

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 2, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

The State Department's Office of Inspector General (OIG) recently released the results of an investigation—started at our request—into the Department's decision not to award the Secretary of State's International Women of Courage (IWOC) award to Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro.

Ms. Aro is a brave reporter who was defamed, stalked, and threatened after she exposed a Russian troll farm—the same operation that later interfered in our presidential election and was then indicted by the Department of Justice on eight criminal counts.<sup>1</sup>

Our diplomats in Helsinki recognized her courage and nominated her for the 2019 IWOC award, and you agreed that she should receive it. But when State Department interns found that Ms. Aro had criticized President Trump's attacks on the media—such as his labeling of journalists as “enemies of the people”—senior officials deemed her “not suitable” for the award.<sup>2</sup>

Embassy officials objected, arguing that her statements were “legitimate political speech” and pointing out that she “has the fullest backing of our counterparts who chair the Finnish President's whole of government approach to strategic communications and countering malign influence.”<sup>3</sup> But senior officials would not yield—they feared “what she may say . . . on the same stage as the Secretary”—and Ms. Aro was removed from the list of awardees.<sup>4</sup> It was a sad moment for U.S. diplomacy, and contrary to the “basic right of speech” that the Department criticizes authoritarian governments for suppressing.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps recognizing this hypocrisy, senior Department officials then concealed the truth. A spokesperson told the media that Ms. Aro had been “incorrectly notified” that she was an award

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<sup>1</sup> “How Pro-Russian Trolls Tried to Destroy Me,” *BBC News*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41499789>; “Grand Jury Indicts Thirteen Russian Individuals and Three Russian Companies for Scheme to Interfere in the United States Political System,” United States Department of Justice, February 16, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/grand-jury-indicts-thirteen-russian-individuals-and-three-russian-companies-scheme-interfere>.

<sup>2</sup> “Review of the Selection Process for the International Women of Courage,” United States Department of State Office of the Inspector General, September 2020, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Pompeo, “Unalienable Rights and the Securing of Freedom,” United States Department of State, July 16, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/unalienable-rights-and-the-securing-of-freedom/>.

finalist.<sup>6</sup> And despite warnings from embassy officials that this claim could be “easily disproven,” officials told Congress the same fib.<sup>7</sup> Department officials, OIG concluded, made “statements to the public and congressional staff that inaccurately asserted that Ms. Aro was erroneously notified that she had been selected for the award.”<sup>8</sup> In brief, they lied.

Ms. Aro deserved the IWOC award. The United States, through the Department of State, should embody the values it encourages other countries to embrace. Rescinding an award for journalistic courage because an individual exercised their freedom of speech sets a terrible example and makes a mockery of the Department’s professed commitment to free expression. The Department should fix its error, apologize to Ms. Aro, and correct the record of its deceptions to the public and Congress.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez  
United States Senator



Patrick Leahy  
United States Senator



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Jeanne Shaheen  
United States Senator



Christopher A. Coons  
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator

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<sup>6</sup> “Review of the Selection Process for the International Women of Courage,” United States Department of State Office of the Inspector General, September 2020, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 13.