

Public-private Partnerships in Croatia: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are versatile business models aimed at creating and offering public goods and services by combining the advantages of public and private sectors. Although they are widely accepted and used globally, public-private partnerships vary greatly in their structures, mutual risk distribution and sector applications. In Croatia, the PPPs have been insufficiently investigated and implemented, even though there have been significant project investments in the education, sports and transport sectors. This article presents a systematic literature review with the aim of filling the knowledge gap by analyzing all of the literature published so far on PPP projects in Croatia. By using the PRISMA methodology, it analyzes and identifies the dominant topics, sectors and methodological approaches in this literature, while at the same time giving indicating gaps and opportunities for the advancement of research and practice of PPPs in Croatia.

Keywords: public-private partnerships, infrastructure projects, contractual agreements, economic development, systematic literature review, Croatia

JEL Classification: H44, H54, L32

1. Introduction

While there is no standardised definition of a public-private partnership (PPP), the World Bank Group defines them as “a long-term contract between a private party and a government entity, for providing a public asset or service, in which the private party bears significant risk and management responsibility” (World Bank Group, 2018). While it remains debatable whether PPPs have better performance and cost-effectiveness than regular contracts between the public and private sectors (e.g. concessions, lease agreements or management contracts), the private partner benefits from access to megaprojects, added security of investment by the public partner and consistent, contract-specified cash inflows (Hodge and Greve, 2017; Lapuente and Van De Walle, 2020; Verweij and Van Meerkerk, 2021). There is, however, a variety of PPP

models that vary in the scope and distribution of responsibilities and risks between private and public partners. Their diversity reflects the diversity of public infrastructure and service delivery PPP projects worldwide, allowing for flexibility in addressing the specific project needs. Most of these models are described by the World Bank and are used as contract models (World Bank, n.d.). For example, in the Build-Own-Operate-Transfer (BOT) and Build-Transfer-Operate (BTO) models, the private partner bears the construction and operational risks of the project, while the public partner bears financial risks and retains asset ownership. The Rehabilitate-Operate-Transfer (ROT) model is often used for upgrading existing infrastructures, but for which the public partner usually carries only the financial risk. In contrast, in the Operations and Maintenance model, the private partner carries the operational, demand, financial, political and reputational risks. DBFOM (Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Maintain), DBFO (Design, Build, Finance, Operate), and DCMF (Design, Construct, Manage, Finance) are some of the most common PPP models. Within their frameworks, the private partner is responsible for almost all of the project stages (from design to ongoing management) and almost all of the risks. The public partner gets the asset ownership after the expiration of the contract. During the contract duration, management is almost entirely designated to the private partner; however, they are regularly and securely compensated by the public partner and assured administrative and other assurances for smooth business operations.

In Croatia, most PPP projects are of the latter types, as observed in the registry of PPP projects in Croatia (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.). In Croatia, there are currently 17 projects worth EUR 339 million, with minor differences by sector, private partner core activities, duration, transferred responsibilities, asset ownership, risk distribution, and project values. The education sector is the most represented and the most valuable by investment is the transport industry. However, as per the contract summaries presented in the abovementioned registry, it is visible that private partners tend to have some common core activities, specifically the construction, design and supervision of assets and real estate management of the contracted assets. In all of the projects, as the DBFOM/DCMF/DBFO models dictate, after contract expiration dates, the asset ownership transitions to the public partner. It is worth mentioning that the registry covers projects established between 2004 and 2024 and that business partnerships between the state and private actors not listed in the registry are not officially public-private partnerships. There used to be a government agency for public-private partnership assistance and registration; however, since 2017, the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Croatia has been directly responsible for overseeing and keeping the registry of such partnerships. Their web pages provide an overview of the existing PPP projects. They are open to inquiries and assistance in establishing PPP projects for potential investors (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Croatia, n.d.).

However, apart from this source, the information on PPP projects in Croatia is relatively scarce. There are some media reports on the well-known projects, many mislabelled as PPP, and the peer-reviewed literature on such projects is scattered, thus potentially giving a false picture of the state of PPPs in the country. The available scientific literature often focuses on single cases or hypothesised projects, not reflecting the actual state of the art or providing a comprehensive overview of the main topics and characteristics of the existing projects. There is no systematic overview of the literature. This article aims to fill this gap by collecting scientific knowledge on the local PPP projects and analysing their coverage, sector focus, methods, and main topics. If future PPP projects in Croatia are to be stimulated, it is vital that potential investors and policymakers have a reference point for high-quality, peer-reviewed literature on the state of PPP projects in Croatia so far and today. In the last five years, for example, there have been only six peer-reviewed scientific publications on PPP, most of which are not on actual PPP projects and are not comprehensive. A systematic literature review of PPP projects in Croatia does not exist. The implementation and research on PPP in Croatia could thus be said to be underdeveloped, and this review aims to analyse the country-specific peer-reviewed literature and propose future directions for research. Thus, this study aims to present a descriptive analysis of the available literature, identify their focus, scope and gaps, and recommend directions for future knowledge development on implementing PPP in Croatia. To do so, this study presents a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed scientific papers published on PPPs in Croatia between 2004 and 2024. It uses the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. It identifies the different topics and sectors for PPP that were discussed, the methods used, and the suggestions for further research that should be addressed. The following section presents this methodology, how the research was performed, and its results. These are discussed within their broader implications, and suggestions for further research and areas of interest are indicated.

2. Research methodology and design

The research applies the PRISMA methodology and framework (PRISMA, n.d.) to analyse and describe the current state and future avenues of research on PPP in Croatia. PRISMA is a well-known and scientifically recognised methodology for systematic reviews (Rethlefsen *et al.*, 2021) and has been used for systematic literature reviews in the area of PPP studies as well (Helby Petersen, 2019; Akomea-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023; Iroz *et al.*, 2024). It has a clear and well-defined selection process and minimises the biases in single studies and non-systematic reviews.

In this research, we use the Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection as sources for literature searches, both highly regarded multidisciplinary research databases with a wide coverage of scientific fields. In Croatia, these two databases are used as

reference bases to ascertain the level of the academic quality of publications by the Ministry of Education to ensure that only publications from peer-reviewed scholarly outlets are included. We took the following steps to determine eligibility and search strategies according to the PRISMA Checklist and Flow diagram (PRISMA, n.d.). First, we searched each of these databases by the following query in the Keywords (all fields): Public-private partnership* OR public-private partnership* AND Croatia, "JPP" AND Croatia, PPP and Croatia, javno AND privatna AND partnerstva AND hrvatsk* , JPP AND Hrvatsk*; PPP AND Hrvatsk*. Note that some of these queries are in Croatian, as we had expected some of the literature to be in the Croatian language ("Javno-privatna partnerstva" is the translation for public-private partnerships). The timespan was unspecified, but there were no articles older than 2005. The study field was also irrelevant as we aimed to gain the largest number of publications in any language. This returned 82 publications, of which 20 were duplicates and removed. The remaining publications' abstracts' were screened, and another 25 were removed as they were irrelevant to the topic, i.e., they did not discuss public-private partnerships. There was one unavailable publication; it could not be located in its publication outlet. This resulted in 35 publications altogether. The authors reviewed these publications for the topics of PPP inquiry/areas of interest, the sector in which the discussed PPP was and the methods which were used to interrogate their topics.

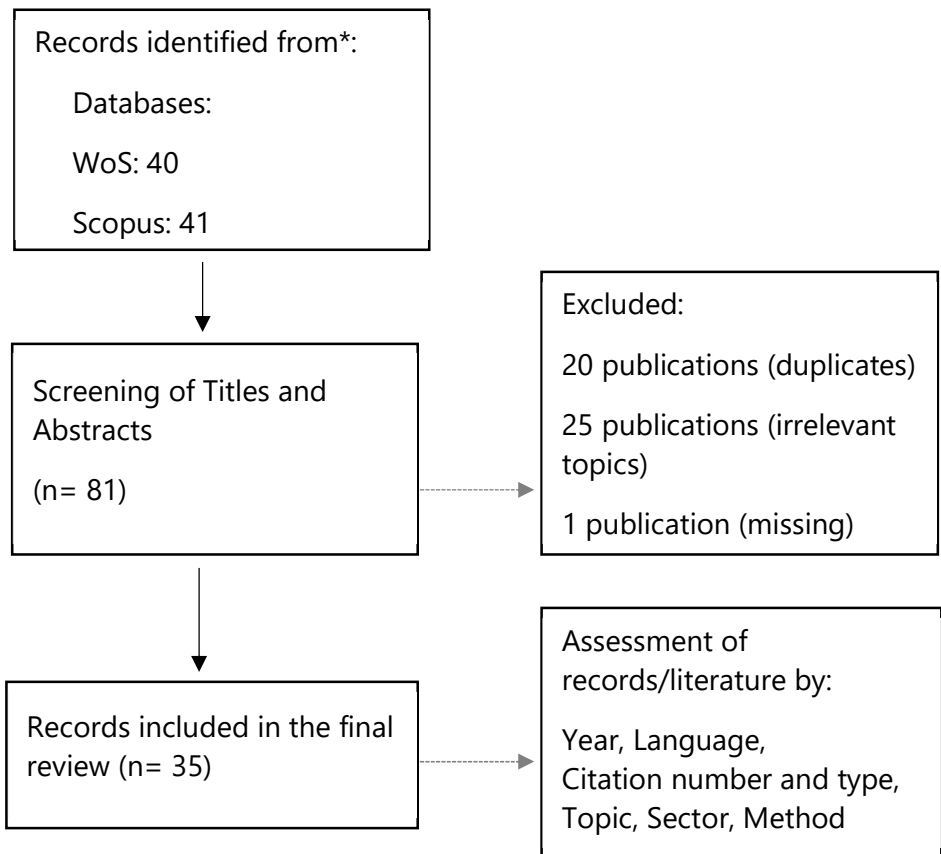


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart

Source: Authors, adapted from Page et al., 2021

3. Results

The reviewed publications were published between 2006 and 2024 and are mostly scientific articles (original research) and a few (eight) review papers. They were published in a wide variety of scientific journals, but mostly from Croatian publishers. Most publications were in the fields of public administration, economics and construction, and a few were in journals for tourism and hospitality management. Twenty-three were in English language, 10 in Croatian and 2 in Bosnian. Altogether, they have 139 citations. The most cited publication is by Milenković et al. from 2017 ("Using Public Private Partnership Models in Smart Cities - Proposal for Croatia"), which has 31 citations, followed by Jelinčić et al.'s also 2017 publication "Public-private

Partnership in Cultural Heritage Sector”, with 11 citations. All other papers have less than ten citations.

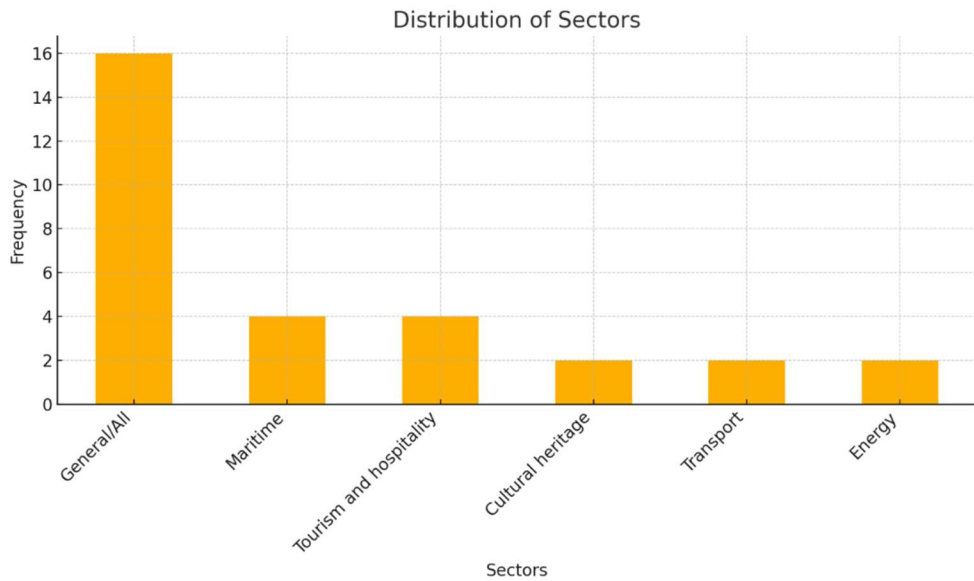


Figure 2. Distribution of Sector focus

A more comprehensive analysis of this literature shows some interesting trends. Although almost half of the publications discuss PPP in Croatia regardless of the sector (in Figure 2, marked “General/All”), the other most common sectors in which PPPs are discussed are Maritime, Tourism and Hospitality, and Cultural Heritage, Transport and Energy. The cultural heritage, transport, and energy sectors are discussed in two publications each, and the other sectors have one citation in Croatian literature on PPP each (Construction, Education, Communal, Sports, and Technology). In the Discussion section, we will discuss the implications of this distribution.

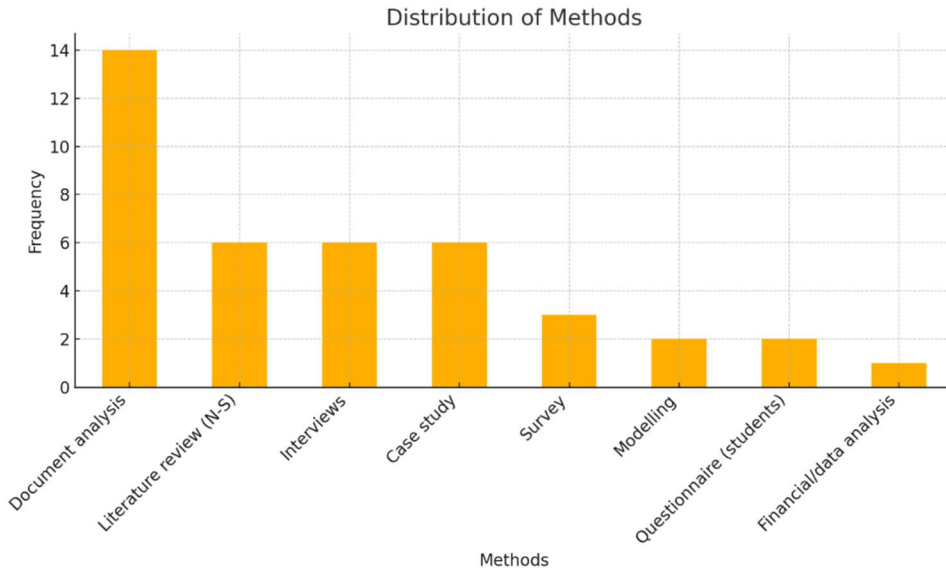


Figure 3. Method distribution

Regarding the methods used, there are some case studies, interviews, and literature reviews (six each) across all sectors, but most of the publications use document analysis (Figure 3). This mainly included literature reviews (non-systematic), media reports, legal document analysis, and an analysis of project proposals, finances, or documents pertaining to different ongoing projects. Some articles use mixed methods. The interviews and surveys are generally done on a small number of respondents, with the most extensive questionnaire having university students' perceptions of PPPs. While financial data analysis was not prominent as a single method, many of the document analyses and, indeed, the central topics included overviews or descriptions of the financial issues and questions.

In fact, as the analysis of the topic distribution shown in Figure 4 (and many of the publications deal with more than one topic), the financial topics (such as investment values or financial burdens) are the most prominent. The other most prominent topic is the legal regulations and frameworks in Croatia and the EU, sometimes comparative. Also, many publications discuss the different PPP models, usually as part of literature reviews. Risk distribution is the least discussed topic in only three of the reviewed publications; although it is, of course, mentioned intermittently across many of the topics, it is rarely directly analysed.

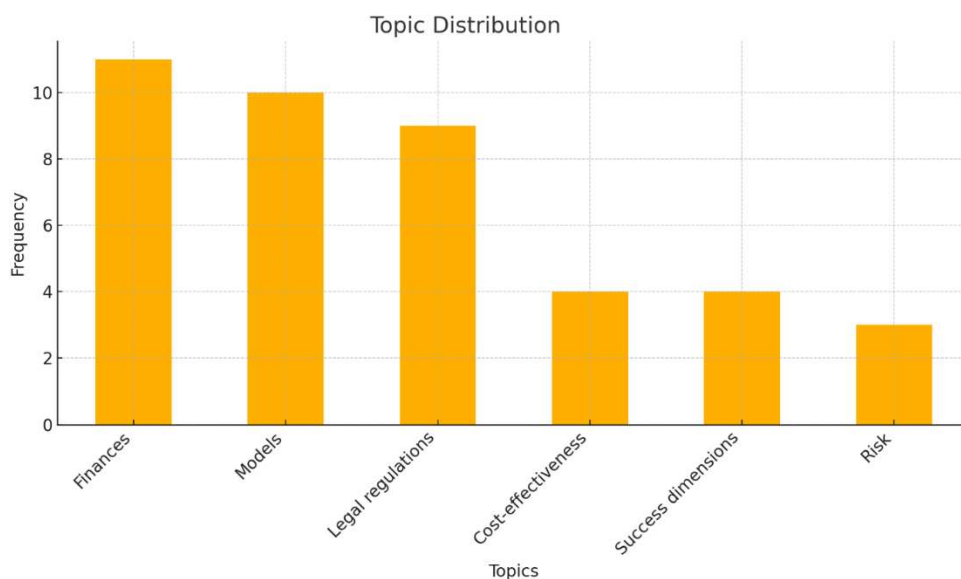


Figure 4: Distribution of topics

4. Discussion

As PPPs are diverse and adaptable to all public service delivery sectors, the sectors discussed in the literature are equally diverse. By far, most of the literature synthesises all sectors. Some discuss Croatia as a case study and the state of PPP locally, elaborating further on, for example, the legal frameworks in place (Perić and Štiglec, 2006; Marenjak and Kušljic, 2009; Devčić, Šostar and Babić, 2014) or financial issues (Juričić, 2008; Šimović and Rogić Lugarić, 2012; Devčić, Šostar and Babić, 2014; Juričić and Marenjak, 2016; Tijanić, Car-Pušić and Čulo, 2019) who discuss PPP as a general concept, i.e., not devoting themselves to a single sector, present discussions on the definitions of the concept, different models, and some characteristics of Croatian PPP governance. However, the analysis of Figure 2, that is, the distribution of sector focus, shows an interesting finding. The most common single-sector focus in the available literature on PPPs in Croatia is on the Maritime and Tourism and hospitality sectors. However, there are no actual PPP projects in Croatia in the maritime industry or the Tourism and hospitality sector. The literature on the maritime PPP in all but one of the publications is by the same author (Perić Hadžić, 2012, 2022; Perić Hadžić, Jugović and Perić, 2015) and all are focused on *potential* models. In the Tourism and hospitality PPP literature in Croatia, the situation is similar as they discuss only its theoretical application in the industry, and all are authored or co-authored by one scholar (Perić and Štiglec, 2006; Perić and Niksić, 2007; Cetinski, Perić and Sugar, 2009; Perić, 2012).

As such, while they do not provide real-life inquiries, they do set up useful groundwork for such potential projects in the future, including their hypothetical scenarios in the sector, possible success criteria to apply, and legal frameworks to take into account.

Cultural heritage and transport are the next most proliferant sectors covered in the literature. There is currently only one PPP project in the Cultural heritage sector, the revitalisation of the County Palace in Varaždin, and both of the publications on this topic analyse this case (Jelinčić *et al.*, 2017; Abdou, 2024). They use interviews and surveys with private and public institutions' representatives, focusing on experiences with this project, cooperation, financing, and political commitment. Their findings underscore that while there is an interest in such projects, there has been an evident lack of experience and cooperation in the projects between the public and private partners, a lack of political will, and that funding has been a persistent issue for public institutions, possibly due to an underdeveloped economic framework for such endeavours. It should be noted that in reality, as per the Croatian PPP registry, the majority of the PPP projects are in the Education sector, nine out of seventeen, mainly of high school reconstructions and operations and of comparably smaller budgets. However, only one scientific publication discusses this sector (Kušljčić and Marenjak, 2011). Another interesting finding is that the most cited paper, a conference proceeding paper from 2017 by Milenković and colleagues, is about the technology sector, a smart cities project proposal for Croatia. There are no such projects in Croatia so far.

Regarding the methodologies used in these papers, there are some case studies, interviews, and literature reviews (six each) across all sectors, but most publications use document analysis (Figure 3). This included mostly literature reviews (non-systematic), media reports, legal document analysis, and an analysis of project proposals, finances, or documents pertaining to different ongoing projects. Some articles use mixed methods. The interviews (Perić Hadžić, 2012, 2022; Perić Hadžić, Jugović and Perić, 2015; Tijanić, Car-Pušić and Čulo, 2019) and surveys (Grubišić Šeba, Jurlina Alibegović and Slijepčević, 2014; Bogovac, Dodig and Lugarić, 2021) are generally done on a small number of respondents, with the largest questionnaire analysing university students' perceptions of PPPs (Bogovac, Dodig and Lugarić, 2021). While financial data analysis was not prominent as a single method, many of the document analyses and, indeed, their central topics included overviews or descriptions of the financial issues.

There are six case studies in the literature review. One is a very focused, in-depth case study of the Arena Split sports hall construction, the second-biggest PPP project in value in Croatia. The study describes its planning, design, and construction, giving important insights into the challenges encountered in its development. As both a sports and construction project, the building of this hall under significant time and

budgetary constraints is a good example for future investors. One publication (Grubišić Šeba, 2015) compares two motorway construction projects; however, these are concession contracts and are not registered PPP projects. One could argue that almost all the publications take Croatia as a case study, comparing its state of PPP projects and issues against global practices or other countries (Cetinski, Perić and Sugar, 2009; Grafenauer and Klarić, 2011; Metaxas and Preza, 2015). There are a few literature reviews (Juričić, 2008; Barković and Širić, 2010; Persoli, 2010; Rakić, Milenković-Kerković and Radjenović, 2014; Milenkovic, Rasic and Vojkovic, 2017), but none are systematic nor analysing literature on PPP in Croatia exclusively. While there is ample literature on PPPs in general (Cheng *et al.*, 2021), and it is undoubtedly worthwhile to compare the state of PPPs in Croatia against the scholarly literature on different topics, this article is unique in systematising the literature on PPPs in Croatia to show the state of the knowledge in this area, and how it was studied.

The topics covered reflect the variety of PPP projects in Croatia and the many factors to take into account when considering such partnerships. Many articles cover more than one topic. The most recurring topics (Figure 4) are finances, legal frameworks and different types of models that are types of PPPs. Less pronounced but still well covered are cost-effectiveness, success and risk. Further analysis reveals that the temporal distribution of articles corresponds to the distribution of topics, so earlier studies often focus on foundational issues, such as financial issues and legal frameworks. Later studies, as the number of PPP projects and their implementation was underway, elaborated on the successes, risks and cost-effectiveness. The financial elements are very pronounced across many studies, indicating their key role in considering such partnerships in Croatia. Insufficient funding, underdeveloped financial arrangements and cost-effectiveness remain important concerns. Legal frameworks are also often described as immature for the needs of PPPs, reflecting a need to focus on establishing clear and transparent schemes in the future (Perić and Štiglec, 2006; Marenjak and Kušljčić, 2009; Devčić, Šostar and Babić, 2014). The general consensus is that the regulatory frameworks do not support these alternative models sufficiently. Nonetheless, the most recent publication discussing legal frameworks in Croatia was in 2017 (Jelinčić *et al.*, 2017), and it would be necessary to make an appraisal of the current legal environment in Croatia for PPPs. The dimensions of success are also a recurring topic, stressing the need for developing specific criteria for evaluating PPP projects (Radic and Bleiziffer, 2010; Kušljčić and Marenjak, 2011, 2011; Abdou, 2024). These authors stress that success in PPP projects is not a unidimensional concept, as it includes measures of financial rationality, stakeholder or user satisfaction, safety, quality (etc.), and is sector- or even project-specific. This line of research is particularly relevant to be further developed to aid in the calculations, design and evaluation of future PPP projects.

5. Implications and suggestions for further research

The results of this literature review provide a rich and detailed insight into the existing research on public-private partnerships in Croatia, showing a variety of topics, methods and focuses of publications. The contributions to this body and area of knowledge display important trends, challenges, and possibilities for examining PPPs in Croatia, which have important implications for scholarly research and practice. PPPs inherently embody economic, social, legal and technical dimensions, and the topics covered in the reviewed literature reflect their variety and complexity. Recurring topics include financial aspects, regulatory or legal frameworks, and different sector model types. Risk distribution is somewhat less pronounced, although it not only determines the model type but is also a core concern in the case studies presented. Therefore, further research in this direction would be welcome, as well as more focus on cost-effectiveness and success determinants, which are now made possible by the rising experience and empirical evidence of such projects in Croatia.

Legal and regulatory frameworks, institutional frameworks, are another relevant area of further research that begs for an update. The studies so far have criticised the frameworks present at their time of study, indicating potential inefficiencies and gaps, and many suggest changes to improve transparency, simplify processes, and strengthen responsibility regulations. Since PPPs function in complex regulatory environments, it is paramount to elaborate on the specific Croatian context to provide potential investors with concrete information on these issues. The reviewed literature also covers several different sectors, supporting the notion that PPPs can successfully be applied in a variety of industries. Several publications have already described potential new ventures in the cultural heritage and maritime sectors, showing how much they could benefit from their development. Each sector has unique challenges and possibilities, which have been examined in detail. However, the sectors in which the existing PPP projects do not correspond to those most covered in the literature (such as education), although their evidence allows researchers to study them in detail. At the same time, as many researchers have noted, it is sometimes difficult to gain access to much of their data, reflecting back on the issues of transparency that regulatory frameworks should support.

The methodological approaches are as diverse as the topics covered in the literature. While document analysis remains the most dominant technique, a growing number of empirical projects can be studied *in vivo*, as some authors have shown it can be done. Qualitative approaches such as interviews and surveys have so far been done on a limited number of respondents, showing an opportunity to use such approaches further to understand the different experiences of such projects' users, stakeholders, and managers. Quantitative methods have been used to a limited extent in the literature, generally for financial analyses. However, they can be used as solid

findings to argue the cost-effectiveness or financial burden of these models in Croatia. These could serve both private and public partners well in the decision-making and planning of such projects and policymakers.

One of the main limitations of the available literature on PPPs in Croatia is that it is currently limited and does not reflect the trends in the current global literature on PPPs, such as sustainability, renewable energy or health care services (Pinz, Roudyani and Thaler, 2018; Cheng *et al.*, 2021; Ferreira and Marques, 2021; Kirikkaleli and Adebayo, 2021). To make local research more visible and relevant, it would be important to engage with these topics. Stimulating more scientific production in the English language and journals with more international leadership could bring this literature to the next level of recognition. By solving these issues and inquiring further into the topic of PPPs in Croatia, scholars can contribute to a better understanding of PPPs and their potential for addressing social needs locally and globally.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review reveals that the scientific literature on public-private partnerships in Croatia is limited in scope and is in its focus very loosely corresponding to the current, real-life PPP projects underway. The most researched sectors such as tourism and cultural heritage are overly represented, while the key sectors of education and transport, the largest in numbers and investments, are insufficiently discussed. Financial and legal analyses are welcome as they underscore the complexity and multidimensionality of PPP projects, and there remains an opportunity to expand the discussions further into their sustainability, including their potential for impact on newer topics such as health and the environment.

In order to advance the understanding and implementation of PPPs in Croatia, future research should focus on developing empirical studies that can evaluate ongoing projects, analyze their cost-effectiveness and identify key success factors. By building upon the knowledge that has been collected so far, such research can help stimulate the growth of beneficial and sustainable infrastructures for the future. In order to do so, we should foster collaboration between the academic community, policymakers and business stakeholders, supported by regulatory frameworks for the growth of these partnerships beneficial for the entire society.

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