



Future of Democracy | 03.2020

## The United Nations. Indispensable, but invisible.

**A large majority of Germans are calling for less national egoism and more international cooperation in solving global problems. The UN plays an indispensable role in this, but it is too intangible for many.**

Migration, social inequality, climate change and now a global pandemic – these are just some of the global problems that countries across the world can only solve together. But instead of unity, populists are demanding a retreat into nationalism, and even during the ongoing pandemic, the initial response has often been: Seal the borders and focus on our own country. The United States' withdrawal from the WHO is only one of the most alarming examples: International cooperation is under pressure.

However, there is little to indicate that Germans are turning away from cooperation. As far as most are concerned, the global collective good is more important than national self-interests. In fact, an overwhelming majority (80%) would like to see countries work together to improve living conditions worldwide. At the same time, only a small slice is concerned about whether this also entails political or economic benefits for Germany.

We have identified four types of multilateralists among Germans: regional isolationists, assertive nationalists, international equality watchdogs and

global cosmopolitans. The vast majority of Germans (74%) are of the latter two types. They care about the welfare of the entire world, and their frame of reference extends far beyond their country's borders.

The UN is the central forum for international cooperation; there, 193 countries work together to respond to global challenges. Today, 75 years after its founding, most Germans (67%) have a very or rather positive view of the UN. At the same time, since they don't see the UN as having any immediate relevance to their own lives, their image of it remains vague. It's hard to grasp, and only a few people know who is working on what and how. Many fear that national self-interests are too important in the UN. They also criticize that member states have varying degrees of influence within the UN, citing examples such as the veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

What they want for the future is clear: more visibility for the UN, more equality among its member states, and less space for national self-interests.

The United Nations (UN) was founded 75 years ago and is now the central organization for international cooperation. Its 193 member countries work together to foster security and peace in the world and in suborganizations on specific global challenges, such as in the fields of health (WHO) and culture (UNESCO). But how good of a fit is the UN for the current day and age? What image do people in Germany have of the UN, how do they rate its work, and what would they like to see from it in the future? And, on a slightly more fundamental level, how do people in Germany view international cooperation in general? This policy brief provides answers to these questions. They are based on in-depth psychological interviews conducted by the rheingold institute and a public opinion survey. All quotations in the following text come from the in-depth interviews; the specific color of the quotation indicates the different types of multilateralists described in detail on pages 4-7.



## Positive, even if somewhat vague: The view of the UN

Most Germans have a positive overall opinion of the UN: Two-thirds of them (67%) have a very or rather positive view of the UN. Central suborganizations of the UN that address a clear and tangible set of topics and tasks are rated even more positively: For example, over 73% have a very or rather positive opinion of the World Health Organization, and the figures for UNESCO and UNICEF even exceed 80% (at 81% and 83%, respectively).

### Sources:

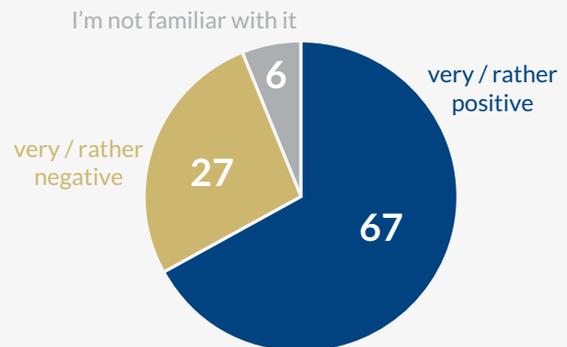
The data forming the basis of this publication has two sources: The qualitative data on attitudes toward international cooperation and the United Nations are based on in-depth psychological interviews with 48 individuals in Germany, which were conducted by the rheingold institute on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung in February and March 2020.

The survey data used originates from an online survey that YouGov conducted on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung, which had 2,024 respondents (field time: June 26-29, 2020). The results have been weighted and are representative for Germany's overall population of individuals age 18 and older. The survey quantified the attitude types identified in the qualitative in-depth interviews. Respondents were assigned to a particular attitude type based on their response patterns in an index made up of seven weighted identification questions. More detailed information can be found here: [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/united-nations/](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/united-nations/)

## Positive view of the UN

Share of the population, in percent

Question: For each of the institutions listed below, please indicate whether you have a very positive, rather positive, rather negative or very negative view of them. – United Nations (UN)



Basis: Population of Germany aged 18 and older (sample size: 2,024).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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In the interviews, it becomes clear that the general attitude toward the UN is consistently positive, but that it is not very concrete for most Germans. They are familiar with the name, but most of them are unclear about what the UN is, who collaborates there, how and on which issues. In their everyday lives, they have no points of reference to the UN's work and view it as being hardly relevant to their own lives. *"The UN is far away from my world, far removed from my everyday life. (...) I don't know a thing about UN politics. It's too abstract."* (m, 34)

For them, the UN is part of a globalized world that is complex, polarized and hard to grasp – and therefore one that they aren't keen to grapple with. According to this line of thinking even for cosmopolitans, it's easier to ignore global problems – and therefore the UN, as well.

*"The world's grievances make me furious. I don't want to talk or hear anything about them. (...) The UN is active in countries you don't even want to think about. I don't want to see that; it's all just too brutal."* (f, 56)

However, if people can overcome this resistance and give some serious thought to the UN, and if the UN's goals and actual work (e.g., the UNHCR's efforts to protect refugees) become tangible to them, then many can be convinced of its value:

*"I am won over by its goals and what it does. I had no idea what its aims were or what it does."* (f, 21)

## My own nation or United Nations: Which is more important?

Although the image of the UN is generally positive, the heart of the conflict behind the “United Nations” can be seen in its very name. The question arises: What is more important when making difficult decisions? One’s own nation? Or the collective good of all nations, the United Nations? Many suspect (and worry) that national interests are too dominant in the UN.

*“It’s just like the 14th century: Every country in the world still only pursues its own interests.” (m, 33)*

They believe that this weakens the UN in terms of its ability to actually solve global problems.

*“We have a planetary state of emergency, and the UN is helpless.” (m, 49)*

This sentiment is also evident in the wider public, as three-fourths of respondents (77%) said they viewed the UN as an arena of competing national self-interests. In the interviews, it became clear that weighing up one’s own interests as an individual or member of a nation against the collective good of the entire world was not easy and was initially met with resistance. This holds true for attitudes toward both the UN and international cooperation in general.

## Collective good trumps self-interest: Overwhelming support for international cooperation

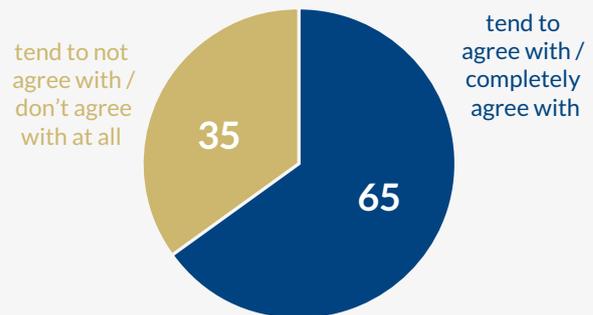
Fundamental support for international cooperation is remarkably high, as 80% of respondents said it is useful for countries to solve global problems together. In fact, this level of support remains high even when international cooperation entails certain disadvantages for Germany. Even then, two-thirds (65%) of respondents are still staunch multilateralists.

But why is this? Well, it depends on when international cooperation is generally regarded as being useful. In this case, it becomes clear that most Germans believe that the global collective good is more important than their country’s national interests. More precisely, international cooperation seems to make sense to them if it improves living conditions worldwide (48%) and if it leads to more understanding among nations and peaceful coexistence (37%). Meanwhile, only 8% respectively believe that it is important for the own region and home country to enjoy a benefit from cooperating with other countries or for Germany to benefit politically or economically from doing so.

## High level of support for international cooperation – even if there are negative consequences for Germany

Share of the population, in percent

Statement: In efforts to solve global problems, it is sometimes necessary for Germany to accept short-term negative consequences to bring about a positive long-term result for everyone.



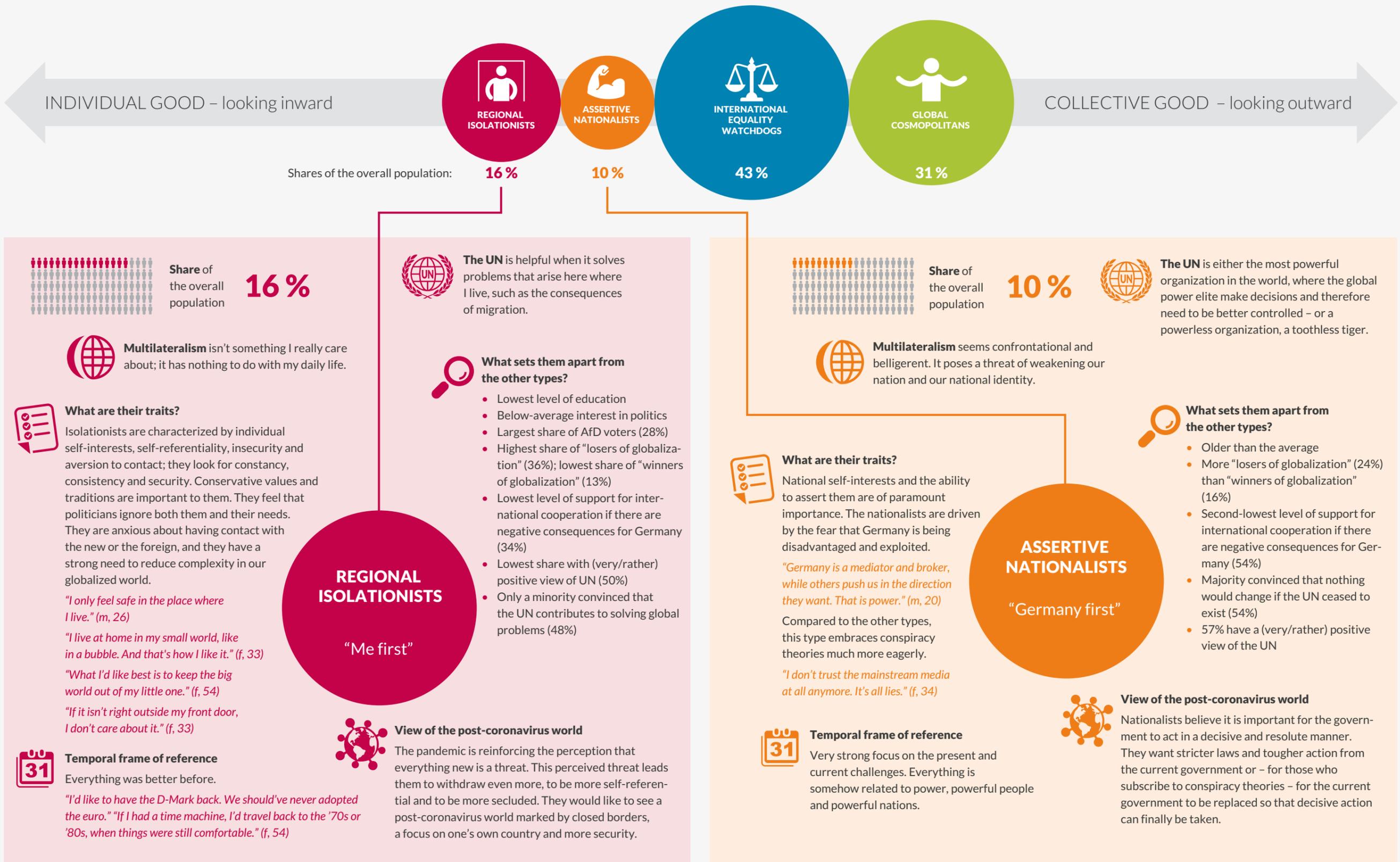
Basis: Population of Germany aged 18 and older (sample size: 2,024).

Source: YouGov on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

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## More cosmopolitans than isolationists in Germany: Four types of multilateralists

Although the level of popular support for international cooperation and multilateralism are generally high, digging deeper reveals some differences. The interviews have allowed us to identify four types of multilateralists (for information on how the index was created, see “Sources”). These types, which clearly differ in terms of their motivations for supporting international cooperation, are: regional isolationists, assertive nationalists, international equality watchdogs and global cosmopolitans. Based on their basic orientation, they can be situated between the above-mentioned competing poles of the individual vs. the collective good. The typology also indicates their spatial frame of reference – ranging from regional to global – in addition to describing the degree to which international organizations are tangible to them or remote from their everyday lives. Looking at the distribution of types in Germany’s overall population, one sees that 43% are international equality watchdogs and 31% are global cosmopolitans. In other words, the vast majority of Germans (74%) are oriented toward the global collective good and have a frame of reference that extends beyond the concrete problems “on their doorstep.”



Source: Author's depiction based on in-depth psychological interviews conducted by the rheingold institute and a YouGov survey, both on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.



**Share of the overall population 43%**

**Multilateralism** should ensure greater justice and reduce social inequalities in the world.  
*"No single country has the power to solve global problems on its own. All countries must act in concert." (f, 21)*

**What are their traits?**  
 The equality watchdogs have a strong desire for equal rights and rules for all nations as well as for using cooperation to reduce global inequality.  
*"A world without international organizations would be less fair. Things would be a whole lot worse for many people. The law of the strongest would apply." (f, 23)*  
 They are rarely affected by inequality themselves and see themselves more as arbitrators in the international arena.

**Temporal frame of reference**  
 The "here and now" is the predominant reference point. Their gaze occasionally wanders to the future; sometimes they are more hopeful about a fairer and more harmonious world, but sometimes they are more skeptical.

**View of the post-coronavirus world**  
 They worry about growing divides in society, and that these divisions could be worsened – nationally and internationally – if the crisis has unequal impacts. They are increasingly focused on fairness.

**What sets them apart from the other types?**

- Below-average interest in politics
- Largest share of non-voters (40%)
- More "winners of globalization" (23%) than "losers of globalization" (17%)
- The majority is convinced that the world would be worse off without the UN (59%)
- Big supporters of international cooperation – even if there are negative consequences for Germany (72%)
- Large share has a (very/rather) positive view of the UN (68%) and is convinced that the UN contributes to solving global problems (68%)

**INTERNATIONAL EQUALITY WATCHDOGS**  
 "Justice for all"

**The UN** is the arbitrator when it comes to international cooperation and a counterweight to the self-interests of nations and corporations.  
*"The UN does a lot of good. It is like a moral authority." (m, 62)*  
 The veto power is therefore viewed very critically.  
*"The UN should be more agile, and it shouldn't be blocked by the US, Russia, China, France or the UK. It needs new scope for action. (...) We have a planetary state of emergency, and the UN is helpless." (m, 49)*

**Share of the overall population 31%**

**Multilateralism** connects the many different countries, fosters cohesion and helps to achieve common goals. The fact that countries are different is enriching.  
*"... unites, stabilizes and stands for a shared set of values." (m, 56)*

**What are their traits?**  
 The cosmopolitans like to live in a world marked by diversity, and they view this as enriching both for themselves and the world. They look beyond their own horizons and enjoy thinking in complex, global terms.

**Temporal frame of reference**  
 They look toward the future to see how things will go for the whole world, whether there will still be nations, and how political decisions will probably impact the future.

**View of the post-coronavirus world**  
 They are dealing with the situation calmly, remaining steadfast in the crisis, and trying to make the best of it. They appreciate the fact that things have slowed down a bit during this phase and that the environment has been able to "take a breather". They would like to see more global solidarity in the world after the pandemic.

**What sets them apart from the other types?**

- Above-average income and education levels
- High level of interest in politics
- Highest share of "winners of globalization" (35%), lowest share of "losers of globalization" (10%)
- Biggest supporters of international cooperation – even if there are negative consequences for Germany (76%)
- Largest share of people convinced that the world would be worse off without the UN (63%) and that the UN contributes to solving global problems
- 78% have a (very/rather) positive view of the UN

**GLOBAL COSMOPOLITANS**  
 "Unity in diversity"

**The UN** has good goals and values, but often loses out in the battle against national self-interests. The cosmopolitans are frustrated by the clash between ideals and reality in the UN. For them, the veto power embodies national self-interests.  
*"More than anything, the veto power limits the UN's ability to act. If one member is opposed to something, the whole thing fails. It doesn't have real power. It's just an aid agency that can't shape policy." (m, 56)*  
*"...in the process, you always merely settle on the lowest common denominator. There need to be new voting rights." (f, 49)*

Source: Author's depiction based on in-depth psychological interviews conducted by the rheingold institute and a YouGov survey, both on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

## **Demands for the future: More “United Nations”**

For the future, people across all types demand for: more cohesion and more “united” nations. An overwhelming majority (91%) calls for less egoism on the part of individual countries and more cohesion within the UN. Nine in ten (90%) would like to see more equality among the UN’s member countries. Likewise, 90% call for clear rules that are binding on all countries. The veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US – was particularly unpopular: 81% of respondents are opposed to having individual countries be able to block resolutions. The public views the veto power as too often rendering the Security Council incapable of taking action when decisions on war and peace need to be made.

But for the reforms described above to “reach” the populace, the reforms – and the UN itself – must become more visible and tangible.

*“I didn’t know anything about the UN before the interview. (...) Now I’m happy that something like the UN exists. (...) People who do these things are heroes. They need to do more publicity work and be more active in the media.” (f, 21)*

This would be challenging, but not impossible. Some images will very clearly convey these reforms as well as the values and principles that the UN embodies:

- (1) More equality among UN member states instead of national egoism and rivalry. The equal rights of the members become evident through images of the round seating arrangement or the sea of flags.
- (2) Equality should not lead to indecision. The UN needs a leadership that can act as a strong force to shield the weak. This image is often associated with former Secretary-General Kofi Annan.
- (3) The UN and its leadership should not become too powerful. This is why having binding rules is so crucial. These are made clear in the UN Charter and by having the International Court of Justice.
- (4) But the rules should not lead to excessive bureaucracy and hamper the UN. Mandates that are effective and visible to citizens, such as the UN peacekeeping missions and UNICEF aid operations, demonstrate the UN’s ability to act and solve problems.

If the UN succeeds in meeting key demands for reform and in making them visible in the ways listed above, the UN will be even more united – as well as more effective and indispensable.

## **Author:**



**Christina Tillmann**  
christina.tillmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81335

Christina Tillmann is Director of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program.

## **Further reading:**

Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020). Acceptance of international organizations using the United Nations as an example. Results of a qualitative-psychological study by the rheingold Institute. Gütersloh

Dellmuth, Lisa, Jan Aart Scholte, Jonas Tallberg and Soetkin Verhaegen (2019). The Elite-Citizen Gap in International

Organization Legitimacy. Conference paper for the APSA’s 2019 annual conference. Washington, DC. August 28 – September 1.

Popovski, Vesselin (2018). “Renovating the Principal Organs of the United Nations.” In Just Security in an Undergoverned World, edited by William Durch, Joris Larik and Richard Ponzio. Oxford. 391-412.

### **Legally responsible for content**

Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
D-33311 Gütersloh · www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

Dr. Robert Vehrkamp, Christina Tillmann

Editorial assistance and inquiries:  
gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81105

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### **A Policy Brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung**

The policy brief of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s “Future of Democracy” program deals with current topics and challenges related to democracy. It concentrates on the issues of political participation, the future of parties and parliaments, the sustainability of democratic politics as well as new forms of direct democracy and citizens’ participation. It is published 6-8 times per year on an unfixed basis.