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Letter to the editor: cooperation needed in Ukraine

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Posted: Wednesday, March 19, 2014 5:44 pm

Ivan Goncharenko, Jewish Agency Israel Fellow to Hillel at Virginia Tech | 1 comment

Two years ago, when I arrived to be an Israel Fellow for Hillel at Virginia Tech, I never thought that I would write about Ukraine. The reason Hillel brought me here was to strengthen relationships between Virginia Tech and Israel, to enhance an atmosphere of diversity and to create awareness on campus about Israeli life.

But as we say, "Humans plan and God decides."

Here I am, feeling a responsibility to write about the Ukrainian crisis and feeling myself a part of this crisis, as well. My parents moved to Israel from Ukraine when I was 10 years old. I am an Israeli, but I feel that I am Ukrainian as well. I speak fluent Ukrainian and I speak fluent Russian, too. I have dual citizenship and visit Ukraine very often.

Israel houses 1.5 million Jews from the Soviet Union, millions of Jews that were expelled from Arab States, 300,000 Ethiopian Jews and hundreds of thousands of American Jews. All of us are Israeli, but we are often able to represent many different nationalities.

During the last two weeks, I have been asked by many Hokies about the situation in Ukraine. My discussions with them have shown me just how much misinformation there is in the U.S. regarding the conflict. So I would like to share my views, as someone who speaks daily with friends in Ukraine and in Russia.

A lot of people tend to believe that the Ukrainian crisis is the same as the crisis in Syria, and in the Middle East in general (i.e. a minority governs the majority, so the majority revolts.) It is wrong to draw these similarities. The population of Ukraine is 46 million people. Historically, Western Ukrainians have been closer to Poland, and Eastern Ukrainians have been closer to Russia, not just geographically but culturally as well. While Western Ukrainians tend to be more nationalistic, supportive of a distinct Ukrainian language and are more religious, whereas Eastern Ukrainians are often more loyal to Russia, speak Russian as well as Ukrainian and are less religious. However, this does not mean that they are a "Russian Minority," Eastern Ukrainians "feel" Ukrainian; they want independence from Russia, but they are not against the influence of Russian culture in Ukraine.

My family lived in the Nikolayev city. At home we spoke Russian, but at school, I spoke Ukrainian. When the Ukrainian president had to decide whether to be closer to Russia or to the West (e.g. the US and Europe) — he chose Russia. That is what led the Western Ukrainians to start demonstrations.

It is true, however, that the entire government was corrupt, including the "Western" president. Every politician in post-Soviet countries is corrupt. This is the culture, and it cannot change from outside pressure, it has to come from within the countries themselves and that will take time. So, while Ukrainians decide which direction they want to move toward, Russia and the U.S. are choosing Ukraine as a ground to fight against each other. As a Ukrainian, it makes me sad.

I also commonly hear that Putin uses his forces in Ukraine because Obama didn't intervene in Syria. This claim does not make sense, and it is used only on the American political ground in fights between the Democrats and Republicans. Russia has always seen Crimea as a part of its territory. Historically, since the independence of Ukraine in 1991, Russia has done everything possible to stay in Crimea. Moreover, according to an accord between Ukraine and Russia since 1991, there are Russian war ships near Sevastopol meaning this conflict is not new. There are historical and geopolitical reasons why Russia so strongly claims this area. Russia would be claiming this land regardless of Obama's actions in Syria. The two things are unconnected.

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When people ask me which part of Ukraine I support, I say, based on the facts, there should be cooperation between the West, Russia and ALL of the Ukrainian nation. Ironically, the U.S. supports the movement that is more nationalistic and radical than the movement of Eastern Ukraine. My biggest concern about this is the Jewish community of Ukraine. There are more than 100,000 Jews living in Ukraine today. They live in the Eastern part of the country. Western Ukrainians (the majority) historically oppressed Jews. In the Second World War, they revealed Jewish homes and families to the Nazis in order to get the Jewish people's property after they were taken. Today, there are hundreds of monuments in Western Ukraine of Stephan Bendera, someone who was personally responsible for killing thousands and thousands of Jews. In the modern Ukrainian language, the West Ukrainian word used for Jewish is "Jid" — the exact same word Nazis used to refer to Jewish people. If the Western Ukrainians take power, I am concerned what will happen to Ukrainian Jews. Even today, many of them are leaving for Israel.

The story is very complicated. There is no good or bad, black or white. We have to look at all the perspectives to try and understand their history and culture's narratives. More importantly, however, the U.S. and Russia need to stop fighting on the backs of other nations.

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