SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK
protection advocacy learning

"Sustainable knowledge: Lessons from universities, scholars and students in exile"

2024 SAR GLOBAL CONGRESS

in partnership with the European Humanities University

SUMMARY REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Inspired	1
Pre-Congress Workshops & Meetings	2
Lessons Learned: Responding to Global Threats	4
Plenary Sessions	6
Academic Freedom Research & Advocacy	8
Courage to Think Dinner & Keynote	10
2024 Courage to Think Award	11
Co-hosts & Sponsors	12

Inspired

When I arrived at EHU and walked into the Courage to Think dinner, I felt inspired. This was SAR's first in-person Congress in six years, and the energy, passion, friendship, and solidarity that are the hallmarks of our network and prior Congresses were all still there, as strong as ever.

Late after a missed flight, I was just trying to slip through the dining room to my table but was delayed on route by handshakes and embraces from friends and partners from Ghana, Brazil, Canada, Afghanistan, and beyond, including of course Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. It is because of people like them that we do this work. It is because of people like them—like you—that I love this work. It is because of people like us, together, that we are making a difference.

This report summarizes the 2024 Global Congress, which was held on June 25–27, 2024 in Vilnius, Lithuania, in partnership with the European Humanities University (EHU). EHU is an international university dedicated to promoting civil society development through the humanities and liberal arts. EHU was founded in Belarus in 1992 but forced by authorities to close in 2004. Rather than be silenced, EHU relocated to Vilnius and has since continued operations as a university in exile. The Congress drew on EHU's vast experience and that of other academic communities forced into exile or crisis by political unrest, repression, disaster and conflict, from Afghanistan to Ukraine, Belarus to Myanmar, Turkey to Sudan, Nicaragua to Israel/Palestine, and beyond.

In all 250 participants from 60 countries took part in four days of in-person workshops, keynotes, and panel discussions, with even more participating online from around the world. The theme, "Sustainable knowledge: Lessons from universities, scholars and students in exile," gave us the space to confront threats to scholars and academic freedom, to learn from each other's experiences, and to help shape SAR's agenda for the coming years.

The Congress featured lectures from distinguished academics who called on the higher education community to warmly welcome at-risk scholars into their institutions, and to protect universities as spaces for critical thought and the open exchange of ideas. Plenaries and parallel sessions highlighted challenges for scholars and students in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Gaza, and the United States. Workshops and panels featured forward-looking strategies for responding to attacks on higher education communities and presented model programs for supporting at-risk scholars and students.

A high point of the Congress was the Courage to Think dinner, with virtual remarks from Oleksandra Matviichuk, Head of the Centre for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize; a keynote from Dr. Ian Bickford, President of the American University of Afghanistan, about their continuing service to Afghan scholars and students; and presentation of SAR's 2024 Courage to Think Award collectively to "the scholars of Ukraine" for their "courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to their teaching, research, students, and higher education institutions, despite the existential threat posed by war."

On behalf of SAR and all the organizers, I thank all those who participated in-person and online, and who supported the 2024 Global Congress with their expertise, insights, and generosity. You inspire us with who you are and what you are doing for your colleagues and communities. You inspire us to keep going, growing the network and helping even more scholars. You inspire us to keep making a difference. Thank you for joining us, and for continuing this vital work together in the years ahead.

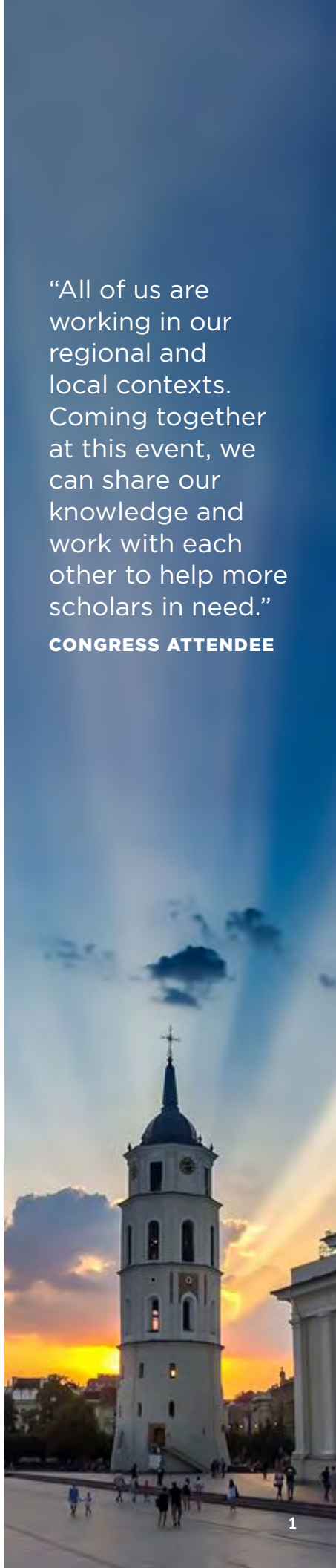
ROB QUINN
Executive Director,
Scholars at Risk

www.scholarsatrisk.org

Audio and video recordings of many sessions are available online at the SAR website.

"All of us are working in our regional and local contexts. Coming together at this event, we can share our knowledge and work with each other to help more scholars in need."

CONGRESS ATTENDEE



Workshops & Meetings

The pre-Congress workshops and meetings fostered in-depth conversations on threats to academic freedom, strategies for members and partners to host and support scholars, and advice for scholars on resuming their academic careers in placements and beyond. Over 120 participants joined these fruitful conversations to share ideas and explore deeper engagement with SAR's work.

Regional coalitions

SAR is committed to ensuring a truly global conversation and community working to protect scholars and promote academic freedom. To that end, SAR is fostering the establishment of regional academic freedom coalitions around the world. Starting with Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, these coalitions will coordinate protection, advocacy and research activities at the local, national, and regional levels. The 2024 Global Congress marked the first opportunity for representatives of these first three regional coalitions to meet together and with the wider SAR network, allowing participants to share experiences and ideas and develop strategies and future actions.

Protection

The SAR Scholar and Practitioner Workshop addressed key questions for scholars and practitioners supported through SAR, EHU, MSCA4Ukraine, and other partner programs. SAR staff and alumni scholars shared advice on topics such as making the most of a placement, building networks and community, planning for transition out of placements, as well as mental health and social well-being.

"In every conflict and in every country where education is under attack, from Ethiopia to Syria to Yemen, we have a moral responsibility to speak out and, whenever possible, to give scholars and students a chance to continue their studies in safer environments."

SAR CONGRESS ATTENDEE

120+
PRE-CONGRESS WORKSHOP ATTENDEES

Membership

The SAR Member Information Sharing Workshop convened representatives from new, prospective, and long-time member institutions to explore strategies to effectively host scholars and engage with SAR's work. SAR membership, advocacy, and protection staff gave advice on topics including network orientation for new member institutions, how to leverage funds to support more placements, and insight into SAR's advocacy, research, and learning activities, including Student Advocacy Seminars, legal clinics, values workshops, and academic freedom curricula.

IAC meeting

SAR's International Advisory Committee serves as an information-sharing and advisory body between the SAR secretariat, SAR Europe, the 17 national SAR sections, partner networks, and SAR research and advocacy partners. The IAC advises the SAR secretariat and board on matters relating to network members, and further embeds an international perspective into every aspect of SAR's work. The 2024 Global Congress marked the first two-day, in-person meeting of the IAC, allowing members to discuss in depth the challenges and opportunities of this work and to help chart a path forward for SAR and the network.

European and national section meetings

During the pre-Congress, members of several national SAR sections met to exchange ideas on their national work and strategies, while representatives of the national SAR sections in Europe met to discuss collaborations and opportunities at the European level. These meetings not only reinforce existing section efforts but provide models for national and regional collaboration that SAR will work to spread to other areas.

"We often think of academic freedom as a problem unique to Southeast Asia, to Eastern Europe, or to Latin America. But SAR shows that these local problems are all interconnected, and are now having a big impact on campuses in Western Europe and the US as well. This Congress helps shine a light on the problems and challenges that we are all facing."

SAR CONGRESS ATTENDEE

Lessons Learned: Responding to Global Threats to Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is under attack on campuses around the world. SAR is committed to protecting those asking questions and sharing ideas, regardless of who they are and where they are from. With our network of over 660 members, SAR can effectively support those in danger through coordinating hosting, sharing resources, and advocating for systemic change.

At the 2024 Global Congress, SAR brought together scholars, activists, and experts from countries experiencing crisis in their higher education communities. In these sessions, panelists examined the lessons learned by defenders of academic freedom and higher education communities in or from Afghanistan, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. These lively discussions allowed space for scholars and supporters to share their experiences, build connections, and collectively envision a path forward for their respective communities.

Afghanistan

Moderator

Dr. Egemen Özbek, TU Dortmund University

Panelists

Prof. Victoria C. Fontan, American University of Afghanistan
Dr. Frangis Dadfar Spanta, TU Dortmund University
Murtaza Mohiqi, Univ. of South-Eastern Norway
Homaira Fayez, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Belarus

Moderator

Dr. Aliaksej Lastouski, European Humanities University

Panelists

Prof. Dr. Iryna Ramanava, European Humanities University
Vytis Jurkonis, Vilnius University
Dr. Gabriele Freitag, German Association for East European Studies
Prof. Dr. Tatiana Shchyttsova, European Humanities University
Dr. Philipp Christoph Schmädeke, Science at Risk Emergency Office

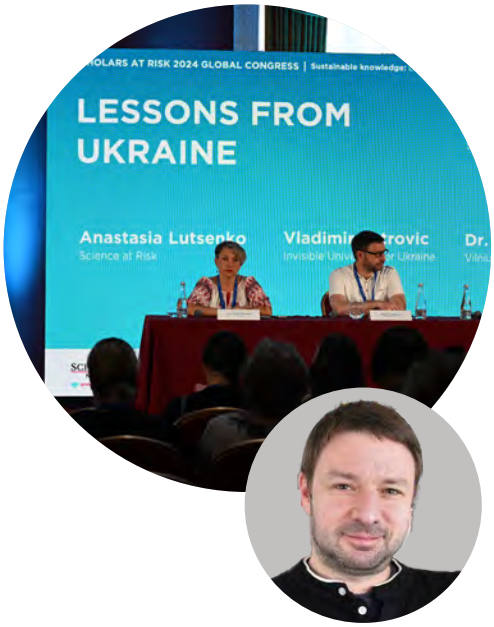
Russia

Moderator

Vasily Zharkov, European Humanities University

Panelists

Ksenia Luchenko PhD, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Montenegro
Dmitry Dubrovsky, Free University (Latvia)
Ilya Kalinin, Bard College Berlin
Oleksandr Shtokvych, Central European University



Ukraine

Moderator

Dominik Kalweit, SAR Europe

Panelists

Anastasiia Lutsenko, Science at Risk
Dr. Vladimir Petrovic, Invisible University for Ukraine
Dr. Zoryna Boiarska, Vilnius University

"Because of SAR, we can look at the problems faced by academics everywhere as if they were our own."

DR. VLADIMIR PETROVIC

United States

Moderator

Nina Burleigh, author and journalist

Panelists

Lisa Anderson, Columbia University
Prof. Jane O. Newman, UC Irvine
Dr. Melanie Adrian, Carleton University

Plenary Sessions

Plenary sessions at the 2024 Global Congress focused on strategies for supporting higher education communities facing crisis. Panelists stressed the importance of international cooperation and the differences in approaches for communities in country and those in exile.

Lessons from the the Founding of the European Humanities University

Moderator

Mr. Maximas Milta, The Reckoning Project

Panelists

Prof. Dr. Anatoli Mikhailov, EHU

Dr. Jonathan Fanton, EHU and SAR boards

Žygimantas Pavilionis, Seimas (Parliament) of Lithuania

Mr. Horton Beebe-Center, EHU General Assembly of Part-Owners

Dr. Liudmyla Ulyashyna, Chair of the EHU Senate

The opening plenary session of the 2024 Global Congress set the stage for two days of conversations in which participants shared their insights from handling the challenges to academic freedom that they have faced in their country.

SAR Board Chair Lisa Anderson and Acting Rector of EHU Dr. Vilius Šadauskas introduced the opening plenary, which focused on the lessons learned by the founding of the European Humanities University. Dr. Anatoli Mikhailov, founder of EHU, spoke about the unique challenges EHU has faced for the last three decades and to the importance of fostering communities for academics in exile. Dr. Liudmyla Ulyashyna and Žygimantas Pavilionis drew on the historical connections between EHU, SAR, and previous programs that served to protect scholars in Europe and beyond.

This global congress is not just about sharing stories of hardship but also about recognizing and celebrating the courage and resilience of those who continue to fight for academic freedom. The experiences of these scholars, researchers, and students in exile are a testament to the enduring human spirit and the unyielding pursuit of knowledge, even in the face of adversity.

DR. VILIUS ŠADAUSKAS

Sustaining higher education in crisis: Responding to Gaza

in partnership with UNIMED

Opening Remarks

Dr. Kherieh Rassas
Vice President, An Najah National University, Palestine
President, UNIMED

Moderator

Marcello Scalisi, Director, UNIMED

Panelists

Dr. Saida Affouneh, TESI initiative

Dr. Shameq Sayeed, University of Leicester & OxPal

Dr. Nishat Naz Asan, Gaza Global University

Dr. Mahmoud Loubani, Palmed Academy, Gaza Educate Medics (GEM)

Dr. Asmaa N. Abusamra, University of Oslo

Dr. Kherieh Rassas provided opening remarks for this powerful session on protecting academics within Gaza, offering key context into the historical development of the higher education community within the region. Panelists shared their personal experiences.

Dr. Asmaa N. Abusamra discussed how critical the conditions are in Gaza for scholars and students, and the resiliency of Gaza academics after decades of constraints and restrictions. Dr. Saida Affouneh discussed her recent work in studying the devastating impacts that the conflict has had on all levels of education in Gaza. Dr. Mahmoud Loubani and Dr. Nishat Naz Asan both discussed paths forward for rebuilding the infrastructure of Gaza's higher education community.

"I am so grateful to be here to share my experience. I am an eyewitness. I lived in war conditions for over 200 days. Luckily, I survived, but my soul did not—it is still there with my family, siblings, and colleagues."

DR. ASMAA N. ABUSAMRA

Academic Freedom Research & Advocacy

As part of SAR's work to protect scholars and strengthen academic freedom, we engage in research and advocacy to investigate and speak out against attacks on higher education communities. At the 2024 Global Congress, we brought together advocates, activists, partners, students, scholars, and supporters to discuss advocacy strategies and to share new insights into scholarship on academic freedom.

Through these sessions, participants shared their experiences in documenting and reporting on attacks on academic freedom, provided context on the ongoing efforts to increase understanding and protection of academic freedom within and through interstate and regional human rights and higher education systems, and discussed more ways to engage higher education students in academic freedom advocacy at the national, regional, and international levels.

Monitoring academic freedom, from the local to the global

Moderator

Monika Steinel, European University Association (EUA)

Panelists

Prof. Dr. Liviu Matei, King's College London

Dr. Sol Iglesias, University of the Philippines-Diliman

Amy Kapit, Scholars at Risk

Ilyas Saliba, Global Public Policy Institute

New research on academic freedom

Moderator

Usang Maria Assim, University of the Western Cape

Panelists

Dr. Rosario Figari Layus, Justus Liebig University of Giessen, Germany

Dr. Khoo Ying Hooi, Universiti Malaya

Dr. Chika C. Mba, University of Ghana, Legon

Successes and challenges in advocating for support for at-risk scholars

Moderator

Laura Lohéac, Collège de France

Panelists

Lauren Berntsen, SAIH

Lisa Krieg, Carnegie Mellon University

Dr. Ertuğ Tombuş, HU-Berlin

Encieh Erfani, International Community of Iranian Academics

Student engagement in academic freedom advocacy

Moderator

Dr. Melanie Adrian, Carleton University

Panelists

Edzia Carvalho, University of Dundee

Salvador Herencia-Carrasco, University of Ottawa

Selma Bratberg, The Norwegian Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH)

Maksim Zafranski, Belarusian Student Association

Academic freedom advocacy in the UN and regional systems

Moderator

Dr. Pingtjin Thum, New Naratif

Panelists

Camilla Croso, Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA)

Prof. Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua, University of Ghana, Legon

Bencharat Sae Chua, Mahidol University

Denise Roche, SAR Europe

Ilyas Saliba, Global Public Policy Institute

"SAR's Global Congress is a great opportunity to come together. There really is no substitute for this type of in-person cooperation. A lot of great work is being seeded right here."

SOL IGLESIAS

Courage to Think Dinner & Keynote

The Courage to Think dinner marks the emotional high point of every SAR Congress. Even as we recognize that there are still too many scholars needing our help, we take the time to celebrate with network members, partners, colleagues and friends the good work we have done so far, and take inspiration from the example of those who have gone out of their way to defend academic freedom. Dr. Ian Bickford, President of the American University of Afghanistan, gave a stirring keynote address about the challenges faced by Afghanistan's higher education community in the years after the fall of Kabul.

"Following the Taliban takeover in 2021, no media account quite captured the chaos and uncertainty of the moment. Our students, not knowing whether they will be persecuted for their education, responded by showing up."

DR. IAN BICKFORD

Keynote speaker, President of the American University of Afghanistan

"The courage and dedication of the scholars of Ukraine is both exceptional and inspiring: Exceptional in withstanding such a prolonged and violent assault, including repeated bombardments, occupations, and displacements on a mass scale; inspiring in their demonstrated solidarity and creativity in supporting each other, their students, and their institutions."

ROBERT QUINN

2024 Courage to Think Award

THE SCHOLARS OF UKRAINE

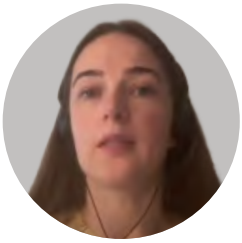
The Courage to Think Award is given by SAR to individuals, groups, or institutions that have demonstrated an exemplary commitment to protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom, whether through their professional work, private or community service, often in the face of personal risk. At the 2024 Global Congress, SAR presented the award collectively to the "scholars of Ukraine" with a citation recognizing their "courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to their teaching, research, students, and higher education institutions, despite the existential threat posed by war."

"This award is a tribute to all academics who show and teach resilience to the entire world. With the help of international partners, the Ukrainian academic community is part of the whole international scientific society."

DR. KATERYNA HORIUNOVA
Mariupol State University, who received the award symbolically on behalf of all of the scholars of Ukraine

"Ukrainian educators are making enormous efforts for continuing educational activities. They're fighting for a chance to create a peaceful and democratic future, which we all want for us and for our children. To be an educator during the large scale war, is an act of resistance."

OLEKSANDRA MATVIICHUK
Head of the Centre for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, winner of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize



Co-hosts & Sponsors

Scholars at Risk would like to thank the 2024 Global Congress co-hosts:

EHU European Humanities University

VILNIUS

Scholars at Risk and the European Humanities University would also like to thank the following organizations and partners for their additional support for the Congress, pre-meetings, and related projects:

Charina Endowment Fund
Charles Koch Foundation
European Union
Freedom House
Fritt Ord Foundation
Gerda Henkel Foundation
Henry Luce Foundation
The Mellon Foundation
Microsoft Corporation
National Endowment for Democracy
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
New York University
Open Society Foundations
Vivian G. Prins Foundation
Wiley Impact Fund
Winston Foundation

Thank you!

Thanks to our host the European Humanities University and all the network members, partners, sponsors, SAR-assisted scholars and practitioners, speakers and participants, in-person and online, who helped make our 2024 Global Congress such an inspiring success.

Save the date!

JUNE 2026

We invite you join us at the next SAR Global Congress to be held in June 2026, including a celebration of SAR's 25th anniversary!

GIVE TODAY

To give, scan the QR code or visit:
www.scholarsatrisk.org/give-today

SCHOLARS AT RISK depends on the generous financial support of friends inside and outside higher education communities to sustain our work. Gifts of any size are appreciated, including gifts in honor or memory of others, matching gifts, and legacies.

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protection advocacy learning

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