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Internship with the Scholars at Risk Network
Summer 2025

This story goes beyond an internship, beyond hatred, and beyond summer. This is a story of, and around, Bahruz Samadov, an Azerbaijani scholar, journalist, peace activist, and good friend. As any worthwhile article about him states, in August of 2024, Bahruz was visiting his grandmother in Baku when the police entered his house and arrested him for two months. And then two months more, and more, until a year later he was sentenced to 15 years on charges of high treason—for advocating peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan—a goal that, at least on paper, Donald Trump was able to force with very little backlash from Baku. And now, when what Bahruz was accused of advocating for has been achieved, there is a hope for his release, nothing more than hope.

I met Bahruz in Tbilisi, a key city in Armenia-Azerbaijan related peace activism, a neutral site available to all, harboring "fugitives" of all sorts. We had been in touch for a long time before first sharing a bottle of wine; he was my primary source for comments on news related to the conflict and to arrests in Azerbaijan. He is the underrepresented anti-nationalist voice in the region, which means that in his comments, he doesn't play teams; Bahruz's only concerns were freedoms and safety of the people, and the just political process.

As this essay does, my paths have crossed the Scholars at Risk's more often than any sane person hopes. SAR has reported on the arrests and repressions of my colleagues, my spouse,

and, lastly, my friend Bahruz. As I think of this writing more and more, I realize a simple yet so crucial mistake I've been committing. It is best to consider this a warning to avoid it.

As an intern, I was intended to work in three fields—drafting Academic Freedom Monitoring Project reports, improving communication within the SAR International advisory committee, and preparing the launch of a new project of US-focused activities. Out of which, to be fair, I mainly succeeded in the first one. Mainly due to issues related to Bahruz's case, as it had reached a penultimate stage in June, when, behind closed doors, he was sentenced to 15 years of prison. I could hardly force myself to do any work unrelated to my friend's imprisonment.

As this internship is centered around hate, I was constantly on the lookout for it—the SAR's understanding, approach, assumptions, and solutions. In general, hate is not a core interest of the organization's activities; it's addressed tangentially and within fine boundaries. Scholars at Risk are primarily concerned with attacks against faculty and students of universities around the world—mainly for their academic work, protesting against the government's education policies, and exercising free speech. As Alisen Stasiowski, the person in charge of the Scholars in Prison project, said, "A lot of where SAR work stems from, and more specifically the Scholars in Prison project stems from, is hate against differences and speaking out against the norm."

For SAR, hate is the suppression of difference, dissent, and academic freedom by governments and authorities. Their approach is to monitor, advocate, and support scholars and students under attack. As Alisen puts it: "We can even see that in the monitoring project in terms of protest suppression and kind of influencing hate in that sense and kind of pitting sides against one another, of suppressing one speech but not the other. And I think that just elaborates and

exacerbates the hate between groups, potentially, rather than creating dialogue." The SAR team acknowledges how difficult it is to define and measure hate, and their solutions include advocacy, protective policies, and raising awareness.

Scholars at Risk approaches hate as a systemic issue, as repressions that play out through censorship, imprisonment, and arbitrary restrictions on speech. Mainly, it is reflected in the work of the Scholars in Prison project, which Alisen describes simply: "I work on that daily, just because that is what the Scholars in Prison Project is." They treat protest suppression and silencing free speech as central dynamics of hate. For SAR, "suppressing one speech but not the other … just elaborates and exacerbates the hate between groups, potentially, rather than creating dialogue." SAR also recognizes that definitions of hate are contested: Alisen emphasizes that "there are so many different types of definitions to what hate is," and acknowledges that the monitoring and advocacy must be flexible to different contexts. Even in specific campaigns like that of Bahruz, they do not see direct violent threats. Still, they do face backlash framed as selective engagement: "There have been some hurtful words … more so questions and hurtful comments as to us not taking on other cases." Which, in itself, shows the current demand for advocacy more than anything else. Altogether, SAR understands hate as suppression, documents it through monitoring, and responds with targeted advocacy to centralize and emphasize dialogue.

When it comes to solutions, SAR emphasizes the importance of immediate protections and long-term structural changes. At the core of the organization is policy: "First and foremost is adopting policies that protect academic freedoms … that dialogue and limiting influences in speech on campus." They see accountability as equally crucial, stressing that "when the hate-based violations happen, we can separate and situate the actions and have perpetrators be

held accountable." Yet, as Alisen confirms, the SAR team is also realistic about the complexity of progress. She notes that strategies have to evolve and shift over time: "What we would have maybe done five years ago is going to be very different than what we would have done now." In practice, this means raising awareness of academic freedom as a global issue and rallying support from institutions: "A big one that we talk about a lot is … how many countries may be signed on to a law or how many universities may create policies that protect and enshrine academic freedom." SAR's solutions strategies highlight the complexity of the issues they deal with; their approaches combine awareness, policy adoption, and accountability.

While the internship was focused on hate, quite soon it became clear that SAR does not treat it as a self-contained category, but rather through the framework of academic freedom violations. As the interview with Alisen started, she was confused about the question of defining hate: put it: "There are so many different types of definitions of what hate is. … Is there a specific definition that you go off of?" This uncertainty shows that SAR does not define hate directly, but instead embeds it within systemic attacks on universities, scholars, and students. She explained that much of their work "stems from hate against the way people operate in terms of their academic freedom and prejudices against what they research and kind of speaking out against governments in that situation." In practice, this means that SAR takes on cases where repression of speech, protest, or research crosses into persecution, while leaving other forms of hate—such as xenophobia and prejudice—outside its scope. Thus, SAR's understanding of hate is deliberately tied to a thin understanding, and framed not in general social terms but through the institutional and legal contexts of higher education.

Another layer of SAR's engagement with hate comes from the reality of making an NGO work, specifically from funding opportunities. SAR's activities are limited by fundraising and the

demand for measurable outcomes. Alisen admits that "you have to have benchmarks, but at the same time … it severely impacts the work that we do." When something as intangible as advocacy, which often addresses the root causes of hate and repression, is quantified: "It's not like we are able to carry out a school pilot program where we train a certain number of people and have this many people take a test and then they get a certain score." This creates pressure to abandon projects that lack quick, obvious, or measurable results, even when they remain somewhat impactful: "Sometimes we have to move off of a project because we're not seeing the progress, even though we know it's impactful, but the donors are just not willing to fund it." In this sense, SAR's solutions to hate are shaped as much by external expectations as by their own strategies. It forces them, as much as the next NGO, to balance long-term advocacy with the need to produce visible results.

Although Alisen did not cite any specific international or scholarly frameworks of understanding of hate, SAR's approach to the issue corresponds to both UNESCO's 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel and Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The UNESCO Recommendation insists that "*higher-education teaching personnel... should enjoy freedom of thought, conscience, religion, expression, assembly and association... [and] should not be subject to arbitrary arrest or detention*" and that "*the principle of academic freedom should be scrupulously observed... freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research... freedom from institutional censorship*". These provisions embody SAR's central mission: protecting academics targeted for their research or opinions and resisting state repression that seeks to silence dissent.

Similarly, ICCPR Article 19 states that "*Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference*" and that "*Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds*". These rights are fundamental to SAR's advocacy for imprisoned scholars and censored academics, treating attacks on expression as manifestations of hate against intellectual freedom. Together, these two instruments frame hate as *systemic suppression of knowledge, thought, and speech.*

The most time-consuming part of my work was drafting Academic Freedom Monitoring Project (AFMP) reports—4-5 paragraph articles about specific events, attacks on faculty, staff, and students of universities in Serbia and Russia. Despite the size, I'd spent at least 20 hours to produce two-three reports every week. As I am familiar with both countries' human rights records and the concept of a relatively small report, I was confident in writing those. I did not appreciate enough the nuances of the format—it's not a news article, it's a report that answers very specific questions: the who, what, when, where, why, and how of each incident, but through the lens of academic freedom and human rights. Each report needed to clearly identify the individuals or institutions involved, the type of attack (imprisonment, loss of position, or violence), the context and possible motivation behind it, and its impact on the broader higher education space. Beyond just describing events, I had to frame them within international legal systems—explaining how they violated freedoms of expression, association, and/or academic inquiry. Besides, it can't be about a professor who was imprisoned for whatever reason; it has to be related to their work as an academic, as an expert in their field.

This specific nuance came up when I was working on the report about Mikhail Volkov, a professor at Ural Federal University and the father of Leonid Volkov, a senior ally of the late Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, who has become the subject of criminal proceedings.

The Russian police raided his house, and he was accused of "financing an extremist organization," fired, interrogated, and barred from leaving the city where he lives. After working for about 15 hours to get the whole story—the sources, reasons, interviews, articles, and so on—I stumbled upon the fact that the criminal case is unrelated to his academic career. The fact that he is the father of an oppositional politician made him a target of the Russian police. I had to spend some time grappling with the fact that this story is not reportable as an AFMP incident.

Most of the reports I have written were about the protests in Serbia. There, the boundaries between academic freedom and political expression are inseparable. As per SAR's *Free to Think 2025* report, "university students launched a protest movement against government corruption sparked by the collapse of a roof at a railway station in Novi Sad that killed fifteen people," and "faculty and administrations were largely supportive of the students, including by backing a student strike." Even though the incident at the station had no relation to academia, previous attacks on higher education forced students and faculty to organize together on an unprecedented scale. "Serbia's government responded by publicly discrediting the students, prompting violence against them," and later by "threatening to defund state universities and withholding the salaries of professors who supported the protests."

What made this situation especially striking was that the protests were not about academic content at all—the Serbian government had already been tightening its grip on higher education: cutting research hours, centralizing oversight, and starving public universities of funding—yet universities became the logistical centers of the protest movement. The *Free to Think* report notes that "Serbia's populist government launched a retaliatory assault on higher education that threatened to undermine both academic freedom and university autonomy." When professors who joined peaceful demonstrations saw their salaries cut and their research hours

restricted, it became clear that academic freedom in Serbia was no longer just about the right to teach or research freely; it was about the right to participate in public life without fear.

Despite being able to appreciate this opportunity fully, I had different periods of activity over the course of the summer, due to various reasons, mostly because of my own actions. In June, Bahruz was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Since then, he committed multiple suicide attempts and went on several hunger strikes—I could not force myself to think of Russia or Serbia while my friend was losing his life. Instead, I tried to focus on what I can do for Bahruz—mobilize his MA and PhD advisors, international academic groups, and work on the campaign advocating for his release at SAR. Thankfully, there were tools at my disposal that I could do something: I gave a lecture about political freedoms in Azerbaijan and Bahruz's case for students at the Student Advocacy Seminar at Monash University in Australia (via Zoom); I sent over 60 letters written by academic from around the world to a friend of Bahruz who brought it to him in prison; I have written letters to Agon Hamza and Slavoj Žižek, and so on. It's comforting to know that I did at least something and did not fall into the abyss, as happens with many campaigns for political prisoners.

Because of all that work on the campaign, I neglected some of my immediate responsibilities with the internship, and I do not regret that. I regret that I did not communicate the problem in full, as I'm sure the people at SAR would have understood. If I could change something about the internship, it would be that. The lack of transparency did no good to any of us.

As I finish this essay, I wish to continue working on the campaign. I wish to see Bahruz out of prison. And I wish we could all be a little less dramatic.