

A Brief History of Ukraine and Its Borders

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An X (Twitter) user, who shall remain anonymous but for the purposes of this article we will call her Emma, has proposed that:

“Russia doesn’t want to take over Ukraine. This is obvious to anyone with a functioning brain. Ukraine simply needs to accept neutrality, and the eastern regions which are pro-Russia should be absorbed into Russia to protect the ethnic Russian population in Ukraine.”

Ukraine’s borders have been shaped by centuries of conflict, empire-building, and shifting geopolitical influences. Here’s a historical overview:

1. Early History and Kyivan Rus’

Ukraine traces its origins to **Kyivan Rus’**, a medieval Slavic state that existed between the 9th and 13th centuries. The region was a dominant power in Eastern Europe until the Mongol invasions in the 13th century fragmented it.

2. Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Cossack Hetmanate (16th-18th centuries)

- Much of western Ukraine was controlled by the **Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth**.
- The **Cossacks**, a semi-independent Slavic warrior class, established the **Cossack Hetmanate** in the 17th century, which had autonomy but frequently shifted alliances between Poland, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy (Russia).
- In 1654, under pressure from Poland, the Cossacks signed the **Treaty of Pereyaslav**, which aligned them with Russia, but this later led to complete Russian domination.

3. Russian and Austrian Rule (18th-19th centuries)

- **Eastern Ukraine** was absorbed into the **Russian Empire**, while **Western Ukraine** remained under **Austrian (later Austro-Hungarian) control**.
- Russian imperial rule imposed Russification policies, suppressing the Ukrainian language and identity.

4. Ukrainian Independence Attempts and Soviet Rule (20th century)

- After the **Russian Revolution of 1917**, Ukraine briefly declared independence (1917-1921), but was ultimately absorbed into the **Soviet Union**.
- The **Holodomor (1932-1933)**, a man-made famine under Stalin, killed millions of Ukrainians and remains a central historical grievance against Russian rule.
- **Western Ukraine**, which had been part of Poland, was annexed by the USSR in 1939 as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.
- Crimea was transferred from **Russia to Ukraine in 1954** by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, though this was largely symbolic at the time, as both were within the Soviet Union.

5. Ukrainian Independence and the Modern Borders (1991-Present)

- With the **fall of the Soviet Union in 1991**, Ukraine became an **independent state**. Its **borders were recognized internationally, including by Russia**, in multiple treaties (notably the 1994 **Budapest Memorandum**, where Russia agreed to respect Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for Ukraine giving up nuclear weapons).

- In 2014, Russia **annexed Crimea**, citing a referendum (widely considered illegitimate).
 - Russia also backed **separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk** (the Donbas region), leading to war.
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Assessing Emma's Proposal

Emma's proposal that Ukraine should "accept neutrality" and that "pro-Russian regions should be absorbed into Russia" is controversial and based on certain geopolitical assumptions. Here are **arguments for and against it**:

Arguments in Favor of the Proposal

1□ Historical Russian Influence

- Ukraine's eastern regions (especially Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea) have historically had strong Russian ties. Many residents are ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking and have been economically and culturally integrated with Russia.
- Some argue that after decades of Soviet rule and Russian influence, these regions are more aligned with Russia than with Western Ukraine.

2□ Ethnic Russian Protection

- Russia claims that ethnic Russians in Ukraine have faced discrimination, particularly after 2014 when Ukraine shifted towards a stronger national identity.
- The **2014 language laws**, which prioritized Ukrainian over Russian, were viewed by some as marginalizing Russian speakers.

3□ Realpolitik and Conflict Resolution

- A neutral Ukraine (similar to Finland during the Cold War) could

potentially prevent further Russian aggression.

- Giving up eastern regions could prevent further war, in a pragmatic sense, even if it goes against Ukraine's national sovereignty.

4▯ **Russia's Security Concerns**

- Russia perceives NATO expansion as a direct threat. A neutral Ukraine (outside of NATO) could address Russia's stated security concerns.
 - Crimea is strategically critical for Russia due to its Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol.
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Arguments Against the Proposal

▯ **Violation of International Law and Ukraine's Sovereignty**

- Ukraine's **borders are internationally recognized**, including by Russia in previous treaties.
- Allowing Russia to absorb territory **sets a precedent for other conflicts**, weakening global norms of sovereignty.

▯ **Ukrainian National Identity and Public Opinion**

- **Most Ukrainians (including many in the east) now support a united Ukraine** due to Russia's invasion.
- Even in Donbas, before the war, support for Russian annexation was **not overwhelming**.

▯ **Strategic and Military Risks**

- Conceding eastern Ukraine **would not guarantee peace**, as Russia could use this precedent to push further into Ukraine in the future.
- A neutral Ukraine might not be enough to satisfy Russian ambitions.

□ Ethnic Justification for Border Changes is Dangerous

- Redrawing borders based on ethnicity could **destabilize other parts of the world** (e.g., should Hungary absorb Hungarian-speaking parts of Romania?).
 - The “protection of ethnic Russians” has been a recurring **pretext for Russian intervention in former Soviet states** (Georgia in 2008, Transnistria in Moldova, etc.).
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Final Assessment

Emma’s proposal **reflects Russia’s own justification** for its invasion but contradicts established principles of sovereignty. While **some pragmatic arguments** can be made for neutrality, the idea that eastern Ukraine should be absorbed into Russia faces strong counterarguments, both from Ukraine itself and from broader international norms.

Would a peace deal involve **some territorial concessions**? Perhaps. But Ukraine sees this as an **existential war**, and giving up territory would likely embolden future Russian aggression rather than resolve the conflict permanently.