



Creeping crises in the Baltic Sea Region: Challenges and strategies

Today the Baltic Sea Region faces slow-building, often compounding threats: pressure on critical infrastructure (energy grids, subsea cables, ports), mounting strains on fragile critical societal functions (food and medicine supply, banking, digital services), climate-driven multi-hazards (coastal flooding, droughts, wildfires). Why don't our leaders take decisive, sustained action to stop these threats from developing into acute crises with devastating consequences for societies?

This puzzling question is normally the starting point for much of the existing research on these threats. In the field of crisis management, there is a growing literature devoted to why governments are not doing enough to stop the long-term build-up of full-blown societal crises.

Within this literature, researchers point out that the factors responsible for inaction include the limited possibilities of experience-based learning, uncertainty about future consequences, instability of responsible organisations, and an unclear distribution of responsibility between levels of government—often leaving the fight to local visionary individuals and “change agents.” Another constraint is a “crisis of imagination”: leaders sometimes struggle to picture credible futures early enough to act.

Building on these insights, many argue that we need a more profound understanding of how and when knowledge about today's threats leads to intervention, along with practical methods to strengthen the imagination capacity of policymakers. There is also a belief that practical and tangible examples of action—clear best practices and demonstrable results can inspire policymakers to act in time before it is too late.

We therefore adopt the creeping-crisis perspective to make sense of and raise awareness about evolving threats and promote early triggers for action before these long-term risks tip into acute societal crises.

Definition: *Creeping crisis is a threat to widely shared societal values or life-sustaining systems that evolves over time and space, is foreshadowed by precursor events, subject to varying degrees of political and/or societal attention, and impartially or insufficiently addressed by authorities (Boin, A., M. Ekengren, M. Rhinard. 2020, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Conceptualizing the Creeping Crisis”, *Risks, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 11(2): 116-138)*

Unlike traditional, time-bound emergencies, creeping crises feature a gap between the objective growth of risk and the attention it receives. A well-known threat may intensify even when society does not experience it as a crisis. In contrast to the risk concept, which sometimes makes us believe that crisis can be avoided even without any (costly) actions, creeping crises *will* lead to explosions if nothing is done. The creeping-crisis lens shifts the focus to the question of *when* a growing threat should trigger timely intervention—before costly “tipping points” are reached. The strategies below translate this logic into practical steps.

Strategies for making policymakers stop creeping crises

- **Strategy #1. Put a price on inaction.** Concretise the cost of the acute crisis that would be the outcome of not stopping the creeping crisis to raise political and societal attention. Use known damages at home or in neighbouring communities or countries to estimate future costs and trigger decisive action.
- **Strategy #2. Set goals and budgets that can't be ignored.** Set clear political goals for the work against creeping crises to raise political attention. Adopt annual and multi-year objectives with dedicated budgets, giving this work the same legitimacy and longevity as other policies—and making it politically costly to avoid action on creeping crises.
- **Strategy #3. Embed researchers in the team.** Work with researchers, not only scientific facts. Bring relevant researchers into the civil-servant team as full partners with access and transparency. Their involvement legitimises early action to stop creeping crises and helps keep political attention high over time.
- **Strategy #4. Empower champions.** Elect visionary leaders and give room and legitimacy to agents of change. Keep the creeping crisis high on the agenda and in the budget and retain key staff through political backing and long-term contracts.
- **Strategy #5. Seize the aftershock attention window.** Strengthen public attention after warning signals and precursor events of evolving threats. Keep it strong after an acute crisis. Use the high public attention after manifestations of creeping crises by establishing the narrative that the question is not “if” but “when” a creeping crisis can explode. Lock in new visions, policies, goals, and institutions while public attention is high.
- **Strategy #6. Keep the collective memory alive.** Build on historic disasters and known vulnerabilities to foster a culture of awareness. Sustained memory keeps attention to evolving threats and sensitivity to precursor incidents high.
- **Strategy #7. Learn from others.** Work closely with colleagues who have experienced outbreaks of creeping crisis. Treat external warnings and consequences—from floods, storms, pandemics, or migration crises—as triggers for action at home; use rapid exchanges and, when possible, site visits to strengthen imagination and urgency.
- **Strategy #8. Make risk real!** Work actively with making the consequences of insufficient action imaginable and tangible for the citizens. Raise attention to existing examples of disasters due to weak adaptation and highlight best practices, model communities and security innovations ready to be translated to local needs. Use visualisation and modelling techniques.

PA Secure Coordinators Comment

This contribution reflects the latest research on creeping crises, and in our Policy Area, we endorse science-based decision-making. In fact, we have just added Harnessing Research, Development & Innovation for societal security as an additional action in the latest review of our main strategic document, the EUSBSR Action Plan. We invite our partners across the Baltic Sea Region—especially those working in civil protection—to discuss this lens and consider implementing the strategies it proposes in their own contexts. We see strong alignment with PA Secure’s ongoing work, especially with Strategy #3 (we already involve researchers in our activities and will explore closer, practice-oriented collaboration) and Strategy #7 (peer learning and knowledge exchange are at the heart of PA Secure; we will continue to facilitate best-practice exchanges, joint capacity building, and targeted study visits so lessons travel before crises do). This framework can be used to brief political leadership, strengthen their imagination capacity, set shared indicators and early-action thresholds to help your policymakers stop creeping crises before they become acute.

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