

Scholars at Risks

Activities' Report - Year 2023

Virginia Coda Nunziante / Stefano degli Uberti

1. Introduction

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is an international network of higher education institutions established in 1999 at the Chicago University. Its aim is to foster the **promotion of academic freedom and protect the fundamental rights of scholars who are threatened or whose work is severely compromised**. SAR headquarters are SAR-US (New York University) at the New York University and SAR-Europe at the Maynooth University (Ireland).

At the end of 2020, 550 universities from 42 countries joined the SAR International network, and most of them are based in the US, Canada and Europe.

It is also part of the Network for Education and Academic Rights (NEAR) and the Institute of International Education (IIE) which established the Scholars Rescue Fund (SRF). In addition to the partners present in each country, the SAR network has signed a collaboration protocol with some partner networks.

Launched in February 2019 with 14 founding members, SAR Italy counted 36 members at the end of December 2022.

The CNR has formally joined the international network SAR for the period 2023-2026 (Resolution of the CNR Board of Directors no. 14 of 14 February 2023). The undersigned is the Representative delegated by the President of CNR, together with Dr Stefano degli Uberti, Deputy Representative.

SAR carries out activities on three programmatic areas:

1. **Protection** - SAR works in collaboration with partner universities to create temporary scholarships (3-36 months) for academics applying for SAR protection. The funding of the scholarships is entirely borne by the host university, although SAR promotes contacts with foundations/international funding bodies (for example, the Scholars Rescue Fund - SRF).
2. **Advocacy** - on behalf of academics, writers, artists and other intellectuals to sensitize civil and political society to cases of attack on academic freedom in different national contexts.
3. **Learning** - Research and training on issues of human rights, academic freedoms, academic refugees and reception policies for researchers and students, through the organization of seminars, conferences, talk series, monitoring projects, and participation in Erasmus+ projects.

2. Main activities carried on by SAR International during 2023 relevant for Italy and for CNR

With specific reference to the Italian section of SAR, during 2023 SAR-Italy organized multiple activities (e.g. meetings, workshops, thematic meetings) always ensuring the possibility to participate both in person and remotely through the ZOOM platform.

SAR-Italia's activities covered a wide range of initiatives in the three areas of intervention: 1) protection, 2) advocacy, 3) research and training.

In particular, the CNR delegates participated in the following activities:

- **17 March – Publication and Presentation of the SAR Italy Report of Activities 2021-2022.** The report that outlines the activities from January 2021 to December 2022, records a growing interest for SAR and the rise in membership. The awareness and need to provide concrete acts of solidarity are also a response to the events of the last years, namely the United States's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Russian-Ukrainian war and most recently attacks on students and academics in Iran.
- **13 April – 1st meeting CNR-Scholars at Risk Italy** (online). The meeting organized between the CNR delegates for SAR and the representatives of the SAR Board had the objective of defining and agreeing on the themes as well as on the managerial and organizational aspects of the future collaboration
- **03 July – General Assembly of SAR Italy** (online). During the meeting, the Report on SAR Italy's 2021-2022 activity was presented, followed by updates on the activities of the four-working group.

1) *Institutional Relations* - In the framework of the collaboration with MIUR and CRUI, talks are held to agree on the possibility of enjoying of extensions for the implementation of reception programmes. The long bureaucratic process that characterizes the start-up phase of the reception programme affects the effective time available to the scholars to implement their work.

2) *Advocacy* – Elaboration of a national advocacy plan for the year 2024. The organizational and thematic framework for the preparation of several future initiatives was also defined: a 'European Advocacy Day' in Brussels; a training course for 'scholars at risk', organized in collaboration with SAR-Sweden; 'Advocacy seminars' among Italian and foreign university students.

3) *Protection* - Presentation of the results of the questionnaire directed to scholars at risk hosted in Italy. The questionnaire was aimed at monitoring their experience in the country.

4) *Events/Training* - Definition of the topics of the training course 'Guidelines for the reception of scholars at risk', organized for all members of the SAR-Italy network.

This summer meeting was also the occasion to welcome a new member: the University of Messina.

Most importantly the elections for the new Executive board were held. The new Steering Committee is composed by: Scuola Superiore di Catania; University of Bologna; University of Cagliari; University of Pavia; University of Turin; University of Verona and University of Roma 'La Sapienza'. After serving for four years, the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa and the Universities of Padova, Trento, Trieste have finished their mandates.

- **05-06 October, University of Trieste - General Assembly of SAR Italy** (in person/online)
The opening of the proceedings was preceded by a brief presentation of the new members of the network. This was an opportunity to announce the membership of CNR. The CNR deputy representative emphasized the efforts the institution has been making since 2022 with the creation of an academic freedom protection programme directed to Ukrainian 'scholars at risk'.
In the framework of the collaboration with CRUI, talks are held to establish closer cooperation aimed at setting up a nationally funded reception programme for scholars at risk. In parallel, official answers are expected from MAECI with respect to the possibility of establishing a collaboration on advocacy and protection activities.
- **10, 17, 24 November and 4 December - Training course entitled 'Guidelines for the reception of scholars at risk'** (online).

The overall objective of the course was to provide information and guidance aimed at improving the regulatory, organizational and, above all, mentoring skills of university communities and all research institutions that are committed to promote academic freedom and to host scholars applying for protection within the framework of SAR.

The course was intended not only for technical-administrative staff but also management staff, researchers, technologists and post-doctoral fellows.

The participation of the CNR staff was particularly remarkable (79 participants: 36 research staff and 43 technical-administrative staff), testifying not only to the growing interest and sensitivity toward the main theme of the course but also to the demand and need to acquire more knowledge and specific training to undertake advocacy initiatives and host scholars from countries at risk in the years to come.

- **22 November 22 and 6 December 2023; 17, 24, 31 January e 5-6 February 2024 – Swetaly SAR Workshop: “Rebuilding careers in exile 2023-24”** (in person/online)

The Swetaly-Scholars at Risk collaboration began in 2020 with the main aim of strengthening the partnership in specific areas relevant to academic freedom. The core values underlying this initiative are: academic freedom, mutual learning and exchange, collaboration and engagement in teaching and learning which would enhance the environment and the growth of both staff and students at the departments involved and the universities members of SAR in both countries.

During the meeting held on 5-6 February 2024 at the Swedish Institute of Classical Studies in Rome focusing on the topic ‘*Networking knowledge beyond academia. Rethinking careers in the international cooperation sector*’, also the CNR deputy representative gave a speech aimed at promoting the knowledge and opportunities offered by the CNR as the largest public body in Italy for advanced scientific and technological research.

It was also recalled the commitment of the President of the CNR prior to joining the SAR network, to promote a scientific dialogue centered also on rights, social status and freedom of researchers. Within this framework that in 2022 several institutes of the CNR (such as IBF, IRPI, IMATI o ISGI) have self-financed research grants for Ukrainian graduates, professors and researchers living in insecurity conditions.

The following activities were also of particular interest to CNR:

- **28 April – SAR Italy meets IIE Scholar Rescue Fund** (online), and more specifically Emily Borzcik from the Institute of International Education’s Scholar Rescue Fund (IIE-SRF). IIE-SRF provides fellowships for established scholars whose lives and work are threatened in their home countries, and partners with higher education institutions who host these scholars for one-year academic positions. To date, IIE-SRF has worked with more than 150 European institutions, including 7 in Italy. Recently, they established a European office and are interested in expanding their service and support to universities in the region. During the webinar the IIE-SRF representative discussed the ways the organization operates and shared the hosting experience at the SPGI Department in Padova.
- **14-15 December, University of Trento – European Student Advocacy Days** (in person)
SAR’s annual Student Advocacy Days events bring students and faculty from SAR’s Student Advocacy Seminars together for training on best practices in advocacy on behalf of imprisoned scholars, and to foster respect for academic freedom.

Participation in other initiatives organized by the CNR institutes and related to the objectives of SAR:

- **2 October, Institute for international legal studies (CNR-ISGI) – “Free Academics without Academic Freedom?”**, Balázs Majtényi, Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary).

The CNR delegates have constantly collaborated online with the members of the Executive board of SAR Italy to contribute to the commitment of SAR-Italy in disseminating information on deadlines and events through the relaunch of e-mails and the CNR official websites.

3. Activities carried on by the Delegates within SAR during 2023 and impact on the Italian scientific community

The main activities carried out by the deputy representative of the CNR (Stefano degli Uberti) were the participation in the SAR-Italy General Assemblies and in the thematic and in-depth workshops concerning the three programmatic areas of SAR.

The main objectives achieved during the participation to the assemblies were the formalization and official presentation of CNR as a new member of the SAR network, and the support for the preparation of the training course on ‘*Guidelines for the reception of scholars at risk*’ in which the deputy representative took part together with a large number of colleagues from several CNR institutes.

Along with these activities the deputy representative participated at individual initiatives organized by the CNR institutes on topics related to SAR's mission.

In this framework, in collaboration with the main representative, it was agreed the proposal to organise a future workshop at the CNR headquarters in Rome, in order to strengthen the new membership of CNR to the SAR network, also through the valorization of the concrete experiences promoted by the CNR through the protection programme aimed at hosting Ukrainian ‘scholars at risk’.

In order to increase the dissemination of SAR's initiatives and stimulate interest in its activities, the deputy representative took several initiatives to encourage a wide participation of the CNR staff to the above-mentioned training course, as well as to provide support to both CNR researchers and directors of institutes who are interested in hosting ‘scholars at risk’.

4. Evaluation of the participation in terms of benefits and membership cost

Through the SAR network Italy has been very active in developing initiatives to protect and host scholars at risk at a global level; therefore it seems of key importance to strengthen the participation of CNR in SAR, which represents a global reference point in the field of human rights protection and academic freedom.

CNR representatives have been working hard in 2023 to enhance the involvement of CNR in the new body; thus it has recently received a positive answer from SAR Italian Executive board to organize a CNR-SAR event in the autumn of 2024.

Through its participation in SAR activities, the CNR has the opportunity to extend its international scientific collaborations and to enhance the internal expertise and experience in the field of human rights protection and academic freedom.

In order to be able to formulate effective responses and sustainable hosting opportunities over time and space, also through synergy and cooperation with the other members of the network, the presence (membership) of the CNR within the SAR network remains of strategic importance, even more after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2022 and the violent resurgence of Israeli-Palestinian hostilities.

5. Evaluation of Italians' attendance and how to improve interest and involvement

Italy participates in the SAR network through its own national section that brings together more than 40 members including universities, research institutes and scientific associations.

Since its foundation in 2000, SAR's protection services have assisted more than 2000 scholars. In the 2022–2023 academic year, SAR received over 1,300 applications and provided a wide range of direct services, including arranging 189 academic positions for at-risk scholars — to date the highest number of placements in a single year.

As already mentioned in the previous sections, with regard to future prospects, the CNR representatives aim at strengthening the Italian presence of the body by fostering synergies between the other members of the SAR network and the individual CNR institutes/researchers within the framework of SAR's three programme areas.

6. Italian experts with important roles within the Union or within related Commissions and Programs

There are currently no Italian experts with senior roles appointed in the international section of Scholars at Risk.

7. If Union with CNR Commission, short summary about the 2023 CNR Commission activities

Not applicable

8. Conclusions

SAR international is a global reference point for the management and defense of hundreds of scholars around the world, thanks to its specific protection programmes, awareness-raising initiatives and training programmes on the importance of academic freedom and the consequences of its violation.

The participation of the CNR in the SAR network is important and strategic as it allows the institution, in synergy with the other member institutions, to take part in the development of more incisive protection and advocacy strategies also beyond the national level.

Thanks to the scientific network of institutes that are active throughout the Italian territory and operating also at international level, the CNR will be able to pursue one of its main missions even more effectively: to promote the development of scientific and technological knowledge in the context of a concrete social commitment

Thus the future organization of a CNR-SAR event in the autumn of 2024, at the headquarters of the National Research Council in Rome, as well as the commitment to increasing awareness and involvement of the organization's staff in SAR activities, will be part of the process.

Nevertheless, in order to increase the capacity to foster global actions in the name of science research, in the coming years the efforts to promote dialogue and potential collaborations between the CNR delegate representatives for SAR and other the CNR delegates of other international scientific bodies (e.g. International Science Council) could be a relevant factor.

Nevertheless, in order to increase the capacity to promote global actions in the name of science research, in the coming years the commitment to the development of a dialogue and potential collaborations between the CNR delegates for SAR and the other CNR delegates in international scientific bodies (e.g. International Science Council) will be of paramount importance.

Rome, 25/06/2024



Virginia Coda Nunziante



Stefano degli Uberti