

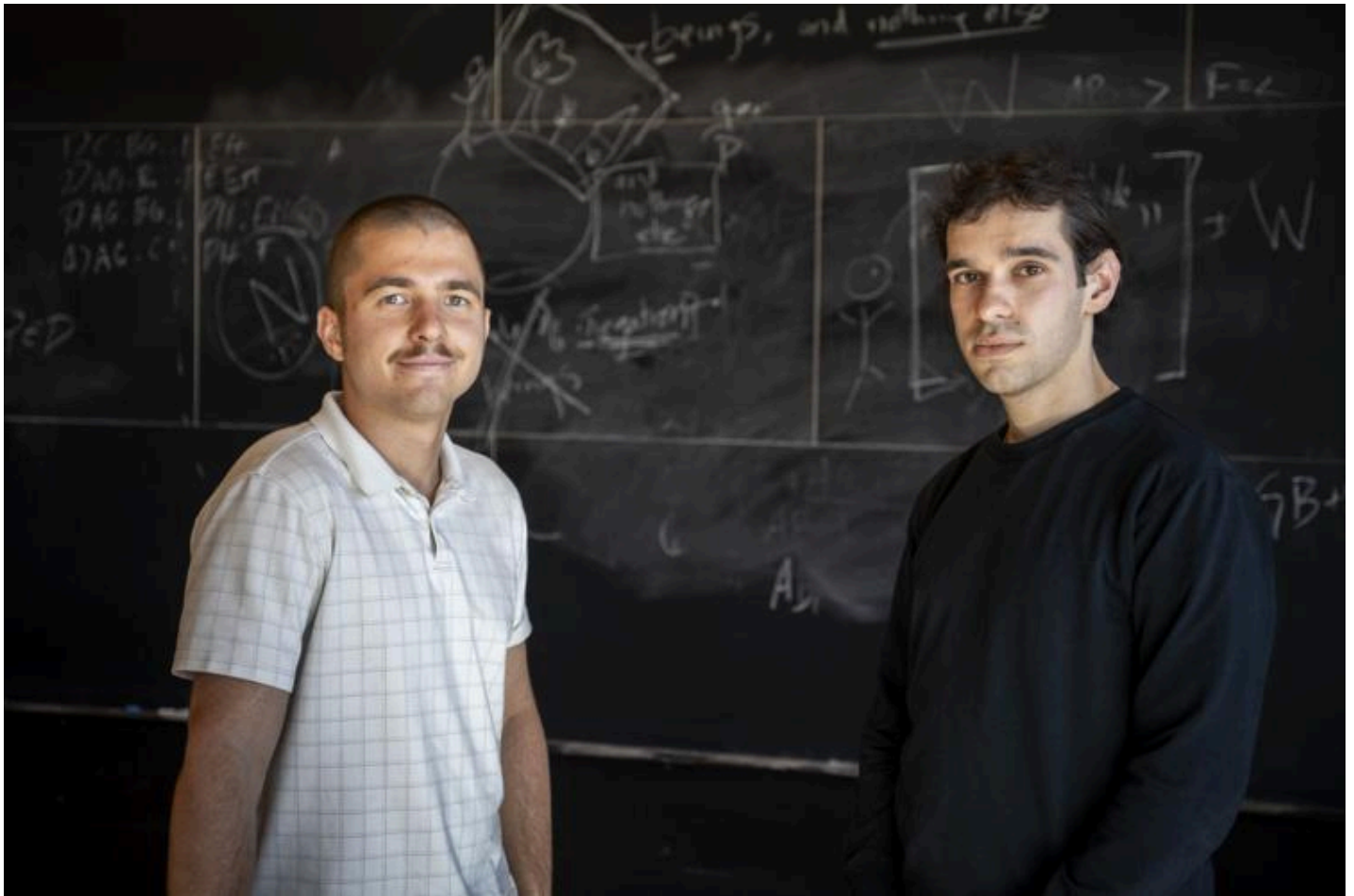
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St. John's College grads use Russia, Ukraine ties to teach local students

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By André Salkin asalkin@sfnewmexican.com

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Amir Bergen of Tolyatti, Russia, left, and Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin of Minsk, Belarus, co-founders of nonprofit Svet Peace Project, stand for a portrait at St. John's College on Friday. They started the organization to counter the roots of violence by running guided, dialogue-based courses in classical literature that help teens learn to listen, think and speak in ways that create connection.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican



They could have met on the battlefield. Instead, they met on the Santa Fe campus of St. John's College.

It was still the early days of the Russia-Ukraine War when forces besieging Kyiv drove Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin from the city in 2022.

A Belarus native living with family in Ukraine, he endured the war for a time, watching social structures begin to fracture and weighing every day whether to volunteer for the army — "as almost every man in Ukraine was," Tsiarokhin said.

By the following year, however, he was in Santa Fe, enrolled at the small liberal arts college, where he met Amir Bergen, a Russian-born student who had been living in Oklahoma when the war broke out.

They had a struggle in common: the "useless" feeling of studying classical literature while people died and city blocks crumbled back home, Tsiarokhin said — and the knowledge that, had the cards fallen differently, they could have been facing each other over gunfire.

"Especially in this world today, you cannot be sure about anything," said Tsiarokhin, 23. "I'd like to believe that it is not possible, but who knows?"



Amir Bergen of Tolyatti, Russia, and Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin of Minsk, Belarus, who was living in Ukraine, at St. John's College on Friday.

Nathan Burton/The New Mexican

The students decided to do something more productive.

Drawing on St. John's format of close discussion of great texts, the pair organized online seminars in 2024, bringing students from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus together over their shared literary heritage. This year, they've incorporated that effort as a Santa Fe-based nonprofit, the Svet Peace Project, and are expanding it to American youth — particularly young people they describe as part of a global wave of alienation and disengagement.

'It is quite dangerous'

"The war for me and Kanstantsin is one of the hardest things," said 25-year-old Bergen, who graduated from the school this year. "It shows me, at least, that even out of the most hard things, very beautiful things can be born. If not that, then our project wouldn't be born."

Incorporating the effort has come with tradeoffs. A more formal organization draws more scrutiny from governments in the region that have moved to supervise and even persecute cross-border communications among their citizens.

"Unfortunately, the case is that it is quite dangerous, even in an online format, for students to participate in something like what we do," Tsiarokhin said. "While the political situation remains what it is on both sides of the front line, we kind of have to restrain our activity a little bit."

Four years after he fled from Kyiv, the initial emotional shock has subsided for Tsiarokhin. He now thinks of the social divisions he watched emerge during the war.

"People started becoming more isolated in their communities and became much more radicalized, which is understandable, to a very high extent," he said. "People started forming kind of echo chambers on both sides."

Their work — with programs for students around the world now, but mostly those in Northern New Mexico — aims to counter that tendency to isolate when met with conflict.

Art, music, great books

Through the Svet curriculum — named for a Slavic word associated with both "world" and "light" — the founders teach books, music, media and games. The approach draws from St. John's Great Books model but expands it, incorporating rap and contemporary music as subjects worthy of close inquiry.

"They live this kind of music," Bergen said. "That's why we thought it was important to use this medium as a way for them to bring their world — their rich and powerful world — out."

He noted art offers young people a way to express their perspectives.

"One of the most powerful ways to share, not your culture directly, but just share who you are, is through a medium such as great books or music or art," Bergen said. "Nothing else can really let you and others show the world of powerful ideas that you have within. These mediums, be it great books or art, they help you bring this world out that you have deep inside."

UWC hosts new course

Bergen has remained in Santa Fe, where he continues to work with students in the juvenile justice system through the Española YMCA and YouthWorks.

"You would be surprised," he said, "how much a 13-year-old teenager has to say."

An online course set to launch next week through United World Colleges — an international network of schools with a U.S. location in Northern New Mexico's Montezuma — drew 207 applications from 53 countries, Bergen said, bringing students together over Nobel Prize-winning authors and their stories.

Tsiarokhin called it "a crucial supplement to our offline work in the United States, allowing us to retain the international scope of our mission while still including New Mexican youth."

The course title, "Many Ways to Be Human," captures what Bergen described as "perhaps the big statement that we're trying to make."

"There is no civilized and barbarian," he said. "There is no correct Western and incorrect Eastern. There are just many ways."

'They're not equipped'

Tsiarokhin moved to New York after graduating from St. John's last year. He teaches at a charter school in Harlem and teaches his own classes in the city through the nonprofit.

Tsiarokhin's classes invite teenagers to read a short story each week and discuss the text with one another to practice what the nonprofit describes as "small but essential habits that help prevent everyday misunderstandings from turning into real conflict."

As he describes it, equipping students with the skill to mitigate conflict helps treat the same issue Tsiarokhin described in Ukraine.

He sees it in his Muslim students, who Tsiarokhin noted still feel the effects of conflict in the Middle East despite living thousands of miles away from the fighting.

"They reproduce those tensions in their daily lives — in their conversations with others, in their classifying of people they see around them," Tsiarokhin said. "It just happens all the time."

The pair said they've seen this type of everyday conflict in the minds of young people in Ukraine, Santa Fe and New York.

"It seems like maybe it is universally the case that things are getting very difficult for young people these days," Tsiarokhin said. "The challenges are really painful, and they're not equipped almost at all to face them."

Takeaways

- A Belarusian student displaced from Ukraine and a Russian classmate met at St. John's College in Santa Fe bonding over the feeling that studying literature could seem "useless" as war reshaped life for people they knew and cared about.
- Their response became the Svet Peace Project, a Santa Fe nonprofit that uses books, music, media and games to bring young people together across divides. The group now offers courses locally and internationally, including a program that drew 207 applicants from 53 countries.
- The founders say young people thousands of miles from war are grappling with their own crisis of disengagement, isolation and conflict. Through discussion of literature, art and music, they hope to give students tools to understand one another — and themselves.

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André Salkin

Education Reporter