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ԴԻՏՈՐԴ ՄԱՐՄԻՆ**

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MEDIA ETHICS OBSERVATORY

JUDGMENT

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Regarding “The Causes of the Tragedy. How to Avoid its Repetition” episode of “Diverse Perspectives with Astghik Sargsyan” program cycle aired on October 24, 2022 on the Public Television of Armenia

Applicant: Hripsimeh Kizogyan, monitoring and evaluation specialist at “Pink” Human Rights NGO

A. FACTS

- On November 14, 2022, Media Ethics Observatory received a complaint from Hripsimeh Kizogyan regarding “Diverse Perspectives with Astghik Sargsyan” program cycle’s episode entitled “The Causes of the Tragedy. How to Avoid its Repetition” aired on October 24, 2022 on the Public Television of Armenia.
- The guests of the program were psychologist Irina Tsaturyan and Ara Zohrabyan, member of the Initiative for the Protection of National Values, lawyer, former president of the RA Chamber of Advocates. The program was triggered by the alleged suicide of two young persons aged 16 and 21 on October 20, 2022, which, judging by their last Instagram post, was connected to their sexual orientation.
- The complaint specifically read: “...The entire interview contains unscientific assertions not aligned with the guests’ field of specialization, and Ara Zohrabyan also used an expression that can be qualified as humiliating one’s dignity, which essentially constitutes hate speech. In particular, he referred to transgender people as “deviant.”
- On November 14, 2022, MEO Coordinator sent a letter to complainant Hripsimeh Kizogyan to verify the latter’s eligibility as an applicant, since according to point 4.6. of [MEO Regulations](#): “MEO can accept appeals-complaints from third parties, provided they are presented by an NGO specialized in the relevant field, and the complaint refers to publications concerning the stakeholders of the respective NGO.”

- In her response letter (14.11.2022) H. Kizogyan clarified that she had submitted the complaint on behalf of “Pink” human rights NGO, where she held the position of monitoring and evaluation specialist.
- On November 29, MEO received a letter from Hripsimeh Kizogyan, which, in addition to her complaint, contained an attachment of a letter by Lilit Avetisyan, President of “Pink” human rights NGO, addressed to Hovhannes Movsisyan, Executive Director of the Public Television Company, along with the latter's response.
- In the letter directed to the Director of the Public TV, the President of “Pink” NGO specifically noted: “In the course of the program, unscientific claims and analyses were made, raising concerns about their potential to mislead a society with an extremely low level of awareness on sexual orientation and gender identity, fostering negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals. As a result, irrespective of the program’s original intent, this could have an even more distressing and discouraging effect on LGBT individuals. ...Having joined a number of human rights recognition documents, the Republic of Armenia has committed itself to respecting the rights and freedoms of every individual within its territory... The state should not only take legal measures, but also engage in educating the public, awareness-raising, and instilling tolerance. This function should be fulfilled, among others, through the media, where Public Television serves as the state’s primary resource. ...Given the above-mentioned, we kindly request to remove the program video or provide a platform for scientifically substantiated and human rights-based information on sexual orientation and gender identity...”
- In his reply letter to the Executive Director of “Pink” NGO, Public TV Director H. Movsisyan emphasized: "According to the policy of the Public Television Company of Armenia, video recordings of programs are removed exclusively in cases of law violations and/or the presence of technical defects in them. In the October 24 issue of “Diverse Perspectives with Astghik Sargsyan” program, the guests presented their subjective opinions, which did not contain hate speech. ...Taking into account the heavy broadcasting schedule and the selection of topics based on their relevance, if the topic raised by you is put on the agenda, you or a representative of your organization will be offered a platform in the near future.”
- On December 14, 2022, MEO held an online session, where the complaint filed on behalf of “Pink” human rights NGO was discussed.

B. ETHICAL NORMS

I. Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists

- 1.3. To clearly distinguish facts and information from opinion, comment and analysis;
- 1.4. To rely on accurate facts and trustworthy information when making analysis and comments;
- 1.5. To ensure that the reports, photo, video and audio materials

correspond to the reality, the headlines derive from the content of the material, citations are not used outside of context, and correspondence of the personal data of ordinary citizens with public figures is not abused;

5.1. To avoid prejudice against people on the ground of their race, sex, age, religion, nationality, geographic origin, sexual orientation, physical handicap, external look or social status;

5.2. Not to promote in any way ethnic or religious hatred and intolerance, or any discrimination on political, social, sexual, and language grounds, exclude hate speech;

6.1. To encourage free exchange of opinions, regardless of any differences between those opinions and the editorial views;

6.2. To be ready to meet with persons or representatives of organizations who feel offended or defamed by a certain publication, and provide an opportunity of response for all those against who criticism and accusations have been made in the publications;

6.3. To admit mistakes and to be ready to correct them;

6.4. To encourage the public to express critical opinions about media and to be ready for a public discourse on matters of journalistic ethics.

C. MEO JUDGMENT

Media Ethics Observatory

taking into consideration that

- although initially Hripsimeh Kizogyan's complaint seemed to be an individual appeal, further inquiry revealed that the latter was acting on behalf of "Pink" human rights NGO, representing the organization's attitude regarding the TV program in question;

and hence

- in its discussions, MEO relied on the provisions outlined in the [Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists](#) and [the MEO Guidelines on Exclusion of Manifestations of Discrimination and Ensuring Tolerance in the Media](#) adopted on May 17, 2017, which specifically states: "The ambiguous public perception of gender issues affects media coverage." The guidelines urge the media to pay attention to "the language used to describe people of different religions, nationalities, opinions, sexual orientations, social statuses," and also reach out to representatives of "organizations dealing with relevant issues" for consultation;

states that

- from the perspective of professional ethics, certain shortcomings of the program, which led to the complaint, are due to the failure to seek consultation as recommended in the very Guidelines.

Based on the above, MEO concludes that

- in a formal sense, the guests invited to the debate on the selected topic, namely, a psychologist working with people of different sexual orientations and a lawyer positioning himself as a defender of traditional values, were in line with the program's idea, and in this regard, the Public Television Company fulfilled point 6.1. of the Code;
- however, during the program, the guests presented ambiguous, subjective views and did not tend to challenge each other's perspectives, which did not contribute to the comprehensive and deep understanding of the problem by the audience. As a

consequence, points 1.4. and 1.5. of the Code received insufficient attention;

- the issue of one-sided opinions of the program's guests could have been mitigated significantly if the host had taken a more active role in intervening during the most controversial claims. The successful management of such a sensitive piece implied an extensive groundwork by the editorial team;
- although in some cases the host managed to steer the conversation in the proper direction in terms of professional ethics, in at least two cases there was no such subsequent necessary intervention or clarification, namely when one of the guests used the word "deviant" to describe homosexuality, and the other made statements implying that sexual orientation could be viewed as a matter of personal choice. These particular episodes serve as grounds for noting violations of points 5.1. and 5.2. of the Code.

MEO acknowledges that

- in the conditions of pluralism and freedom of speech, it is impossible to avoid errors when addressing complex topics. However, quality and responsible media are expected to work openly and efficiently for correcting any mistakes;
- MEO considers well-founded the approach of the management of the Public Television Company not to remove any program from the air unless there is a violation of the law or a technical error present;
- at the same time, points 6.2. 6.3. and 6.4. of the Code envisage a more specific response from the TV Company in terms of timeframe and format, with regards to the cooperation proposal of "Pink" NGO.

Media Ethics Observatory recalls that the representatives of the media that have signed the Code have acknowledged the authority of MEO (which was elected by them) to review the compliance of their actions and publications with the provisions of the Code. Additionally, they have expressed their readiness to publish the MEO decisions on their respective media.

***Adopted on December 29, 2022
by the following MEO composition:***

- Davit ALAVERDYAN**, Chief Editor of "Mediamax" news agency
Narineh AVETISYAN, Executive Director of Vanadzor "Lori" TV Company
Ara GHAZARYAN, Lawyer
Karineh HARUTYUNYAN, Executive Director of Gyumri "GALA" TV Company
Ashot MELIKYAN, Chairman of Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression
Gnel NALBANDYAN, Ombudsman of "Armenia" TV Company
Boris NAVASARDIAN, President of Yerevan Press Club
Nouneh SARKISSIAN, Managing Director of Media Initiatives Center
Anzhela STEPANYAN, Editor of Armavir "Alt" TV Company

Gegham VARDANYAN, Producer at Media.am

[Media Ethics Observatory](#) was established by the media, joining the self-regulation initiative, which make 69 as of today. In its judgments MEO is guided by Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists, adopted at the self-regulation body's meeting on March 10, 2007, and revised on May 16, 2015