Family or just friends: a monument to the friendship of Russia and Ukraine in Kyiv, Ukraine. SAGAPHOTO.COM/Alamy Stock Photo

How Russian is Ukraine? (Clue: not as much as Vladimir Putin insists)

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A political pamphlet published in 1762 described a conversation between "Great Russia" and "Little Russia". In the exchange, the latter refused to be simply reduced to part of Great Russia and put forward its own unique history and identity. At the time, the name "Ukraine" did not yet designate a state. But the noun *ukraina* – a word that meant "borderland" in several Slavic languages – was already used to describe its future territory: the vast steppe region surrounding the Dnipro (*Dnieper*) River and bordering the Black Sea.

The term Little Russia was gradually abandoned in the age of nationalism, as 19th-century Ukrainian-speaking academics and thinkers decided to subvert the old derogatory term to devise the modern idea of Ukraine as a nation. But two centuries later under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia is exploiting these historical discourses to justify its own encroachments into independent Ukraine. He made his sentiments clear in an article from July 2021 published on his presidential web page when he wrote of Russians and Ukrainians as "one people – a single whole".

The capital of Ukraine, Kyiv (or Kiev), has been repeatedly described as the "mother of Russian cities". Kyiv was at the centre of the Kyivan Rus' (882-1240), an Orthodox medieval state to which Russian leaders – from the tsars to Putin – trace the origins of their country (an ancestry also asserted by Belarus and Ukraine). The claim is often used to support Russia's claims over Ukrainian territories.

But this is a misconception. While the predecessor of the Russian empire, Muscovy, rose in the aftermath of the Mongol invasion (1237-40) that marked the end of the Rus', the rulers of Moscow only took control of Kyiv 500 years later. Claiming Kyivan origins was rather a convenient method to negate the Mongol and Tatar element shaping Muscovy's early development and instead give Russia an Orthodox past, with tsars apparently appointed by God.

Russia's territorial sway over the remains of the Rus' was limited by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795), a bi-federation of the two powerhouses of central Europe. Most of the region known as Ukraine remained outside Russian authority until the final partition of Poland in 1795.

Whose influence?

Ukraine is one of the largest states in Europe and its geography was influenced by many more realms than just Russia. Since Ukraine originally meant "borderland", the territory was a target for several kingdoms – not just Russia, but also the Khanate of Crimea, the Kingdom of Poland, and the Habsburg and Ottoman empires.

Map of Ukraine in 1720, showing the lands of the Cossacks, the Krimean Khanate, Ottoman and Russian Empires, Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, Wallachia and Moldova. Ukraine is already a recognised territory.

The Polish-Lithuanian nexus was key to understanding this geography – before 1648, almost all Ukrainians lived under the rule of Warsaw. The southern steppes area of Ukraine had a sparse population, while in the west Hungary had ruled Transcarpathia since the Middle Ages, and main cities such as L'viv or Ternopil were successively Polish or Austrian. These cities briefly became the centres of the West Ukrainian People's Republic between 1917 and 1921, before their integration into the USSR.

Since 2014, the Donbas region in the east and the Black Sea coast have been at the centre of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. This land was known as "New Russia" (*Novorossiya*) by Catherine II "the Great" after her armies conquered them in the 1770s. But only a few Russians moved to the south Ukrainian "wild field" (*dikoe pole*), prompting the recruitment of foreign settlers from elsewhere in Europe.

Statue of Catherine the Great in Odessa, Ukraine.

Mother of all Russians? Catherine the Great remembered in Odessa, Ukraine. Multipedia via Shutterstock

So "New Russia" was never really very Russian. Historically, its territory was settled by Mennonites and Catholic Germans, French and Italian traders as well as large numbers of Greeks, Jews (from Poland and west Ukraine), Bulgarians, Serbs, and of course Ukrainians.

When Vladimir Putin refers to this large region as "New Russia", he mostly reveals an inadequate understanding of Ukraine's multi-ethnic past. Trying to understand Ukraine solely through the Russian prism is limiting: Ukrainian identity is a synthesis of its multicultural population which is connected not solely to Russia, but also, substantially, to central European states and the Black Sea region.

Cultural hegemony in Ukraine

The rise of the Ukrainian nationalist movement in the 19th century was seen by the Russian authorities as a sign of corrupting foreign influences – even perhaps the result of a western plot. Ukrainian identity was characterised as subordinate to a mostly urban high Russian culture, the Ukrainian language being associated with the countryside.

The Russian language remained a tool of social mobility – vital for anyone wanting to enter the administration of the Russian empire and improve their socioeconomic status. Still today in Ukraine, Russian remains a convenient language for employment, used by many businesses and tech industries.

Ukrainian was spoken long before Taras Shevchenko's first publications in Ukrainian in the 1830s, but its alphabet was not standardised until the end of the 19th century. Initially, Ukrainian was encouraged by the tsarist authorities as a counterpoint to Polish influence. But as clandestine Ukrainian societies (*Hromady*) developed to pursue research into folk culture, in 1876 the tsarist government outlawed all publications and performances in Ukrainian.

After 1917, Ukraine experienced a short-lived cultural spring due to policies of indigenisation (*korenizatsiia*) under the Bolsheviks. They initially encouraged national languages to undermine Russian cultural domination, with 89% of newspapers printed in Ukrainian by 1931, and 97% of primary-school pupils learning the language. But Stalin reversed these policies in 1932.

An image of a starving Ukrainian woman is projected on to a wall behind candles lit in remembrance of the millions of Ukrainians who died in the Holodomor famine.

Devastation: millions of Ukrainians died in the 1932-1933 Holodomor, a man-made Terror famine engineered by Soviet requisition of grain. paparazzza via Shutterstock

The Holodomor famine, which killed about 3.5 million in Ukraine alone in 1932-33, destroyed the very population that could preserve the social and cultural markers of a national identity. This disaster shifted the country's demographic balance, with the loss of one-third of Ukraine's population.

The swift succession of occupations and battles during the second world war also marked the loss of Ukraine's rich multi-ethnic past, with the execution and deportation of its Jewish population, and the near eradication of the remaining Crimean Tatar population.

By 1946, only 25 million inhabitants were left in Ukraine, which opened the country to rising migration from other parts of the Soviet Union –especially from Russia. The destruction of pre-war Ukrainian society and its replacement by supporters of a Greater Russian ideology was bolstered by the 1958 language and education reform, which aimed to make Russian the second native language of all non-Russians.

By the time of Ukraine's independence in 1991, one-third of the population was made of these Russophone migrants and their descendants, especially in the industrial east and Crimea. To this day, Ukraine is home to the largest population of Russian speakers outside Russia.

Shape of the territory of Ukraine filled with red poppies, with some blue and yellow ribbons.

Map of Ukraine made with poppies, outside the memorial complex of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. Olivia Durand

In 1991, 90% of the population voted in favour of an autonomous Ukraine. Now, 30 years later, Ukraine sees itself as a postcolonial and multinational state – neither "Russian" nor "Little". While Russian politicians continue to frame Ukraine as Russian for their own benefits, this view ignores how Ukraine has persevered in the face of forced assimilation, cultural differentiation, imperial belligerence and colonial exploitation, to become its own country.