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Tehničko i magijsko u Topuskom: implikacije izgradnje podatkovnog centra umjetne inteligencije u Republici Hrvatskoj

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Sažetak: Rad razmatra odnos suvremenoga tehnološkog razvoja i magijskog mišljenja, polazeći od simboličke poveznice između antičkog Panteona i projekta podatkovnog centra Pantheon AI u Topuskom. Posebno se razmatra umjetna inteligencija kao kvalitativno nov tehnološki iskorak te se analiziraju njezine društveno-političke implikacije i rizici povezani s masovnim nadzorom, profiliranjem građana i autonomnim naoružanjem. Razmatraju se energetski i ekološki zahtjevi podatkovnih centara te proturječja suvremenoga tehnokratskog poretka. Oslanjajući se na tehnokritičku misao Jacquesa Ellula, rad razvija tezu o neomagijskoj naravi moderne tehnike, u kojoj se konkretna ljudska dobra podređuju obećanjima budućeg napretka. Projekt Pantheon AI pritom se promatra kao primjer šireg procesa u kojemu tehnološki razvoj poprima obilježja samosvrhovitoga sustava, otvarajući pitanja nacionalnih interesa, ekološke održivosti i ljudskog dostojanstva.

Ključne riječi: umjetna inteligencija, Jacques Ellul, magija, tehnika, tehnokracija, podatkovni centri, Pantheon AI, Topusko

The technical and the magical in Topusko: implications of building an artificial intelligence data centre in the Republic of Croatia

Abstract: This article examines the relationship between contemporary technological development and magical thinking, taking as its starting point the symbolic connection between the ancient Pantheon and the Pantheon AI data centre project in Topusko. The article focuses in particular on artificial intelligence as a qualitatively new technological advance and analyses its socio-political implications and the risks associated with mass surveillance, the profiling of citizens and autonomous weapons. The article considers the energy and environmental demands of data centres and the contradictions of the contemporary technocratic order. Drawing on Jacques Ellul's technocritical thought, it develops the thesis

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that modern technique has a neo-magical character, whereby concrete human goods are subordinated to promises of future progress. The Pantheon AI project is thus considered as an example of a broader process in which technological development takes on the characteristics of a system that is an end in itself, raising questions of national interests, ecological sustainability and human dignity.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, Jacques Ellul, magic, technique, technocracy, data centres, Pantheon AI, Topusko

INTRODUCTION

Like many similar megaprojects, the Pantheon project bears a name that suggests a link between the modern relationship to technique and the ancient relationship to magic. The Pantheon was an ancient Roman temple dedicated to the worship of all the gods. Its name comes from the Greek *Pántheion*, meaning 'a temple dedicated to all the gods'.[1] These deities were believed to govern forces beyond human control, from wind, rain and sunshine to storms and the sea. Among other things, sacrifices were offered in the Pantheon so that those who made them might win the favour of the gods,[2] particularly of the gods whose favour they needed at the time. From a historical and anthropological perspective, this ancient habitus is often associated with the age of magic,[3] when people sought to master nature through a ritual and transactional relationship with the transcendent.

People offer a sacrifice in a time of drought, and nature, if the sacrifice is satisfactory, responds with rain. On this basis, some of the more perceptive theorists of technique have argued that magic is its precursor or primordial archetype. In Jacques Ellul's philosophy, technique is the totality of methods used to pursue predetermined ends efficiently. It is certain that the Republic of Croatia, too, will soon begin offering sacrifices to the new technique of our day, which we have named artificial intelligence.

With this in mind, the article considers the philosophical and socio-political premises of contemporary technological development, with particular attention to the relationship between technique and magical thinking. Starting from Ellul's critique of technique and drawing on Heidegger's analysis of the essence of modern technology, it examines the neo-magical dimension of contemporary technocracy. It then considers how that dimension manifests itself in the Pantheon AI data centre project in Topusko and its potential energy, environmental and socio-political implications.

[1] Terenzio, 1935.
[2] Siwicki, 2019, p. 289.
[3] Ellul, 1964, pp. 25–26.

TECHNOLOGICAL TEMPLES

Research on data centres to date has generally taken one of two approaches. The first regards them as essential infrastructure for digital and economic development, while the second critically examines their environmental, political-economic and social consequences.

Research by Siddik, Shehabi and Marston draws attention to the substantial energy and water footprints of data centres,[4] while Bresnihan and Brodie[5] question how digital infrastructure fits into existing patterns of natural resource exploitation. Using a data centre development in Sweden as an example, Sefyrin further shows how projects of this kind can conflict with local communities' interests, with questions of environmental sustainability often subordinated to efforts to legitimise the projects through discourse.[6] Instead of addressing the problems raised by local communities with concrete concessions, investors often seek to defuse objections by presenting the project as environmentally sustainable and socially beneficial, thereby making it more acceptable to the wider public.

In the Croatian context, Bilić, Vučković and Prug conclude that building digital infrastructure alone is insufficient for socio-economic development. They stress the importance of institutional capacity and the state's ability to turn infrastructure investment into concrete social and economic benefits.[7]

Alongside these environmental and economic considerations, AI data centres also warrant scrutiny for their role in building infrastructure for mass surveillance, profiling and population management. The British mathematician and philosopher John Lennox draws attention to this dimension in his analysis of artificial intelligence. Starting from Orwell's vision of a surveillance society, Lennox raises the concern that artificial intelligence, coupled with large-scale data collection and processing, might become an instrument for invading privacy and controlling human behaviour on an unprecedented scale.[8] His criticism focuses on the gradual normalisation of such a system. Through tacit cooperation between corporations and state

[4] Siddik et al., 2021, 064017.
[5] Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023, p. 361.
[6] Sefyrin, 2026, p. 3272.
[7] Bilić et al., 2025, p. 6.
[8] Lennox, 2024, p. 67.

authorities, technological instruments of control are presented as neutral means of improving convenience and efficiency in society and business.[9]

Although a data centre cannot automatically be equated with mass surveillance infrastructure, it is one of the key technical prerequisites for such infrastructure. It makes it possible to store, link and process vast amounts of data and to analyse those data using increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence systems. In combination with smart cameras, biometric identification systems, surveillance drones and digital records on citizens, such infrastructure could become part of an architecture for continuous population surveillance. It is therefore reasonable to ask how much energy and water the Topusko data centre will consume, what systems it will enable, who will operate them and whose legal and political oversight they will be subject to.

The development of data centre infrastructure is justified by promises of economic progress, security and efficiency. There is no doubt that powerful AI technology, like other technologies built on the growing network of data centres, considerably accelerates our business and other processes and makes them more efficient. Rather than approach this complex of technological and philosophical phenomena through what Heidegger criticised as the instrumental definition of technology[10] – the understanding of technology as a means to predetermined ends – this article examines technology's wider effects on reality.

THE BRAVE NEW MACHINE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The development of artificial intelligence is now widely portrayed as a further stage in an inevitable process of progress that will make life easier by providing unprecedentedly advanced tools to do the work people dislike. Artificial intelligence is thus often defined as something akin in essence to earlier major technological breakthroughs, such as the Industrial Revolution.[11] Such assessments overlook the possibility that artificial intelligence represents a qualitative change that goes beyond differences of scale.[12] Rather than simply increasing the speed, power and efficiency of existing inventions, it introduces something genuinely new

[9] Lennox, 2024, pp. 67–74.
[10] Heidegger, 1977, p. 5.
[11] Schwab, 2016. https://www.weforum.org/stories/technological-innovation/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond (accessed 4 November 2026).
[12] Goleš Babić, 2026. https://heretica.com.hr/luka-goles-babic-metafizika-umjetne-inteligencije-i-problem-suvremene-tehnike/ (accessed 4 November 2026).

and unprecedented. It is a new kind of information-processing machine that by its nature tends towards complete autonomy and seeks to rival humans in the rational capacities that distinguish them from other living beings.[13]

Artificial intelligence is an attempt to realise precisely what its name implies: *artificial intelligence,* an artificial pseudo-mind that is faster and more efficient than the human mind in technoscience, the field most highly valued in today's technologised world. Yet this machine lacks a human moral sense, a human soul and everything else of a metaphysical nature that makes us unique beings in this world. Our new, increasingly autonomous machines are inherently expansionist and seek to reach into ever more of our world. The mystery of the human being, by contrast, stems from human limitations. It is through those limits that human beings grow in their humanity,[14] a Christian truth called seriously into question in an age dominated by technique. In Heidegger's account, *Gestell* denotes the mode of revealing characteristic of modern technology, in which reality appears as standing-reserve (*Bestand*).[15] From this perspective, reality is taken to be a series of problems that sufficiently powerful technoscientific tools can solve.

It follows that, within the technical paradigm, limits come down to what currently available technique can achieve. Such a limit can and must, of course, be overcome by developing whatever is still lacking through continuous technical refinement. The drive of artificial intelligence towards unlimited expansion raises concrete socio-political problems that any state planning to develop this technology on its territory should bear in mind. They include the possibility, already mentioned, of establishing unprecedented systems of mass surveillance through a growing network of smart cameras and surveillance drones, the possibility of indiscriminately profiling citizens by processing vast quantities of collected data – a practice described in the literature under the concept of *surveillance capitalism*[16] – and the development of autonomous weapons, which is intrinsically problematic from the standpoint of the principles of the Catholic Church.[17]

[13] Goleš Babić, 2026. https://misao.hr/umjetna-inteligencija-kao-krvnik-phronesisa-zasto-ne-treba-koristiti-chatgpt/ (accessed 3 November 2026).
[14] Lav XIV., 2026, para. 118.
[15] Heidegger, 1977, pp. 17, 19.
[16] Zuboff, 2019, p. 15.
[17] Lav XIV., 2026, para. 198.

A public debate on whether the state should agree to host and service such machines in its own backyard cannot be complete or satisfactory unless it also examines the nature of artificial intelligence itself, which remains largely unclear but is decidedly expansionist and seeks to rival human beings.

HOW THE TEMPLES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DEVOURED THE 'GREEN AGENDA'

The artificial intelligence data centre announced for Topusko is one of many hubs in a vast transnational network, a kind of nervous system that embodies, powers and sustains artificial intelligence machines around the world. In the International Energy Agency's (IEA) Base Case, data centres will account for just under 3% of global electricity consumption in 2030,[18] while in Ireland they already consume around 20% of metered electricity.[19] Even at this relatively early stage in the construction of such an artificial intelligence nervous system, many have voiced clear opposition.[20] Among the reasons are actions that raise serious concerns from the standpoint of national and environmental interests, such as Google's legally questionable felling of 250,000 trees in Finland at a site designated for a new data centre.[21]

It is particularly striking that projects of this scale, destructive in many respects, are taking shape now. Only a few years ago, the entire world, including the ruling political elite, was bracing for a climate apocalypse that would supposedly befall us because of our neglect of the environment. As early as 2021, through its landmark seven-year budget and its *NextGenerationEU* recovery package, which runs until 2027, the European Union stipulated that as much as 30 per cent of all funds, or around €540 billion, had to be allocated to environmental and climate objectives.[22] Shortly before that, in 2019, the European Union had presented the *European Green Deal*, with the aim of making Europe the first climate-neutral

[18] International Energy Agency, 2025, p. 62.
[19] International Energy Agency, 2025, p. 37.
[20] Goleš Babić, 2026. https://misao.hr/o-projektu-pantheon-podatkovni-centri-kao-cvorista-vrlog-novog-svijeta/ (accessed 3 November 2026); Robinson, 2026. https://truthout.org/articles/the-fight-against-ai-data-centers-is-the-newest-frontier-of-global-class-warfare/ (accessed 3 November 2026).
[21] Bryant, 2026. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2026/oct/22/finland-google-felling-trees-datacentre (accessed 3 November 2026).
[22] Europska komisija, undated. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/horizontal-priorities/green-budgeting_en (accessed 3 November 2026).

continent by 2050.[23] Many strategic documents, regulations and funds were directed towards decarbonisation, reducing CO_2 emissions and preserving biodiversity.

This example makes the contradiction of the modern technocratic order fairly clear, at least to those who do not remain trapped in the Platonic cave of the news cycle, where the mind is constantly fixed on 'the issue of the day', whatever currently dominates the headlines. Only a mind so fragmented could accept imposing taxes, surtaxes and levies on citizens in 2021 and burdening smaller businesses with a web of excessive regulation in the name of 'protection against climate change', then asking those same citizens in 2026 to agree, almost blindly, to the construction of a new technopolis in their backyard that will devour as much electricity as a sizeable part of the country consumes. Examples of AI data centre construction already under way in parts of the world suggest that people will also be expected to accept having their homes taken under threat of legal action so that the land beneath them can be used to support this technological architecture.[24]

THE TECHNICAL AND THE MAGICAL, THE MODERN AND THE ANCIENT

Political priorities change, of course, and public rhetoric is adapted for propaganda purposes to suit the current interests of those close to the levers of power. Neither is new. What is striking is how much the political and technocratic establishment's apparently opposing modes of action in the 'green' years and in the present years of technological megalomania have in common. The positions promoted in 2026 and 2021 contradict one another in substance: the former advocate the large-scale construction of technological and architectural giants, whereas the latter sought to direct the entire political apparatus towards protecting the environment and slowing development. Yet both are based on the same schematic approach to reality. We call this approach neo-magical.

'Nothing belongs any longer to the realm of the gods or the supernatural. The individual who lives in the technical milieu knows very well that there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man

[23] Vijeće Europske unije, undated. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-green-deal/ (accessed 3 November 2026).
[24] Henry and Luibrand, 2026. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/georgia-power-ai-data-centers-eminent-domain/ (accessed 3 November 2026).

cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself.'[25]

With these words, the French critic of technique Jacques Ellul describes the modern relationship to technique. According to Ellul, in the modern age technique gradually ceases to be a tool for pursuing predetermined ends and becomes an abstract idol, an end in itself to which even very real, immediate human welfare is subordinated. People who thought in magical terms offered sacrifices to appease the gods and secure a desired material outcome: relief from drought, the calming of a storm, fertile land or victory in war. Modern people, although they have technoscientific means beyond anything the ancient world could have conceived, also adopt a transactional relationship with reality. They give up concrete goods in the present in exchange for a promise of future good: material prosperity, freedom from scarcity, an environmentally sustainable future, or even a world in which artificial intelligence takes on the burden of human labour, allowing people to live with fewer work obligations and greater personal autonomy.

Both cases involve the expectation of a future good that is supposed to arise from establishing the right relationship with certain forces, or from correctly carrying out prescribed magical procedures in the past and technical procedures today. Both approaches are unfalsifiable and view reality as a series of problems to be solved. The magical and technical approaches differ in the means by which they seek a solution. Whereas people once believed in the efficacy of influencing divine forces through ritual, today they believe that technical intervention in natural and social processes has virtually unlimited potential.

Both approaches are largely unfalsifiable because failure to achieve the desired end will be understood as a consequence of insufficient command of magic in one case and inadequate application of technique in the other, rather than as a failure of the approach itself. In other words, magic and technique as such are exempt from criticism. Criticism is directed instead at their incorrect use, their insufficient application or the failure to use some other, more effective subset of technomagical methods.

In his anthropological work, Marcel Mauss treats magic as a social phenomenon whose efficacy must be understood in the context of a community's wider prevailing beliefs.[26] In his

[25] Ellul, 1964, p. 143.
[26] Mauss, 1972, p. 120.

analysis, magical practice rests on individual action as well as on social recognition of the magician's authority and collective acceptance of the efficacy of ritual procedures. This perspective deepens the analogy between magical and technical thinking: in both cases, action takes place within a system of collectively accepted ideas about the possibility of mastering reality.

Ellul points out that historically the development of magical proto-techniques was generally localised, remaining relatively static and tied to particular tribes.[27] Modern technique, by contrast, requires people to subordinate themselves ever more to its expansionist needs while presenting itself as the means of their ultimate liberation. This creates a paradox in which people sacrifice concrete goods to enable the development of a system that promises one day to free them from those very sacrifices. The expanding bureaucracy built on green policies, which should itself be understood as a form of technique, and the growing infrastructure of technological megalomania are two different manifestations of a wider technical order. Their immediate aims and means differ, but both follow the same logic: the present is ritually, almost magically, subordinated to a projected, unfalsifiable future, to so-called Progress, and concrete human goods are readily sacrificed to bring it about.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL TEMPLE IN TOPUSKO

The Republic of Croatia plans to build its own Pantheon in Topusko as part of the pointedly named Pantheon AI project. According to the project lead, once fully operational, the Pantheon data centre in Topusko would demand an annual sacrifice of around 5 TWh of electricity, some 56% more than Zagreb's annual consumption and more than a quarter of total electricity consumption in the Republic of Croatia.[28]

As for water, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Green Transition warns in its decision that operating the campus will require 'very substantial quantities of water'.[29] The scale of potential demand can be gauged from Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory data. In 2023, US data centres directly consumed an average of just over 0.36 litres of water per kilowatt-hour of electricity used by IT equipment. An increase to 0.45–0.48 L/kWh is

[27] Ellul, 1964, p. 26.
[28] HRT, 2026. https://vijesti.hrt.hr/gospodarstvo/gudelj-zbog-pantheona-struja-gradanima-nece-poskupjeti-12949963 (accessed 17 November 2026).
[29] Ministarstvo zaštite okoliša i zelene tranzicije, 2026, p. 2.

projected by 2028.[30] Applying these figures to Pantheon's planned annual electricity consumption of approximately 5 TWh and allowing for the difference between the centre's total electricity consumption and that of its IT equipment yields an estimate of 1.3 to 2.1 million m³ of water per year. Evaporative cooling could further increase water demand. Actual consumption, which could realistically be several times higher than this estimate, will therefore depend on the cooling technology ultimately selected. The project would thus put substantial pressure on local water resources, and its final water requirements have yet to be established with precision.

Beyond construction of the data centre itself, the project would entail substantial changes to land use and the landscape in Sisak-Moslavina County and beyond. These include building a substation, solar power plants and battery storage facilities, installing approximately 280 kilometres of new transmission lines and rerouting part of an existing county road.[31]

The stated reasons for the undertaking include creating jobs and making Croatia more competitive in the global market. Given that one of the long-term goals of every data centre is to automate its operations and make them as autonomous as possible, it remains unclear how many jobs would be created. Here two promises conflict. Around the world, artificial intelligence is presented as a technology that is supposed to free people from the burden of work, while the construction of the Topusko data centre is justified by the promise of new jobs.

The real reasons for accepting the development are more likely to lie in the extraordinary technology of artificial intelligence described above and in its promises and threats, which the Republic of Croatia appears unable to resist. One of the key questions that should rationally be answered before agreeing to place even a centimetre of Croatian land at the service of foreign supranational corporations is exactly what purposes artificial intelligence will serve here. What is it for, and will its uses include geostrategic purposes, such as military, intelligence or security applications, or the intrinsically problematic purposes mentioned earlier, such as the indiscriminate collection and processing of citizens' sensitive data? Given that the project is led by nominally private US interests, the Republic of Croatia must

[30] Shehabi et al., 2024, p. 48.
[31] Odluka o izmjeni Odluke o izradi V. izmjena i dopuna Prostornog plana Sisačko-moslavačke županije, *Službeni glasnik Sisačko-moslavačke županije*, no. 7/2026; HRT, 2026. https://vijesti.hrt.hr/gospodarstvo/gudelj-zbog-pantheona-struja-gradanima-nece-poskupjeti-12949963 (accessed 17 November 2026).

establish and clearly articulate national criteria before agreeing to develop a technology as powerful and still as poorly understood as artificial intelligence.

CONCLUSION

In his novel *Till We Have Faces*, C. S. Lewis depicts the well-known scene in which the protagonist's hardened disposition finally breaks before the face of the Lord, and she has the momentous realisation that all her questions, uncertainties and doubts fall away before Him.[32] The questions and uncertainties of modern people fall away in much the same way, except that they do so before the promises of the abstract idol of technique instead of before transcendence. More seriously still, we are trying to give our new idol an artificially created pseudo-mind to which we increasingly delegate the very activities that until recently made human beings unique in this world, from moral judgement[33] to communication, decision-making and forming interpersonal relationships.[34]

The magical nature of such promises is apparent in the way even our basic logic falls away before them, along with our questions. Thus, within just a few years, the same supranational political circles can call for citizens' energy consumption to be restricted through excessive regulation in the name of environmental objectives, and then call for staggering amounts of that same energy, along with other natural resources, to be offered on the altar of technological development, the magical pseudo-deity of our age.

In the case of the Pantheon project in Topusko, this logic is apparent in the scale of planned electricity and water consumption, the extent of the land-use and infrastructure changes required and the project's still insufficiently understood social and geopolitical implications. Its immediate economic viability and potential to create jobs must be considered alongside the long-term benefits and costs for the local community and Croatian society as a whole. It is particularly important to establish the conditions under which this infrastructure will be developed, who will oversee its use and management, and how national interests, the environment and citizens' rights will be protected.

[32] Lewis, 2012, p. 143.
[33] Vallor, 2015, pp. 107–109.
[34] Goleš Babić, 2026. https://misao.hr/umjetna-inteligencija-kao-krvnik-phronesisa-zasto-ne-treba-koristiti-chatgpt/ (accessed 3 November 2026).

The debate over the Pantheon project shows how far Croatian society can today make independent judgements about its own interests and set limits on technological development. Technological progress alone cannot justify giving up natural resources, national sovereignty and concrete human goods, especially when its actual purpose and long-term consequences remain unclear. Many contemporary thinkers have warned that artificial intelligence remains poorly understood and is increasingly used for morally questionable purposes such as mass surveillance, indiscriminate profiling and development of autonomous weapons. In light of these warnings, the construction of data centres that will enable the development and use of this technology cannot be regarded as simply another routine investment project.

Technique must once again become a means of human action. It has become an end that imposes itself and calls for human submission. Ultimately, human greatness comes from recognising which limits must be respected. The capacity to use tools and machines to abolish every limit and conquer or turn every inch of the world into a resource cannot confer that greatness.

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