

PRELIMINARY REPORT
ON MONITORING THE ARMENIAN MEDIA COVERAGE
OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2007
(APRIL 8 - MAY 10, 2007)

I. GENERAL OVERVIEW

MONITORING OF MEDIA COVERAGE of parliamentary elections of 2007 was administered by “TEAM” Research Center with the financial support of the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation-Armenia and the resource and methodology support of the Yerevan Press Club. The monitoring covered the period of the pre-election promotion campaign - from April 8 till May 10, 2007.

The monitoring objectives were to determine and define by analyzing quantitative data:

- how free and impartial the Armenian print and broadcast media were in informing the voters of the parties/blocs running in elections to the RA National Assembly by proportionate representation system;
- to what extent the media legislative framework and the state structures assisted the performance by media (primarily, the public/official ones) of their mission to ensure free, fair and transparent elections;
- how compliant the media were with the legislative provisions, regulating the coverage of the official promotion campaign for RA National Assembly elections;
- to what extent the media ensured the compliance of Armenia with its international commitments in terms of media coverage of elections.

To meet these objectives, methodologies of qualitative and quantitative monitoring were applied. The qualitative monitoring included studying legislation and other official documents, relevant for the elections process in Armenia, conversations with media heads, journalists, politicians, representatives of the public, as well as the analysis of public statements, opinions voiced regarding the media activities at election time. Quantitative monitoring included counting and measuring of publications/programs in media directly.

The monitoring object were 18 broadcast and print media of Armenia:

4 national TV companies - First Channel of the Public Television of Armenia, "ALM", "Armenia", Second Armenian TV Channel;

6 TV companies of Yerevan - "AR", "ArmNews", "Yerkir Media", TV-5, "Kentron", "Shant";

3 TV companies of Gyumri (Shirak region) - "Shirak" public TV channel, "GALA", "Tsayg" (28th UHF);

1 national radio company - Public Radio of Armenia;

4 national newspapers - the official "Hayastani Hanrapetutiun" and "Respublika Armenia", private "Aravot" and "Haikakan Zhamanak".

On the TV and radio channels above all programs (including political advertising) were studied as broadcast on their daily air from 18.00 till 24.00. The programs that start but do not end before 18.00 were not studied. The programs that start but do not end before 24.00 were studied completely.

The only exception was “Shirak” TV channel (part of the structure of the Public TV and Radio Company of Armenia) being monitored in its full broadcast volume, from 16.00 till 20.00, i.e., the whole daily four-hour airtime.

Besides, since the First Channel of the Public Television of Armenia, in accordance with the resolution of the RA CEC of April 8, 2007, aired the pre-election promotion of parties/blocs from 17.15 till 21.00, political advertising on this channel was monitored starting at 17.15.

The newspapers above were studied in full.

II. PRELIMINARY REPORT (APRIL 8 - MAY 10, 2007)

THIS REPORT covers the period of **April 8 - May 10, 2007**. (*Quantitative results of the monitoring are in the tables enclosed.*)

In the “election period”, as defined by the RA legislation (for the current parliamentary elections this started in February 2007), the monitoring group recorded a higher level of political plurality than during the preceding months. The most balanced was the coverage of parties during the pre-election promotion of April 8 - May 10. Most parties, running in elections and displaying relevant activeness of promotion campaign, received an opportunity to present their platforms, approaches, opinions to the public. None of the parties encountered any obstacles in using the paid and free airtime, allocated by the law on the public radio and television.

At the same time, the access of parties to the air directly before elections, primarily on TV, which is the main source of information for public in Armenia, could not fully compensate for the rather restricted attention of broadcast media to opposition politicians throughout quite a lengthy prior period. The pre-election level of political awareness of the voters was affected by the reduction of the number and volume of news, analytical, discussion programs in broadcast media that would present various perspectives regarding the most urgent issues, faced by the country.

In the two months that preceded pre-election promotion most of opposition parties that had problems accessing TV air in 2006 did already gain the attention of the leading TV channels. An exception to this were three parties, “Republic”, “Heritage”, “New Times”, regarding which the discrimination by all seven TV channels studied at that stage of monitoring was retained. The first of the parties named was one of the two main founders of the biggest opposition bloc and parliamentary faction “Ardarutian”, involving a number of former high-ranked officials. The second was headed by the first Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia who scored rather high political rating, as Gallup polls in 2006 showed. The leader of the third party ran for presidency in the elections of 2003, coming the fourth by votes gained. All the three parties were actively involved in the pre-election race of 2007 and had all the reasons to expect media attention.

It was only in the third decade of March that the attitude of television towards these parties changed, they were more frequently mentioned in the news and their leaders started to be invited for an interview. There are grounds to suppose that both before and after this change a coordinated policy was exercised towards opposition parties, and the weakening of their information isolation occurred as the international observers became more active before the elections.

The period of the actual pre-election promotion can be divided into two almost equal halves. The first was characterized by the aspiration of most TV channels to give attention to all parties/bloc, running for elections, to avoid connotational references. If some political forces were out of the broadcast media attention scope, this was due to their own passiveness. This is true primarily of

“Christian People Renaissance” party, which, during the first days of pre-election promotion, did not use even the free airtime on public TV and radio.

In the second half, as the voting day drew nearer and the political competition got tougher, the share of connotational coverage increased significantly. For three parties, the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), “Dashnaksutiun”, “Prosperous Armenia”, that have certain levers of influencing TV channels, the reference balance was overwhelmingly positive, whereas the opposition “Orinats Yerkir” had its balance strongly negative. Three other opposition parties/bloc - “Republic”, “New Times” and “Impeachment” - received several dozen times less coverage than RPA, “Dashnaksutiun” and “Prosperous Armenia”, despite their active campaigning. Similarly to “Orinats Yerkir”, these political forces had a negative balance of connotational references. And if in the case of “Orinats Yerkir” this balance was due to the scandal of publishing a secret transcript of the conversation the party leader had with a British diplomat, the three others were covered negatively mostly due to the clashes with the police that occurred after their rally on May 9.

The advantage that the three parties, leading in terms of the airtime allocated, the frequency of appearing in TV pieces and in terms of invitations to the programs of “guest in studio” format, had was particularly evident on the last day of pre-election promotion, May 10. While at some TV channels half of the parties, running in elections, did not receive any coverage at all, the Republican Party of Armenia received 13,788 sec., “Prosperous Armenia” - 9,675 sec. and “Dashnaksutiun” - 9,044 sec. Thus, on the last day these parties were allocated about 1.5-2 times as much airtime that on an “average” day of pre-election promotion. The fourth, by the results on May 10, was the United Labour Party - 4,558 sec., exceeding its “average” figures more than four times. On the final day of promotion these very four parties had more opportunities than others to take part in “guest in studio” programs in the broadcast media studied: “Prosperous Armenia” and RPA - 5 times each, “Dashnaksutiun” - 3, United Labour Party - 2. It is noteworthy that the RA President Robert Kocharian stressed that it would be desirable to have these parties, enjoying the chance of “last impression” effect, in the parliament - in his interview to three Armenian TV channels, also broadcast on May 10.

Overall, during the 33 days of pre-election promotion the aggregate figure of RPA on the evening TV air made 279,637 sec. and 2,447 references, “Dashnaksutiun” - 217,885 sec. and 1,220 references, “Prosperous Armenia” - 175,947 sec. and 981 references. They are followed at a notable distance by “Orinats Yerkir” (82,842 sec. and 751 references) and the Popular Party (78,030 sec. and 277 references) that in their turn are quite ahead of the next group. Yet, the Popular Party received 92% of its airtime on “ALM” TV channel, owned by the leader of the party Tigran Karapetian. In terms of the number of invitations to “guest in studio” programs almost all the same parties are the leaders, albeit in a somewhat different order: RPA - 74 times, “Prosperous Armenia” - 73, “Dashnaksutiun” - 66. With a significant gap, the fourth in this category was “Orinats Yerkir” - 31 times.

It is important to note that from the start of a pre-election promotion, April 8, the monitors recorded any media appearance of politicians who take the first three lines in the electoral party lists as attention to the respective party - even if they were presented as appearing in the line of their non-party work or position held. This was conditioned, firstly, by a common unwritten norm - the individuals, running in elections, must restrict their public activeness as officials during the pre-election campaign (otherwise this activeness can be considered as a use of administrative resource), and, secondly, by the circumstance that at election times the audience associates political leaders with the parties they head, regardless of whether their party affiliation is stressed or not.

The First Channel of the Public Television and the Public Radio displayed the greatest balance in covering the parties/bloc. This refers primarily to the attention distribution among the competing political forces, and in case of the radio - also to the minimal number of connotational references. Both public broadcasters aspired to observe the letter of the law and were generally successful in meeting this target. At the same time, in some of the TV pieces, dealing with the pre-election events

held by the opposition parties, elements of irony were present - which did not find its reflection in the quantitative findings of the monitoring, even though it influenced the perception of information by the audience.

The broadest coverage of the political spectrum during the pre-election promotion was ensured by "Yerkir Media" and "Kentron" TV channels. They both, along with "ALM" and the Second Armenian TV Channel, were among the leaders in terms of the editorial coverage of parties.

"Yerkir Media" gave a substantial advantage to "Dashnaktsutiun" both in terms of airtime (89,425 sec. - almost 7 times as much as the Republican Party of Armenia, gaining the second place) and in terms of the number of references (526 versus 264 of RPA), as well as in terms of invitations to "guest in studio" programs (11 versus 6 of "Orinats Yerkir" and "Prosperous Armenia" each). "Yerkir Media" displayed quite level attitude to other parties, running in elections. This was manifest along all dimensions, including the list of "guests in studio": only 5 parties did not take part in the programs of this format, even though they had been duly invited.

"Kentron", as compared to the period prior to pre-election promotion, somewhat narrowed the circle of parties it was interested in. This affected, in particular, the list of "guests in studio": thus, in March this year in the 32 programs of this format, where politicians took part, 13 parties were represented, on April 8 - May 10 in 73 programs of the kind 9 parties appeared.

The two other TV channels that were most active in covering elections had their attention to parties distributed less evenly than "Yerkir Media" and "Kentron". This is particularly true for "ALM" where 68% of the "party" airtime was given to the Popular Party and RPA. On the Second Armenian TV Channel 83% of the "party" airtime was allocated to four parties - "Dashnaktsutiun", RPA, United Liberal National Party (ULNP) and "Prosperous Armenia". It should be noted that the airtime of ULNP was partly due to the broadcasting of the entertaining shows with the participation of Garik Martirosian, the number two candidate of the party till May 2. In these shows background advertising of ULNP was made as well.

Approximately equal level of attention to elections and of balance in covering the pre-election campaign out of the Yerevan TV channels studied was displayed by "Shant", "TV-5" and "AR". Of these, the former two were more frequent than the last in using the "guest in studio" genre. Besides, "AR" had a significant gap (more than fivefold) between the first (RPA) and the second ("Dashnaktsutiun") places by airtime allocation.

"Armenia" and "ArmNews" were the least active in covering the pre-election campaign of all the TV channels studied. And while in case of "Armenia" this can be explained by the new profile of the TV company that has given up a number of news and current affairs programs in early 2007, replacing them by entertainment, the small volume of party coverage by "ArmNews" does not correspond to the idea of a 24-hour news TV channel that it is. In fact, "ArmNews" did little to contribute to the awareness of the audience about elections, particularly, if one takes into account the fact that 17,102 sec. of its "party" airtime (ten times less than that of the most politically active TV channels) were constituted by the numerous repetitions of the same stories.

On 8 out of 13 TV channels studied, during the pre-election campaign political advertising was completely absent from the evening air, on three others it was of sporadic nature (on "Yerkir Media" and "Armenia" each 8 parties used it, and on "ALM" - 6). The reasons for that were, in some cases, the high tariffs on political advertising, in others - the prior decision of the TV companies not to give airtime to pre-election promotion at all. This circumstance influenced the voters' awareness, too, and affected, in particular, the public in regions of Armenia that did not have the assortment of the TV channels and the volume of elections reporting the audience in Yerevan had.

Even the voters of the second biggest city of Armenia, Gyumri, where it is possible to receive four national TV channels and where four local TV channels are broadcast, were quite behind their

compatriots in Yerevan in terms of awareness. Only one of the Gyumri TV channels, “Shirak”, placed political advertising on its air, and the main figures of the three TV channels studied (“Shirak”, “Tsayg” and “GALA”) are a sign of their very restricted capacities to familiarize the audience with parties, running in elections. The residents of other regions, where only 2-3 national and 1 local TV channel are accessible, were even more deprived of information. This refers primarily to the awareness about the parties/bloc, running in elections by proportional representation system, that received less attention from the local media than the majority candidates.

In the four newspapers studied, similarly to the TV channels, predominance of pieces on Republican Party of Armenia has been recorded, followed by “Prosperous Armenia”, “Dashnaktsutiun” and “Orinats Yerkir”. However, in terms of connotational references, unlike the TV channels, it is not only “Orinats Yerkir”, but also the three other leading parties that have a negative balance in newspapers. This balance was formed due to private dailies “Haikakan Zhamanak” and “Aravot”; in official “Hayastani Hanrapetutiun” and “Respublika Armenia” the three leaders have either positive or neutral balance.

“Haikakan Zhamanak” was one of the main tribunes of the pre-election promotion of “Impeachment” bloc, “Republic” and “New Times” parties. Besides the positive editorial coverage, these political forces were allocated newspaper space for free pre-election announcements.

“Aravot” daily was the only one among those studied that had its space used by parties - by “Heritage” more than others - for paid advertising.

The official bodies that are to trace the compliance with electoral legislation in media recorded only one violation: this was the episode when the Marxist Party of Armenia “conceded” the time allocated to it for free advertising on the Public Television to another person, violating Clause 13 of the CEC Resolution No. 84-a.

Meanwhile, no response came to other episodes that raised certain questions with regard to compliance with electoral legislation. In particular, the TV and radio coverage during the study period of a whole number of visits and meetings, participation in pre-election events of individuals, holding political, discretionary posts, civil servants and representatives of local self-government can be qualified as a violation of Article 22 prime of the RA Electoral Code. These episodes are related, mostly, to the coverage of events where representatives of the Republican Party of Armenia participated.

The performance on air of the promotional songs of the parties, running in elections, with no “political advertising” subtitle and appropriate payment could also be seen as violation of Article 11 of the RA Law “On Television and Radio”, prohibiting the broadcasting of promotional materials disguised as “news, editorial, documentary, author or other programs”.

The announcements of pre-election events, placed in commercial advertising slots, were also questionable, particularly for the TV channels that did not announce the pre-election promotion tariffs within the timeframes specified by law and, correspondingly, having no right to such advertising. Meanwhile, the announcements on pre-election events should be qualified as political and not commercial advertising.

Finally, the negative reference to the People’s Party of Armenia in a story of the “Day by Day” newscast of April 13 could be qualified as a law infringement made by “ALM”, since the author's text contained assessments of this party, which is prohibited by the new provision of the electoral legislation (Article 20 of the RA Electoral Code).

“TEAM” Research Center and Yerevan Press Club express their gratitude to Internews Armenia and “Asparez” Journalist’s Club of Gyumri for assisting the administration of the monitoring.

METHODOLOGY FOR MONITORING THE ARMENIAN MEDIA COVERAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2007

1. The main unit of the research was the TV/radio/newspaper piece.
2. Monitors recorded the references, their connotations/nature (positive, negative, neutral), as well as the airtime/newspaper space (in sec./sq.cm), allocated to parties/bloc, running in the elections to the RA NA by a proportionate representation system. The party/bloc “accounts” also received the portion of references (their connotations) and the airtime/newspaper space given to the representatives of these parties/bloc (their statements, speeches, quotations, as well as descriptions of their activities, opinion, and comment about them by other persons). The references, airtime/newspaper space dealing with the leaders of the parties/bloc (the first three in the election list) were recorded regardless of the capacity these persons appeared in. In the cases with other representatives of parties/bloc, the references, airtime/newspaper space were only recorded when their party affiliation was somehow stressed in the piece.

Connotation (positive, negative) references were understood to be the ones, contained in the pieces, making an unequivocally positive or negative overall impression on the audience about the party/bloc or its leaders/representatives. Whenever the tone was not that unequivocal, the reference was recorded as neutral. All the doubts of the monitor were also interpreted in favor of a neutral record.

Each piece marked only one reference and only one tone of attitude to each party/bloc (in units).

A reference was also understood to be any appearance of the leaders (the first three of the election list) of parties/bloc in the TV shot or on a photo/other graphic material, which was not a part of a piece. If the appearance in the shot was a part of the piece, where this party/bloc, its leaders were mentioned, this was not recorded as an additional reference.

3. The airtime/newspaper space (in sec./sq. cm), allocated to the parties/bloc for pre-election promotion and distinguished in the newspapers as advertising and marked as “political advertising” or “pre-election promotion program” on TV and radio channels, was measured separately. The volume of paid and free advertising was measured separately.
4. A separate list recorded the cases of the TV/radio channel monitored addressing the facts of electoral process violations in the newscasts of the channel (from 18.00 till 24.00, for “Shirak” - 16.00-20.00).
5. The persons, invited for discussion programs during the monitoring period (the genre of interview, “guest in studio”, “talk-show”) of the TV, radio channels studied, were also listed separately.