

**THE IRONY OF THE  
POST-COLD WAR  
GENERATION AND  
TRANSATLANTIC  
RELATIONS**

**2014-2015 TRANSATLANTIC  
GOVERNANCE PROJECT**

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## Introducing the Post-Cold War Generation

The alarm bells heralding a transatlantic relationship in crisis have been sounding for well over a decade, and yet the eleventh hour never seems to pass. For all the concern over a seemingly imminent collapse<sup>1</sup> in the transatlantic community, a more appropriate metaphor might simply be the slow and steady breakdown: like an old watch that slowly falls behind before winding down completely. The transatlantic community, as a clearly defined bloc of states advocating liberal democratic values since the end of the Second World War, is now struggling to adjust itself to the times. The kinetic energy of the Cold War that provided cohesiveness, as well as a shared sense of purpose, for the community is fading. The generation in their 20's and 30's – born shortly before the fall of the Iron Curtain and thereafter – lacks the perspective that shaped transatlantic relations for the last seventy years. It is an issue often overlooked and underappreciated. This upcoming generation<sup>2</sup> of decision- and policy-makers sees the Atlantic alliance with very different eyes and in more of a twilight than their parents and grandparents. The Cold War paradigm, characterized by the narrative of overcoming the adversity of the Second World War and withstanding the threat of the Soviet Union, is simply not salient to the post-Cold War kids. For this generation, 1968 is just a date in a textbook that would hardly conjure the dreary thought of a dark Prague spring; 1989 might even be equated sooner with Taylor Swift's new album than a political occurrence.

On the basis of such a post-Cold War perspective, this brief seeks to investigate the existing system of transatlantic relations wherein mobility and diversity constitute the foundation of a

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<sup>1</sup> From op-eds to anthologies, a number of analysts and political scientists have noted the shift occurring in transatlantic relations. While often hinting at a silver lining, many sources – particularly those published from 2003 onwards – tend to relay pessimistic outlooks. Major events such as the revelations of Abu Ghraib or the NSA wiretapping have unleashed big waves of such works, but these belong to a steady tide of literature doubting the survivability of transatlantic relations as they existed before 1989. Some examples include Cox's [The Trans-Atlantic Relationship in the Post-Cold War International Relations](#) (2004); Kupchan's [The Fourth Age: The Next Era in Transatlantic Relations](#) (2006); Anderson, Ikenberry and Risse's [End of the West?](#) (2008); or Dempsey's [The End of the Post-1945 Transatlantic Relationship](#) (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as the "post-Cold War generation" because (a) the political and historical connotation of the term conveys the circumstances of this cohort and (b) the author does not want to complicate this discussion with the loaded and now-reduced-to-kitsch phrase "millennial."

new globalized mentality. Critical to this investigation is the seismic shift in demographics that not only characterizes the post-Cold War generation, but that is furthermore steadily pulling the transatlantic community apart. The great irony of this endeavor, however, resides in defining the rough contours of this new era of transatlantic politics by setting it in opposition to that which no longer exists.

## **The Post-1989 Liberation and a New Generation**

The end of the Cold War and the largely peaceful and democratic revolutions were meant to indicate a new rose-colored era of liberty and prosperity. Indeed, with the Iron Curtain drawn back, the world of today has shed many of the divides that crisscrossed the continents. The new world order that the post-Cold War generation has grown up in is immeasurably more mobile than that of their parents and no longer split into fierce ideological camps. Almost counterintuitively though, the lack of distinct borders has not fostered a greater sense of common purpose and in some cases has elicited new problems. The prevailing mood of this generation is instead increasingly apprehensive and introspective.

For the first post-Cold War generation of North Americans and Europeans, the constraints their parents faced are simply unimaginable. Forget the visa struggle and the antenna to receive Western television channels; for the price of a low-cost airfare ticket an American on study abroad can raft the Vltava before meeting some ERASMUS-exchange friends in Europe's New Amsterdam<sup>3</sup>. Staying in touch internationally is easy, too; from free wi-fi at Starbucks to exchangeable SIM-cards, connectivity is never a problem. The geographical breakdown of the East-West divide, manifested most clearly in the expansion of the European Union, has facilitated unprecedented gains in physical mobility while rapid improvements in technology have hastened the process. Through exchange programs, communications technology and the

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<sup>3</sup> It's Prague, if you're curious to know.

comparative ease of international travel, young people on both sides of the Atlantic have far greater opportunities to immerse themselves in another culture and learn from one another than their parents' generation. And yet with newfound freedom comes adjustment. EU enlargement has turned out to be more complicated than merely importing the *acquis communautaire* into candidate states from the former Eastern bloc; for many young people mobility is a necessity more than an option or activity for personal or cultural development. Disparities in wealth and [youth employment](#) across member states or across urban and rural landscapes thus motivate migration amongst highly educated and unskilled workers; American youths face [similar dilemmas](#). While European youths are more likely to fear that their [futures are out of their control](#) than Americans, both groups tend to be [less optimistic](#) about the future than their parents were. The assumption that the world is an easier place to live in, either because of new opportunities or technology, ought to be dispelled. The fun and games of a road-tripping university student are short-lived and certainly do not encapsulate the experiences of the post-Cold War generation. Increased mobility is not just about leisure; it also makes demands of young people in today's economy. Young Americans are increasingly migrating to [expensive cities to find work at low wages](#), while [young Europeans](#) are turning to major cities like Berlin and London to find work even if it means learning a new language.<sup>4</sup> Troubling, however, is the residual effect of the economic depression, which prevents some members of this generation on both sides of the Atlantic from making any move due to lack of funds; as a result they are left in zones of high unemployment with few alternatives<sup>5</sup>. The inability to be mobile has thus evolved from a feature of the Cold War status quo to a severe disadvantage for those who cannot afford it.

The importance of mobility to this generation often remains an underestimated current in the

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<sup>4</sup> One such article on the situation in [Italy](#). Also worthy of note, the center of industrial productivity in Europe is shifting East as part of the "[extended production line of German industry](#)," making the East-to-West picture of migration that characterized much of the debate in 2006-2007 obsolete; movement is now more centrally driven.

<sup>5</sup> Important to note here is the inequitable distribution of hardship caused by the financial crisis. While [Poland](#) or [Germany](#) may have weathered the storm comparatively well, many states in the South of Europe, including [France](#), experienced much more severe state debt crises and unemployment rates.

larger discussion of the political transformation of 1989 which has enabled new political constellations. While the debate over the merits of capitalism versus communism no longer captivates the imaginations of activist youth, the past twenty-five years have also revealed that the [‘end of history’ is not coming](#). The triumph of the liberal democratic order was never guaranteed, and new electoral authoritarian states are showing that ballot boxes and democracies do not have to go hand in hand. Even in liberal democracies, many of the optimistic assumptions of the early 1990s have given way to cumbersome realities. In the transatlantic realm, the [rise of far-right](#) parties in Europe and political [polarization in America](#) are macro-level symptoms of the political paradigm that lost its counterbalance. Rather than continue to propagate the abstract narrative of the moral superiority of the West, the old alliance is often finding itself at odds over concrete issues of welfare,<sup>6</sup> migration,<sup>7</sup> surveillance,<sup>8</sup> targeted killings<sup>9</sup> and a host of other contentious topics. Young Europeans, especially, have grown up knowing the post-9/11 America, where republican and constitutional traditions have come under duress in the name of security interests; young Americans, conversely, see Europe as a reluctant partner that relies on American power projection abroad. In lieu of old black-and-white geographic divides, opinions on these issues are filling in a greyscale that enables a wide range of both convergence and disagreement within the post-Cold War generation. Yet in contrast to the accusations of political apathy amongst the youth, this generation has distinct progressive political preferences,<sup>10</sup> but would rather not be corralled into party politics or mass demonstrations the way their generational predecessors were. The online world, however,

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<sup>6</sup> Consider the conservative [American anxieties](#) toward the stereotyped European welfare state.

<sup>7</sup> While North Americans and Europeans cope with legal flows of migration with varied success, humanitarian crises associated with migration could be an area where these states could learn and benefit from cooperation and shared best practices. One poignant example includes the increased rate of unaccompanied minors both into the [US](#) and into [Europe](#).

<sup>8</sup> Represented best by the [NSA affair](#); this is practically a symbol now in the debate over privacy versus security, whereby the European mindset holds that “data protection and privacy are fundamental rights.”

<sup>9</sup> As just one recent example, disagreement over American military intervention in the Middle East has put the German government once again in a dilemma: what kind of complicity does the German government play in [drone strikes](#) when the facilities used to carry out these attacks happen to be located on German soil; and what can or should Germany do to restrict American activities conducted at a US Air Force base?

<sup>10</sup> For studies in America, see Kohnle’s [Angry, Yet Apathetic: The Young American Voter](#) (2014); a German perspective on the [“Generation Merkel”](#) (2014), and for a different spin on the same theme in the UK, [“Generation Boris”](#) (2013). Despite the many names, the commonalities are significant: youth are cast as generally socially liberal (i.e. progressive), but unaffiliated and accused of political indifference.

offers another outlet. In a [news consumption study](#) conducted in the UK, 60% of respondents aged 16-34 used online platforms to read the news; comparatively in another [study](#) from the US, respondents under the age of 30 were more than four times as likely to get news from social media than other age groups. As a means of news dissemination, [Facebook](#) commands a major share of social media traffic. The means of addressing youth in politics is thus shifting from print and the collectivized party platform to individualized, fragmented and unregulated networks of blogs and websites that know no geographical bounds.

Intriguingly, freedom of movement, communication and expression do not seem to compensate for the lost sense of shared purpose after the fall of the Berlin Wall in transatlantic relations. Indeed, the sheer expectation of and entitlement to these privileges seems to be a catalyst for taking the gains of liberal democratic values for granted among the post-Cold War generation. But this should not be about what resources the post-Cold War generation is squandering, but rather how their expectations and preferences are different. The seemingly dissipating cohesion between transatlantic youth, despite their marked commonalities in political disposition and environments, appears to be driven in part by other powerful forces specific to this demographic. Increasingly heterogeneous societies on both sides of the Atlantic with diverse youth populations and increasingly varied globalized interests, are causing the former transatlantic partners to look away from each other and dedicate themselves to the dual process of introspective reevaluation and outward reorientation—but they play out differently. For Americans this may be the renegotiation of a non-white majority populace coupled with the long-awaited pivot to Asia; for Europeans a coming-to-terms with necessary and permanent immigration from the South and East.

One of the greatest challenges confronting the future of transatlantic cooperation is the search for purpose that is currently preoccupying the transatlantic partners *individually* and *independently* of the community's attempts to define itself as a whole. National self-perception

based in religion, ethnicity or certain national characteristics have been and are continuing to be remolded to fit pluralistic societies that are, whether they like it or not, increasingly multicultural, diverse and dynamic. They also find themselves in direct economic and political competition with emerging powers in Asia and Latin America. That far-right parties in Europe and the anti-immigration wings of the Republican Party in America can resonate with their respective populaces is indicative of the strain that these evolving national communities are feeling. The post-Cold War generation's ability to negotiate what it means to be American, French, Polish, Dutch or, even more complexly, European, is a critical precursor to defining how the transatlantic community of the future will look and what it will demand of its citizenry.

## **The Transatlantic Post-Cold War Generation is more than Open Borders**

A new generation is growing into decision-making positions, and to them, the old view of a bipolar world does not apply. Born roughly from 1980-2000, this cohort is now aged between 15 and 35 years—a decade from now they will move into senior positions of political power, economic decision making and cultural trendsetting. Having spent their childhood during the last years of the Cold War or being born after 1989, this generation does not operate on the Cold War paradigm. To them, the world is new, open and diffuse; the old East-West orientation does not provide any pillars of identification anymore. While it would be false to presume that conditions in former Eastern communist states immediately reached parity with their Western counterparts after the end of the Cold War, members of this generation from both sides of the Iron Curtain have grown up more interconnected and tend to think of international relations more broadly in terms of globalization. Instead of the old East-West paradigm, the youth of today is more likely to identify the [North-South](#) divide as the world's fault line. Ironically this term might only slightly modify and mask the categories previously encompassed by East-West, wherein the "North" constitutes the core states of the "West" with the addition of new

European Union states and maybe Russia, while mainly less economically developed countries belong to the “South,” regardless of their relation to the equator. The defining role of wealth and economic prosperity in this division reflects both the transformation of ideological boundaries and the continuation of global regional stratification.

Despite the absence of the Cold War political climate, the post-Cold War generation is very familiar with instability—not in the form of a frozen nuclear conflict, but in the form of continuing uncertainty. At the global level, this is represented most clearly by the 2008 Financial Crisis and the immediate concerns of economic wellbeing and future prospects. For young adults, this has manifested itself most clearly in the student debt crisis, which leaves graduates with both the [financial disadvantage and mental stress](#) of repaying student loans – a problem of heightened proportions in a high-tuition country like the United States. Additionally, the coupling of high levels of debt and unemployment with rising housing costs has resulted in an increasing number of 20 and 30 year olds living at home instead of taking their chances independently of parental assistance.<sup>11</sup>

Politically, the notion of anxiety in a changing world is even more ubiquitous. While some subsets of this cohort may have personal memories of the upheavals of the 1990s – whether in terms of post-communist transitions to democracy in Northeastern Europe or the violent transformations of states in the Southeast – the era ushered in by the 9/11 attacks in the United States is characterized by a more fundamental form of uncertainty. Though some members of this generation may even be too young to have memories of this pivotal event, the vague yet pervasive threat of terrorism constitutes the new “external”<sup>12</sup> menace of our age. The response

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<sup>11</sup> Although statistics over the past twenty years have indicated that young adults are increasingly likely to live at home longer, the Financial Crisis has exacerbated the problem. For statistics on: the [United States](#); [UK](#); [Germany](#).

<sup>12</sup> International terrorism in this sense is the counterpart to the Soviet external threat of the Cold War. The externalization of terrorism, however, might be said to better reflect a perspective that views terrorism as an import from unstable regions of the world, although in fact many terrorist acts of the past decade have been committed domestically or regionally by homegrown terrorists. The fact that terrorists are fragmented without a country, capital city, or noted leader, also makes it a different sort of threat that the Soviet Union.

to this atmosphere of insecurity, however, is one of the distinct ways in which the post-Cold War generation is developing differently on opposite sides of the Atlantic. While Americans, looking through the lens of 9/11, may be predisposed to focus on external foes, Europeans express a greater concern over internal social fears. Young college students in the United States, for example, could [take to the streets in disturbing euphoria](#) after the geographically far removed killing of Osama bin Laden, but European youths have no comparable cathartic outlet in the face of [23% unemployment rates](#) in the EU. The policies that have emerged within these camps to respond to these fears further exacerbate the differences: overwhelming American technological capacity has resulted in the implementation of massive surveillance and the use of air assets to identify and preemptively counteract potential threats. Meanwhile the EU is not only constrained by its limited military capabilities and the reluctance of many Europeans to engage out of area, but furthermore by moral and political objections to employing similar tactics or even joining U.S. efforts.<sup>13</sup> The continuing discord over what course of action to take, if any, in Libya, Syria, or Iraq, as well as indecision over the right course of action regarding Eastern Ukraine, further suggests that the pervasive atmosphere of instability on the periphery of the transatlantic community will persist into the indefinite future.

The differences in approach to counterterrorism from one side of the Atlantic to the other, however, are not specific to the post-Cold War generation, but symptomatic of a scenario where the transatlantic partners no longer feel compelled to act as a politically aligned community. Perhaps unexpectedly, the greatest challenge to both national and transatlantic identifications in the coming years will not be driven by political division, but rather by an immense, yet basic feature of these societies: demography.

Demographic changes never come out of the blue, so the minimal signs of divergence now

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<sup>13</sup> Although the recent conversations about surveillance in France may indicate, at least at the governmental level, a shift in attitudes towards some of these issues.

indicate a long and unrelenting process of aging, decreasing birthrates and increasing levels of immigration within North American and European societies. The post-Cold War generation is thus merely a precursor to the larger shift to come. The population of America is increasingly of non-European descent, and given high birth rates, is going to stay relatively younger and grow for many decades to come. Aging will raise issues for both sides of the Atlantic, but according to [recent census data](#) and projections, the current median age in the United States will increase from 37 to 41 years by 2050, whereas European populations will be almost ten years older on average. In fact, over a decade ago [The Economist](#) was already predicting that “America's ties of family and culture will multiply and strengthen with the main sources of its immigration—Latin America chiefly, but also East and South Asia. As this happens, it is probable that it will also pull American attention further away from Europe.” In a new [special edition](#) for 2015, *The Economist* revisited the same material with gusto. Not only do forecasts predict that the United States will no longer be majority white by 2044, but a quarter of Americans will be Latino. Focusing on what this means for the present, each year an additional 900,000 Latinos reach voting age. The make-up of the United States is changing fast – from a country where 70-80% of citizens could trace their historical roots back to the Old World, to a veritable ethnic mix that will feel increasingly closer to the South and the Far East. Cultural and linguistic ties, as a part of the American melting pot culture, will strengthen relations in other domains such as the economy, which has a gravitational pull of its own.<sup>14</sup> The social and economic opportunities offered by increasing cultural diversity in the United States on the whole outweigh the anxieties, represented in part by anti-immigration policies and deportation rhetoric, which inevitably accompany big changes. In contrast, however, the perceived threat of immigration to European societies could result in a reactionary situation where anxiety overtakes opportunity.

If America is being pulled towards its South and West, Europe has its own South and East to

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to the rise of the [Chinese and Indian economies](#) as major loci of global economic development, the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP) is another facet of an American pivot toward Asia that cannot be overlooked. After roughly five years of negotiation, a completed the deal would encompass 12 countries and 40% of the world's economy.

contend with. The unremitting instability in Syria and elsewhere across the Middle East and North Africa has contributed to an increased anxiety over the immediate [migrant crisis](#) in the Mediterranean. Moreover, [colonial legacies](#) also play a major factor in the origins of migrants arriving from outside the EU, particularly from Francophone Africa. The question of immigrants in the European Union, however, is not only characterized by the political instability of the Union's geographic periphery, but also by aging. In a [study](#) conducted by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development, the phenomenon of an aging and shrinking Europe<sup>15</sup> will necessitate the acceptance of migrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia into society, as the current birthrates in a majority of EU countries is well below the 2.1 replacement rate required for a stable population. On the whole, Europe's population is expected to shrink by over 8% by 2050 – a drop from 590 million to 540 million people. Aging will place additional strains not only on European welfare programs and infrastructure, but also on economies: Spain will face a major adjustment with an expected increase in median age from 40 to 50 years by 2050; Germany's averages are predicted to rise from 44 to 51; and only in the United Kingdom and France the numbers are slightly lower: from 40 to 43.<sup>16</sup>

Within the EU, the relative ease of mobility is contributing to huge population flows within the Schengen Zone. Even if the vast majority of post-Cold War era youths do not identify primarily as "European," most do consider themselves simultaneously [nationals of their member states and Europeans](#); a nascent, if weak, European identification is in the making.<sup>17</sup> This by no way means to overlook the slow and disruptive process of balancing traditional national

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<sup>15</sup> Defined in the study as EU countries, Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland.

<sup>16</sup> These statistics are taken from the previously referenced [Pew Research Center Report on Global Demographics](#) from 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Although Eurobarometer data indicates that feelings of "Europeanness" have been adversely affected by the Financial Crisis, when measured by age cohort, the younger the recipient is, the more likely they will respond that they identify as "European." This trend appears to hold over time and indicate a growing identification of the post-Cold War generation with the EU.

characteristics (including religion and ethnicity)<sup>18</sup> with broader civic values (tolerance, principles of democracy and rule of law). Just as the renegotiation of an American culture that is no longer majority Protestant and white will cast waves throughout the United States, European national and supranational forms of self-perception will require fundamental recalibration to accommodate the reality facing a continent of not only internal migratory movements, but also immigration.

## **Discovering the Substance of a New Transatlantic Narrative**

Against the background of societies in transition, what can the post-Cold War generation do to reconstruct the Western Alliance and thus keep transatlantic relations thriving? While the solution to rekindling the transatlantic community might lie in the affirmation of the civic values that will be key to maintaining social cohesion within the rapidly changing demographics in North America and Europe, the new Atlantic order cannot simply depend on the resurrection of old dichotomies to prop up these liberal principles. The normative concepts of western, democratic and liberal are lacking in substance when stripped of a sufficiently defined eastern, authoritarian and illiberal other. The argument that the transatlantic community could define itself in opposition to new reactionary phenomena – for example the extreme fundamentalist ideology of ISIS – is unlikely to yield meaningful results as the rejection of such outright brutality is not specific to so-called western values. Furthermore, such an opposition may do little to alleviate the introspective concerns over assimilation and social cohesion in diversifying societies. In essence, the fundamental problem of the post-Cold War generation, as well as the crisis of transatlantic relations, is that it has been captured in a moment of transition out of the previous politico-historical epoch for a long quarter century. The way forward requires meeting difficult and new challenges without falling back on old dichotomies.

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<sup>18</sup> Even though many European states have historically defined citizenship by legal standing rather than blood relations, the common conceptions of being "British," "German," "Italian" or "Slovakian" are still socially adapting to questions of mixed heritage families or migration backgrounds.

Remaining in the post-Cold War frame of mind is thus the greatest irony and challenge to the post-Cold War generation. The transatlantic community of the future will have to develop new core principles and scope for cooperation; outdated views premised solely in military predominance and collaboration, such as the estimation that [NATO is the biggest priority in transatlantic relations](#), might have made sense in the 1980s but no longer. While it is hardly fair to assume that an entire cohort of transatlanticists has agency over their collective identity, this group must certainly hope they can find another way to define themselves.<sup>19</sup> Certain clues to this definition loom on the horizon. As demographics change, American and European societies will probably not be able to talk of wholesale transatlantic perspectives; rather, subsets within this cohort will remain engaged in the transatlantic community. In other words, while Europe and America remain highly economically integrated, their respective youth populations may consider transatlantic relations as more of a given rather than an overarching global priority. Consequently, other subsets within these societies will pivot towards other regions. The post-Cold War generation in America and Europe will thereby take on more globalized perspectives. This decreasing sense of intimacy within the transatlantic community is a substantial change from the Cold War perspective, yet nostalgia must be warded off. If the future of the transatlantic community is about lamenting the passing of what once was, then there is no future for it either.

Given the new macro-trends, however, the underlying system for a lasting transatlantic cooperation may still be in place. The legal and technological infrastructure enabling extensive mobility is perhaps the foundation of its future and could serve as a major propellant. It is up to the post-Cold War generation to make the most of the opportunities made available by relatively unrestrictive migration, while also ensuring that this system does not seize up.

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<sup>19</sup> "Millennial" is equally devoid of meaning, as it is based on a happenstance of the common calendar rather than defining values or characteristics.

Defending mobility must be among the highest priorities of this generation, particularly given the unprecedented freedom of movement that characterizes the transatlantic space. From visas to youth exchanges and cheap flights, mobility must increasingly become legally and financially feasible.

Guaranteeing the continued existence of a mobile transatlantic community will require political engagement, but the post-Cold War generation does not need to fear the restraints of a pre-package set of ideological principles. In response to events such as the Financial Crisis and the NSA affair, young people are calling into question the existing model of capitalist democracy and its capacity to appropriately self-regulate. Many social desires – including privacy, security, welfare and social justice – have yet to evolve into mutually understood principles, but they lie at the heart of current contentions between transatlantic partners. Political crises that foster the sense that Americans and Europeans have irreconcilable preferences regarding these values are what currently threaten cooperation in the long run. Hopefully, however, transatlanticists will be able to endorse a degree of political pragmatism in the name of the transatlantic community. This means that unanimous agreement does not have to be found on, for example, the issue of data privacy; what it does mean is that both sides of the Atlantic need to negotiate their common goals. In the aforementioned case, this could be developing similar standards for accountability mechanisms for government and commercial use of personal data. While it is unlikely that any consensus will emerge over the rank importance of these various values, within a generalized framework they could still establish the core of a political mindset that one day could provide a substantial alternative to “post-Cold War” identifiers.

The clock did not stop in 1989. Time is marching forward, and the transatlantic community must find a way to keep on ticking. As the Atlantic order faces a future full of diverse new opportunities, the post-Cold War generation will function as the bridge between the old paradigm and something new and globalized.

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