Newsmaker Q&A: Luba Iskold
EXPERT ON CRIMEA CRISIS

Dr. Luba V. Iskold, a Russian professor at Muhlenberg College, is the subject of this week's Q&A.
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Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty last week making Crimea part of Russia again, despite Ukrainian protests and sanctions from the West. Dr. Luba V. Iskold, a Russian professor at Muhlenberg College, is the subject of this week's Q&A.

Q: How did you become interested in teaching about Russia?

A: I came to the United States from Western Ukraine in 1991, right before the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The study of Slavic languages, literatures and cultures is an area of my professional interests and expertise. I've been teaching at Muhlenberg College since 1995.

Q: Why should Americans care about what is happening in the Ukraine and in Crimea?

A: The attempts by President Putin of Russia to bring back the Soviet-era control over a sovereign state should concern everyone who cares about democracy and stability in the world.
Q: Putin, defying sanctions and Ukrainian protests, inked a treaty this week making Crimea part of Russia. Why did he do this?

A: On Crimea's southern shore sits the port city of Sevastopol, home to the Russian Black Sea Fleet and its thousands of naval personnel. Russia had an agreement with Ukraine to lease the port of Sevastopol till 2042 as well as to station up to 25,000 military there. Russia fears that Ukraine's new pro-Western government could evict it.

Q: Why is the Crimea important to Russia and to Putin?

A: There are three main reasons. The Black Sea Fleet has been based on the peninsula since 1783. The fleet's strategic position remains crucial to Russian security interests in the region. While the peninsula formally became part of independent Ukraine after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Crimea still has a 60 percent Russian population. In addition, there is a "shared history of pride" with Crimea where Russians fought and won numerous battles.

Q: Why did residents of Crimea vote to join the Russian federation? Was this a fair and true election?

A: Ethnically, the Crimea is a diverse region. Its population is about 2.2 million, of whom almost 1.5 million are Russians, 350,000 are Ukrainians (who primarily identify themselves as speakers of Russian), and about 300,000 are Crimean Tatars (who historically were anti-Russian and, more recently, became pro-Ukrainian). Thus, the majority of the population there is pro-Russian. Historically, Crimea was part of the Soviet Union until 1954, when Nikita Khrushchev gave the peninsula to Soviet Ukraine to mark the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's inclusion in the Russian Empire, a "donation" many in Russia still see as illegitimate. This hardly mattered until the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 and Crimea ended up in independent Ukraine. In the disputed referendum on March 16th, the majority voted in favor of joining Russia. It is difficult to assess the legitimacy and legality of this vote with no international observers on the ground. Vice President Biden described it as "nothing more than a land grab."

Q: Putin said he did not plan to seize any other regions of Ukraine. Should the world believe him?

A: I am cautiously optimistic. Perhaps, you should ask President Bush, who said when he first met Mr. Putin: "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. … I was able to get a sense of his soul, a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country."

Q: Should neighboring countries be concerned about Putin's actions? If so, which ones and why.

A: Poland and the Baltics are less vulnerable because of their NATO membership. However, other neighboring states with history as Soviet satellites, all share concerns revived by the Russian incursion into Ukraine.
Q: If Putin shows signs he intends to take more of the Ukraine, what measures should the international community take?

A: Because Russia largely depends on oil and gas revenues to fund its imperial ambitions, furthering the sanctions, discussing energy security with the Europeans, diversifying energy sources will make it harder for Russia to use its gas and oil supplies as a political weapon against other countries.

Q: Is the U.S. doing enough to stop Russia's actions in the Ukraine?

A: In my view, taking additional steps to bring Russia to a negotiation table with Ukraine might be an effective measure in stabilizing the situation in Eastern Europe.

Q: Fast forward six months: Do you think the Crimea will remain part of Russia?

A: I think it might. The Ukrainian government has just ordered their troops to withdraw from the peninsula.

—Jennifer Sheehan

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