

## THE AGE OF WILL: INTRODUCTION INTO THE THEME

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We are living in a time when the will—long a subject of profound philosophical inquiry—has returned with renewed urgency to the center of our political, cultural, and existential experience. This volume, *The Age of Will: Philosophical Foundations, Political Expressions, and Cultural Shifts*, brings together diverse contributions that examine this multifaceted notion from a range of perspectives: metaphysical, ethical, political, and societal. We pay the main attention to the developments of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The contributors, representing ten countries across four continents—Europe, America, Australia, and Africa—share a common interest in analyzing the growing significance of *will* in contemporary societies. They explore how individual and collective actions are increasingly shaped not by reasoned deliberation or normative consensus, but by expressions of volition—by the dynamics of wanting and refusing, asserting and rejecting. Will, whether it be the will of political leaders, a movement of peoples, or individual power, can be understood as a powerful capacity that chooses the path to the future, starts Big Events, and initiates the situational chains that drive history. We are moving away from the dominance of reason, reasonable talks, clear causes and international laws towards a situation dictated by strong will. As Heidegger said, *will wills! A will to will!* (Heidegger 1989: 46).

In this new order, a will emerges not merely as a complement to reason, but as a central force trying to shape the world-picture. As Hannah Arendt observed:

Memory and thought are directed backwards and inwards: memory toward the past, thought toward the realities present to the self. Will, however, is directed forward toward a future which is not yet, and can be nothing but empty space, until it is filled by the activity of the will itself. (Arendt 1978: 55)

Speed-time requires strength and undermines stability. Willpower tries to dictate. Diversification, what is so popular today, divides, not strengthens. The marginals can no longer be at the center. Where the Enlightenment upheld reason as the compass of the human will, today we see a reversal: *Will has become the power that shapes reality itself*, unconstrained by rational justification, in many cases detached from ethical obligation, and often indifferent to truth. A policy of power, force, and rampant imagination has begun in the world. Whether as a philosophical concept, a political force, or a cultural energy, Will has reasserted itself as a defining element of our time.

The term “Age of Will” is not intended as a metaphor, nor merely a commentary on political willpower. Rather, it names a transformation of Ages in the very structure of

how power, agency, perceiving human being and reality operate, including fastness, living in an accelerated time.

A defining feature of the Age of Will is the intensification of events, where seemingly minor incidents can rapidly escalate into significant turning points. These events often unfold according to an internal logic that defies straightforward causality. Although scholars attempt to identify their origins, such explanations tend to be merely descriptive and fail to capture the true impetus of some kind of Will behind the events.

In various spheres, politics, culture, organizational structures, and administration, a shift can be observed from horizontal, democratic forms of interaction toward vertical, authoritative ones. Decisions once grounded in collective discourse are increasingly dictated by centralized power. For instance, such a trifle as the appointment of university deans—traditionally an elective process—is now often unilaterally imposed by higher authorities, justified by a vague imperative to respect authority. Similarly, in a highly developed nation, the president may abruptly halt all university development projects that were previously approved through rigorous academic evaluation and open competition, acting solely on the basis of heavy political will.

Such developments—small and big in their meaning – are indicative of the Age of Will, although they often go unnoticed. One of the hallmarks of this era is the unpredictability of events, which frequently lack a rational foundation. Power becomes performative, with its agents increasingly driven by the desire to assert dominance and "save face." Charismatic leaders emerge, guided more by intuition and sheer will than by reasoned judgment or expertise.

In such conditions, significant segments of the population become silent and withdrawn, adopting a strategy of non-participation as a means of self-preservation. Historically, the Age of Will has led to uprisings and revolutions. However, when societies are subdued from the outset, such resistance is delayed or entirely suppressed. Democratic institutions begin to erode, as the tempo and pressure of events render meaningful deliberation and public discourse unfeasible. Democracies often lack adequate mechanisms for self-defense against such erosive forces. An example is Germany in the 1930s.

The widespread adoption of artificial intelligence may further catalyze the Age of Will, as a growing divide emerges between those who develop and control AI technologies and those who remain unaware or disinterested in their workings. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the integration of AI into everyday life are key catalysts, shaping the evolving contours of this age.

It appears that the Age of Reason (based on Enlightenment) is coming to an end, and we are being drawn—perhaps without full awareness or consent—into the Age of Will, which can continue for decades or even longer. This shift is not the result of a deliberate choice by European citizens or global actors but rather resembles the emergence of a new spirit—an epochal mood that displaces peaceful coexistence with conflict, replaces law with command, and transforms communication into aggression.

The world philosophy is undergoing changes, and we must follow them to understand what is happening. This is not to say that there is a lack of reason and rational, moral actions in the contemporary world. But in many cases, it is not the reason that drives goodwill, but that the will seeks to use reason for its own ends. And these ends are not always universally good, and freedom oriented. The authoritarian will also realize malignant goals and turn to a lack of human freedom and dignity. It is difficult to justify the start of the war with Ukraine on 2022 February 24 with the presence of reason and foresight, but the manifestation of a strong, ambitious will of the Russian president is palpable there.

The Russian justification for invading Ukraine is unconvincing because, on the one hand, Ukrainians are called by Putin's ideology makers a brotherly people, and on the other hand, annihilation of all nation is being perpetrated against them. Russian ideology uses the peculiarity of the Age of Will, that statements do not have to be coherent, reliable, or non-contradictory. The will declares what it wants, not what is reasonable. This ideology is chosen with a tendency to manifest itself in the form of messianism, as if applauding others, even those who do not want to.

In this new configuration, events driven by violence necessitate a response of counterforce. This imperative now shapes the geopolitics of Europe and its neighboring regions, including the post-Soviet countries. The militarization of nearly all global powers signals a profound restructuring of the geopolitical order. Whether this restructuring will stabilize or spiral into deeper crises remains to be seen.

In this context, the Age of Will captures a growing tendency toward the concentration of power in the hands of strong political actors, the rise of personalist and autocratic regimes, and the increasing marginalization of deliberative democratic processes. Accompanying these developments is a widespread affective climate of uncertainty, anxiety, and societies' disorientation, where the will—rather than law, ethics, or rational consensus—often appears as the primary organizing force. Many of us don't like this turn of events, but it's coming at us like an inevitable wave, like some higher power is sending humanity into a time of collapse.

The volume is unified by its central theme: *The Age of Will*—a term that we propose as a conceptual framework for interpreting the transformations unfolding in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the force of will has undoubtedly played a role in earlier historical epochs—such as the revolutionary energies that reshaped France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Trotsky and Lenin's "revolution" in 1917 etc.,—what marks our current era is a shift in narrative: the will creates the situations (not the other way around)—from peace to war, from dialogue to opposition, from cooperation to imposition, from autonomy to impressing and domination, from natural reason to artificial intelligence, from truth and morals to post-truth and post-moral epoch. These developments are occurring in parallel with the advancement of technology, the expansion of knowledge, and the improvement of social welfare in many countries, but that does not stop the impression that the will makes. To ignore it is to be blind.

The Age of Will does not cover the whole world. The military wage will continue with humanistic desires, dialogues and hopes, human rights demands and hope, etc.

Although the new *Zeitgeist* is still in formation, several of its defining features have already become apparent: a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety, growing distrust in liberal-democratic norms and values, and deepening skepticism toward the idea of human autonomy grounded in reason. We are witnessing the ascent of affects, desires, and the agency of trans- or non-human forces as primary structuring elements of political and cultural life. The will takes over the reason, and the lifeworld becomes more irrational.

These tendencies point to a paradigmatic shift—a change of epoch that demands not only political awareness but also sustained philosophical analysis. From a modern world once oriented around the authority of reason, international law, rationality, and scientific knowledge, we now enter a configuration in which alternative forms of life and power relations prevail. This transformation is not limited to state structures but affects the very constitution of subjectivity, collective feelings, and actions.

Philosophers and theorists have proposed various names to describe this shift. Some frame it as a contest between autocracy and democracy, or between interests and values. While others describe the clash in terms of patrimonialism or neo-feudalism. Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin have provocatively termed nowadays with its techno-authoritarian and neo-monarchist ideas as the *Dark Enlightenment*. Mikhail Minakov characterizes this shift as a conflict of two Enlightenments—“light” and “dark”. He recognizes:

What is crucial for this study is the intrinsic value of a liberal, and even progressivist interpretation of freedom and progress. (Minakov 2025: 99)

Yet, in the contemporary context, the will is increasingly severed from its traditional association with freedom and autonomous choice. Instead, it aligns with desire, unconscious drives, and a will-to-power-expressing itself through acquisition, realization, and domination.

Under these conditions, the figure of the *hierarchical individual*—the charismatic leader or “new tyrant”—gains renewed prominence, and governance returns to centralized structures. The collective will, once seen as legitimizing ideologies through deliberative consensus, is now often shaped *by* ideologies that instrumentalize affect and allegiance.

The will thus no longer functions as a vehicle of free decision, but as a mechanism of imposition. With the rapid expansion of technology—particularly in digital media and artificial intelligence—these dynamics of domination have become increasingly insidious and pervasive. Forms of control are embedded in infrastructures of communication and cognition, making resistance difficult and complicating our very capacity to distinguish between truth and manipulation.

We are living in a time in which the next steps of political and societal development can no longer be confidently anticipated. The world has become profoundly uncertain, marked by collapsing plans, fragile projections, and eroding temporal horizons. In this context of disintegration, we witness the resurgence of hierarchical structures of authority and the reassertion of vertical forms of governance. The modern ideal of linear progress—of history moving “forward”—appears to lose its normative traction. This is not merely a crisis of direction but of intention: for the will today often manifests not as a

striving toward collective achievement or ethical ends, but as a drive to possess, control, and acquire.

It is interesting that in the Age of Will, the question about values is not in the center, as is commonly thought; values are only referred to when marking the forceful tendencies. Moreover, meta-ideologies have become insignificant, without teleology and a clear picture of the future. They appear and disappear. Putin's ideological simulacrum is much weaker than was Communist ideology based on Marxism-Leninism with the idea to achieve Communism.

The European Union has a lot of economically and socially oriented programmatic documents, but the EU Constitution was not adopted; only four basic values were outlined, and the ideology (philosophical background) of the coexistence of European states does not exist. Pragmatic ideas are at the forefront in Europe. However, this means more functioning and trading than the collective strength required when the Age of Will arrives. The collective will of Europe is just beginning to awaken. As Māris Kūlis ironically writes in the volume, weakness is a virtue of contemporary Western culture:

In contemporary Western European liberal democracies, weakness has seemingly been elevated into a high normative value. Public discourse and institutional policy increasingly valorize vulnerability, victimhood, and emotional safety, while displaying suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward strength, confidence, or risk-taking. This inversion of value hierarchies, in which strength is redefined as dangerous and weakness as virtuous, has deep philosophical roots. (Kūlis 2025: 256)

Kūlis argues that the Europeans may need to abandon certain comforting illusions and recover the value of discomfort—the productive tension that enables not only personal development but also the emergence of a collective will to defend what is truly good, just, and enduring.

Human beings have different kinds of pleasure: the *pleasure of power* and the *pleasure of consumption* (which can also be called the pleasure of goods or fortunate life). The war between Ukraine and Russia proposes to initiate events around both pleasures. For the Russian public, it offers the pleasure of power in a very vivid way, and it is a passionate, powerfully arousing feeling—participation in an awakening imperial Russian collective consciousness. The Russian war ideology has found a place of pleasure for its society—to understand itself through imperial self-affirmation. Russia, though war-weary, seems to be powerful in its self-confidence. It is the sharing of the feeling of willpower that gives an intangible, subconscious pleasure to the Russian public who stands on the side of Putin's aggression. This ingrained relishing of power may be the root of the next, extended war, expansion, a choosiness that has not yet been maximized.

Now the stakes are high for the question: will the pleasure of the power being offered, by identifying with Putin's war ideology, be stronger than the pursuit of the pleasure of consumer benefits, which is characteristic of many Western countries? Will Western sanctions influence the psyche? The benefits will be lost, but maybe the pleasure of power will compensate with its allure?

The contemporary technocratic Western world appears fundamentally unable to relinquish its orientation toward consumer pleasure. Within Western democracies, political leadership is subject to periodic re-election, coalitions are regularly reshaped, and the tenure of officeholders is typically limited. Underlying these institutional arrangements is a critical normative principle: the prevention of the consolidation of power driven by the pleasures it confers. This principle—aimed at curbing the seductions of power—may be considered even more foundational than democracy’s provision for public deliberation and freedom of expression.

The general Will—once conceived as a unifying force in democratic theory—is increasingly shaped by mini-ideologies that do not seek legitimation through reason, deep philosophical theories, or consensus but function instead as vehicles of mobilization and manipulation. The result is a fragmentation of the civic sphere, in which symbolic narratives and cultural aesthetics take precedence over substantive democratic deliberation.

What I have called the “life-form on the surface”—a postmodern sensibility characterized by performative politics and aestheticized governance (Kule 2006)—continues to prevail. Yet it now opens the door ever wider to expressions of raw volition. The will no longer presents itself as the basis for autonomous choice, but as a force of domination and imposition.

Compounding these transformations is the rapid expansion of technologically advanced media ecosystems. These developments have intensified the mechanisms of influence and control, rendering domination more subtle and pervasive. The distinction between truth and media fabrication becomes increasingly blurred, as knowledge is destabilized and displaced by conspiracy theories, affective appeals, and algorithmic persuasion. The reflective-quantitative definitions are the means for power, the magical language for the contemporary world.

The modern conception of the will is not about the question— is human will free or determined, where the will has a choice *between*. Will is expressed as a force, a strength, and dynamism. Algis Mickunas elaborates on the metaphysics of Will:

This will does not choose between two factors which are there, but “projects” possibilities which do not have any reality and hence causal force. [...]. It means the dominance of the will. The shift from the power of nature to the power of the human is almost complete. (Mickunas 2025: 29).

Some may ask: what drives Will? What are its roots—economic conditions, class struggles, imperial ambitions, collective trauma, or unconscious drives, etc.? While these are legitimate and important questions, they fall outside the scope of this volume. Our intention is not to offer a genealogy of the contemporary forms of the expressions of will, nor to explain it through historical causality or sociological reduction. Instead, we aim to describe the *phenomenological experience* of the contemporary will as it manifests in lived reality.

The phenomenological method has played a crucial role in articulating the dynamics of our contemporary condition. In this volume, we have sought to trace the

transition between historical epochs and capture the fundamental transformations in prevailing life-forms. Following the global pandemic, the outbreak of war in the heart of Europe marked a further intensification of the Age of Will. This transformation is not merely symbolic; it is inscribed in escalating geopolitical tensions, persistent armed conflicts, the deepening climate crisis, financial instability, and widespread human disillusionment with the existing world order.

Will, in this context, is not treated as a subject in the Hegelian sense—whether as subjective, objective, or absolute spirit. Nor do we reduce it to structural determinants, as in classical Marxism. Such reductionism, while illuminating in certain contexts, often obscures the phenomena themselves. What we offer instead is a phenomenological account of the Age of Will—*an epochal configuration of the lifeworld in which the meanings of action, authority, and affectivity have undergone profound transformation.*

### **Structure of the volume “The Age of Will”**

This volume seeks to explore the Age of Will in its multiple dimensions. It brings together a diverse set of perspectives that collectively interrogate how will functions as a metaphysical principle, how it manifests in political life, and how it shapes and is shaped by broader cultural and social dynamics.

The idea of “Will” has a long and complex history. From classical debates on free will and determinism to modern theories of desire, agency, and motivation, philosophers have long struggled with the question: *What does it mean to will something?* In metaphysical terms, will has been seen both as a rational faculty and as a deeper, often unconscious force shaping our choices. In the contemporary context, the question becomes even more urgent: *Whose will govern? What does it mean to act willfully under conditions of crisis, oppression, or uncertainty?*

This volume is structured into three thematic parts, each addressing a different but interconnected dimension of will. Part 1. *Philosophical Foundations of the Will.* This section revisits the metaphysical and ethical underpinnings of the concept of will. Authors explore questions of free will versus determinism, the role of desire and necessity, the rational organization of human motivation, and the phenomenology of uncertainty in a world increasingly defined by instability.

The article by Algis Mickunas represents a significant contribution not only to this volume but also to the broader philosophical discourse on the concept of will today. Since the groundbreaking insights of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, contemporary philosophical engagement with the phenomenon of will has been relatively limited, often confined to Kant’s framing of the problem as one of free will. While the contributions of Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, and the early Paul Ricoeur deserve recognition, comprehensive metaphysical inquiries into the nature of will—such as those undertaken by Mickunas—remain rare. Yet, a thorough understanding of what may be termed the Age of Will is scarcely possible without engaging its metaphysical dimensions.

Jānis Tāivaldis Ozoliņš offers a nuanced analysis of how the concept of will was understood by Aristotle and Augustine. Both thinkers assert that any meaningful discussion of the will must be grounded in the concept of freedom. For them, virtue constitutes the ultimate aim of human action. However, most individuals fail to will the good because they are driven by desires for material gain and sensual pleasure. As demonstrated throughout this volume, such tendencies are characteristic of many individuals in the modern era, reflecting a broader shift in the conceptualization of will - from a faculty oriented toward moral choice to a mechanism for the realization of desire.

Bence Marosan, in turn, investigates the interrelation between rationality and will, showing how their interplay is essential for the sustenance of a just and coherent community. In his opinion, the primary task now is to win back the members of irrational ideologies to the cause of universal, all-encompassing rationality, as Husserl believed.

Finally, Giulio Lo Bello identifies anxiety and uncertainty as defining features of the contemporary Age of Will, offering critical insights into its dimensions. He recognizes that the neoliberal imperative to fabricate meaning internally, without shared myths or ethical norms, transforms anxiety from circumstantial affliction into a constitutive structure of Self. The Enlightenment's ideal of the rational and autonomous person changes into a managerial Self. Today, the symptoms Nietzsche foresaw manifest in the normalization of cynicism, nihilism, and the commodification of life under digital capitalism.

Part 2. *Political Expressions of Will Today*. These reflections provide the necessary conceptual framework to understand will not only as an individual faculty but as a collective and historically situated force. This section shifts the focus to concrete manifestations of will within the political sphere. From the struggle for national survival and the assertion of Ukraine's state sovereignty—vividly and poignantly portrayed by Oleksandr Kulyk—to broader civilizational confrontations within the Euro-Atlantic context, the contributions examine the various ways in which will is mobilized, asserted, or contested in the realm of politics.

Mikhail Minakov addresses recent developments, notably Vice President J.D. Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference (2025 February 14), which highlights an emerging ideological divide between the foundational values of the classical Enlightenment and the so-called "Dark Enlightenment." The latter challenges the liberal democratic order by deconstructing its core principles and promoting a model that prioritizes hierarchical efficiency and techno-authoritarian governance. This conception of efficiency aligns closely with the defining characteristics of the Age of Will. The difference is that techno-authoritarians are more concerned with justifying the possibility of freedom through technologies, while will adepts want the realization of strong-willed desires, as we can see in the USA President Trump's, Russia President Putin's, and other authoritarian leaders' ideas and actions.

In this context, Minakov draws on the philosophical framework of Peter Thiel, referencing David Perell's observation on the evolving perception of will:

The medievals believed in the weakness of the will but the power of the intellect. Modern people tend to believe in the power of the will and the weakness of the intellect. (Perell n. d.)

This quote is apt and correctly reflects historical trends. Minakov also examines the critical responses to J. D. Vance's speech from European leaders, who have pushed back against the implications of the Dark Enlightenment, defending the values underpinning liberal democracy.

In the Age of Will, political authoritarian leaders play a pivotal role. Leons Taivāns contributes a comprehensive study on Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as willful political figures in Asia. He contrasts European conceptions of will with the approach to its realization in Asia—broadly defined here to include Russia. The differences from Western models are substantial, as religious and cultural traditions in Asia exert a significant influence. These traditions are often invoked in efforts to legitimize political authority, shaping both the discourse and practice of governance in this world region.

What about the expression of Will in Africa? The paper written by two African professors Joseph C. A. Agbakoba and Anthony Chinaemerem Ajah from Nigeria, gives a fresh and innovative perspective which enables Africans to re-focus on their agency and to re-humanize their predominant understanding of African Will. This turn in African studies fully coincides with the positive meaning of the Age of Will – *to return to things themselves*, as Husserl called for, *Africans to Africa*. They discuss the current popular approach to African studies—about the African Renaissance as Pan-Africanism and about the deconstructive movement to decolonize all spheres of human engagements in Africa, with the idea that Africa must de-link from the West—a struggling will for freedom from 'outsiders'.

The authors' aim is to re-center human agency and the will of Africans to a consistent, reasoned, and empathic collective human will. Nothing will happen on the continent without the outright collaboration and willing of Africans.

They reflect on the weaknesses of the decolonial position and ask to stop the African elites' position that insists on defining themselves from the limited prism of their tribe, ethnic group, and race. The authors of the paper have mentioned that the same colonial experiences have huge positive deposits and heritages. Akbakoba and Ajah look for the art of *creative willing, reasonabilism, and transcolonial framework*, which includes an openness to learn from and in collaboration with others. What Africa truly needs is its own modern development vision. The elite must be held accountable for corruption and for their lack of commitment to comprehensive national development.

The manifestations of Russia are aptly described in two articles: Leons Taivāns "Willful Leadership and Religious Heritage in Asia", one part of this article is devoted to Putin's ideology, and Yulia Sineokaya "Barbarism as Result from the Obsession with State-civilization", where she shows Russia's contemptuous and violent attitude towards academia and protesters. The ideological foundation of this process is Russia's newly asserted identity as a "civilization-state": a *Greater Russian World* in opposition to the

*collective West*. Sineokaya illustrates how unfavorable this path is for Russia itself and how perilous it is for the entire world due to its aggressiveness.

Oleksandr Kulyk, in his paper “The Will to Freedom: A Ukrainian Perspective on the Issue of Will,” reveals the positive and creative power of the nation’s will to defend freedom. He examines the interpretations of *volia* found in Ukrainian culture and philosophy, systematizing them by introducing the concept of “the will to freedom”. The article allows you to feel so deeply and attractively is the loving attitude to the Ukrainian nation, to understand its strengths and ability to win the war against Russia’s full-scale invasion.

The section on the realization of will in the authoritarian politics and collective resistance to it also includes Tatiana Shchytsova’s paper on the rise of *democratic We* in Belarus and the dispute over sovereignty in the Belarussian opposition in 2020. She explained what the imperative “*shnavats’!*” means, which was implied in the affective genesis of the protesting democratic multitude. The will in her article is examined through the example of the post-election political antagonism in 2020. She shows that the long-lasting peaceful protests in Belarus can be viewed as a manifestation of the “goodwill of the people”. In her opinion, it was a *different expression of Will*, which is not as Kantian autonomous practical reason but functions as a *Democratic Multitude, Origin of the New Democratic We*. Emotions played a constitutive role in the formation of the collective agency of the protest community, being saturated with the will of the nation. The example of the Belarusian protest shows how important collective will is when it has a positive–freedom orientated–goal.

The part 3. *Cultural Trends and the Social Feeling of Will* extends the inquiry beyond the traditional boundaries of political philosophy to explore the multifaceted expressions of will as they emerge in feminist theory, democratic care, personal autonomy, and critical social thought. Recent years have seen a marked intensification of conflicts and cultural polarization, yet these have been accompanied by acts of courage, resistance, and hope. These seemingly divergent phenomena point to a deeper philosophical question: *Who wills, and in what way?* Is the will merely a mechanism of power and control, or can it also be conceived as a striving toward freedom, dignity, and responsibility?

In a period characterized by the rise of right-wing populism, left-wing radicalism, and progressive activism, the *feeling of will*, or how individuals experience their own agency, or its absence, has become a crucial subject of inquiry. This section examines how cultural narratives, gendered experiences, and collective memory shape our shared understanding of willing and being willed.

Māris Kūlis offers a critical perspective on the European Union, identifying a troubling trend of doublethink, linguistic inversions, and paradoxical interpretations of key values such as compromise, tolerance, and comfort. He critiques a pervasive victimhood culture and the apparent erosion of a strong collective Will within the EU’s political discourse.

Olga Shparaga investigates the erosion of democratic norms, particularly through the economization of non-economic spheres of life. She highlights how this trend

transforms citizens into market subjects and reconfigures all domains of existence into forms of enterprise, effectively turning the state into a managerial body. This process reproduces new forms of inequality across various social strata, disproportionately affecting women and migrant care workers. Shparaga identifies the absence of an alternative agenda rooted in freedom and solidarity as a critical issue. In response, she proposes the notion of *caring democracy*, drawing from the context of the 2020 Belarus protests. In these protests, acts of resistance were closely intertwined with practices of care, and marginalized groups—including people with disabilities and the elderly—actively participated, seeking innovative forms of democratic engagement. Such practices not only expand social networks but also imbue them with ethical significance, including commitments to environmental stewardship and participatory governance.

Maija Kūle revisits the question of personal autonomy and free will as a central philosophical concern, a theme also explored in contributions by Lo Bello and Shparaga. Kūle argues that autonomy is deeply entwined with the notion of the free individual. Drawing on figures such as Kierkegaard, who portrays the individual as silently standing before God, she positions autonomy as a fundamental existential condition. Yet, in the contemporary landscape, the human will is increasingly constrained and subject to various pressures, including those that the person themselves cannot observe. The conceptualization of the subject and its relationship to power has undergone a profound transformation, particularly in the Age of Will, characterized by heightened exertions of authority and systemic control. This dynamic was clear during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contemporary frameworks often advocate a relational model of autonomy, one based on collaborative life projects and social interdependence. However, Kūle questions whether such models adequately preserve the core of individual self-determination. While acknowledging the importance of social embeddedness, she cautions against relinquishing the ideal of autonomy. In a time increasingly defined by coercive forces and normative conformity, she underscores the need to protect the everyday individual's capacity to experience and enact personal freedom and agency.

Together, these contributions present a vivid portrait of a world in which the question of will—its origins, its legitimacy, and its consequences—is no longer merely philosophical. It is existential, ethical, and profoundly political. In assembling this volume, we aim not to offer a singular theory of will, but rather to open a space for plural inquiry. The Age of Will is not a time of consensus—it is a time of contestation, where the very capacity to act and choose is under pressure. And yet, it is also a time of new possibilities: for rethinking agency, reclaiming autonomy, and reshaping the future through acts of will, both great and small.

This volume does not claim to exhaust the philosophical potential of this concept. Rather, it opens a dialogue, inviting philosophers and social theorists worldwide to further develop the idea and assess its relevance to our lived condition. To our knowledge, the term The Age of Will has not yet been employed in philosophical or political discourse to describe the defining character of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This volume thus offers an initial and exploratory contribution; a collaborative innovation aimed at illuminating our tense and unstable lifeworld through a new conceptual lens. It drives

forward the will—power and stimulates the politics of power. This philosophical fascination should be softened, and philosophers must understand the deeper meaning of the *philosophy of realism* and objectivity. In this shifting landscape, the task of philosophy is not to restore a lost order, but to critically engage with the new forms of will that shape contemporary life-forms that no longer emancipate, but obscure, dominate, and redirect the very conditions of possibility for ethical and political agency.

Concepts such as *the Age of Will*, *forms of will*, *collective will*, *reasonabilism*, *volia – desire*, *will for state (valstsgriba)*, *democratic “We”*, *alteronomy*, *re-humanized will*, *akrasia*, *techno-authoritarianism*, *Dark Enlightenment*, *Z-philosophy*, *Z-ideology*, *the Big Event*, *non-participation*, *hesitant bodies*, and *the phenomenologically perceived atmosphere* may prove valuable for interpreting the contours of the emerging new world.

### **The Age of Will and the Politics of Power**

The increasingly prevalent expression “*the politics of power*” signals a fundamental transformation in the hierarchy of human faculties. In this emerging paradigm, Will and action take precedence over memory, reflection, empathy, and reason. It reflects a growing dominance of force as the primary mode of political life—force concentrated and exercised not through deliberative thought or normative consensus, but through acts of volition. As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky remarked, “*Mir čerez silu*”—*peace through strength*—capturing the orientation toward power as the will to impose, not to reconcile. Similar rhetoric is echoed by other global leaders, including former U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President V. Putin. This discourse has become intelligible and persuasive to many heads of state, as it expresses a collective desire for strength, rearmament, and assertive sovereignty.

*The politics of power* today manifest as a mode of governance in which domination supersedes deliberation, emotion overshadows reason, and symbolic or actual violence substitutes for ethical and rationally political leadership. Will prevails over rational knowledge, and persuasive dialogue is increasingly replaced by imposition. In such a climate, reform is not only a matter of policy innovation—it requires a reorientation of thought, a new philosophical compass. The liberal democratic framework, particularly in its post-World War II Transatlantic form, has proven inadequate in withstanding the aggressive resurgence of power politics.

In many regions, diplomacy is giving way to force. Politics mainly is about the pursuit of influence, dominance, and the realization of ambitions. Calm rhetoric is supplanted by raw assertion. Power today is maintained not only through legal structures and rational principles of governance but also via ideological fragments, contemporary myths, emotionally charged symbols, and spectacles mediated through the digital sphere. As Guy Debord presciently observed in *The Society of the Spectacle*. that the spectacle is not merely a distortion of the visual world or a side effect of media technology—it is “a worldview that has been actualized, translated into the material realm... a worldview transformed into an objective force” (Debord 1994: 13).

Power is not negotiated between rational agents according to legal and moral norms, but instead emerges through the conflicts among economic, bureaucratic, political, military, artistic, and cultural actors—each with their own agendas and identities. Opponents are framed as enemies, beyond the possibility of simply being “wrong.” The world begins to resemble a mythic battlefield, a modern—day fairytale kingdom populated not by rational citizens, but by angels and demons—figures of absolute Will. As the Age of Will intensifies, confrontational logics replace coexistence, and force becomes the new normal.

In this context, *deterrence* has become a key concept. Its dialectical nature reveals that it means to appear unwilling to fight while being fully prepared for conflict. Such contradictions lie at the heart of the Age of Will, which operates through a logic of opposites—assertion and avoidance, visibility and concealment, aggression and passivity. The will expresses itself not only through assertive acts but also through withdrawal, evasion, and passive resistance.

The global ascendancy of will resonates with elements of Nietzschean thought, particularly his emphasis on *Will to Power*. However, today's situation bears little trace of Nietzsche's tragic idealism. There is no lingering hope for the advent of a spiritually elevated *Übermensch*, no echo of Zarathustra's joyful affirmation of life. Instead, we encounter a grim and simplified stage: robust men called to fight and die, vulnerable populations left to suffer, and opportunists who profit from war and centralize control. This is not a class struggle in the Marxian sense, but a multidimensional struggle for empowerment.

Tracing the origins of this dangerous release of willpower is no simple task. It may, in fact, be impossible—an emergent phenomenon arising from a convergence of political, economic, technological, and cultural processes. The world stage is increasingly saturated with risk, violence, irrationality, and unpredictable behavior. Despite occasional pauses, the momentum of this transformation remains unchecked. Promises of peace, such as former USA President Trump's proposed negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, collapse under the weight of power dynamics. Those in command within authoritarian regimes, particularly in Russia, exemplify the most extreme form of this new will: the unrestrained imposition of desire as a form of legitimacy.

The closest circumstances of the coming Age of Will include the COVID-19 pandemic starting in late 2019 and the war in Ukraine, started on February 24, 2022, and the “12 days” Iran–Israeli war, also adding about the continuation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. All of them have a global meaning: they are Big Events with a meaning for the historical development.

The era of the pandemic changed the lives of people dramatically (Analecta 2022: 3–347). These were not ordinary changes, but, as philosophers say, ontological with existential impact. COVID-19 changed the world picture from an understandable, mainly rational, science-based one in which many people feared: “science does not know”, “vaccines are not safe”, “state power uses coercive means”, “individual freedom is suppressed”, etc. Resisting the virus required a will—personal, collective, and state power's will. The will comes to the fore, not so much rationality, knowledge, or obedience.

Each person was forced to decide on her or his body and life, choosing to follow the official politically-medical line or resist it.

Since the 1990s, a conviction has developed in Europe that focusing on the economy and trade would ensure that war would never return. As a result, a culture of the "I" has emerged, where people concentrate on their individual chances of success. During the pandemic, strict government policies were implemented worldwide, yet approximately one-third of society in different states chose not to comply or remained as hesitant bodies.

However, what we need more urgently to combat the trends of increasing power, is a mentality of positive collective will as rationally responsible "we." The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis experience from which, unfortunately, many have drawn the wrong lesson. A new formula appears: to be secure—it means not to be involved ("pandemic lesson—it is better to avoid others!"). The Age of Will may also lead to an even deeper form of individualization of the part of society.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine raised the stakes and need for the positive, collective "we" even higher. It was not for nothing that the worries of COVID-19 stopped. It is a full-scale for life and death, with Ukrainians legitimately asserting the sovereignty of their country. War requires the maximization of willpower. It is *the policy of the Will*, expressed by other means.

### **Will for Freedom and the People's Goodwill: A Positive Expression of Contemporary Era**

This volume does not only reflect the threats posed by the Age of Will. The collective will can also be expressed in standing up for freedom, emancipation, and the will for state (valstsgriba).

The idea of the meaning "to have a will" is developed by Latvian ex-president, lawyer Egils Levits in his book "Valstsgriba. Will for state" (Levits 2019). What he published in his book resonated with the characterization of the premises of the Age of Will. The state does not exist if there are no people who *will it*, who stand for the state. Levits sees will as a dynamic force capable of transcending boundaries and expanding freedom. However, as will detaches from its origins and constraints, it becomes unpredictable, intensifying global insecurity. This development aligns with the secularization of the world, famously described by Max Weber as the *disenchantment of the world* (*Entzauberung der Welt*).

Levits links this condition to growing contingency—an idea central to Niklas Luhmann's theory, where everything could be otherwise. Such contingency underpins critique, which assumes alternative possibilities. Christian Schuldt, in *Erweiterung der Kontingenzzone* (2023), notes that this expanding sense of contingency fosters anxiety and insecurity. Consequently, Levits argues, people search for reference points to stabilize their increasingly autonomous will. Luhmann's concept of *trust in contingency* (*Kontingenzvertrauen*) is offered as a response, but whether such trust is viable remains an open and urgent question in the Age of Will.

A powerful historical illustration of the aesthetic, uplifting, and liberating dimensions of human experience is *the Baltic Way*, which took place on August 23, 1989—symbolically coinciding with the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. This event vividly manifested the collective will for freedom among the three Baltic nations: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It has since become a landmark in global history, exemplifying a non-violent, morally and aesthetically compelling form of human solidarity and the realization of political will, subsequently inspiring similar demonstrations elsewhere (*The Baltic Way* 2005).

Approximately six million people formed a continuous human chain across the three Baltic states, symbolizing their shared aspiration for independence. Despite the ongoing threat posed by Soviet rule at the time, participants took the considerable risk of public protest because their aim—freedom—was a value universally understood and embraced. The will expressed in this act was not driven by aggression or irrationality but was characterized by its liberatory and profoundly affirmative nature. Even those who were children at the time recall the event with vivid clarity, attesting to its lasting emotional and symbolic significance.

It is important to emphasize that this was a moment in which the individual will be harmonized entirely with the collective will of the community. Participants actively sought out locations along roads and through cities where the human chain might otherwise be incomplete, filling potential gaps to ensure the continuity of the demonstration. Every detail was thoughtfully considered—even the use of traditional folk belts or flower garlands to symbolically and physically maintain unity, reflecting the depth of communal engagement. People were drawn to this collective expression of what might be termed the *Will of 'We.'*

Such a will, when positive in nature, possesses not only moral force but also aesthetic and uplifting power. In prior discussions of two dominant forms of pleasure—the pleasure of power and the pleasure of consumption—I would now propose a third: *the pleasure of the sublime action and events*. This form of pleasure, rooted in shared meaning and transcendence, offers a potential counterbalance to the excesses of what has been described as the Age of Will. It points toward a form of will that is guided by reason, responsibility, and a sense of the sublime—one capable of garnering broad, even universal, assent.

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