

# Responsibility not vetoes

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If you look up 'responsibility' in the dictionary, you'll find two definitions. Firstly, 'the state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or of having control over someone'; secondly, 'the state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something'. If even the dictionary interprets the term in two different ways – one looking to the future, the other to the past – how much scope for interpretation is there at the top of political systems, the place where responsibility is concentrated? What does responsibility mean to those in power, and how do they interpret it?

### VETOES ALLOW STATES TO BLOCK DECISIONS THEY DON'T APPROVE OF

A glance at the world of politics shows that politicians interpret it very freely indeed. And nowhere is that clearer than in the use of vetoes, a mechanism that allows states to block decisions they don't approve of. They're especially common in contexts where cooperation is important, for instance at international organisations such as the European Union or United Nations. A veto circumvents the process that should be at the heart of cooperation: seeking a common solution through debate and consensus, and putting common resolutions into practice in a responsible manner.

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Veto politics has dire consequences. The UN Security Council has been unable to take action over the war in Syria because Russia keeps vetoing resolutions. As a

result, the people in the warzone have been living in fear for their lives every single day since 2011. International cooperation, which is said to be the greatest achievement of the post-WW2 era, only exists on paper when it comes to Syria.

### WHEN WILL THE EU ABANDON THE PRINCIPLE OF UNANIMITY?

The European Union is also reluctant to wholly abandon the principle of unanimity. Most votes are decided by a qualified majority (at least 55% of EU member states representing at least 65% of the EU population). But changes to tax law, for instance, still require unanimity to pass. So if one of the twenty-six member states doesn't approve of a proposed change, it won't happen. That means every member automatically has a power of veto.

### VETO POWERS UNBALANCE INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Historically, vetoes were intended to ensure that countries with contrary views had an incentive to work together. A government that has the option to block decisions doesn't need to worry that they will negatively impact its own citizens. That's the theory, anyway. But what was intended in the aftermath of the Second World War to protect individual states had by the late twentieth century morphed into the exact opposite. Individual states block resolutions that have a clear majority within organisations. Veto powers unbalance international cooperation, slowing down international political processes to a crawl and allowing individual interests to trump the common, cosmopolitan good.

International cooperation can't work if the gulf between powerful and less powerful states is widened by an imbalance in voting powers. Veto mechanisms need to be abolished. They contribute to an uneven

playing field for cooperation. Veto and unanimity principles may be seen by some as a guarantee of cooperation, but in reality the most important condition for cooperation and consensus is for countries to relinquish sovereignty. Nowadays, those who insist on having a veto are not interested in real cooperation. At the individual level, we are willing to relinquish sovereignty and follow the rules and constitution of the country or city where we live. We pay taxes and wear face masks. And it works. Without any need for vetoes.

### PROGRESS IS ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN WE ACT COLLABORATIVELY

We now need to project that onto the global arena too. Those who wish to take responsibility for themselves, their fellow human beings, their citizens, need to accept they can't always have everything their own way. If we want to make progress, we have to act collaboratively.

International politics can't do that while it clings to obsolete mechanisms. In the face of genocides like those witnessed during the war in Syria, it's more vital than ever for the international community to exert pressure and impose sanctions, such as a trade embargo or punitive tariffs. We know from past experience how to effectively take a stance in international affairs. If it works in bilateral trade relations, it will definitely work when states work together as allies. Those who seek to block progress must expect to be blocked themselves.



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