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FUTURE(S) VISIONS

20
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Club
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Introduction

We cannot predict the future. But we can teach others how to make sense of what they see – and help them create their own. By introducing people to various theories and methods of futures thinking, we aim to provide the basics of the field and encourage readers to start working with tools that can help them integrate futures thinking into their jobs and everyday lives. But why now? We argue that in today's rapidly evolving world – characterized by technological advancement, global interconnectedness, and unprecedented challenges – the ability to think about and plan for the future has become more crucial than ever. Teaching the fundamentals of futures thinking to both current and aspiring leaders is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it equips them with tools to navigate uncertainty and make informed decisions in complex and dynamic environments. Secondly, it fosters a proactive mindset, enabling leaders to anticipate trends, identify opportunities, and mitigate risks before they materialize. Additionally, futures thinking encourages innovation and adaptability, both vital for sustaining competitive advantage and driving progress. By integrating futures thinking into leadership development, we can en-

sure that leaders are better prepared to address tomorrow's challenges and contribute to a more resilient and prosperous future for all. In this publication, we aim to capture and carry forward our discussions and the ideas sparked through these conversations. The rapid learning progress made during the two-day workshop with Club Alpbach Czechia & Slovakia, together with the deep reflections of our participants, inspired us to continue developing the program and fostering dialogue across companies and industries. The essays are divided into four chapters, which we believe you will enjoy exploring: *Futures for the Youth*, *Future of Growth*, *Environmental Futures*, and *Futures Thinking*. We invite you to engage with these ideas and reflect on how they might shape your everyday life. To support this, we have also included comments and introductory methods you can try yourself. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and learning what these essays have sparked in you. Please let us know. And if you are interested in organizing your own Futures Thinking workshop, feel free to reach out.

Pavλίνα & Lukas

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FUTURES FOR THE YOUTH

Youth is often treated as a prediction problem: what they will buy, believe, fear, or fix. But young people are not just “the future” – they are a living signal of what the future is already doing to us. These three essays approach youth as both mirror and map: a reflection of today’s pressures and a guide to the systems we are quietly building.

We continue debating what young people will become while ignoring what the world around them is becoming. AI, climate volatility, mental health pressures, and attention economics are not merely contexts – they are formative forces. As you read these essays, ask yourself: how are they already shaping me?

Pavčina Louženská

The Taste Economy: When Taste Becomes Capital

Pavčina Louženská

As the internet enters its third decade, our understanding of what we call taste has quietly transformed alongside it. Not because society has suddenly learned to better distinguish beauty, quality, or meaning, but because algorithms have turned personal preferences into readable and tradable signals. Taste has become capital – something that can be displayed, measured, optimized, and converted into attention.

In an environment where content is cheap and produced faster than thought itself, the ability to create is no longer a competitive advantage. Nearly anyone can do so today. What matters instead is the ability to choose, to filter, and to say: this deserves my attention, while that does not. The Taste Economy describes precisely this shift. It is no longer about what we produce, but about what we consider worthy of interest – and how consistently we are able to stand behind those choices.

Taste was once a personal matter, often shaped by class, education, or cultural background. Today, it has become a strategy. For individuals,

it is a way not to disappear into the noise. For brands, it is a tool for building identity in an environment where everything increasingly looks the same. And this similarity is key. A glance at cafés, hotels, or coworking spaces across cities and continents reveals the pattern: minimalism, plants, muted colors, neon signs carrying universally relatable messages. Everything appears as a personal choice, yet in reality it reflects an aesthetic optimized for the feed.

Journalist Kyle Chayka described this phenomenon as *AirSpace* – environments that promise authenticity while producing interchangeability. Instagram and other platforms have effectively created a manual for what “good taste” should look like, while simultaneously establishing the expectation that this taste represents the norm.

Algorithms did not enter our lives as dictators, but as assistants. They were meant to show us what we might like. The problem is that the same selections began appearing to millions of people at once. Personalization gradually turned into synchroniza-

tion. Taste stopped emerging from individual experience and instead followed what had already proven successful elsewhere. What generated engagement increasingly came to be perceived as quality.

Cultural critic Mark Fisher argued that we have lost our ability to grasp the present because we live in the continuous aftershock of past trends. In such a world, taste no longer has time to mature. It constantly reacts, adapts, and waits for the next signal marked as relevant by the algorithm. The result is a culture in which individuality appears self-evident but is, in fact, carefully pre-digested.

Taste thus becomes a commodity. Every like, every share, and every recommendation functions as a microtransaction of attention. What we consider “good” is no longer merely a personal judgment, but a public position. And the clearer that position becomes, the greater its value.

In an overwhelming abundance of content, it is impossible to follow everything – so we follow those whose choices we trust.

Magazines once served as curators of taste, offering frameworks, context, and narrative. Today, that role is increasingly assumed by individuals and brands attempting to operate as media entities of their own. The defining question of the future may therefore no longer be who the next MrBeast will be, but who the next Tina Brown is – not the person capable of producing the most content, but the one able to sustain a coherent and meaningful sense of taste over time.

The Taste Economy is therefore not only about aesthetics or trends. It is about the power to decide what deserves our attention in an environment constantly pulling us elsewhere. And perhaps this is where the true competitive advantage of the future lies – not in data, nor in technology, but in the ability to maintain one’s own compass in a world that continuously attempts to reset it. ■

Europe’s Divided Generation

Ester Žitňanská | Strategy Consultant, Raiffeisenbank

Today, European security no longer concerns only external threats such as armed conflicts, economic instability, or crises linked to climate change. It increasingly depends on the stability and cohesion of society itself – or on their absence – particularly when it comes to shared values, social attitudes, and political engagement. Rapid social transformations driven by global phenomena such as digitalization, globalization, and multiculturalism continuously generate both novelty and uncertainty. We fear the unknown and face unprecedented challenges, anxieties, and insecurities. In search of clarity and reassurance, many people look for answers wherever they can find them.

Too often, however, those answers are found in the wrong places. Populist politicians, marketers, and movements across the world offer seemingly simple solutions: they validate frustration, identify scapegoats, and propose radical measures. This frequently takes the form of calls for a return to traditionalism, rejection of progressive values, hostility toward minorities, and more recently the violent radicalization of young men within online “manosphere” environments. What some consider unacceptable, others perceive as

a justified response to the threats and uncertainties of contemporary life.

For younger generations – particularly Generation Z and Generation Alpha – these developments are especially significant. They are still forming their values, opinions, and sense of belonging. One of the most powerful forces shaping this process is social media, which increasingly serves as their primary source of information. This poses a substantial risk: from an early age, young people are continuously exposed to polarizing, radicalizing, and hateful content long before they are capable of critically evaluating it. As a result, today’s youth are exceptionally vulnerable and may internalize such attitudes subconsciously, without fully understanding their consequences. This is particularly true for young boys and men, who are still developing their identities while navigating rigid expectations surrounding masculinity – often in its toxic forms.

Over the past decade, Europe has witnessed a significant rise in extremism across politics, political rhetoric, and the public sphere. Such ideologies gradually erode tolerance and mutual understanding, creating an environment in which young people grow

up perceiving extremist behavior as normal. A generation that becomes desensitized or directly radicalized represents a serious and multidimensional risk to Europe's future security.

Social Media and Youth Radicalization

Today's youth are, to a large extent, raised by the internet and social media. These platforms shape their identities, preferences, interests, and values from early childhood. Social media algorithms reward emotionally charged and confrontational content, frequently trapping young users within algorithmically curated echo chambers. Complex social debates are reduced online to a simple narrative of “us versus them.” No longer limited to conflicts between elites and the public, nearly every difference becomes a target – religion, origin, gender, lifestyle, or personal choices.

For adolescents searching for certainty and belonging, such polarization can be appealing precisely because of its simplicity – yet it comes at the cost of tolerance, nuance, and the ability to coexist.

In times of uncertainty, political actors often reject progressive values and instead promote rigid systems of belief that may appear attractive to young people seeking stability. Calls for a return to “traditional values” promise certainty and identity, frequently defined in opposition to liberal and progressive norms. While this may partly reflect a legitimate desire for cultural continuity, it also conceals a more troubling process

of radicalization. For many young men, distancing themselves from liberalism increasingly entails rejecting feminism, gender equality, and pluralism altogether. What appears to be an innocent “return to tradition” can thus become an entry point into reactionary politics.

The Manosphere: From Online Subculture to Societal Risk

From an early age, boys are confronted with expectations that discourage emotional expression and vulnerability, urging them instead to be strong, dominant, and successful. When they feel misunderstood and lack safe spaces in which to express vulnerability, they may easily fall into the trap of the manosphere. This phenomenon illustrates how personal insecurity, combined with unrestricted access to digital environments, can radicalize vulnerable young individuals.

The manosphere consists of online forums, influencers, and communities built around narratives of male victimhood, antifeminism, and authoritarian masculinity. Figures such as the discredited Andrew Tate have become role models for many European teenagers, presenting misogyny and contempt for democratic values as signs of strength.

Manosphere influencers – in reality closer to opportunistic marketers than mentors – channel frustration toward women. They claim that women are both inferior and unfairly privileged at the expense of men. In part, this may reflect an adjustment to a changing social reality in



It's so important to understand the tension between commercial benefits and long-term consequences.

which success is no longer guaranteed by traditional privilege alone but increasingly depends on skills, competence, and adaptability. Many men are encountering, perhaps for the first time, a world in which historical advantages no longer ensure success – and where more capable women may surpass them.

This frustration often turns into anger, which is then projected outward and passed on to young, easily impressionable boys. Evidence suggests that these narratives resonate. A recent study by King's College London found that men and women from Generation Z are more divided on questions of gender equality than any previous generation: 57% of young men believe that the advancement of women's rights has gone too far and now discriminates against men, compared to 36% of women (King's College London, 2025).

For young men, the manosphere offers identity and meaning; for women, it creates an increasingly hostile environment – both online and offline. At the societal level, it undermines gender equality, deepens resentment, and fosters extremist attitudes that may ultimately escalate into violence.

Implications for European Security

Social fragmentation and youth radicalization carry profound consequences for European security. Polarization weakens social trust, undermines democratic institutions, and fuels hostility between genders and generations from an early age. At the political level, it contributes to

the rise of illiberal movements that threaten both national cohesion and the stability of the European Union itself. Radicalized youth may also become targets for extremist groups, including those promoting far-right or violent agendas. These developments are not merely cultural shifts. They represent tangible societal vulnerabilities that threaten security, civil liberties, the rule of law, and ultimately democracy itself. ■



Algorithms systematically reward extremity, turning uncertainty into identity — and identity into tribe. From a trend forecasting perspective, the greatest risk lies in the fact that radicalization is no longer an exception at the margins but is becoming a normalized part of online socialization.

Further reading



Pavčina Louženská: Ahoj vol. 52: První Máj, lásky čas. Ale jen pro někoho (2023, pavlinaspeaks.substack.com)



Amia Srinivasan: The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century (2021)

Potential vs Practice: Children in a Digital System

Matyáš Michel | Co-founder of Gamifit and Cognivib

We live in a paradox. Digital products today carry genuine potential to improve children's learning, mental health, and physical activity – yet the outcomes we actually observe often point in the opposite direction: greater distraction at school, fragmented attention at home, less sleep, and less time spent outdoors. The gap between potential and practice is not a moral story about “good” or “bad” technologies. Nor is it a question of whether we should have more or fewer technologies. It is a story about systems – about default settings, meaning what products and institutions do automatically, and about distribution, which determines who has access to high-quality uses of technology.

This paradox takes many forms. The internet promises universal connection, yet often confines children within digital bubbles shaped by algorithms and group chats, thereby contributing – at least in part – to the current mental health crisis. At the same time, technologies are increasingly – though not necessarily causally – associated with sleep problems and declining physical fitness

among children, while an endless number of applications promise to solve precisely these issues. The paradox of “potential versus practice” thus repeats itself across multiple domains. Nowhere, however, is this gap more visible than in schools.

On the one hand, AI tutors, adaptive practice tools, spaced-repetition systems, and well-designed augmented reality technologies can significantly expand learning opportunities, personalize education for individual students, and save teachers time. On the other hand, public education systems struggle with the slow adoption of these tools, while smartphones and social media continue to disrupt children's attention.

Today, 99% of children aged 9 to 15 have access to at least one digital device, and 94% own a mobile phone. Research suggests that even the mere presence of a phone during work reduces concentration – a finding consistent with teachers' experiences worldwide. Experiments also show that banning phones in schools improves students' attention. The benefits, however, are uneven:

lower-performing students gain the most, while high-performing students show little change.

The pandemic and the rapid rise of AI have accelerated the introduction of technology into schools, yet outdated institutional systems continue to hinder large-scale implementation. Although, for example, 60% of teachers in the United States report using AI in their work, disruptions to traditional school practices – from homework to assessment – have triggered a new wave of skepticism. The central dilemma therefore lies in minimizing technological risks in the classroom while simultaneously harnessing their potential to improve outcomes. How successfully schools manage this balance is, unfortunately, strongly shaped by their financial capacity.

Wealthier and elite schools move forward with the latest tools, while public schools lag behind due to limited resources. According to a UK survey conducted in 2025, private schools were three times more likely than state schools to have an institutional AI strategy in place (27% compared to 9%) and more than twice as likely to provide formal AI training for teachers (45% compared to 21%). This gap is likely to widen further: public schools will increasingly need to restrict technology use or introduce strict safeguards against AI misuse, while private schools continue implementing innovations that improve outcomes – particularly for already high-performing students. As a result, children will become divided not only by knowledge but also by digital literacy, further deepening social inequality.

According to my analysis, the main drivers shaping this development are the default settings of digital technologies and access to them. Although both factors are influenced by complex mechanisms, stepping back from these complexities allows us to distinguish four possible future scenarios depending on how these two elements interact.

This analysis suggests that without a fundamental shift in how we think about technology itself – particularly its default settings – both its use and its positive impacts will remain closely tied to economic capital and social position. In other words, if we maintain today's attention-maximizing technological model, the benefits of artificial intelligence in education, health, and social life will remain unevenly distributed.

Regulatory frameworks such as the Digital Services Act propose options like non-profiled feeds based on user consent. Yet such versions are unlikely to see widespread adoption, as they undermine the very logic of the feed and reduce user experience. Similarly, many countries are developing national strategies for AI in education but often lack mechanisms to ensure real implementation. Discussions quickly return to questions of funding, revealing that the relationship between technological defaults and access to technology is less independent than the four-quadrant model suggests. The most probable outcome, therefore, is that technology will continue to function as a force that deepens inequality. ■



Wonderful to see this use of the 2x2 matrix scenario approach!

Image 1:
Scenarios for future developments on 'Children
in the Digital World', designed by Matyáš

Closed Utopias

(child-centered design,
privileged access only)

Independent, high-performing public schools implement AI tutors, new assessment models, and secure devices. Students receive personalized feedback, teachers gain time, and outcomes improve. Elsewhere, the status quo persists under increased regulation and restrictions.

Fragmented Attention

(attention-maximizing design,
privileged access only)

Wealthy families purchase “calm technologies” and personal AI coaching, while most children grow up in an environment saturated with notifications. Digital literacy becomes a luxury good. Signals include the growth of consumer digital well-being solutions and public policies focused on bans rather than new learning models.

Quiet Society

(child-centered design,
broad adoption)

Governments introduce phone-free classrooms, thoughtful AI integration, teacher training programs, and national AI infrastructures with privacy protections. Screen time shifts from feeds toward adaptive learning, with early improvements visible particularly in schools serving lower socioeconomic communities. Signals include national AI education guidelines, public procurement of AI tools, and reduced teacher overload.

Casino for Children

(attention-maximizing design,
broad adoption)

Cheap devices, open feeds, and weak regulation dominate. Platform use increases even during school hours. AI is used primarily as a shortcut for homework. Educational outcomes stagnate while inequalities grow. Signals include rising classroom distraction, increased cheating, and unchanged assessment systems.



Do we need
greater
technological
neutrality in
our regulatory
system?

It is crucial to recognize that this issue concerns not only schools or children. The foundational systems we are establishing today will shape the future structure of society as a whole. This raises a broader question: will transferring cognitive effort to artificial intelligence affect our minds in ways comparable to how mechanization transformed the relationship between human bodies and physical labor?

The answer does not lie in merely adjusting existing default settings, but in creating new ones altogether. Regulators understandably seek to compel major technology companies to change their behavior; however, incentives within the system often fail to function as intended, and any new rule can either be circumvented or undermine the very principle of the product it aims to regulate.

Our only real option is to look further ahead and examine how current trends will shape the future. How will the attention economy influence the cognitive abilities of the next generation? How will differences in educational quality reshape labor markets? The recurring cycle of innovation – solving existing problems while creating new ones – shows that these challenges cannot be addressed through incremental fixes to past systems. Instead, we must create conditions for the emergence of new technologies capable of balancing, resetting, reversing, or offering genuine alternatives to today's paradoxes. ■



Technology is introducing a new layer of inequality into society. Just as disparities exist in housing or healthcare, differences will increasingly emerge in the quality of cognitive environments. This quality is becoming a new form of luxury — silence, notification-free routines, healthy digital habits, ad-free internet experiences, and adults capable of setting meaningful boundaries that reflect the pace of technological change. Only some families and schools will have the capacity to create this protective layer for children; others will grow up in a state of permanent attention fragmentation.

Further reading



Creation Generation, examining how platforms such as Roblox foster children's imagination, teamwork, and entrepreneurial skills.



Derek Thompson:
Monks in the Casino (2025,
derekthompson.org)

Innovation adoption curve

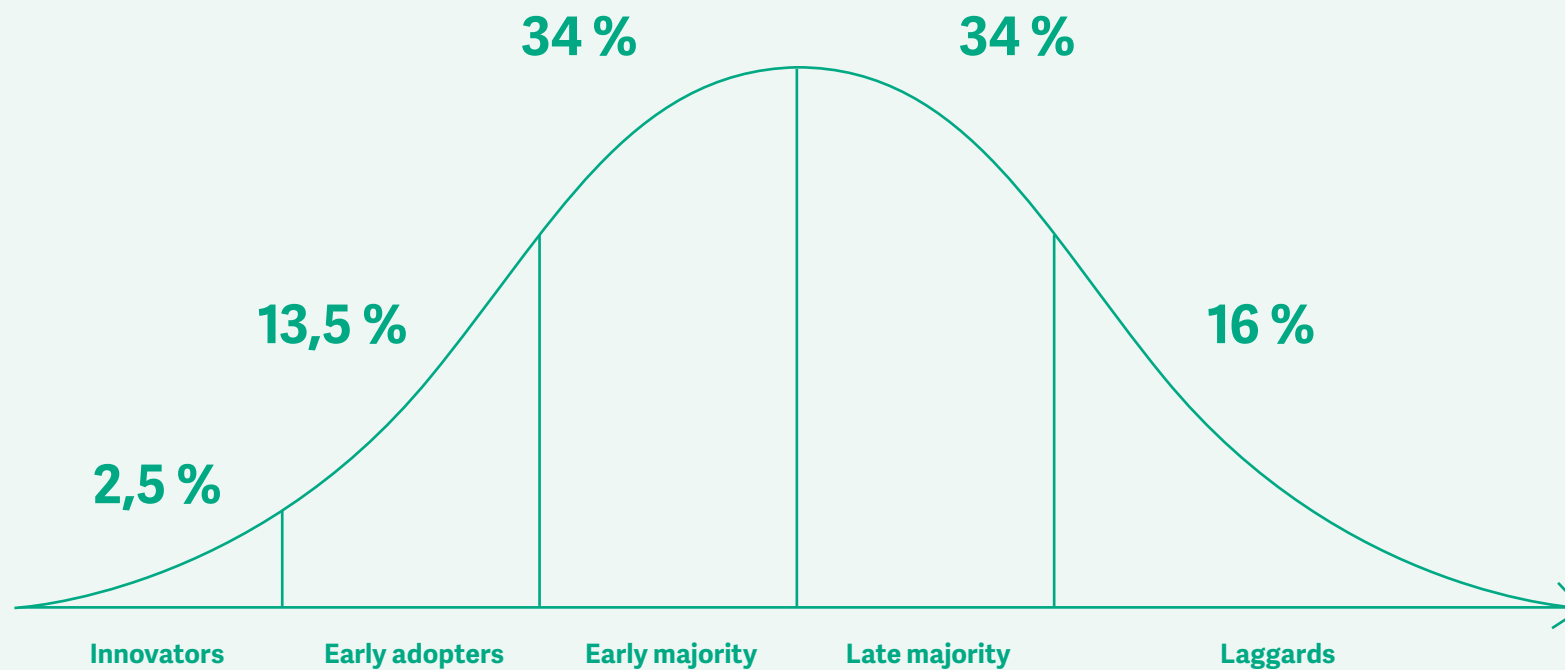
Diffusion of Innovations is a theory explaining how new ideas, technologies, or practices spread through social systems over time. Popularized by Everett Rogers in his 1962 book, it explains why some innovations gain traction while others fail.

Adoption typically follows an S-shaped curve: a small group adopts first, uptake accelerates as proof and trust grow, and finally slows as the remaining non-users become harder to convince.



Quest for the reader:

Choose one innovation (idea, tool, or practice) you want to spread. How could you intentionally move it from innovators to early adopters – and then into the early majority – within your own context (team, community, or market)?



Adopters follow a bell curve distribution:

Innovators (2.5%)
Risk-takers who try first.

Early adopters (13.5%)
Opinion leaders.

Early majority (34%)
Deliberate but open.

Late majority (34%)
Skeptical, adopt under pressure.

Laggards (16%)
Traditionalists, last to adopt.

FUTURE OF GROWTH

For generations, growth was a simple equation: more resources, more production, more consumption. But the assumptions underpinning that formula – cheap energy, stable climates, predictable supply chains – are unraveling. What happens when the engine of progress starts to sputter, not because of a lack of ambition, but because the world itself has changed?

Yet this is not necessarily a story of decline. It is one of reinvention. The future of growth will be shaped by those who recognize that constraints are not barriers, but new parameters for innovation. From circular economies to climate-adaptive infrastructure, the next chapter requires us to ask: what thrives when the old rules no longer apply? The challenge is immense, but so is the opportunity. The question is not whether we can grow, but *how* – and *who* will lead the way.

Lukas Zumbrunn

AI's Future on a Scale of Uncertainty

David Jokeš | Product Designer at Česká spořitelna

The world has become increasingly complex in recent years. Over the past fifteen years, the complexity of many issues shaping our lives has grown to such an extent that even understanding their full scope is no longer easy for most people – including the general public. I am no exception. Navigating this complexity and forming informed opinions is becoming ever more demanding. That is why it is useful to rely on a conceptual framework that helps us orient ourselves without reducing decisions to a simple coin toss.

For me, the answer lies in thinking in terms of scales. Almost any issue – and its consequences – can be understood as movement between two opposing poles. Take migration as an example. At one end of the scale lies the complete rejection of migration, which would very likely lead to the collapse of healthcare systems and other services dependent on foreign labor. At the opposite end stands absolute openness without control mechanisms, which may result in rising crime and radicalization across society.

When making decisions with long-term consequences, a scale becomes a valuable tool. We rarely know which

extreme will ultimately prevail, and reality is almost never a 100:0 outcome. But when we find ourselves somewhere around equilibrium, we can use available signals to estimate which direction the balance is beginning to shift. In other words, while we may once have leaned slightly toward openness, today we may be moving – by the same small fraction – toward restriction. Does that make sense?

The same principle can be applied when thinking about climate change, the development of AI, or Europe's security situation. Even the smallest movement along a scale can help us decide which direction to take – or which direction we *should* take.

And this brings me to the central topic of this text: artificial intelligence.

AI and the Future

Since the announcement of ChatGPT, I have been thinking about what artificial intelligence might look like in ten or twenty years – and how it will reshape our society. Will it improve social balance? Slightly more likely not. Will we become happier as a society? Again, slightly more likely not.

What interests me most are its societal consequences. Not long ago, social media emerged with the promise of connecting people and dissolving boundaries. No one was supposed to feel alone anymore. Yet today, seventeen years after Facebook's widespread adoption, we are lonelier than ever. Depression has reached unprecedented levels, antidepressant consumption continues to rise, and therapy has become a basic necessity of life in Western societies.

This raises an unavoidable question: what impact will AI have on social development? Have we learned enough from the consequences of social media to manage the coming wave of AI? Slightly more likely not.

This text is not meant as an outlet for pessimism. Instead, I would like to outline several reflections that, in my view, remain overlooked in discussions about AI adoption.

1) Which AI Will "Win" – and How Will We Know?

The race to develop AI has become enormous. Meta is spending tens of billions on recruiting AI engineers, Elon Musk has assembled Grok by whatever means necessary, OpenAI currently leads, and Google is attempting to integrate Gemini into as many devices as possible. Models are constantly benchmarked in IQ tests, programming, medicine, and law, competing for higher scores.

Yet I increasingly feel that rankings themselves may not matter much.

I have noticed that the phrase "Google it" has almost overnight been replaced by "ask Chat." This suggests a situation reminiscent of the VHS versus Beta-max battle. Grok may be technically superior, just as Betamax once was, but ChatGPT – much like VHS – is winning the narrative. And today, narrative is what truly matters.

2) AI's Impact on Learning, Thinking, and Public Discourse

In the past, private tutors and scholars played a crucial societal role. Today, universities largely fulfill that function – and in the future, artificial intelligence may take it over.

The challenge is that AI models are largely the same for everyone. Whether an American or a European asks ChatGPT a question, the response will be nearly identical. If AI assistants were used universally – and we may not be far from that reality – it would resemble a world in which everyone learns from the same private teacher or coach.

This raises an important question: could this lead to a decline in societal diversity? Will we learn how to communicate, process trauma, or search for meaning in increasingly similar, machine-like ways?

The Future

Much has been written about the commoditization of AI – a future in which users no longer care which system they use, leaving companies without meaningful differentiation.

I do not believe this will happen. Even if AI eventually becomes a commodity, companies will maintain distinction through marketing, narrative, first-mover advantage, and above all, context.

Even if AI ultimately proves less revolutionary than its evangelists claim, it will almost certainly change how we interact with technology. And interaction requires context – vast amounts of context. For this reason, I believe the future development of AI will not primarily lie in improving benchmark scores in medicine or law, but in expanding memory and personalizing interactions based on user data. Such progress might reduce behavioral uniformity. At the same time, however, it could lead to even greater social isolation – and ultimately to rising dissatisfaction with life, trends already reflected in increasing antidepressant use.

Or perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps I am overly pessimistic. Maybe none of this will happen. Maybe I will be pleasantly surprised. As an incurable optimist, I would say there is a slightly greater chance that we will handle this transition better than before.

And perhaps – who knows – precisely because of AI. ■



Technologies such as AI introduce a gradual privatization of reality: everyone may soon have their own coach, their own interface, and their own explanation of the world. As a result, shared language – and even shared facts – may become increasingly difficult to sustain.

This is why Lukas and I work with tools such as the Futures Wheel: they allow us to look beyond immediate technological gains and consider second-order effects – not only productivity improvements, but also the long-term impact on relationships, trust, and social cohesion.

Further listening



Ezra Klein a Zadie Smith: On populists, frauds and flip phones (2024)



80 000 Hours podcast: AI might let a few people control everything – permanently by Rose Hadshar (2025)



NZZ: Google as AI winner: Why the firm will define our future (2026)

Can Technology Save Democracy?

Petr Boroš | Founder of Retino

Many people fear that technology undermines democracy. We argue the opposite. Democracies survive when most people believe that tomorrow will be better than today. But that belief requires a steady rise in living standards. Since globalization is slowing and natural resources are finite, the only reliable way to keep improving living standards is through productivity growth – the ability to do *more with less* – driven by technology.

A widespread belief holds that democracy caused modern economic growth. The evidence, however, suggests the opposite, at least when it comes to democratic survival. Countries may become democratic for many different reasons, but they remain democratic primarily when their incomes grow. Democratic backsliding often follows prolonged periods of weak or unstable growth – moments when politics turns into a zero-sum game and voters become increasingly open to granting “emergency powers.”

Even advanced democracies come under pressure after a series of shocks; newer or poorer democracies are considerably more fragile. Interwar Germany provides a clear example:

the Weimar Republic collapsed after a period of hyperinflation and economic depression, opening the path to dictatorship. More recently, Venezuela – once the wealthiest democracy in Latin America – descended into authoritarianism following economic collapse.

Why are rising incomes so crucial? Because economic growth reduces conflict over how the “pie” is divided. When the pie expands, it becomes easier for winners to compensate losers and for elites to respect electoral outcomes. When growth stalls, every budget becomes a battleground, trust erodes, and hard political tactics spread. If stagnation lasts too long, democratic guardrails begin to bend.

The conclusion emerging from the data is straightforward: rising incomes protect democracy. If democracy is to endure, economic growth must be sustained. But where is such growth supposed to come from today?

The one-off gains of globalization have largely been exhausted. The share of trade in global GDP rose sharply during the 1990s and early 2000s, but its growth stalled after 2008. Supply chains are moving

back home or toward “friendly” countries, and new trade barriers are emerging. Trade will continue, but the easy gains from ever-deeper integration belong to the past.

Nor does increased extraction of natural resources offer a solution. In advanced economies, per-capita consumption of materials and energy has remained broadly stable for years, while climate commitments further limit the use of fossil fuels. Simply pushing larger quantities of raw materials and energy through the system will no longer generate additional growth.

If neither globalization nor expanded resource use can guarantee economic growth, democracy faces an existential threat. Without a new engine of growth, the stagnation of the 2020s could prove fatal for democratic stability.

That engine can only be technology. Unlike natural resources or global arbitrage, technology enables us to do *more with less*. Technological progress – whether in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, renewable energy, or digital infrastructure – increases productivity without requiring ever-growing physical inputs. Consider the transition from fixed telephone lines to mobile phones: what once required kilometers of copper wiring and extensive operator networks can now be achieved by a device in every person's pocket, supported by automated base stations.

Historically, nearly all long-term productivity growth has been driven by technological innovation.

The Industrial Revolution transformed agrarian economies into industrial ones, multiplying output per capita. In the twentieth century, electrification, automobiles, antibiotics, and semiconductors fueled unprecedented economic expansion.

In his growth analysis, economist Robert Solow demonstrated that most long-term GDP growth in advanced economies cannot be explained solely by increases in capital or labor; instead, it derives from so-called total factor productivity – essentially a measure of technological progress. Today, artificial intelligence illustrates this principle vividly. A 2023 report by McKinsey estimates that AI could add between \$2.6 and \$4.4 trillion annually to the global economy, primarily through productivity gains.

Technology must therefore be viewed not as a threat, but as a potential safeguard of democracy. Yes, technology brings new challenges – but the alternative is stagnation, which has often proved fatal for democratic systems. A society without growth becomes a society of scarcity, in which voters are more susceptible to authoritarian promises of order.

Technological progress, by contrast, expands the boundaries of what is possible. It provides a material foundation for hope – the belief that tomorrow can be better than today. It allows governments to invest in social security, education, and infrastructure without resorting to destructive redistribution.



This is exactly why it is so important to think about change not as linear, but exponential.

It strengthens the legitimacy of democratic institutions by supporting rising living standards.

If democracies are to survive the twenty-first century, technological innovation must therefore be embraced not hesitantly, but confidently. Regulation is necessary, but smothering technology out of fear would be self-defeating. The real danger is not that technology will destroy democracy, but that without technology, democracy itself may fail. ■



Technology today is no longer a neutral engine, but also a form of power infrastructure — and this is precisely why we must rethink how technology is considered within new models of thinking about the future.

Further reading



a16z: American Dynamism Manifesto (2022)

Europe 2050: From Crisis to a New Equilibrium

Klaudie Mrkusová | Policy Assistant of the Director General
(in the European Commission)

When I think of the year 2050, the first thing that comes to mind about the European Union is not a political map or new borders, but its commitment to a decarbonized economy. In its Climate Law, the European Union has set the goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 – and this essay is based on the assumption that it will indeed succeed. The year 2050 will therefore not be just another date, but a symbol of a profound transformation of the European economy, the energy sector, and everyday life. This will not mean a world without problems, but rather a Europe that has succeeded in turning an ambitious goal into reality.

The path to this point, however, will not be straightforward or calm. Over the next ten to fifteen years, we can expect a culmination of far-right movements and other radical political currents across the Member States. Fears related to migration, pressure on living standards, high energy prices, and fatigue caused by constant crises, excessive bureaucracy, and negative news have been shaping public sentiment for several years. Yet the solutions proposed

so far – and even those already implemented – have failed to bring about changes significant enough for Europeans to proudly call them solutions.

Have you recently heard a family member, a neighbour, or a friend say that their electricity bills have gone down? Or that the refugee crisis has finally been resolved? A large part of society will therefore, in my view, gravitate toward nationally oriented solutions. European politics will stagnate. States may even agree to refrain from adopting new European legislation for several years, allowing domestic political leaders to emphasize the return of competences to the national level. Decision-making will be driven more by the protection of domestic markets and voters than by a long-term shared vision.

As a result of this culmination, Europe will “hit rock bottom.” Some traditional industrial sectors, unable to keep pace with global competition and rapid decarbonization, will decline. Regions dependent on heavy industry will face social tensions, rising unemployment, and an outflow

of investment. The European economy may temporarily lose part of its dynamism and self-confidence. For many people, this phase will serve as proof that transformation is painful and that the European project is not functioning as promised.

At the same time, however, a group of pro-European political leaders will begin to emerge across Europe. They will build on European values and objectives, but above all on the conviction that ambitious change can – and must – be implemented quickly and decisively. Major political decisions, together with their precise implementation, will form the foundation of their approach. It is the period between 2035 and 2040.

By around 2040 at the latest, a new generation of political leaders will take the helm of the Union. They will not shy away from making forward-looking decisions, even at the cost of short-term unpopularity. Their goal will not be a return to the old model, but the creation of a more modern and competitive European economy that connects green ambitions with a well-designed industrial strategy.

With the arrival of this new generation, the Union will expand.

After a demanding post-war reconstruction, Ukraine will join the European Union, bringing with it not only symbolic strength, but also enormous potential – agricultural, technological, and human. Alongside Ukraine, the countries of the Western Balkans will also become members (unless this naturally happens earlier). An expanded European Union will be larger, more diverse, and more geopolitically significant. The integration of Ukraine in particular will play a key role in restarting the European economy: the reconstruction of infrastructure, energy systems, and industry¹ will create space for investment, innovation, and deeper economic cooperation. This will mark a new beginning for the European internal market, where the so-called 28th Regime – a supranational system with uniform rules for companies across Member States – will become a reality for any firm choosing to operate on a pan-European scale. The Capital Markets Union will be completed, and doing business across the Union will become both administratively and financially simpler.

Industry, weakened in previous years, will begin to be reborn – but in a different form than before. It will be more digitalized, more automated,

and built on clean technologies. Geography will never allow Europe to match the sheer size of economies such as China or India, but it will begin to carefully safeguard its strategic self-sufficiency. Extraction within European territory will increase once again, as reserves of mineral resources in Europe are substantial. Attention will also return to the production of goods that have in recent years been considered less valuable and whose manufacturing was moved outside the continent. In 2050, the European Union will indeed achieve a decarbonized economy – not because the path was easy, but precisely because it was difficult. After a period of political polarization and economic downturn, a more self-confident and strategic Europe will emerge. It will be larger, with Ukraine and the countries of the Western Balkans as members, more experienced because of past crises, and more determined to protect its values and its place in the world. It will not be a Union without disputes or challenges. But it will be a Union that has undergone a profound transformation, found a new balance between green ambitions and economic strength, and demonstrated that even in a world full of uncertainty, planning the future together still makes sense.



It is naïve to think that the future unfolds as a smooth curve. In reality, it is a sequence of shocks, reactions, and reconstruction. This is precisely why thinking about the future is so difficult: we tend to plan it through narratives that replicate current patterns and trends, while in fact it is shaped by black swans and grey rhinos.

Further reading



European Commission 2025
Strategic Report

¹ The current target date for the accession of some Western Balkan countries is 2028. In 2050, the European Union will indeed achieve a decarbonized economy – not because the path was easy, but precisely because it was difficult. After a period of political polarization and economic downturn, a more self-confident and strategic Europe will emerge. It will be larger, with Ukraine and the countries of the Western Balkans as members, more experienced because of past crises, and more determined to protect its values and its place in the world. It will not be a Union without disputes or challenges. But it will be a Union that has undergone a profound transformation, found a new balance between green ambitions and economic strength, and demonstrated that even in a world full of uncertainty, planning the future together still makes sense.

Futures Wheel

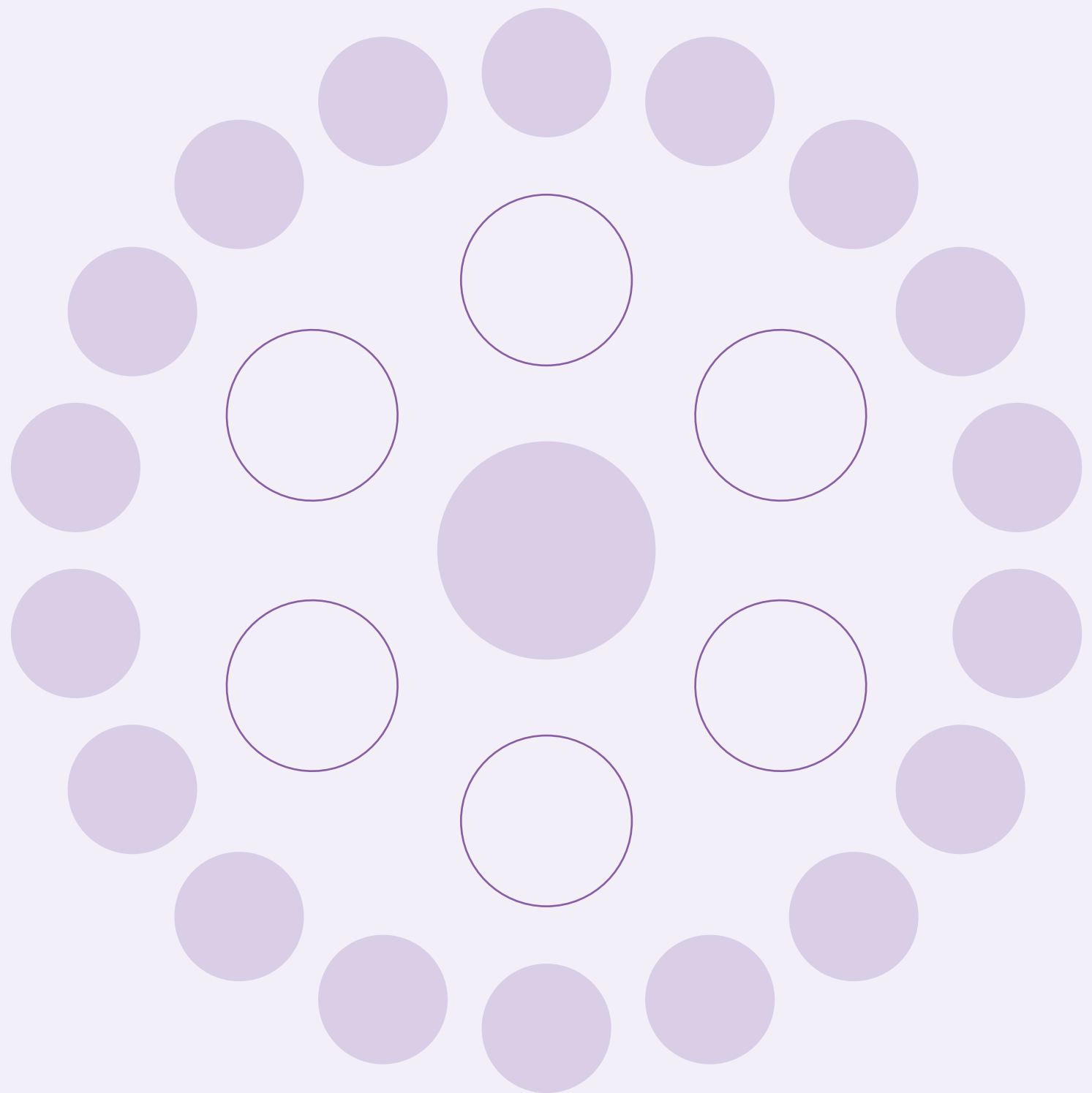
The Futures Wheel is a practical tool for mapping the domino effects of a single change – whether a new law, technological breakthrough, or social shift. You begin by identifying first-order consequences (immediate impacts) around a central idea, then expand outward to uncover second-order consequences – effects that may not be obvious at first glance.

The method reveals how one change can trigger cascading reactions across different areas of life or business. Its strength lies in turning abstract change into a clear visual map of possibilities, illustrating interactions and helping us consider potential ripple effects – the so-called “butterfly effect.”



Quest for the reader:

Choose one emerging trend, technology, or shift (e.g., AI in healthcare, remote work, urban farming). Place it at the center. In the first ring, write 3–5 direct consequences. In the next ring, ask: what might these trigger? Continue expanding outward, then circle the most unexpected or impactful ripple. How might it reshape your work, community, or daily life?



ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES

For decades, we treated the environment as scenery: important, yes, but ultimately secondary to the “real” plot of growth, politics, and culture. That framing no longer holds. The living world has become an active force in our daily lives, shaping what is possible, affordable, and safe. These three essays place the environment at the center of the story – not as a niche concern, but as the condition that now determines how we build, eat, move, insure, and govern. Together, they ask what changes when nature stops being a backdrop and becomes the main character.

We are surrounded by apocalyptic imagery and urgent language, yet many people feel stuck – overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge and unsure where meaningful action begins. These essays aim for a more difficult balance: clarity without collapse, urgency without paralysis. They explore what is breaking, what is already changing, and which responses can truly compound into real-world impact. Read together, they offer a way to hold two truths at once: the situation is serious, and agency remains possible.

Pavla Louženská

The Climate Crisis as a Test of Collective Coordination

Emilia Richterová | Marketing communications (Charles University)
and Data analytics (University of Economics, Prague) student

When I was asked how the world might look in 2050, the first image that came to mind resembled a scene from a sci-fi film: flying cars, teleportation, aliens – along with visions of scorched earth, droughts, and deserts replacing green landscapes. Yet the real future will likely not resemble cinematic scenery, but rather our present world, profoundly shaped by how we respond to the climate crisis. The year 2050 is not as distant as it seems. I won't be ninety, as I once imagined, but “only” fifty. I won't be nearing the end of my life, but standing in its middle. That is why it feels essential to reflect on the conditions in which I will live – and the contribution I will make to shaping them. Will our planet still be habitable? Will ecological disasters have become everyday reality? Will it still be possible to survive a summer without air conditioning? And will I be able to trust that there is still enough food and clean water?

Our future is no longer just a question of which technologies we are able to develop, but above all, of the decisions we make – or fail to make – as a society. When it comes to the climate,

the contrast could not be starker. On one side lies the possibility of cooperation: sharing resources, seeking common solutions, and taking others into account. On the other side stands the idea that every nation and every individual will look out only for themselves, even if that means worsening conditions for everyone else. Both scenarios are possible – yet their consequences differ like fire and water.

Imagine the year 2050, in which cooperation has triumphed over selfishness. Nations have managed to find a common language and build frameworks within which they share not only data, but also resources and technologies. Climate action is no longer the result of competing national strategies, but part of a broader, collective plan. Energy comes predominantly from renewable sources, water is distributed fairly, and climate adaptation is not a privilege but a standard. Such a world is not without problems, but it remains livable for everyone.

Even a small country like the Czech Republic has a chance for a stable future, because its voice becomes part of a shared chorus — one that is stronger than a solitary soloist.



“Policy taking”
on the global
stage can
be directly
mitigated by
cooperation!

A completely different image appears when cooperation collapses. In that version of 2050, every nation and every person defends only their own survival and interests. The stronger players secure access to water, food, and habitable conditions, while the weaker are left to their fate. Inequalities between regions deepen, and distrust and border closures replace solidarity. Migration crises become the new normal, and climate disasters take their toll. In such a world, it no longer matters how many innovations we have at hand – their benefits vanish if they are not shared. The result is a planet that may be technologically advanced, yet far less habitable for most than it is today.

The path to the first scenario – a world built on cooperation – is only possible if we change the way we think about time and about the decisions we make. We are used to thinking in the short term – in election cycles or fleeting moments. But the climate crisis does not follow electoral calendars; it demands long-term, collective effort. To succeed, we need an approach known as cathedral thinking. Just as the builders of cathedrals once began their work knowing they would never see the finished structure, we too must accept that the outcomes of today's decisions will manifest only in the lives of generations to come. Without the ability to think beyond our own lifetimes, no real change can take place.

Cathedral thinking does not apply only to international agreements or corporate strategies. It concerns each of us in everyday life. It means accepting that our efforts – whether sup-

porting sustainable projects, planting a tree, or consciously reducing consumption – may not bring immediate results, yet they are the driving force of change in the long run. The same logic applies to seemingly small and sometimes unpopular steps at the societal level, such as banning plastic straws or attaching caps to plastic bottles. Their true significance will become apparent only decades from now. The same is true of our votes in elections. It means resisting the lure of quick fixes and empty promises, and instead asking how today's choices will shape the world we live in the decades ahead.

When I think about the year 2050 today, I no longer imagine sci-fi scenery. Instead, a single question comes to mind: What will the world look like when I am fifty – and will it still be habitable? The answer does not depend on the technologies we develop – although they will always play a role – but above all on whether we, as a society, can cooperate and think beyond the limits of our own lives. If we settle for short-term comfort and quick victories, each of us hidden in our private refuge, we face a planet where survival becomes a privilege. But if we embrace cathedral thinking and begin, even now, to build our metaphorical cathedral – knowing that it will only be completed by those who come after us – then the vision of a livable world can become reality, not just a dream. ■



Great application of the butterfly effect, with small changes having a lasting impact.



The climate crisis is not merely an environmental issue, but a test of societal coordination. None of the topics we address in foresight ever exist in isolation. Narratives about the economy go hand in hand with climate change as well as with China's geopolitical influence. Likewise, it is impossible to discuss climate change without considering how it will shape all other domains.

Additional watch



[The Butterfly Effect \(2024\)](#)

From Globalization to Survival: A Vision for 2050

Otto Eden | Co-founder of CACS

For many years now, we have been hearing slogans such as “act now,” “there is no Planet B,” and “delay is denial.” At the beginning of the 2020s, there was a sense of hope – the climate movement had finally gained global attention and momentum. Environmentally focused companies, such as Tesla, saw their value rise rapidly.

Today, we live in a different world. A world shaped by wars, politics, and shifting ideologies. A world of crises – in fact, several overlapping crises unfolding at once. A world that has become far more transactional, lacking a long-term vision, let alone the willingness to build one. A world that appears increasingly fragmented.

So my vision for 2050? A bleak one.

The very foundations must change. Our leaders need to start thinking long-term. **Politicians must look beyond the limits of electoral cycles.** Yet it is difficult to blame them – they face constant pressure from far-right movements, social unrest, and political instability, all of which push calm, stability, and meaningful change further out of reach. Companies, meanwhile, remain trapped in the endless cycle of maximizing shareholder

value – the familiar phrase you might hear from a two-meter-tall man with blue eyes wearing a Patagonia vest.

It is true: we strive to increase revenues, reduce costs, and outperform competitors – at least according to Wall Street metrics. From that perspective, acting differently is difficult. In an environment where key performance indicators are shareholder-driven, failure is inevitable if growth is not delivered. So is degrowth – the deliberate reduction of economic growth – the solution?

No. The solution is shock.

By 2050, our societies will experience a series of disruptions. At different times, for different reasons, and with different responses. “Mitigation” will become the defining slogan of the era. Political and social distrust will shape the public sphere, yet communities will simultaneously begin to draw closer together in search of local solutions and ways to endure. Help will increasingly come from ourselves or from people within our immediate surroundings.

Globalization – and interest in events taking place hundreds or thousands of kilometers away – will gradually

weaken. People will experience crises so frequently that they become routine. Attention will shift toward what is here and now. Community energy networks, local agriculture and food production, and local transport systems will become common practice. Construction will rely primarily on local materials, while landscape adaptation aimed at mitigating climate impacts will become a shared community priority.

This may sound dark – at least when viewed through today’s lens of consumerism, growth, and constant mobility. But if we look deeper, toward the essence of things, there is also hope to be found. It may become a world more focused on communities, the present moment, and reconnection with nature. Time itself may begin to move more slowly. The world will become more decentralized and less equal – some places will withstand shocks better than others. Yet for some, and perhaps for many, fundamental values may finally become reality.

Perhaps this is the world we truly long for. Today’s world is chaotic, constantly changing, and increasingly difficult to understand. A constant flood of hype, trends, and political spectacles reshapes the present almost daily. The world is more connected than ever, and yet people often feel profoundly alone within it.

And so, if my vision of 2050 comes to pass, it will not be a darker world – simply a different one. And for some, perhaps even a better one. ■



Otto tells a story about how the central question of the future will be who owns the infrastructure of resilience — energy, food, and housing — and how fairly access to it will be distributed. It is also a story about why we increasingly use the term *resilience* instead of *sustainability* today. Not only in relation to climate change, but also in connection with security and the military capabilities of states.



Generally, the problem does not stem only from a lack of willingness. For us to change this, we need to think about incentive structures for the people we elect to make long-term decisions in our name. As long as their main goal is to be reelected in four years, short-term problems will indefinitely be more urgent and thus politically rational for them to use.

Further reading and listening



Crossing Channels: How big a problem is short-termism in government? (2023)



Improta, Marco; Mannoni, Elisabetta: Government Short-Termism and the Management of Global Challenges (2025)



Such an important thought! Legislative short-termism has held us back long enough.

Scenarios

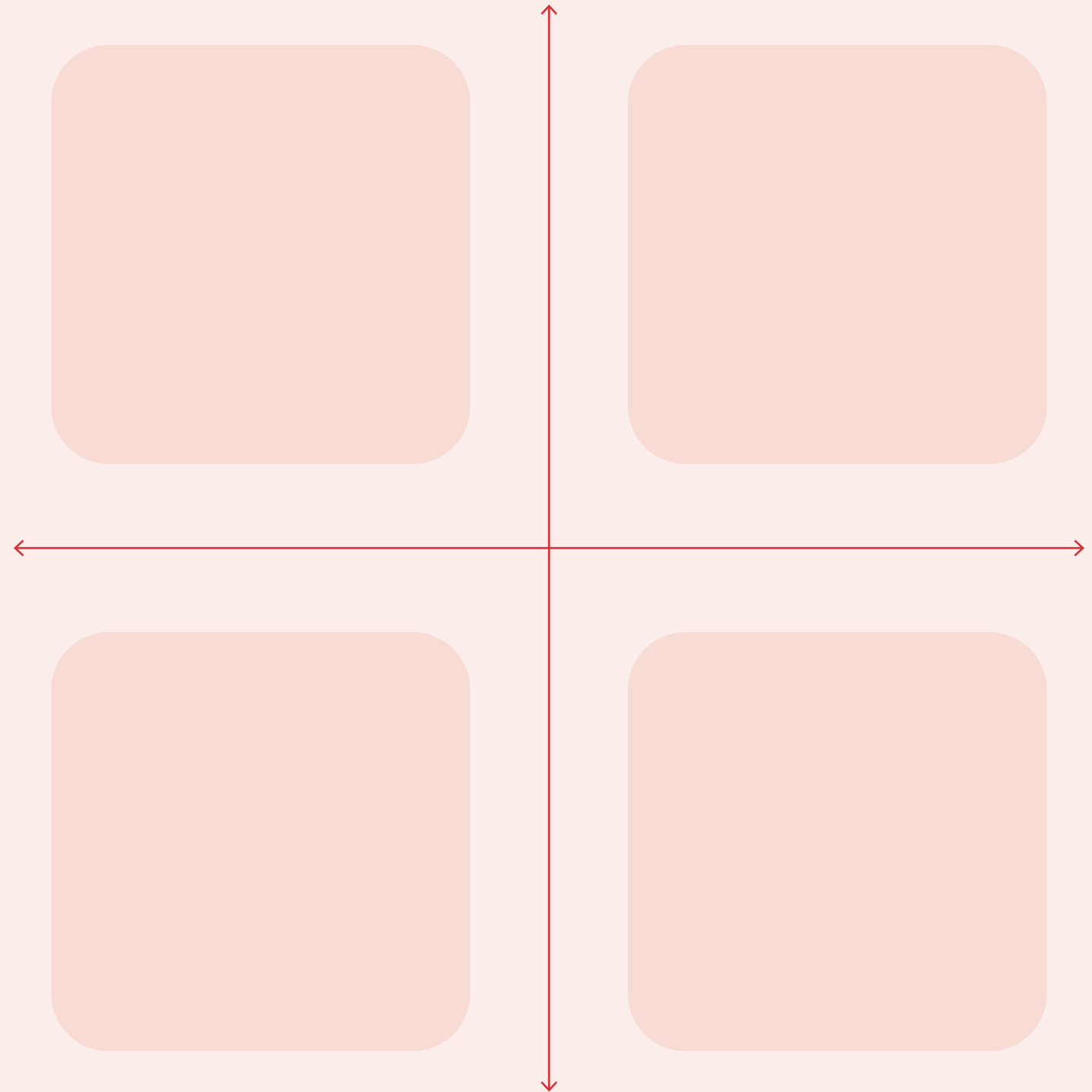
Scenarios are like rehearsals for the future – imagining different ways events could unfold so we are not caught off guard. Rather than predicting exactly what will happen, they help us ask “*What if?*” and prepare for multiple possibilities, whether related to market trends, sudden crises, or unexpected opportunities.

By visualizing alternative futures, scenarios encourage creative thinking and support better decision-making today. Think of them as a way to stress-test your plans before reality does. They are among the most widely used foresight methods and are often illustrated through a 2×2 matrix.



Question for the reader:

What key uncertainties shape the “scenery” of your future? If you map them onto a 2×2 matrix, what quadrants emerge?



FUTURES THINKING

We have long relied on the past to map the future – extrapolating trends, refining models, and assuming tomorrow will resemble yesterday. But in a world where disruption has become the norm, this approach is increasingly inadequate. Futures Thinking is not about predicting a single outcome; it is about embracing *cathedral thinking* – the patience and vision to lay foundations today for structures we may never see completed, knowing their value will outlast us.

This kind of thinking demands more than forecasts. It asks: what values, systems, and infrastructures must we begin building now, even if their full impact will only be realized decades from today? These essays explore how individuals, organizations, and societies can adopt this mindset – not as passive observers, but as active architects. Because the future is not something we stumble into; it is something we build, with the humility of knowing we are part of a much longer story. The question is not only what comes next, but how we choose to lay the groundwork today.

Lukas Zumbrunn

Shaping the Future Beyond One's Lifetime

Kryštof Čižmář | Co-founder of CACS

I was born in 1999. If I look at the world through the lens of cathedral thinking, my horizon would extend somewhere beyond year 2080, assuming an average life expectancy of around eighty years. What can I predict about the year 2080? Certainly something. Yet on such a distant horizon, with sufficient determination, we may actually have a greater chance to influence events than in the years immediately ahead of us – or at least to begin changing the world in those that are still to come.

If I am to think about a “cathedral project” that may only be fulfilled after my lifetime, it would be a vision of a utopian world in which my children and grandchildren could live. What kind of world would I want to leave behind for them?

First and foremost, it should be a free world – a world in which people are not surveilled, forced to work against their will, or subjected to a foreign ideology. A free world.

At the same time – and this is the second point – such a world must not slide into anarchy. We need a functioning society that shares a common mission. Ideally, however, this mission should not be freedom alone. We all

desire freedom, but what we additionally need is prosperity. That is why I would like to see massive investment in education and its fundamental restructuring. We still do not fully recognize its importance, even though people are shaped from the very beginning of their lives, and this ultimately determines who they become. We can raise innovative, value-driven, and active individuals – a generation capable not only of sustaining this world, but of improving it, or at least improving some of our countries.

In my view, the combination of freedom and prosperity should lead to greater individual initiative: founding businesses, taking responsibility for them, perhaps reviving certain forgotten professions while simultaneously developing new ones. Yet what the economy and the labour market will ultimately look like remains very difficult to predict today.

It is clear that for many years now we have been spending an increasing amount of time in digital space. Between 2010 (Facebook and wall posts) and 2020 (COVID and the normalization of online work), society underwent near-complete digitalization. By the mid-2020s, we are also witnessing the full emergence of artificial intelli-

gence. Each of us is gradually forming an ever closer relationship with it – it assists us with almost everything imaginable, from language learning to task automation that will soon affect many industries.

What comes next? That is the crucial question. Over the next five to ten years, it will be decisive how society responds to this transformation. I would compare it to earlier technological turning points that fundamentally reshaped the world – such as the rise of engines, which marked the end of agriculture as the primary source of livelihood and its replacement by factory work. The subsequent development of cities then gave rise to entirely new professions.

The need to concentrate in cities emerged in the nineteenth century because of factories. Today, however, the opposite trend may begin to take shape: a return to rural areas. Cities are no longer essential for most professions. The real requirement is internet access – and that is available in rural areas as well, together with the benefits of a healthier lifestyle, local food production, and more affordable housing. Some professions may therefore naturally shift in this direction.

Returning to the question of how technology will transform our society, the outcome will depend on politics and – as always – on human will. Will a revolution come once we realize that we increasingly live in what Yanis Varoufakis calls technological feudalism? Our phones listen to us, companies target us with extraordinary precision, and we are tracked even through payment systems. It is

possible that cash may soon return as the most private form of payment.

To summarize my reflections, within cathedral thinking, we need solid foundations – a free, prosperous, and functional society. The next five to ten years will likely be difficult and will determine how successfully we cope with the rise of artificial intelligence and the phenomenon of technological feudalism. Technology can be regulated or restricted, but it will not disappear; the real question is whether life in such a world will remain economically and socially sustainable. What is certain, however, is that people will always create and act. Technology transforms society and people ultimately adapt to it. ■



Words have the power to shape reality. If freedom is framed in the broader social narrative as an individual escape, it may ultimately become a luxury available only to a few.

Further reading



Han Byung-Chul:
The Burnout Society (2016)



There's something deeply human in the tension between freedom and structure, individualism and collective purpose. Cathedrals weren't just feats of engineering; they were acts of faith, both literal and metaphorical. But faith isn't static: it evolves, fractures, and sometimes crumbles. The most enduring "cathedrals" of the modern era, namely democracy, human rights, and scientific progress, weren't built in a straight line. They were messy, contested, and constantly rebuilt.

The Future of a State Without a Future

Miroslav Crha | Expert in Public administration

Before we begin predicting the future, we should honestly ask ourselves whether we actually want one. And if we do, whether we are still capable of influencing it. I have serious concerns that in many of the areas addressed by the Czech public administration, we currently lack this ability. The levers we would need to pull are either broken, or being pulled in different directions by ten people at once.

I work in public administration, where I lead a department responsible for overseeing that systemic human rights violations do not occur in the Czech Republic and that the standard of their protection is gradually improving. Our work focuses, for example, on conditions in prisons and psychiatric hospitals, on how the police treat victims of crime, or on the accessibility of public offices for people with disabilities. We do not deal with individual cases, but with systemic settings: legislation, strategies, methodologies, training, and how these are translated into practice.

I therefore often look into the work of various ministries and public authorities and ask them about their priorities, goals, and how they plan to function ten years from now.

One might expect that they would not have an answer. But that is not the problem – they always have something written down. The Czech Republic is surprisingly rich in government strategies, but the real issue lies in what those strategies actually contain.

The official Strategy Database website, which collects these documents, currently lists 281 strategic documents at the national level. Think about it: can you name at least one of them? If we were talking about European Union strategies, it would be easy – everyone knows the Green Deal. But what about Czech strategies?

The database includes many documents that make you think, "Sure, that makes sense." We have, for example, the Gender Equality Strategy or the Library Development Concept. Others may prompt the reaction, "Hmm, that sounds somewhat redundant," such as the National Space Plan. And some provoke a more direct response: "What does that even mean?" Among my personal favourites are the National Quality Policy or the National Reform Programme.

The diversity does not end with the titles. Some strategies are written for ten years, others for only three. Some have a date of adoption but no deadline for completion. Many relate to periods that have already long passed. Moreover, evaluations assessing halwhether the strategies were actually implemented are often missing.

This fragmentation points to a deeper problem. In Czech public administration, strategies are often not an effective tool for achieving concrete goals. Over time, I have come to understand that in practice they frequently serve a different purpose: creating space to clarify what is and is not considered desirable. The author of a strategy submits it for comments and is essentially telling other authorities: “This is what I would like to do. Are you okay with that? You’re not going to stand in my way, right?”

At the same time, however, they cannot guarantee that anything will actually be implemented. Strategies are usually drafted by civil servants within ministries, often lawyers by training. Yet they lack the time, personnel, expertise, and financial resources needed for real implementation. Funding decisions rest with political leadership, which is often happy to ceremonially present new strategies but far less willing to allocate budgetary resources for their execution. And this still takes place within a single ministry and a single electoral cycle. Ensuring coordination across the entire state apparatus over a period longer than four years becomes several levels more complex.

I do not want to blame anyone in particular. A strong professional civil service capable of producing data-driven, high-quality, measurable plans – and then implementing them in a coordinated way – does not seem to be widely demanded in the Czech Republic. There is fairly broad political consensus around the idea that civil servants are inefficient and that regulation hinders competitiveness. The result is that employment in the civil service – the largest, most complex, and most important “corporation” in the country – is neither financially nor materially competitive with an average marketing analyst position in an online shop selling colourful socks. As a result, the country’s future is shaped, at best, by half burnt-out idealists gathering in small islands of positive deviance. At worst, by anyone with a university degree who can survive in Prague on a gross monthly salary of 33,000 CZK.

The EU, NATO, and many countries operate foresight units that help them plan for possible futures and prepare for them. Do we need such a unit as well? It probably would not hurt, and public administration certainly needs to experiment with new approaches. But I am not convinced that, in its current form, we would be able to prepare adequately for the future – even if we knew it with certainty.

I do not want to end on a negative note. Some of the smartest, most dedicated, and hardest-working people I have had the privilege to meet work for the Czech state. Positive examples exist. What we still lack



Highlighting this gap between the supply of foresight information and the implementation is key.

are systemic conditions that would make such quality the norm rather than the exception. This is unfortunate, because a capable person in public service can have an enormous impact – saving billions in public procurement, creating services used by millions of people, or helping those in need.

Moreover, we already know that things can be done differently. Initiatives such as BYRO, České priority, or Česko, funguj! propose concrete measures to improve the functioning of public administration. We know what needs to be done. What we now need is “only” a societal consensus that this truly matters. We need to recognise that without a state capable of delivering change, we will remain merely passive observers of our own future. ■



The greatest problem of a “state without a future” is not the lack of visions, but the absence of a shared societal belief that the future is worth investing in at all. When politics and institutions become oriented toward surviving from one budget cycle to the next, an environment emerges in which long-term thinking is treated with automatic suspicion. In such a context, foresight easily turns into little more than an attractive decoration.

Further reading

OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation: The Triple Challenge of Embedding Strategic Foresight in Government (2022)

European Parliament (EPRS): The Use of Strategic Foresight in Commission Impact Assessments (2024)

The Future Is Only as Strong as Our Imagination

Maria Połomska | Co-founder of h23,
Mentor for the Google for Startups programme

„Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were. But without it, we go nowhere.” Carl Sagan

In an age of acceleration, the future arrives faster than ever – and yet it is increasingly difficult to imagine. Not because it is distant, but because it is saturated with anxiety: climate collapse, democratic decline, and the algorithmic governance of everyday life. We no longer dream about the future. We prepare for it as a threat.

Imagination, once a cultural superpower, is now often perceived either as an escape from reality or as a warning. An increasing share of speculative fiction – once fertile ground for utopias – now unfolds in dystopian worlds. This shift is not merely aesthetic. It reflects a deeper social exhaustion and a loss of agency, particularly among younger generations who feel trapped in crises they did not choose and cannot resolve on their own.

History teaches us, however, that imagination has always preceded change. Leonardo da Vinci sketched

flying machines four centuries before the invention of the helicopter. The communicators of *Star Trek* and the touchscreens depicted in *2001: A Space Odyssey* anticipated technologies we now routinely carry in our pockets. And dystopian visions such as *Brave New World* or *Gattaca* raised ethical questions long before CRISPR made the editing of the human genome possible. These were not mere fantasies. They were hypotheses about the future – often mistaken, sometimes prophetic, yet always generative.

In Central Europe, the tension between imagination and reality carries a particular historical weight. Decades of authoritarian regimes constrained the range of imaginable futures. Bold visions therefore had to be encoded in metaphors, allegories, or silence. When democracy arrived, it brought with it the promise of plurality – the idea that the future could once again be co-created, reshaped, and questioned.

Today, however, even this democratic imagination appears constrained

once more. The very tools meant to expand our possibilities – networks, platforms, and data – often narrow them instead. Our attention is fragmented, public debate polarized, and long-term thinking replaced by the logic of quarterly results, populist cycles, and instant digital feedback.

This is not merely a question of technological development or optimism. What is at stake is the intellectual infrastructure of the public sphere itself. Imagination is neither frivolous nor childish; it is the starting point of politics, science, and governance. It determines which problems we consider worth solving – and which futures we are able to envision at all.

Restoring imagination is therefore not only a cultural task, but a political one.

We may draw inspiration from the concept of *cathedral thinking* – the idea that it is possible to commit to projects whose outcomes will only be seen by future generations. Medieval cathedral builders laid foundations for structures they knew they would never live to see completed. Today, such thinking may appear naïve, yet in an era dominated by short-term incentives and crisis management, a long-term perspective may be the most radical act available to us.

The goal is not to construct utopias. It is to articulate futures that are rich, realistic, and inspiring – futures that acknowledge complexity, provide reasons to act, and are capable of holding both tension and hope at once.

The question, then, is not what future awaits us. The question is which future is worth striving for? And perhaps even more fundamentally: whose imagination is shaping it today?

Because if we do not fill that space ourselves, someone – or something – else will do it for us. ■



When the public sphere becomes saturated with anxiety, polarization, and short-term incentives, we lose the ability to articulate desirable futures – and without that capacity, even good technologies and policies are reduced to mere crisis management. The result is the emergence of a new “opportunity” for authoritarian regimes, which appear to offer clear and long-term solutions. A 2025 study reported by *The Independent* suggests that half of young Britons would prefer Britain to have an authoritarian dictator who would not need to “bother” with democratic processes.

Further reading



Mark Fisher: *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2014)

Betting on Cathedrals

Michal Najman | Founder of Aim

A couple of years ago I was sitting in a Five Guys across from the Sagrada Família with friends, enjoying consumerism while staring at a marvel. I clearly remember us discussing how it was never going to be finished. Well, ten days ago they came close, as the central tower was finally put in place.

Curious about the cathedral's origins, I read the leaflet we were handed at the entrance. €100 million in revenue is generated by 4.7 million visitors, financing the completion of a 144-year-old and eventful story. Construction began in 1882 under an architect who wasn't Gaudí. Gaudí took over a year later and worked on it for forty-three years, living in poverty, only to die after being hit by a tram two streets away. Anarchists burned his drawings and models. The architects who followed had to reconstruct the design from fragments. The quarry ran out, so they switched to concrete. Nobody could build Gaudí's geometry by hand, so aeronautical software arrived in the 1980s, followed by CNC machines in the 1990s. Dalí, by the way, thought the entire project was a betrayal and argued it should remain unfinished: "Let it stay there, like a huge rotting tooth."

Let's move to a different Five Guys – this one on Broadway and 110th Street in Manhattan, about a minute from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Construction began in 1892 with the ambition of building the largest cathedral in the world. The lead architect died, his successor changed the entire design mid-construction. World War II halted the project, and the cathedral stood idle for three decades. Work eventually resumed, and by 1984 completion was projected for the year 2000. But in 1992 the money ran out, and it never returned. Some now call it St. John the Unfinished.

In France, Beauvais Cathedral began construction in 1225. It built the highest Gothic vault ever attempted – which collapsed a few years later. The structure was rebuilt over sixty years. A spire was completed that briefly made it the tallest structure on Earth – only to collapse four years later. Eight hundred years on, the choir still stands, held together by steel braces installed in the 1990s. (According to Google Maps, the nearest Five Guys is a fifty-minute ride to the Paris suburbs.)

In all three cases, a grand vision alone was not enough to complete the project – even though each cathedral certainly had one. Nor does having a detailed plan guarantee success. Contrary to popular belief, Gaudí did not plan for CNC machines.

What ultimately separated Barcelona from New York and Beauvais was

a series of independent and, at the time, unlikely events: enthusiasm that helped recover fragments of the design, digital tools arriving just when Gaudí's geometry had become impossible to construct by hand, and tourism turning an unfinished building into a self-funding engine.

Put differently: if you had been placed in the 1890s and asked to bet on which of these cathedrals would be completed by 2030 based on their vision or plans, you would be fooling yourself if you believed you could beat chance.

Whether a plan reaches its goal is often the unpredictable outcome of a Markov chain. The small steps in a random walk – the pieces of information that actually shape the outcome – are difficult to observe. And in the post-LLM world, with its overwhelming abundance of information, one might argue it is humanly impossible to see them all. There is simply too much of it.

The people who thrive are those with insight, not foresight. Those who can read the signals that actually matter and act before the window closes. Not predict – see, and move. I went to Barcelona with friends, stopped for a drink at Five Guys, and learned about the Sagrada Família. A sequence of small, unplanned events had already made the decision for me, long before I sat down to order. ■



What I find most interesting is that the "cathedral" behaves here like a platform: incompleteness is not a failure, but a feature. It generates story, visitors, and cash flow. That feels very contemporary. Many products and institutions today survive not because they are finished, but because they remain permanently in version 0.9 and know how to monetize the process itself. The question is no longer "when will we finish it," but "what, in the course of building it, begins to build us."

Pavĺína Louženská

Pavĺína founded the trend forecasting agency TrendBrews, which specializes in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. Her newsletter on trends and technology: pavlinaspeaks.substack.com, has over 13,000 subscribers, and Substack has ranked it among its Top 50 Rising in Business globally. Her predictions have been published by media outlets such as Wired, ELLE, and TED. She serves on the advisory boards of various technology companies and foundations—including the Independent Press Foundation and Nkrachni. She is the lead mentor for Google for Startups in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. She has received several awards for her work, including the European Citizen's Prize, bestowed by the European Parliament.

In 2025, she served as a mentor for the European Forum Alpbach hackathon as part of the Lab Days program, where the teams she led went on to win awards in the final competition.

Lukas Zumbrunn

Lukas Zumbrunn is a PhD student in international relations at the University of St. Gallen, where he focuses on the application of foresight in the public sector via various future-oriented analysis methods. During his research fellowship at the University of Oxford, he served as a teaching assistant for the course “Managing Tomorrow Today” at the Blavatnik School of Government.

Together with Pavĺína Louženská, he led Future Studies workshops for Club Alpbach CZ & SK in August 2025 and February 2026 in collaboration with the Václav Havel Library. He has also led a series of workshops focused on the importance of working with multiple future scenarios for strategic decision making, for example in collaboration with the OECD, the Swiss Ministry of Defence, and the Swiss Federal Archives.

Lada Zajac | editor

Lada Zajac works as a junior analyst at the trend forecasting agency TrendBrews, where she focuses on trend analysis and preparing materials for strategic projects. Her professional background is in journalism—before going on parental leave, she worked as an editor for the news portal iDNES.cz, where she primarily covered domestic issues.

At the crossroads of media, trend analysis, and content, she also contributes to publishing projects. In 2024, she collaborated with the Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences at the Czech University of Life Sciences in Prague on the creation of the interview book Letokruhy vzpomínek (Growth Rings of Memories). In 2025, she helped compile The Future is in Your Hands diary, a planner created in collaboration with the brand papelote and Pavĺína Louženská

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This publication was created with the incentive of inviting readers to reflect on the future—not as something distant and abstract, but as a space that is already being shaped today by our decisions, priorities, and imagination. The texts in this publication offer various perspectives on a world that is changing before our very eyes: from the position of young people in an era of technological and social change, through questions of growth, democracy, and climate, to the very tools that can help us think about the future more sensitively, accurately, and responsibly.

We hope that these essays have not only provided you with answers but have also sparked new questions. If any of the topics have prompted you to pause, reflect on your own perspective, explore further connections, or try some of the exercises at the end of the chapters, then this publication has served its purpose. We believe that this is precisely how meaningful work on the future begins: with curiosity, openness, and a willingness not to settle for the quickest answer.

At the same time, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to this project. We thank the authors of the essays for their time, ideas, and willingness to share their perspectives. A special thank you goes to Pavĺína Louženská and Lukas Zumbrunn for their expert supervision, guidance, and the framework that allowed the entire project to take shape. We thank Lada Zajac for her meticulous and wonderful editorial work, Veronika Adamcová for the beautiful design that gave the publication its distinctive character, and Michaela Kulíšková for bringing the entire project to life.

On behalf of Club Alpbach Czechia & Slovakia, we would like to thank you for joining us in exploring difficult questions.

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European Forum Alpbach

European Forum Alpbach was founded in 1945 out of a vision of a truly European future. To this day, this idea inspires around 5,000 participants who gather annually in Alpbach. The Forum brings together key players from across Europe and creates a space for learning, dialogue, and a shared search for future directions in decision-making.

European Forum Alpbach would never have existed without young visionaries. And it is precisely the new generations of leaders and dreamers who continue to shape it today. In this book, twelve individuals from diverse backgrounds reflect on the future. Whether they are contemplating the year 2050, expectations related to the climate crisis or economic developments, or the changes they wish to see—and are actively working toward—they offer personal perspectives on what lies ahead.

This project is dedicated to critical voices, diversity, active leadership, and open-mindedness.



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