The atmosphere in Kyiv is pretty tense. But I have the feeling that the threat of a military invasion will still be far away and is not a sure thing that will happen. But this very situation will exhaust the country economically, and the people morally. My feeling is that this is what is being done. I mean, it will be worse, but how soon it will be worse, I don’t know. But we are going to hope for peace, and if you can’t come in April, then in the summer or fall you will have the chance to come to Ukraine and you can come visit us. (20 February 2022)

After a visit to Kyiv in September 2021, I planned to return to Ukraine the following April to continue my new research project on state response to long-term internal displacement from the temporarily occupied territories of Donets’k, Luhans’k, and Crimea. I planned to travel to Mariupol for the first time to begin a secondary phase of research in a city that had seen its population expand with the arrival of many displaced people over eight years. And I planned to visit friends at their homes: most people did not really appear to believe that an invasion was coming, so I continued to make plans.

Four days after I received the message above, the Russian Federation, on the orders of Vladimir Putin, began bombing airfields near cities across Ukraine. Then, Russian bombs began falling on the cities themselves. Russian tank columns from the north threatened Kyiv. Bombs from the south – from Crimea, the Black Sea, and the occupied territories – fell on Kharkiv. Mariupol was besieged and thousands of its citizens were stuck in basements without supplies while the city was almost entirely destroyed. Millions of Ukrainians left their homes or became homeless in the wake of the invasion. Millions have been displaced within Ukraine, and millions more – women and children, as martial law prevents men ages eighteen to sixty from crossing the
border – left the country for safety in Poland and other neighbouring countries. As of this writing in the beginning of April 2022, the world is just discovering the atrocities that took place during the Russian occupation and attack on villages and cities around Kyiv, including Bucha, Irpin, and Hostomel. Citizens are evacuating Mariupol in humanitarian convoys, but at least a hundred thousand people remain in the city, with dwindling supplies.

The events in this book focus largely on the events of 2013–14 in Ukraine: the Euromaidan protests. In the wake of the overthrow of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych at the end of those protests, Russian troops quietly invaded and occupied the Crimean Peninsula, which had been part of Ukraine since 1954 and remained part of independent Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russian troops supported the separatist movements in the Donets’k and Luhans’k regions, beginning a protracted but contained war that continued through February 2022. On 21 February, Putin recognized these occupied territories as separate republics. In his speech announcing this policy shift, he also clearly expressed his position that Ukraine should not exist as an independent country. His move to recognize the occupied territories and to fabricate a narrative of a Ukraine run by Nazis who need to be removed worked as Putin’s justification for the full-scale invasion that began on 24 February.

Russian aggression towards Ukraine over the previous eight years of war did not make Ukrainians see themselves as part of Russia. Indeed, Ukrainian sentiments towards Russia declined progressively over these years, and there is little or no evidence of Putin’s claims that Ukrainians wish to be part of Russia – even in the then-temporarily occupied territories, it was not necessarily a majority opinion. In the wake of Euromaidan, Ukrainian public opinion became increasingly oriented towards Ukraine’s future in the European Union. Internal politics focused on anticorruption efforts, curbing the role of oligarchs, and domestic reforms – including in the judicial and police sectors, as well as decentralization to give more powers to Ukraine’s regions – were playing out with varying degrees of success and support. From 2014 to 2022, Ukraine saw two democratic transfers of power. President Volodymyr Zelensky, the TV comedian elected in 2019, brought a new perspective to reforms, earning the ire and disappointment of many when he was unable to fulfil campaign promises to end the war in Donbas.

Zelensky’s approval rating was at an all-time low at the end of 2021. After winning the presidency with nearly 75 per cent of the vote, and the majority in all but two of Ukraine’s regions, people became disillusioned because of high rates of turnover in the government and failure
to implement effective reforms in many sectors. Yet Zelensky was also Ukraine’s most progressive president on, for example, LGBTQ+ rights (Channell-Justice 2020b), and he established the Crimea Platform, an effort to bring a global focus on the illegal annexation of the peninsula and the violation of sovereignty it represented. In other words, Zelensky was leading a democracy – he often faced disapproval, but he also often listened to his constituents when they pushed back against his initiatives.

Perhaps it was Zelensky’s low approval ratings that led Vladimir Putin to think that Ukraine would easily give in to Russian threats and advances. Perhaps it was Putin’s rage and Ukraine’s clear movement towards democratic practices – however imperfect that movement was – that prompted him to act. There will surely be many books written on this question in the coming years. More relevant for the present volume is the question of the Ukrainian response. President Zelensky – despite many offers of safe passage – has remained in Ukraine, advocating for military and humanitarian aid to every possible audience. Petro Poroshenko, his predecessor, has picked up arms, as has Kyiv mayor Vitaliy Klitschko, along with his brother Wladimir, both well-known boxing champions.

More widely, the Ukrainian response to this war has elicited surprise from much of the world. The Ukrainian Army was not expected to succeed in defending Kyiv and other major cities from Russian forces, let alone retake any towns and villages from those Russian forces, as they have done in April 2022. Ukrainians have volunteered in droves to serve in the military, as well as in Territorial Defence Units, which are being mobilized across the country and doing everything from liberating previously occupied cities to evacuating civilians. Those who decided to remain in Ukraine are organizing humanitarian efforts, including delivery of necessary goods and medicine to places under siege, as well as organizing ride shares when information about cars to transport people to safe places is available. Ukrainians who are already abroad are helping organize resources available to refugees, such as housing information for people needing to resettle.

This response is not a surprise to many of us who watched the 2013–14 Euromaidan protests unfold. The key contribution of this book is about self-organization: when people have the ability or the resources to do something, and that thing needs to be done, they simply do it. They do not wait for the government or an international organization to come meet people’s needs if they can do it themselves. The roots of the Euromaidan protests were in self-organization, and in this book I argue that the widespread use of self-organization in 2013 and 2014
has shaped people’s engagement with political participation in Ukraine since the protests ended.

When I began new research in Ukraine in 2021, with a focus on the long-term implications of the internal displacement that began in 2014, many people I interviewed, especially Ukrainians who worked in international and non-governmental organizations that served internally displaced people (IDPs), referenced self-organization. One woman from Dnipro, a city in eastern Ukraine, told me about how the city allowed her to repurpose an unused dormitory to house IDPs from Donets’k and Luhans’k as they streamed into the city. Ordinary people mobilized to clean up the dorm, put up wallpaper, remove mould, and bring along basic supplies such as sheets and towels so that newly displaced people would be comfortable. This self-organized initiative existed before any Ukrainian government officials took over the distribution of services to IDPs. Indeed, the woman who recounted this story from Dnipro told me that representatives from various government ministries came to talk with her about the initiative, and that none of them wanted to take on the task of helping IDPs. Most government officials preferred to let self-organized groups handle such tasks.

In other words, self-organization is alive and well in Ukraine and is a robust part of the response to Russia’s invasion. The proliferation of self-organized initiatives on Maidan prepared people to understand that there are many ways to be involved. Ivan Shmatko, a Ukrainian criminologist doing research there when the war broke out, described the importance of informal practices and local knowledge in making self-organized mobilizations effective. “While the armed forces were largely preoccupied with the war itself, millions of Ukrainians fled their homes. At the same time, more than one hundred thousand people rushed to sign up for the Territorial Defence Forces (TDF), a network of local volunteer units created to help the army protect cities and villages. These volunteers were often supplied with nothing more than automatic rifles. They also supplied the TDF with bulletproof vests, medical kits, and clothing. To do all this, volunteers relied almost exclusively on informal networks, not on state institutions” (Shmatko 2022).

As anthropologist Maryna Nading wrote, describing the hundreds of thousands of people who have mobilized to help one another, “I have been searching for a better word than self-help to describe this nonlinear, chaotic mobilization. ‘Self’ has expanded and subsumed individual families and neighbourhoods into a much larger entity that spans continents” (Nading 2022). Indeed, self-organization in this time of war subsumes individuality. It has gone beyond many selves acting outside of government entities, as characterized by the self-organization of
Euromaidan. Self-organization is part of the impulse to justify Ukraine’s very existence.

It is impossible to predict what will have happened by the time this book is published, so I will not spend time speculating here. Instead, I want to return to 2014, when I was interviewing activists and included a question about how they saw the future of Ukraine. While many activists answered pessimistically – they were concerned about the rise of the far right, the diminished power of the left, and the long-term implications of war – one person, Svitlana, shared a more positive sentiment.

It’s 2024. Somehow Putin is not in power. None of his close descendants. Somehow the conflict is resolved. By 2024, I think we will have to connect with the European Union, [but] diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation are preserved. Someone else has power in Russia and they don’t bother us as much. We are less dependent on Russian gas, resources. I think what would be important is if we have some kind of treaty with the EU that the borders are open, more people, especially young people, have the opportunity to study abroad. So, education for young people, opportunity to travel … I think a lot of people, there would be a big migration out of the country, but the believers would stay and try to change it in their lifetime, try to create opportunities and not look for opportunities in other places. Maidan helped promote these initiatives. So, peace, no Putin, opportunities to travel, to work, to study. (March 2014)

There is still time for Svitlana’s vision to come true. Even nearly ten years after Euromaidan, her words are more poignant than ever.
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