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# Hillel fellow, Ukraine native answers students' questions

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Courtesy of Ivan Goncharenko

## Ivan Goncharenko

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Charlotte Gross, lifestyles staff writer | 0 comments

Confusion is rampant in the homeland of Virginia Tech faculty member Ivan Goncharenko.

Goncharenko is the Jewish Agency Israel Fellow to Hillel at Virginia Tech, but his Ukrainian roots have made him a prime source of information for students concerned about the recent developments in the Crimean Peninsula.

"I go to Ivan for history," said Elizabeth Wisgerhof, a junior biology major and vice president of Hillel. "I asked him what caused the different Ukrainian factions to behave the way they did."

Wisgerhof also said that Goncharenko is the go-to guy for information about events in the Middle East and

anything political.

Goncharenko graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with a combined degree in religion and politics and Middle Eastern studies.

He migrated to Israel when he was 11 years old, and his parents taught him to be fluent in Russian, Ukrainian and Hebrew.

Having gained military experience, a degree focusing on political and cultural spectrum and a command of a variety of languages, Goncharenko is able to provide insight into the perspectives of both Russia and Ukraine, both a privilege and rarity at this time.

"People ask me if I think that Ukraine should be part of the European Union or a part of Russia, and also about the Russian minority in the Ukraine," Goncharenko said.

He said there is no such decision to be made, as the EU has never made an offer of membership to the Ukraine. Goncharenko emphasized the complexity of the situation.

"Crimea has been part of Russia. It was only in 1954 that the Soviet Union transferred it back to Ukraine," Goncharenko said. "It wasn't such a long time ago that it was Russian."

Goncharenko's extensive knowledge of these topics may be what drives students to ask for his opinion, but his personal history plays a major role in how he connects with and helps students year-round.

His Israeli education consisted of high school followed by compulsory military service — three years of service for males and two years for females.

For all Israeli citizens, "Krav Maga" is taught as a self-defense mechanism and is a technique adopted by armies around the world.

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At Tech, Ivan has been teaching "Krav Maga" classes primarily attended by cadets, but he's done more than just teach them how to fight. Many members of the Corps of Cadets have come to him with questions about Ukraine as well.

James Turbyfill, a sophomore finance major and a member of the Corps, said he asked Goncharenko about the cultural divisions in Crimea and Ukraine.

"The eastern side is predominantly Russian-speaking, but the western side is more Ukrainian and Western European. Crimea falls into the Eastern Russian culture," Turbyfill said.

Goncharenko also told inquiring students that the Russian military has always been present in the Ukraine, but it is only now that their presence has become apparent.

"It has been part of an agreement since 1991 that Russia is granted a number of soldiers in Ukraine if they think it's important for their security," Goncharenko said.

For some, it can be difficult to comprehend the magnitude of the Ukrainian crisis, with much ambiguity over what Ukraine wants as a nation and how much of that is being overruled by Russia, but Goncharenko seems to stay in tune with what is happening.

"He's really informed, and he does his research," Wisgerhof said.

To keep up to date, Goncharenko relies on several news sources, appreciating that each will have a particular angle: Fox News, i24 News (an Israeli TV source), Al Arabiya News (a liberal Arabic source) and the Russian RIA News, among others.

Goncharenko and Turbyfill agreed that American news sources often portray Russia too negatively on the basis of the events of the Cold War, which is arguably still ongoing.

"Do you think Russia would like it if their neighbor was a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member?" Goncharenko said. "If they are pushed into a corner, of course they will push back. However, to say that Russia can just take over is not good, according to international law."

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