

## Regional

# Why is Russia so involved in the Ukraine?

From 2013 to the present, public opinion in Ukraine has split over whom it should have closer ties with: western European countries or Russia. This fissure led to the ouster of Ukraine's president in February 2014, with his democratically elected replacement pursuing closer ties with the west, and in particular, the European Union. Subsequently, armed conflict arose between Ukraine, Russia, and Russian-backed militia groups. This conflict has resulted in numerous casualties, including the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 approximately nine months ago.

One person whose work helps explain what is happening in Ukraine is Sophia Wilson, an assistant professor of political science at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Born in Ukraine, she immigrated to the United States approximately 20 years ago. She became interested in politics when a newspaper salesperson left newspapers for her during her childhood. This interest blossomed through some inspirational professors at the institution at which she received her bachelor's degree, Utah State University. She pursued these interests by receiving her master's degree in political science at that same institution. She later received a second master's degree and her Ph.D. in political science from The University of Washington in 2011.

She started at SIUE in 2013, after a one-year post-doctoral fellowship at the Center for Law, Society, and Culture at Indiana University, Bloomington. Currently, she teaches courses on the politics of Eastern Europe, post-Soviet countries and public law across different parts of the world. Additionally, she performs research on the politics of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries from a legal perspective. She is currently writing a book, tentatively titled Ukraine's Rights Revolution, in which she explains what happened in Ukraine, why it occurred and how it is relevant.

When asked what happened in Ukraine, she said that the origin of the current conflict lies in Russia's March 2014 annexation of the Crimea, in southern Ukraine. In part, Russia annexed this portion of Ukraine because there is a large naval base on the Black Sea that Russia inherited from the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Wilson argues that this action destabilized Ukraine because it resulted in a clash between the government and a small minority of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine who wanted to secede



For the Intelligencer

### Dr. Sophia Wilson

and become part of Russia.

In Aug. 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine. While the Russian government officially denies invading Ukraine or having any formal involvement in the conflict, Wilson cites numerous pieces of evidence to the contrary. These pieces of evidence include discoveries from western intelligence sources, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Ukrainian government and politicians who oppose Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This disconnect between the Russian government's statements and its behaviors requires an explanation. Wilson argues that Russia's actions are a consequence

of the destabilization of Ukraine. More importantly, she states that Russia wanted, "overreaching control of Ukraine" that is based on nationalistic sentiment. This sentiment, according to Wilson, is best epitomized in Putin's statement to then-President George W. Bush that, "Ukraine is not a country, and it was never a country."

Yet, Ukraine became a country as part of the breakup of the former Soviet Union in 1991. Since Ukraine's territorial integrity is at stake, one can ask how the international community has reacted to this situation. To this point, Wilson describes the response of west-

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ern countries as "meek." She said that the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, has appealed for help from western countries on several occasions, including requests for defensive weapons. Wilson said that Poroshenko has also asked Britain and the United States to honor their international legal obligation to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity as part of the Budapest Memorandum. Signed in 1994, this memorandum states that Ukraine agreed to surrender its nuclear weapons to Russia in exchange for guarantees from the United States and Britain to defend Ukraine if it were ever invaded.

The United States has condemned Russian aggression and imposed economic sanctions against Russia. While these sanctions have had a powerful, negative and wide-reaching economic effect on the Russian people, they have not stopped Russia's actions.

While Russia and Ukraine are an ocean away from the United States, Wilson argues that Americans should care about the events in Ukraine for three reasons.

"Americans have a strong sense of justice," she said. "We have a relatively small country being harassed by a bigger one, bringing death to the other and taking control of its territory."

Second, she pointed to the United States' signing of the Budapest Memorandum. "The United States gave its word that we would protect it from invasion," she said of the Ukraine. Lastly, she said that U.S. failure to support Ukraine would send a dangerous message to the rest of the world.

"There is a very important security reason because a failure to fulfill this promise sends quite a bad message to other countries," she said. If the United States fails to help, according to Wilson, what kind of message does this send to Iran, who the United States is trying to stop from developing nuclear weapons? More broadly, Wilson asked, "What kind of message does this send to other countries?"

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