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Values in challenging times: strategic crisis management in the EU



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Crises cause hardships and often existential threats to citizens. They also pose significant challenges to policy makers. Against this backdrop, the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE) was, next to the Group of Chief Scientific Advisers (GCSA), tasked to produce expert advice on Strategic Crisis Management in the European Union. Their statement was published alongside the Scientific Opinion of the GCSA and an Evidence Review Report by the SAPEA consortium.^{1–3} The EGE recognises that policy making should be based on sound scientific evidence that identifies the root causes of specific crises and analyses how different groups are affected by them. It highlights the need for public health authorities and political decision-makers to establish suitable opportunities for people from as many groups as possible to share their experiences and perceptions.

The EGE also stresses that all public policies are inevitably shaped by moral values. Making these values explicit is important as it opens these values up to public scrutiny. Doing so can improve communication and make decisions more robust: Policies cannot be defeated simply by bringing value considerations to bear afterwards that were not anticipated in advance. It also

increases legitimacy because stakeholders' values have been taken into account upfront.

One value that is of particular relevance in the context of strategic crisis management is solidarity. When solidarity is used as an analytic lens on how to prioritise scarce resources in our crisis management policies, for example, it can help to make more ethical and—socially and politically—more sustainable decisions. When it is used normatively, solidarity can help us to see (and act) beyond differences between people, and to focus on what we share and what brings us closer. It thus prioritises policy solutions that benefit everyone and particularly the most vulnerable, instead of pitching the needs of different groups in society—or different countries—against each other. In this sense, solidarity goes against the treatment of individual rights and collective goods as a zero-sum game, where one must give for the other one to gain.

Rather than seeing individual rights and collective goods as dichotomous, solidarity reminds us that they are complementary and require each other. People who are afraid to leave their homes due to high infection risk in public places, or because they fear armed conflict or other forms of violence, cannot exercise their individual rights. The same goes for people who cannot heat their homes or buy food. Similarly, lack of respect for individual rights will not lead to desirable forms of living and working together.⁴ Solidarity can bridge individual and collective needs and interests in the deep awareness of

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human interdependence across borders, social groups, and other boundaries.

As useful as solidarity can be in crisis management, it can also be misused. Too often, solidarity is appealed to in purely tokenistic ways by governments. During conflicts, solidarity has been mobilised by political leaders to promote nationalistic or racist goals. During the ongoing pandemic, officials have called on citizens to practise solidarity with others while neglecting to enact it themselves—by failing to provide adequate support to people who were struggling, or by failing to ensure global vaccine equity.

The EGE could have foregrounded many other values in its Statement—such as dignity, justice, or privacy, which all play crucial roles in strategic crisis management, too. The reason that the EGE chose to place emphasis on solidarity was to sketch how it can be used more fruitfully. This includes placing stronger emphasis on institutionalised forms of solidarity, not merely individual action. While interpersonal acts of solidarity between citizens can go a long way in crises, they need to be supported and upheld by institutional efforts. Without this, not only do we lose out on the positive effects of solidarity, but distrust, polarisation, and atomisation are likely to increase. Taking solidarity seriously as a guiding principle for crisis management means directing financial and other resources to solidaristic systems of social and economic support. Solidaristic systems are those to which people contribute to their abilities and from which they receive support as they need it. Societies with lower levels of social and economic inequality are better prepared to respond to most crises.^{5–7} Governments have a duty to combat poverty, to ensure that everyone receives the economic, social, health-related, and psychological support that they need. When people are economically safe it is also

easier for them to support others, and to comply with crisis management measures.

Contributors

This comment is based upon a Statement by the European Group on Ethics in Science and New Technologies (EGE), which advises the European Commission. As members of the EGE, all authors participated in writing the Statement. The Comment itself was drafted by the first three authors (BP, MdCN, NES), with contributions from all authors. All authors participated in the revisions and approved the final version.

Declaration of interests

All authors are members of the EGE, and many are also members of national bioethics councils. They have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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