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EXPERT OPINION OF MEDIA ETHICS OBSERVATORY

Regarding the complaint by Gagik Aghbalyan against the publication of “Zhoghovurd” daily

A. FACTS

1. On June 16, 2023, Media Ethics Observatory received Gagik Aghbalyan's complaint against “Zhoghovurd” daily.
2. Gagik Aghbalyan, Director of “Banaki Kentronakan Marzakan Akumb” (BKMA, i.e. Central Sport Club of the Army) filed a complaint against the piece titled “Nikol Pashinyan's former photojournalist shows interest in lavish vacations”, published in “Zhoghovurd” daily and subsequently on armlur.am. He argued that certain assertions, opinions and analyses in the piece had no connection to reality.
3. The publication was caused by Gagik Aghbalyan's Facebook post regarding the cost of constructing a tourist cabin.
4. The day before the publication, on June 12, Gagik Aghbalyan received a phone call from “Zhoghovurd” journalist Lida Yeghiazaryan, inquiring about cabin prices. Yeghiazaryan explained her interest by citing her acquaintances' involvement in cabin construction. A few hours later, the journalist called again, mentioning her plan to prepare a piece about that post and asking once more about the cabins. Gagik Aghbalyan refused to provide any comment.
5. MEO reached out to “Zhoghovurd” daily via email to obtain comments on the matter. In their written response, the editorial team of the daily indicated that addressing Gagik Aghbalyan and the issue of tourist cabins was a decision taken collectively by the editorial team and the journalist.
6. The piece of “Zhoghovurd” daily ends with this statement: *“And you will wonder what has changed in the life of an everyday RA citizen: nothing, simply, instead of Khachatryan GAGIK, Aghbalyan Gagik-like figures have prospered.”* According to “Zhoghovurd” daily, the journalist made the comparison with Gagik Khachatryan for two reasons: *“Firstly, due to the coincidence in names, and secondly, because Gagik Aghbalyan’s recent interest - DISPLAYED THROUGH A PUBLIC STATEMENT - in cabins for the wealthy echoed past indulgences of Gagik Khachatryan.”*
7. On the day the piece was published, Gagik Aghbalyan addressed its claims via several Facebook posts, with 3 employees of the daily defending the authenticity of the publication in the comments under his post.
8. On July 6, 2023, “Zhoghovurd” daily reached out to MEO via email,

expressing readiness to settle controversies with Gagik Aghbalyan professionally, away from the public eye. MEO informed Gagik Aghbalyan of this proposal during a phone conversation, which he turned down.

B. ETHICAL NORMS

Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists

1.2 Clearly notify the audience about the cases when the editorial office received information of public significance, but has been unable to verify the facts after employing all the reasonable measures.

1.4 To clearly distinguish facts and information from opinion, comment and analysis.

1.5 To rely on accurate facts and trustworthy information when making analysis and comments.

1.6 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.

4.1 To respect and protect the human right to private life, including respect to personal and family life, residence, property, health condition, correspondence.

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.

6.4 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 EXPERT OPINION

- In the first telephone conversation, “Zhoghovurd” daily journalist Lida Yeghiazaryan failed to properly introduce herself as a journalist when speaking to BKMA Football Club Director Gagik Aghbalyan. She attempted a sophisticated journalistic investigation technique, yet executed it in a superficial and unprofessional manner.
- “Zhoghovurd” daily has violated Paragraph 4.1 of the Code, urging to protect the right to private life, including respect to personal and family life and property. When posing questions such as *“Who is Aghbalyan going to spend a romantic evening with? Is the expensive “tent” he is seeking intended for FFA President Armen Melikbekyan to install in the forests of Tavush?”* the journalists did not rely on accurate facts and verified information. This ambiguous question with the intention of discrediting Gagik Aghbalyan and Armen Melikbekyan constitutes an encroachment on their private lives.
- The publication’s fictitious assumptions and obscure insinuations are followed by unequivocal conclusions, which are not backed by evidence and reliable arguments, breaching Paragraph 1.4 of the Code. These manipulative elements cast a biased and negative light on the individual in question.
- The journalist's personal perspective, assumption and beliefs are interwoven with events presented as facts, in violation of

Paragraph 1.5 of the Code. Furthermore, they are presented as indisputable truths, transforming into accusations and condemnations.

- Appreciating the willingness of “Zhoghovurd” daily to collaborate with MEO on Gagik Aghbalyan’s complaint, MEO urges the editorial team of “Zhoghovurd”, as a gesture of goodwill, to engage in a constructive dialogue in this and other similar information disputes, to seek and discover effective ways to eliminate violations of ethical norms.

Note

According to provision 4.13 of MEO Regulations, *“Complaints regarding the publications by non-member media can be reviewed with the media’s consent. Nevertheless, if the media refuses to grant consent, MEO reserves the right to present an expert opinion on the publication, disseminating it through the means at its disposal.”*

**Adopted on July 20, 2023
by the following MEO composition:**

Davit ALAVERDYAN, Chief Editor of “Mediamax” news agency
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Ruben BABAYAN, Director, Professor
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Karineh HARUTYUNYAN, Executive Director of Gyumri “GALA” TV
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Ara GHAZARYAN, Lawyer
Ashot MELIKYAN, Chairman of Committee to Protect Freedom of
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Gnel NALBANDYAN, Chief Editor of “Newmag” Publishing House

Boris NAVASARDIAN, Honorary President of Yerevan Press Club

Ara SHIRINYAN, Chairman of the Council of Public Broadcaster of
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Nouneh SARKISSIAN, Managing Director of Media Initiatives Center

Vigen SARGSYAN, Chairman of the Commission on Professional Ethics
of Yerevan Press Club

Anzhela STEPANYAN, Editor of Armavir “Alt” TV Company

[Media Ethics Observatory](#) was established by the media, joining the self-regulation initiative, which make 76 as of today. In its judgments MEO is guided by the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists, adopted on March 10, 2007 and revised at the June 25, 2023 general meeting of the media that joined the self-regulation initiative.