A Brief History of Ukraine and Its Borders

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An X (Twitter) user, who shall remain anonomous 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.

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.

$3 \square$ 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.

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.).

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.