

NATO HAS A GEN-Z PROBLEM

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Gen Z support for Ukraine is declining, and skepticism towards the existing security architecture is rising—what is happening to the age group that makes up one-third of NATO's population? The subfactions that make up Gen Z have left the generation critical and dissatisfied with the current global security architecture and NATO. The defining characteristics of the "digital generation," which include deep polarization, anti-imperialism, and anti-hypocrisy, compound with Russian disinformation, and misinformation more broadly, steering the young generation away from NATO and weakening the Alliance's resilience and readiness. NATO should be cognizant of mending this divide to combat the decreasing enlistment rates across NATO countries and develop future political will for the sustainment of the Alliance. To reverse this phenomenon, NATO members should integrate Gen Z dialogue into their political processes, particularly with those who are critical of the current security architecture.

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Gen Z is not a monolith, but in observing its factions, NATO and its members should be paying closer attention to the trends of this generation's discontent with the existing security architecture.

In a Gen Z world where NATO stands for “Not Attached To an Outcome,”¹ or “NATO dating,” with no relevance to the North Atlantic Treaty but in reference to casual dating, NATO is obligated to actively bridge this disconnect and remind Gen Z what NATO really stands for.

Gen Z is the most active online and connected generation in human history, and it makes up roughly one-third of the Alliance's population.² Just like the rest of Gen Z, I am chronically online and stressed about the future, but unlike most of my generation, I am also a transatlanticist actively working on developing Gen Z transatlantic leaders. As such, I am concerned by the growing disconnect between my peers and the transatlantic security establishment.

Given the shocking lack of polling and statistics on Gen Z, based on the data available, and the trends I see in my own lived experience as an American who has lived in Prague, Brussels, and Madrid and is working on youth transatlantic policy incubation, I have identified the following themes as defining features for this generation's relationship with the existing security architecture:

- 1) Gen Z is deeply polarized;
- 2) Gen Z is anti-imperialist;
- 3) and Gen Z hates hypocrisy.

Together, these defining themes compound into a perfect storm that leaves Generation Z vulnerable to anti-NATO narratives, Russian disinformation, and skeptical of the rules-based order that threatens NATO's current readiness and long-term resilience.

Gen Z is Deeply Polarized

Gen Z is experiencing a growing political gender divide that has left much of the generation vulnerable to anti-NATO narratives.³ While Gen Z is not a monolith—the gender divide is not homogeneously constructed either—the trend of Gen Z polarization has led to concerning developments among sizable portions of Gen Z.

1) Mark Travers, “A Psychologist Explains The ‘NATO Dating’ Trend,” Forbes, 10 January 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/traversmark/2024/01/10/a-psychologist-explains-the-nato-dating-trend/?sh=23a772d24ec7>

2) Anne Freer, “A Look at Gen Z Mobile Behaviours – 64% of Mobile Users are Always Connected,” Business of Apps, 19 June 2019. <https://www.businessofapps.com/news/a-look-at-gen-z-mobile-behaviours-64-of-mobile-users-are-always-connected/>

3) DW News, “Why the Political Worldviews of Young Men and Women are Increasingly Diverging | DW Analysis,” Youtube Video, 1 March 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54H8ppxnp8I>

Where past generations were more progressive than those before them, Gen Z has altered this cycle, with Gen Z women becoming more progressive over time and Gen Z men becoming more conservative. Plus, there is not only a gender split, but a drastic move apart to opposite extremes of the political spectrum. A Gen Z centrist is a rare relic of a bygone era.

Gen Z men are strongly attracted to and vulnerable to far-right figures such as Andrew Tate, Tucker Carlson, and Nick Fuentes. Across both North America and Europe, the “culture wars” have taken storm, and the far right is winning among Gen Z men. Politico Europe found that political content on TikTok surrounding the election of the European Parliament is dominated by the right wing, with right-wing Members of the European Parliament obtaining 39 million likes and 2 million followers.⁴

Gen Z-ers that move left, move very left. Some sub-factions that are included in this are leftist progressives who embody coming of age during the cancel culture era and full-blown Soviet nostalgic communists, nostalgic for a life they never lived and can’t possibly know.⁵

Gen Z is Anti-Imperialist

This theme is most apparent in Gen Z’s response to the Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel, the subsequent increased Israeli bombardment of Gaza, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Triggered by the Israel-Hamas conflict, right now, you can observe trends of Gen Z-ers finding which celebrities to block next, which companies to boycott next, as well as videos referring to President Joe Biden as “Genocide Joe,”⁶ and most recently, students at Morehouse University turning their backs to President Biden as he gave the commencement speech. There are more than 100 student encampments around the world calling for attention to the mass civilian deaths in Gaza, a ceasefire, and divestment from Israel.⁷ Almost all of them are within NATO member states.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two thought leaders have emerged: realist U.S.-skeptic political scientist John Mearsheimer and philosopher Dr. Cornel

4) Politico, “Europe’s Far Right uses TikTok to Win Youth Vote,” 17 March 2024.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/tiktok-far-right-european-parliament-politics-europe/>

5) Rev. Ben Johnson, “Half of Gen Z Supports Marxism/Socialism. Here’s why,” Acton Institute, 23 October 2020. <https://rlo.acton.org/archives/117396-half-of-gen-z-supports-marxism-socialism-heres-why.html>

6) Shia Kapos, “Pro-Palestinian Protesters are Backed by a Surprising Source: Biden’s Biggest Donors,” Politico, 5 May 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/05/05/pro-palestinian-protests-columbia-university-funding-donors-00156135>

7) See for instance, AlJazeera, “‘Divest from Israel’: Decoding the Gaza Protest Call Shaking US campuses,” 30 April 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/30/divest-from-israel-breaking-down-the-us-student-protesters-demands>

West, whose presidential campaign calls to “disband NATO.”⁸ Far-left social media accounts emerged including Slow Factory,⁹ and separately, directly-affiliated accounts with Russia have captured the minds of far-left Gen Z-ers. These figures and platforms place a spectrum of blame on NATO for the invasion, seeing NATO as an imperial force and Russia as the reasonable victim defending itself from potential Western atrocities.

For European Gen Z-ers in this camp, they feel they have been born into a weak Europe that is trapped under a tyrannical NATO that is the extension of the U.S. empire. For Americans in this camp, they believe their tax dollars are being wasted on submitting a faraway continent to the American will, all while their streets are riddled with opioids and homelessness.

While on the practical transatlantic policy level, there should be little relation between the events in Eastern Europe and the events in the Middle East, for far-left Gen Z-ers, they are products of the same story: an imperial West asserting itself in a victimized Global South.

Far-right Gen Z-ers have much overlap with the Gen Z left on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, primarily because they are anti-imperial, not from a reformist liberal agenda but from an isolationist one. Included in this is also the fact that Putin and Russia have been drawn into the culture war as a symbol of masculinity, which has encapsulated Gen Z incel culture.

Gen Z’s anti-imperial nature could and should translate into being anti-Russia, anti-China, or other current empires on this planet, but they are not, because as they see it—be it from differing perspectives—the United States and NATO are the imperialists. This is because, for Gen Z, what supersedes all is there is no B.S. view of their respective governments. If they sense you are hypocritical, you’re canceled.

Gen Z Hates Hypocrisy

While Gaza is very much removed from North Atlantic policymaking, for Gen Z, the hypocrisy in response and rhetoric from Western governments to Gaza versus in Ukraine culminates in a “you’re canceled” sentiment with NATO.

On TikTok, where the large majority of users are Gen Z, #freepalestine has 31 billion posts, compared to 590 million for #standwithisrael.¹⁰ Palestine is at the center of Gen Z’s attention, no matter their political allegiance. And for all of Gen Z, no matter

8) See CornelWest2024, <https://www.cornelwest2024.com/platform>

9) See SlowFactory, <https://slowfactory.earth>

10) The Hill, “Why is Gen-Z so Pro-Palestine and anti-Israel?” 11 December 2023.

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4353828-why-is-gen-z-so-pro-palestine-and-anti-israel/>

their support for Israel or for Palestine, Western rhetoric and response signifies to them that the narrative of promoting a rule-based order in Ukraine is empty.

This perception is dangerous, as it leads many to begin to further buy into Russian disinformation. Where Gen Z senses hypocrisy, they are quick to abandon their previous political position. As a result, American Gen Z support for Ukraine has declined since October 7th.¹¹ Concurrently, Gen Z support has shifted to the Congo, Yemen, and Sudan. These are important issues, but for Gen Z, they signify a change of sides. Gen Z may not even have fully identified what these sides are, but they know that one of them—the West, the United States, NATO—is hypocritical.

Gen Z are not Inherently Transatlanticists

Gen Z is one of the most diverse generations in history. As a result, the traditional familial links between North America and Europe do not exist in the same way that they once did. This is particularly evident in the generational divide in American connections to Europe, which is becoming more prevalent. In 1940, 89.8 percent of the United States was White (of European origin),¹² with many Americans still holding on to their heritage and connection to Europe. Thus, fighting in WWII and the commitment towards the future security of Europe were supported on a familial level to the American public. Today this is not the case. In 2021, 58.9 percent of the U.S. population is White,¹³ many of whom are generations removed and feel little connection to their ancestry.¹⁴

On the European side of the equation, more European Gen Z-ers are born to immigrants than ever before, primarily of North African and Middle Eastern descent.¹⁵ European Gen Z-ers, were also born into the post-History era of Europe, refining their ideas in a world pre-Russian invasion of Ukraine, where NATO and the United States-Europe relationship are less relevant.

11) Ipsos, “How Young Americans view the Wars in the World Right Now,” 17 November 2023. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/how-young-americans-view-wars-world-right-now>

12) David Morgan, “1940 U.S. Census Data Released Online,” CBS News, 2 April 2012. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/1940-us-census-data-released-online/>

13) See CensusGOV, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045223>

14) D’Vera Cohn, Anna Brown and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Black and Hispanic Americans See Their Origins as Central to Who They Are, Less So for White Adults,” Pew Research, 14 May 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2021/05/14/americans-origins-and-connections-to-their-families-roots/>

15) Niall McCarthy, “Europe’s Biggest Foreign-Born Communities,” Statista, 27 February 2018. <https://www.statista.com/chart/13064/europes-biggest-foreign-born-communities/>

Conclusion

Whether Gen Z looks up to RFK Jr., Cornel West, Tucker Carlson, or Member of German Parliament Sahra Wagenknecht, what they all have in common are contempt for and dismissiveness of NATO. No matter where a Gen Z-er lies on the political spectrum or within the gender divide, the odds are that they are critical and dissatisfied with the current global security architecture. Gen Z does not (yet) have the power to hinder NATO, but NATO should be paying attention for the following reasons:

- 1) There is a global culture war happening, and Russia is winning by stoking and aiding in both far-left and far-right extremist campaigns. Gen Z is just the most symptomatic, given that they are the most exposed.
- 2) Gen Z makes up a third of the Alliance's population and, at present, appears to be one of the most politically engaged and connected generations in history. As NATO is the result of member states political will, the transatlantic relationship should be cognizant of tending to and growing this political will for future generations.
- 3) Lastly, and most importantly, young people fight wars. Across the member states of NATO, enlistment rates are down,¹⁶ and I do not believe this to be a coincidence given the described situation in this piece. As hot wars are here and have growing potential for spreading, young people need to be ready to understand who the enemy is and why NATO is their friend.

NATO member states must recognize Gen Z and the internet as spaces of confrontation, not just for addressing the adversary but also for understanding the psyches of those on the receiving end. The Alliance needs to go further than hosting the NATO Youth Summit or relying on student-led awareness campaigns; the majority of this generation is uninterested in these outlets.

NATO members should integrate Gen Z dialogue into their political processes, particularly with those who hold opposing views on the current security architecture. This will enable NATO to hear Gen Z's concerns, comprehend their motivations, and ultimately convince Gen Z that NATO is not just a dating acronym but the most effective conflict deterrent in human history, vital to the well-being of Gen Z's future.

This is not only a public relations issue but also a practical and operational one. In a world where Gen Z rejects hypocrisy and is quick to turn their back on those they see as doing so, the West must strategically align itself on the right side of history. Absent this, NATO is an aging 30-plus club.

16) Jack Detsch, "NATO Doesn't Have Enough Troops," Foreign Affairs, 10 April 2024.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/10/nato-troop-numbers-russia-ukraine-war/>