



SVET PEACE PROJECT

Founding Report

December 2023 — May 2026

Two and a half years. Six programs. Over 170 students. One conviction.



Amir Bergen and Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin, co-founders of Svet Peace Project, at St. John's College, Santa Fe

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OPENING LETTER

There is a word with a common stem in Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian that means both light and world. We chose it as our name because we believe these two things are inseparable. You cannot build a world without light, and light, in the end, is what education is for.

Svet began as a response, there was no further plan. All that there was is two students from opposite sides of a war, sitting in the same classroom in Santa Fe, New Mexico, asking the same question: is there anything meaningful we can do about this? We had no funding, no office, no staff. What we had was priceless though: we had books, a method we believed in, and the conviction that if teenagers from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus could read and think together during a war, then genuine understanding across the deepest of divides was possible.

This report covers the years before we became an official organization. The years we worked without salaries and without knowing whether any of it would grow into something lasting. We are sharing it because we think that story matters, and because the people who supported us during those years deserve to see what their trust made possible.

Warmly,

Amir Bergen and Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin

Co-founders, Svet Peace Project

Two people. One seminar room. One war.

Amir grew up in Tolyatti, Russia, and left home at the age of 17 to study at United World College Dilijan in Armenia. After graduating, he went back to Russia and spent several years building an online vintage store that grew into one of the largest in the country. He had built something successful, but knew it wasn't the calling he had been searching for. So he left again, this time for St. John's College in Santa Fe, where he found a way of learning that changed everything. He ran the store remotely until closing it in December 2024, carrying Svet alongside it the entire time.

Kanstantsin grew up between Minsk, Belarus and Kyiv, Ukraine. His path in education began early, when he founded conversational English courses in Minsk that brought together students from different backgrounds. After the war broke out in 2022 he left Kyiv under siege, eventually making his way to Berlin where he learned German and immersed himself in European intellectual life, before completing his studies at St. John's College in Santa Fe.

We could have met on a battlefield. Instead we met in a seminar room. That meeting became Svet.

Both of us had been shaped by institutions where learning meant sitting with hard questions together rather than receiving answers. St. John's gave us the method. UWC gave us the vision. The war gave us a reason.



Students from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus in one of the first Svet online seminars

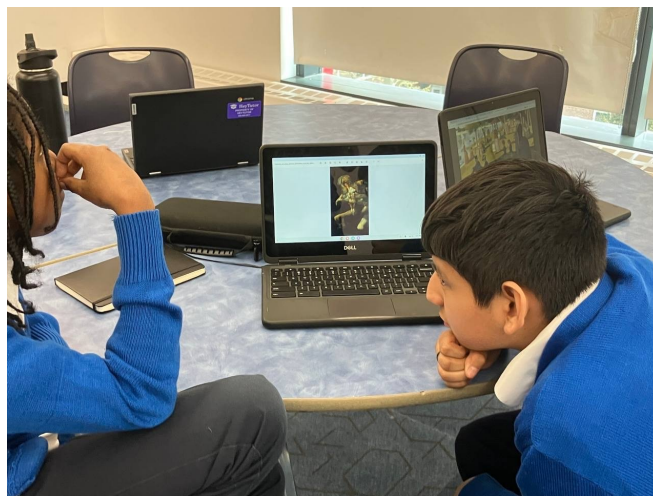
No lectures or right answers. Just thoughtful conversation.

Svet runs small-group seminars for teenagers. No lectures, slides, or right answers. Students engage with a text, a piece of music, a work of art, or a meaningful question, and then talk about it together. A tutor is in the room, but not to teach. Their job is to help the group go deeper, to slow down when something important surfaces, and to make sure every voice is heard.

The materials we use are not easy. Classical texts, stories, music, and art that have survived because they ask questions that do not go away. Questions about justice, loyalty, what we owe each other, and what it means to be human at all. These questions do not have clean answers. When a group of teenagers from different countries and backgrounds sits with a question like that together, something happens that is difficult to describe but easy to recognize. They start listening differently.

We were shaped by two institutions. St. John's College, where we both graduated, taught us that the best education is a thoughtful conversation. UWC, where Amir studied, showed us that young people from different nations can build real understanding when you put them in the same room. But Svet is not a replica of either. We took what we learned and built something that did not exist before: a program that brings the Socratic seminar to teenagers living through war, displacement, and division, in languages and contexts that neither institution ever reached. We are standing on the shoulders of both, and reaching somewhere new.

Our programs run online and in person, with international students and with teenagers across the United States, including young people from some of the most difficult backgrounds imaginable.



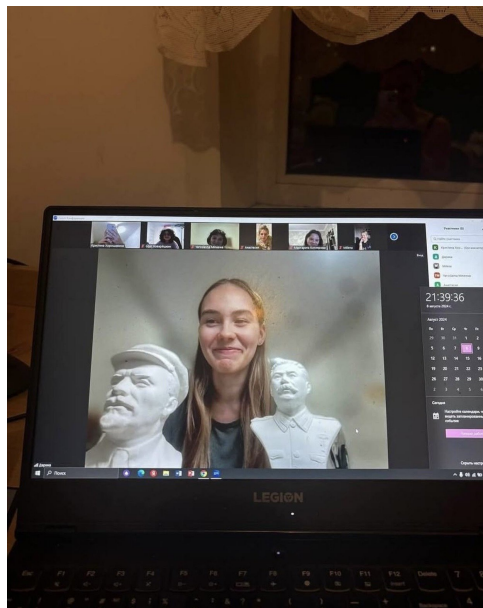
Students in New York City, during a session on classical art

December 2023 — May 2026

Svet began in December 2023 with nothing but an idea and a belief that we could do something valuable. What followed was two and a half years of building without salaries, without any guarantee it would amount to anything, and with thousands of hours worked on top of studying and part-time jobs. This is what we built.

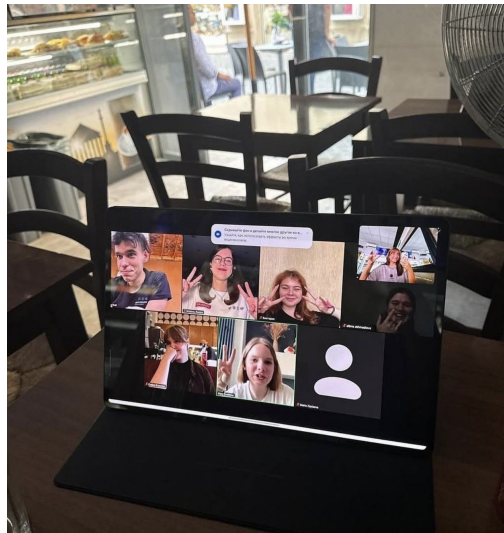
The first thing that made everything else possible was a \$10,000 Projects for Peace grant from Middlebury College's Kathryn W. Davis Collaborative. The application was long, hard, and thorough, and we were honored to be selected. It was our first real vote of confidence from the outside world, and we used every dollar of it on programs.

With that grant we ran our first course in 2024, bringing together teenagers from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus during an active war. They read works from all three countries, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Svetlana Alexievich, and Nikolai Ostrovsky, and spoke to each other across a divide that the world had come to see as absolute. That course became the proof that what we were trying to do was not naive.



A student in the second Eastern Europe course, August 2024

We ran two more courses for students from our home region after that. The second explored the history and contradictions of the Soviet project. The third moved into Russian short stories and poetry, using Chekhov, Brodsky, and others as shared ground for exploring the emotional and moral complexities of the region's conflicts. In all three courses, literature became the space where division could become dialogue.



Students from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus at the end of the first course's final session

Starting in the fall of 2025, we brought our work to the United States. It was another test: whether what we do could matter in a different country, and whether what we had built online could work in person. It did.

We ran two long experimental programs in New Mexico: one at YouthWorks in Santa Fe, built around music with teenagers from challenging backgrounds including young people in the juvenile justice system, and one at the Española YMCA Teen Center, where middle school students used games as the starting point for guided conversations about cooperation and responsibility. In New York City, in partnership with The Catherine Project, we ran a course built around classic short stories that brought the same format to a completely different context.



Left: YouthWorks, Santa Fe. Right: Española YMCA Teen Center

Along the way we built a website, created our social media presence, and held our first fundraiser evening in Santa Fe. We began meeting the people who would become our earliest donors, advisors, and friends. We were covered by the Albuquerque Journal and Middlebury College. We registered as a nonprofit, assembled a board, set a first-year budget, and began fundraising in earnest, having raised nearly \$50,000 of our \$65,000 first year goal by the beginning of June 2026.

207 applications. 53 countries. Every inhabited continent.

In early 2026, we brought an idea to United World Colleges: a short course built around Nobel Prize-winning authors from around the world, asking students to sit together with the question of what it means to be human. UWC understood it immediately, and Svet became an official UWC Short Course partner.

The course title, Many Ways to Be Human, is not just a description of what students discuss. It is the statement we are making. That there is no single correct way to live or to see the world. That the stories of a student in Colombia or a writer in Japan all carry equal weight and equal dignity. We built the reading list around Nobel Prize-winning authors from across the world precisely because we wanted students to arrive at that realization through the experience of reading and thinking together.

Then we opened applications, not knowing what to expect.

207 people applied from 53 countries, spanning every inhabited continent. Nearly a quarter came from active conflict zones: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Palestine, Ukraine. We had no school network behind us, no institutional infrastructure. UWC posted about the course once on social media. The rest came from the connections we had built ourselves over two and a half years.

We could only take 26 students for the first run. But we did not want to simply turn the others away, so we built more: a second cohort in August, and five free public seminars open to anyone who applied and did not get a spot.

Every student who applied to this course was offered something. Not everyone got a spot, but no one was simply turned away.

This course is where our informal years ended and our first official year began. It is also the clearest proof we have that what we are building is needed, and that the need is not regional. It is global.

207

applications received

53

countries represented

46

from active conflict zones

BY THE NUMBERS

170+	6	207	\$50K
students reached during informal years	courses and programs across 4 countries	UWC applications from 53 countries	raised toward \$65K Year 1 goal

Between late 2023 and May 2026, before our first official year even began, we ran six courses and programs across four countries and two continents.

STUDENTS REACHED

Three online courses for students from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus: 84 students total across three cohorts of 30, 34, and 20.

Two programs in New Mexico: approximately 50 students at the Española YMCA Teen Center and 30 at YouthWorks in Santa Fe.

One course in New York City in partnership with The Catherine Project: 6 students.

In total, we worked directly with over 170 young people during our informal years.

THE UWC COURSE

Before our first official year launched, we had already received 207 applications from 53 countries and every inhabited continent for our first UWC Short Course. Nearly a quarter came from active conflict zones. These numbers told us something we had suspected but could not yet prove: the need for what we do is not regional. It is global.

STUDENT RETENTION — EASTERN EUROPE COURSES

34%	28%	62%
of students from our first course joined the second	joined on the recommendation of peers from the first course	of our second cohort were directly inspired by the first

WHAT STUDENTS AND PARTNERS SAID

“I finally understood what was happening in the USSR and, most importantly, what people who lived at that time felt. It was transformative. It made me reflect deeply on how understanding the past can shape a more compassionate and peaceful future.”

Viktoria, Russia — Eastern Europe course participant

“We’ve seen students become more open, more engaged, and more connected with their peers during the sessions and afterward as well.”

Ben Sandoval, Director, YMCA Española

“As far as I know, this is the first time that students, in a very formal way — explicitly — want to use the St. John's College seminar mode as the way to solve a very big project, which is the psychology, history and toxicity of history that leads to conflict.”

Charles Bergman, Head of Office of Personal and Professional Development, St. John's College — founding board member

“There are great teachers everywhere, no matter the education system. Kanstantsin and Amir gathered a wonderful group of teachers for their project — I learned from them as much as they learned from my experience in the St. John's classroom.”

Khafiz Kerimov, Tutor, St. John's College

“The most real thing you can do is try to see through someone else's eyes. It is harder than it sounds. And I think it is the only thing worth getting better at.”

Aayan, India — UWC course applicant

“I have learned that belonging can be created through a single conversation. I believe stories and conversations can reduce prejudice and help people connect across differences.”

Mohamed, Sudan — UWC course applicant

IN THE PRESS

Svet's work was covered by the **Albuquerque Journal**, New Mexico's largest newspaper, and by **St. John's College**, whose article explored how the project began and where it is heading.

WHERE WE'RE GOING

Year 1 has begun.

June 2026 marks the beginning of our first official year. We have a budget, two founders now working on Svet as their primary focus, and a set of programs already running. The UWC course launched on June 21 with 26 students from around the world. Our summer seminar series follows immediately after. Our programs in New Mexico and New York continue. And we are building toward a second year that is larger, more structured, and more sustainable than the first.

We built something during those two and a half informal years that we deeply believe in. We have seen what happens when young people sit together with a hard question and take each other seriously. We know it matters and we intend to work as hard as we possibly can to bring it to more people.

We will share a full report on our first official year with you when it closes in May 2027.

THANK YOU

None of this would exist without the people who believed in us before we had much to show.

To our donors: you made it possible for us to stop working for free and start working properly. Every dollar you gave went directly into building something we hope will outlast all of us.

To our board, advisors, and mentors: you gave us your time, your networks, your honest feedback, and your trust. That has been worth more than we can easily say.

To our partners at UWC, St. John's College, YouthWorks, the Española YMCA, and The Catherine Project: thank you for opening your doors to something that was still finding its shape.

To the students who showed up, read with us, and spoke honestly: you are the reason this exists.

And to everyone who forwarded an email, made an introduction, came to an evening, or simply told someone about Svet: those small things added up to everything.

With gratitude,

Amir Bergen and Kanstantsin Tsiarokhin

Co-founders, Svet Peace Project · June 2026



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