives each and two with 6 representatives each). The date and time of the debates should also be decided by drawing lots, and the latter can be organized (or changed) taking into consideration the readiness of the political forces to participate in the debates.
- 3.** If a certain political force refuses to take part in the drawing of lots and the debate on a specific topic, the TV hosts inform about it at the beginning of each programme.
- 4.** In case of not appearing in the shooting after participating in the drawing of lots, the TV viewers shall also be informed about it, the place allocated to the respective political force shall be preserved, but the empty place must be seen only in long shot.
- 5.** International experience suggests that the format of debates is more effective, when along with the main host, there are also representatives of several other media with a large audience. In the case of Armenia, it is expedient to invite representatives of 6 national broadcasters (PTA, "Armenia", "Shant", "Yerkir Media", "Kentron", ATV). In case of refusal of one of them, that place shall be filled by drawing lots with another media with national coverage that has submitted a relevant application. The media engaged in the debates should have the opportunity to change their representatives depending on the topic of the debate. The names of the journalists are officially presented to the Public Television by a letter signed by the head of the given media. Journalists participating in the debate should be authorized by their media to change the content of their question if necessary.
- 6.** The law stipulates that each debate programme must be at least 90 minutes long. The duration may be longer depending on the number of participants. The duration of each program is calculated by the following formula: $6 \text{ (number of journalists with the opportunity to ask questions)} * X \text{ (number of representatives of political forces)} * 2 \text{ (time allocated to each answer)} + \text{time allocated to journalists}$.
- 7.** In the studio, the representatives of the political forces are positioned according to the numbers obtained during the drawing of lots held in the CEC for the given elections. The order of answering the questions should be changed in the following way: the participants answer the first question from left to right, the second from right to left, the third from center to right, the fourth from center to left, the fifth from right to left, the sixth from left to right.
- 8.** The journalists' questions should be relevant to the topic of the debate and exclude political assessments and statements. It is advisable to organize a discussion with the journalists, the host and editor/producer immediately before the live broadcast to avoid

repetition of questions and deviations from the topic. In case of disagreement, the decision is made by voting, in which each of the 6 media representatives has one vote. Violation of general agreements or transfer of the content of the questions to the representatives of the political forces should lead to a warning to the given media, and in case of repetition - to its suspension from further participation in the debates.

9. The opening speech of the host should be exclusively information about the essence and topic of the given debate and briefly present it to the participants. The opening speech should not exceed three minutes. The final speech should also be purely informative and should not contain assessments. Its duration should not exceed one and a half minutes.

10. The debate of the first numbers of the electoral lists of the parties and blocs participating in the elections should be held in a separate format. The representatives of the six media involved in organizing/conducting the debate will decide immediately before the broadcast the three topics on which the participants of the debate should present the content of their pre-election programmes. The decision of the journalists is made according to the above-mentioned rules. The presentation of topic formulations is delegated to the host. At the same time, the names of the journalists and the media they represent are also published. Apart from answering the questions, the leaders of the political forces shall be given the opportunity to make a final statement. The answers to the questions and the final statement should not last more than two minutes. The opening speech of the host should be exclusively information about the essence and topic of the debate and briefly present it to the participants. That opening speech should not exceed three minutes. The final speech should also be purely informative and should not contain assessments. Its duration should not exceed one and a half minutes.

11. If a certain political force refuses to participate in the final debate, the host informs the audience about it at the beginning of the programme. The seat allotted to the representative of the political force is preserved, but the empty place must be seen exclusively in long shot.

12. The duration of each programme is calculated according to the number of representatives of the participating political forces, based on the following formula: 3 (topic formulation) * X (number of representatives of political forces) * 2 (time allocated to each answer) + time allocated to the host.

13. In the studio, the representatives of the political forces are positioned according to the numbers obtained during the drawing of lots held in the CEC for the given elections. The representatives of political forces answer questions/make statements in the following order: the first topic from left to right, the second from right to left, the third from center to right, the final statement from center to left.

14. The representatives of the political forces participating in the debate should hold discussions within the framework of ethical standards, should not use insulting expressions about other candidates, political parties, their members. Their speeches should not contain calls for forcible overthrow of the constitutional order, damaging the territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia, state security, propagandizing social, racial, national, religious and class hatred. The host may interrupt such speeches.

15. According to the above-mentioned Law, all TV debates must be broadcast live. We suggest doing so with a certain maximum delay provided by the technical capacities. The

mentioned delay is necessary to prevent the appearance of indecent expressions and gross personal insults on the air. The relevant directive should be jointly developed by the CTR and the Public Broadcaster Board, taking into account the suggestions made during consultations with international and local observers and experts.

16. Given the risks conditioned by the coronavirus pandemic, we do not recommend having an audience in the studio. If the management of the public broadcaster makes another decision, that audience should be formed on the principle of allocating an equal number of seats to the political forces participating in the relevant debate.

17. The political forces participating in the TV debates shall be informed about the mentioned and possible additional rules of their conduct, express their consent and confirm it by signing.

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