THE ROOTS OF RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

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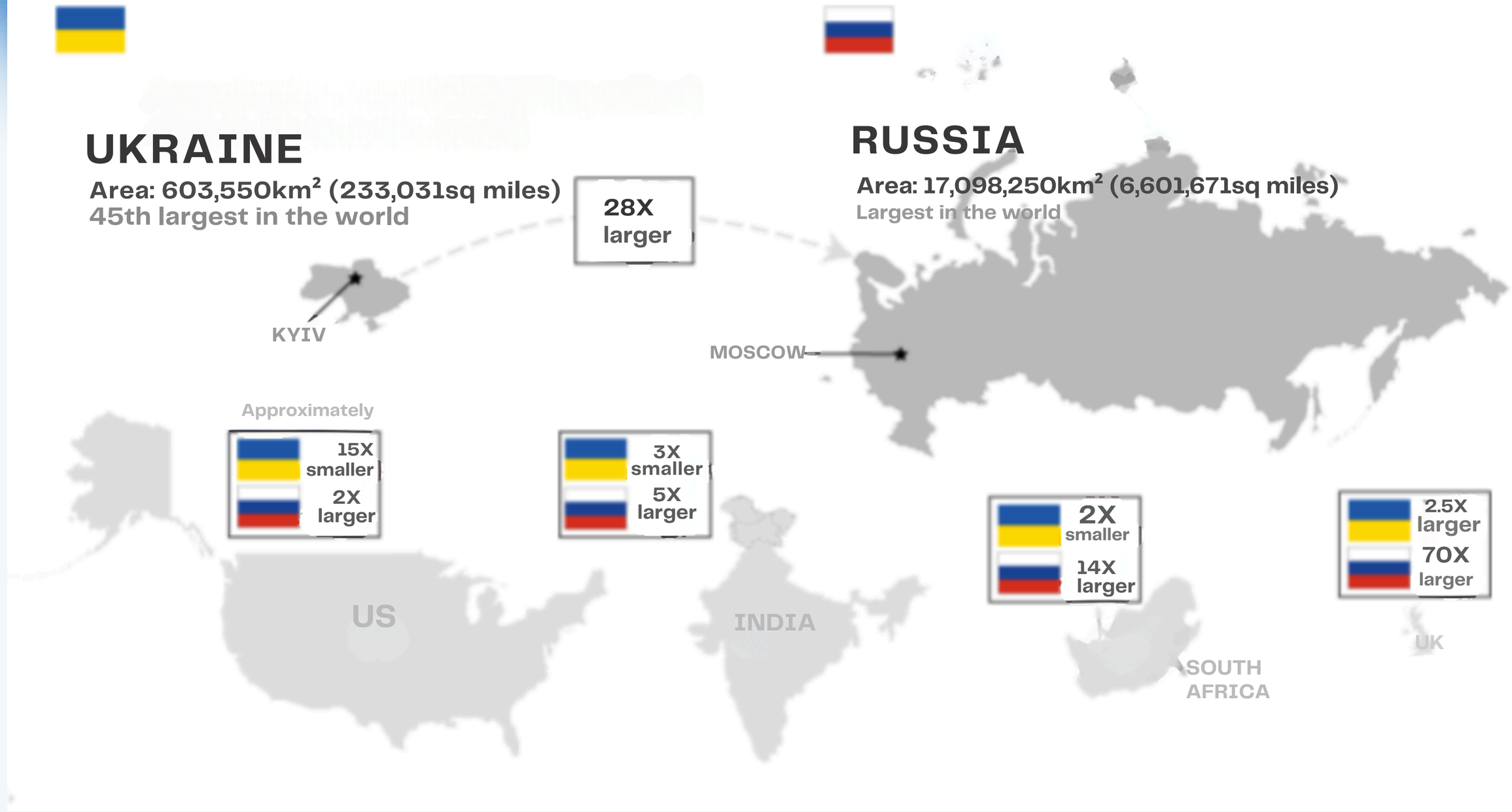
The roots of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reveal a clash between incompatible frameworks of identity, memory, and statehood within Europe

We will analyze:

- How narratives construct reality
- How historical memory is weaponized
- How identity manipulation legitimizes violence



Ukraine and Russia are the two largest countries in Europe.



USSR republics

Russia and Ukraine were part of the **15 Soviet republics that made up the USSR**.



Independence

- **March 1990**
  (1) Lithuania
- **May 1990**
  (2) Latvia
  (3) Estonia
- **April 1991**
  (4) Georgia
- **August 1991**
  (5) Ukraine, (6) Moldova,
  (7) Azerbaijan, (8) Uzbekistan,
  (9) Kyrgyzstan
- **September 1991**
  (10) Tajikistan, (11) Armenia,
- **October 1991**
  (12) Turkmenistan
- **December 1991**
  (13) Belarus
  (14) Russia
  (15) Kazakhstan

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Source: Al Jazeera

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🇺🇦 Rising National Movement

- **By the late 1980s,** glasnost and perestroika unleashed a **wave of civic activism**
- Movements like **Rukh** (People's Movement of Ukraine) demanded sovereignty, democracy, and cultural revival
- In July 1990, the Ukrainian parliament adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty, asserting that **Ukrainian laws had priority over Soviet ones** (key legal step toward independence)

🗳️ The December 1991 Referendum

The real breaking point came on **December 1, 1991, when over 90% of Ukrainians voted for independence**, with majority support in every region **even Russian-speaking** areas.

Only a week later, the leaders of Russia (Yeltsin), Ukraine (Kravchuk), and Belarus (Shushkevich) met secretly in the Belavezha Forest (Belarus) and signed the document formally dissolving the USSR, replacing it with the **Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)**

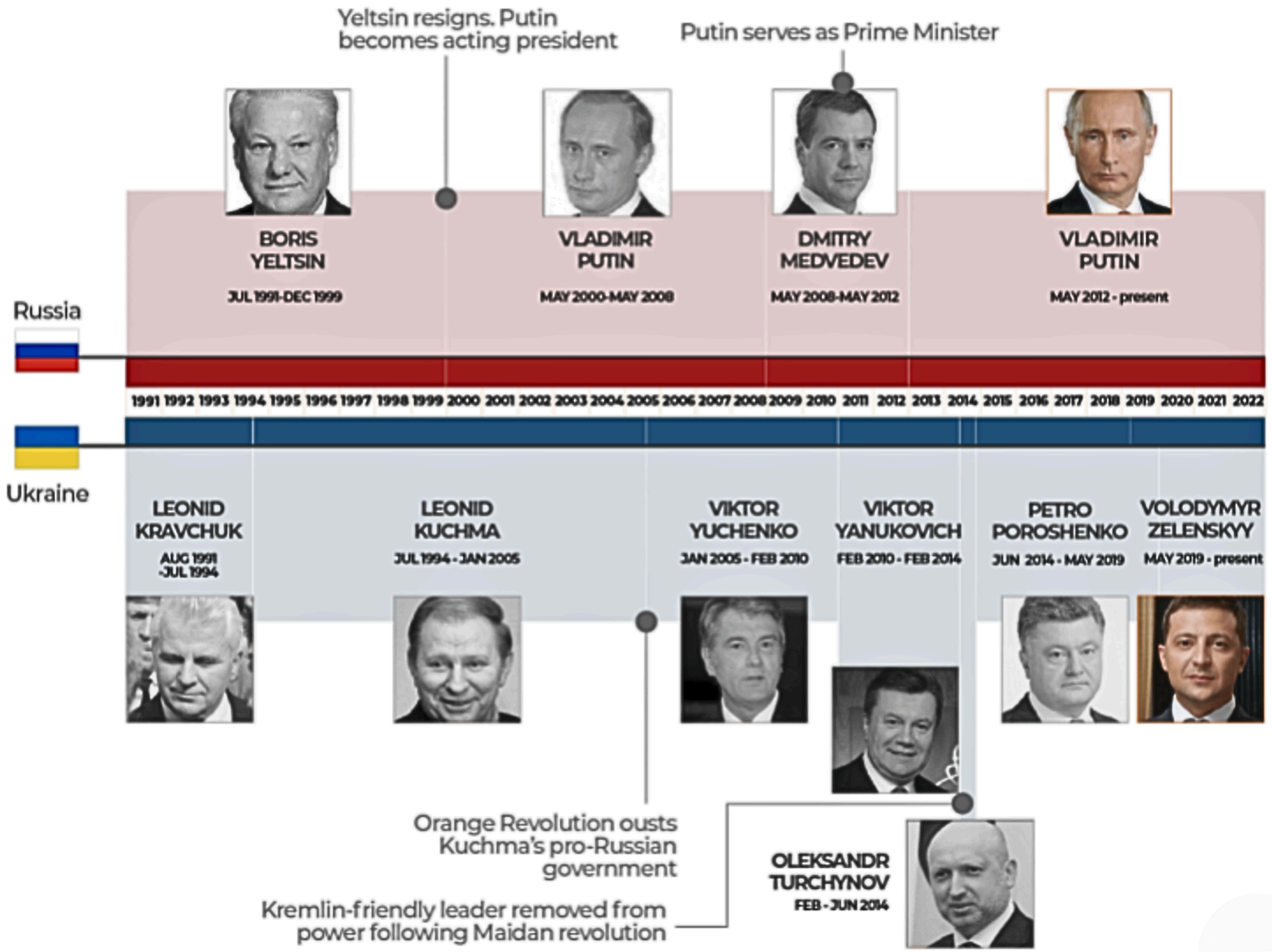
⚫ Historical Significance

Ukraine's choice gave legitimacy and **finality to the collapse**:

- It showed that even the most integrated republic **wanted sovereignty**
- It **deprived Moscow** of **population, resources, and geopolitical depth**
- It **shattered the idea of a "Slavic core"** holding the Union together

Political leadership

Following the **collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991**, Ukraine has moved to shed its Russian imperial legacy and **forge increasingly close ties with the West**.



the USSR was built around Russia. It was the metropole of a colonial-like system: resources, elites, and decision-making
all flowed through Moscow

After 1991, Russia retained:

- **The imperial memory** the belief it was the natural leader of the post-Soviet space;
- **The institutional continuity** army, diplomacy, and intelligence structures;
- **The myth of unity** the idea that separation was artificial and reversible.

the USSR's collapse ended the empire but left Russia with the identity of an empire without an empire.

That unresolved status **between loss and entitlement** lies at the heart of its later aggression toward Ukraine

TWO INCOMPATIBLE IDENTITY FRAMEWORKS

- Semiology = the study of signs and meanings
- Looks at how language, symbols, and stories create reality
- Meanings are not fixed, they are constructed and can change over time
- Words carry power: they can define or erase identities

Example:

- “Malorossiya” (literally “Little Russia”) a historical name used by the Russian Empire
    - Implies inferiority and dependency, not equality
    - Reduces Ukraine from a nation to a region,

a “smaller” version of Russia

Historical Mythologies and the “Imagined Unity”

Text: Putin (2021), “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”

- Deconstruct Putin’s mythopoetic narrative of “**one people**.” not simply history; it is **myth-making**
- **Ukraine’s independence as a tragic mistake** caused by foreign powers
- Uses **sacred origins** (Kyivan Rus, St. Volodymyr) as **semiotic anchors of shared destiny**.
- **Language of kinship** (“brothers,” “common tragedy”) **masking hierarchy** — the colonial trope of elder brother / younger brother
- The **erasure of Ukrainian subjectivity**:
  - Ukraine appears only as Malorossiya, borderland, periphery, **never as an autonomous signifier**.
- Notice how his story redefines key symbols: “Ukraine” – “borderland”, not a country but an **edge of Russia.**
- Kyivan Rus becomes the “mother of all Russian cities” — **not Ukrainian heritage but Russian origin**.
- Cultural note: This narrative performs **re-appropriation of cultural capital** (Shevchenko, Hrushevsky) to sustain imperial identity.

Historical Mythologies and the “Imagined Unity”
Text: Putin (2021), “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”

- Toward the end of the essay, Putin argues that **Ukraine has been turned into an “anti–Russia” by the West → Russia must protect its historical unity**.

The emotional shift is clear: **from nostalgia to accusation, from “brotherhood” to “betrayal.”**

- This is how narratives prepare the ground for violence.
- Transition discussion:
  - From **“historical unity” → to “anti–Russia”** construction: the semiotic shift where Ukraine’s independence becomes a sign of betrayal.

- Step 1 Myth of Unity:
  - “Russians and Ukrainians are one people” → erases boundaries between states.
- Step 2 Story of Betrayal:
  - Ukraine’s independence = a mistake or Western manipulation.
- Step 3 Moral Mission:
  - Russia must “protect” the unity of the Rus’ people.
- Step 4 Political Action:
  - 2014 Annexation of Crimea
  - 2022 “Special military operation” to “restore historical justice.”
- Semiotic logic: The myth becomes mandate: symbolic unity transforms into real invasion.

Ukrainian Identity	Pan-Russian Identity
Defines Ukraine as an independent nation, not a “younger brother”	Sees Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” within a shared Slavic civilization
Civic and pluralistic — citizenship, not ethnicity, as the basis of belonging	Authoritarian and hierarchical — unity through subordination to Moscow
Builds legitimacy through democracy, diversity, and self-definition	Builds legitimacy through tradition, Orthodoxy, and imperial continuity
National memory focused on Holodomor, repression, and anti-imperial struggle	Memory centered on the Great Patriotic War and Soviet victory myth
Promotes Ukrainian language, culture, and European integration	Promotes Russian language, Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), and “Russian World” ideology
2014–2022: consolidation of civic Ukrainian identity (Euromaidan, reforms, army, EU/NATO path)	2014–2022: loss of soft power → shift to coercion and war to “restore unity”

Kuzio’s Perspective: Two Opposite Identity Projects

Russia’s narrative	**Ukraine’s narrative**
Pan-Russian unity: one Orthodox Slavic civilization	Civic, plural identity: Ukraine as European democracy
History as empire	History as decolonization
Fear of loss	Desire for self-definition

THANK YOU

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