

Civic Crowdfunding: Systematic Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Abstract— In the last few years, civic crowdfunding has been receiving a growing attention among scholars and practitioners in various fields, ranging from technology to public administration. Civic crowdfunding is a sub-class of crowdfunding in which citizens collaborate with government to (co-)finance public goods or services. Although it is an interesting and promising area for both research and application, only a paucity of attention has been given to broad literature review. The main aim of this paper is to provide a systematic literature review in this worldwide early stage of the development of civic crowdfunding. To address this aim Scopus database was browsed and the total of 71 papers were analyzed. The results indicate a number of opportunities and challenges which were discussed in the Serbian context.

Keywords— *civic crowdfunding; philanthropy; alternative financing; literature review*

I. INTRODUCTION

Financial services have witnessed some major disruptions in the last few decades. Alongside the proliferation of novel technologies, even the centuries-old financial professions, such as accounting [1] or insurance [2], have been rapidly changing, let alone some more dynamic financial services, including entrepreneurial finance and money lending. These intense-changing services are affected by ‘financial democracy’ and emergence of crowdfunding as an alternative way of financing new ventures or nonprofit projects [3].

Crowdfunding allows founders of for-profit and nonprofit ventures to ‘fund their effort by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the internet, without standard financial intermediaries’ [4]. In the last decade, the popularity of the crowdfunding concept has grown so rapidly that even Serbia as a developing country has been affected by scholarly attention [5]. As the concept of crowdfunding evolves, so do evolve theories, principles, legal frameworks, voting permissions and rights, tech-platforms, donor-attracting strategies etc. Accordingly, crowdfunding as such might not be a novel

research topic. Specific niches, sub-classes and genres, however, still attract scholarly radars’ attention.

A specific sub-genre of crowdfunding is civic crowdfunding. Civic crowdfunding is an alternative public financial instrument [6] which can contribute to community development [7]. Some authors, such as [8], infer that the term has been used for the first time in 2012, and that, in a grand scheme of things, it refers to ‘the use of crowdfunding projects that produce community or quasi-public assets. This definition is narrow and emphasizes outcome as the only point of differentiation to other crowdfunding schemes. Logically, this difference is easily observable, but superficial. When closely dissected, civic crowdfunding displays a myriad of additional differences and peculiarities. It has been challenged as a contributor to social inequality, as it favors projects in wealthy neighborhoods [9]. Another interrogative expressed in [8] might be whether civic crowdfunding augments or undermines (local) governments? Also, a number of community or quasi-public projects require ongoing cost coverage which is not supported by civic crowdfunding, at least as currently structured [10]. Finally, any innovation in public financing tends to be slower than the entrepreneurial finance counterpart [11]. A lot of questions still require answers, and civic crowdfunding grows as an interesting field of research.

Even though this sub-class of crowdfunding has been developing for a decade now, we still lack for comprehensive and systematic literature review in the field. Up to date, a number of platforms have specialized in attracting fund for community-based projects. As indicated in [12] ‘specialized civic crowdfunding platforms (*Citizeninvestor*, *ioby*, *Spacehive*) host civic projects exclusively. As a result, the platforms are capable of guiding creators through the specifics of civic crowdfunding project set-up, and are familiar with civic project success factors.’ Even though these platforms enable global impact of local projects, it seems that the ‘localization’ plays pivotal role. By analyzing more than 800 campaigns and the data on 18,000 donations, [13] have shown that the median donor to

project distance is 8 miles, and the average is 300 miles (around 482km). Transposed to the Serbian terms, this would imply the whole Serbia being in this radius.

This paper aims to fill the lacuna in the present body by systematically analyzing concurrent theoretical and empirical findings in the field of civic crowdfunding. Particular objectives of the paper are:

- to examine the maturity of the field by identifying and analyzing published literature;
- to identify the main challenges and opportunities for the application of civic crowdfunding in the Serbian setting following the STEEP framework.

To the best of authors' knowledge, a systematic literature review on civic crowdfunding of this kind has never been conducted before. Evidently, a number of concurrent publications includes overview of the extent body of knowledge to address challenges, opportunities and future agenda in civic crowdfunding [11]. In [14], a narrative literature review is conducted aimed at defining the term and providing four perspectives – project, supporter, owner and platform – of civic crowdfunding. This paper is idiosyncratic by nature as it seeks to identify the main features of civic crowdfunding, rather than indicate any recommendation for the future practical use. The evidence on the identification of challenges and opportunities for the Serbian context is even scarcer.

The remainder of the paper is organized in the following order. Section 2 elaborates on the current trends and issues related to the civic crowdfunding in Serbia. Section 3 delineates the methodology used for the state-of-the-art literature review and depicts the STEEP analytical framework to detect the main provocations for civic crowdfunding implementation in Serbia. Section 3 elaborates on the results of the analysis. Section 4 contextualizes the main findings. The last part of this section is reserved for the concluding remarks.

II. BUSINESS CASE FOR THE CIVIC CROWDFUNDING IN SERBIA

From the point of view of the local communities, the concept of civic crowdfunding is seen as an alternative form of financing. From the donors' perspective, whatsoever, it is a form of charity. Following the findings of [15], individuals in Serbia are more generous than their corporate counterparts (only around 1% of consolidated corporate revenues in Serbia are donated in various philanthropic activities). The same study reports that out of 3.037 instances of philanthropy, somewhat above 42% is being categorized as 'mass individual'. It seems that Serbia is a fertile soil for the implementation of civic crowdfunding initiatives.

Nonetheless, by browsing through the main international crowdfunding platforms (*Kikstarter*, *IndiGoGo*) and specialized civic crowdfunding platforms (*Citizeninvestor*, *ioBy*, *Spacehive*), we recorded none of the projects from Serbia. By further browsing through local initiatives, one civic crowdfunding initiative was recorder. "National Alliance for the Local Economic Development" (NALED) in cooperation with "Loud Crowd" and supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has organized a civic crowdfunding conference in May, 2021. The final conference was a grand

finale of the competition for the best project ideas and three distinct projects were competing for the reward (if loosely defined, the first one fits environmental category, the second fits medical, and the third one is from the civil rights category) [16].

Although this is plausible initiative, the impact has been modest. Namely, Serbia is a country with a long tradition of citizens' self-imposed contribution as a class of public revenues. Arguably, civic crowdfunding is merely a civic self-imposed contribution in a platform-based digitalized world. In turn, as indicated in [17], civic crowdfunding is a 'collective funding of public works and projects – outside the budget of the interested entity or administration - collected by citizens, organizations and private companies sometimes in match funding with the administrations themselves.'

Self-imposed contribution is an additional fiscal levy for which the residents of a certain local community (city or municipality) are willing to pay. The self-imposed contribution is usually introduced under the referendum and the funds are earmarked for the specific use [18]. In Serbia, self-imposed contribution is a singled-out topic when it comes to the direct involvement and participation of citizens in the financial decision-making at the local community level. In the first decade of the 21st century only, approximately 42 referendums per annum have been carried on a topic of self-imposed contributions in different municipalities in Serbia (interestingly, Smederevo, Lucani, Sremska Mitrovica and Sid all have had 30+ referendums during this decade) [19].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Systematic Literature Review Framework

The aim of this paper is to systematically analyze concurrent literature on civic crowdfunding. For this purpose, we created systematic literature review framework as inspired by [20]. In particular, we formalized the SLR framework as given in Table 1.

TABLE I. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW FRAMEWORK

Area	Action(s)	Output
Search strategy	Selection of database Definition of Boolean phrases Definition of limiters Exclusion criteria	Search results
Initial exclusion criteria	Identification of relevant papers using meta-data (title & abstract only) by single reviewer	Initial paper set
Final review	Identification of relevant papers using whole text by two reviewers	Final paper set
Data collection	Collection of bibliometric and paper-specific data	Group discussion
Analysis & synthesis	Inductive approach	Classifications and research report
Collection of findings from Serbia	On-desk analysis of main outputs from Serbian civic crowdfunding initiatives	Comparison and report on policy recommendations for Serbia

We selected the Scopus database to search for relevant literature as it provides prompt access to peer-reviewed articles. Since there are multiple ways to address the term civic crowdfunding, we consulted several publications to search for synonyms and closely related terms. The research was constrained to papers whose title or abstract contained following set of Boolean phrases: "civic crowdfund" OR "civic crowd fund" OR "citizen crowdfund" OR "citizen crowd fund" OR "donation based crowdfund" OR "donation-based crowd fund" OR civic AND crowd fund OR Civic AND crowdfund OR citizen AND crowdfund OR citizen and crowd fund

The initial search generated the list of total 140 papers. Then, initial list is filtered by document type to include articles, conference papers, book chapters, reviews and books. After additional filters are applied, total 128 papers remained as starting point for analysis.

Preliminary identification of relevant papers is done by scanning meta-data (title & abstract only) by single reviewer. Out of initially identified 128 papers, 57 were excluded from the analysis due to the following reasons (i) they covered the search terms in combinations that are not related or were not relevant for analysis of civic crowdfunding (ii) they examined civic crowdfunding but not in a way in which citizens collaborate with government (for instance, crowdfunding of medical research or scientific research) (iii) they represented an advice not backed by concrete scientific research methodology.

B. A STEEP Framework for the Organization of Relevant Policy Findings for Serbia

For the purpose of appropriate synthesis of the main findings from the systematic literature review, and for the purposeful commentaries on the possible influence of the findings on the current and future Serbian civic crowdfunding initiatives, all the findings were organized following the STEEP framework.

The STEEP framework is a useful for determining the key factors that enable or drive use of technology or innovation of various kinds [21-22]. The STEEP framework organizes the findings in five distinct sections: societal, technological, economic, environmental and policy-related findings.

IV. RESULTS

A. Bibliometric findings

From the total of 71 papers dealing with the topic of civic crowdfunding, 54 directly reported on the findings from completed or undergoing projects (either as a case study, mixed-method, or large sample reports). The distribution over the years is presented in Fig. 1.

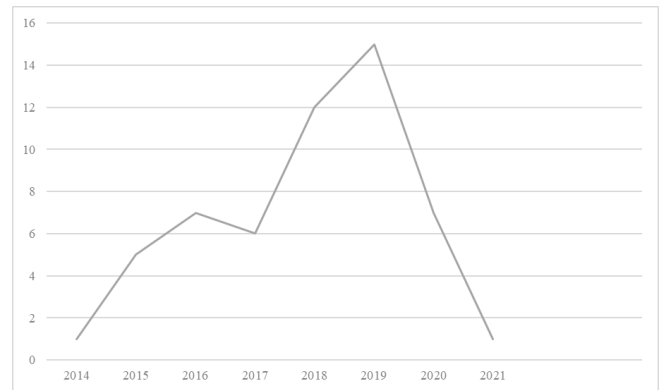


Fig. 1. Distribution of the publications per year

As shown in Fig.1, the pandemics has severely affected scholarly reports on civic crowdfunding. The peak of publications was reached in 2019.

Approximately two thirds of the publications were article papers (67%), followed by conference papers (17%) and book chapters (12%), as presented in Fig. 2. Usually, conferences make the greatest part in the split for innovative topics such as civic crowdfunding. Even though it might be a judicious judgement, this particular split is owned to a crowdfunding as an 'older brother' of civic crowdfunding.

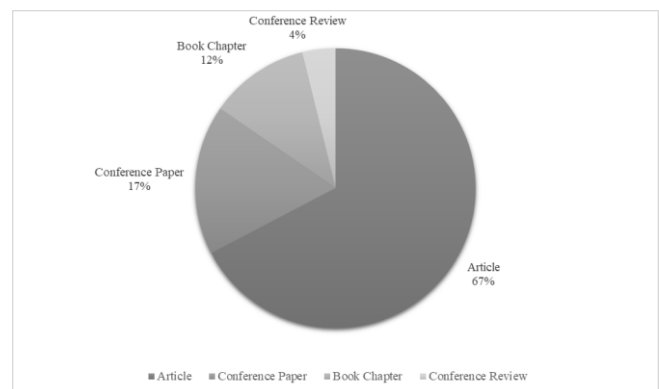


Fig. 2. Document type split

As for the distribution by subject areas, as expected, Social Sciences are leading (27 publications), followed by Business, Management and Accounting, and Computer Sciences (20 for both). This is displayed in Fig. 3.

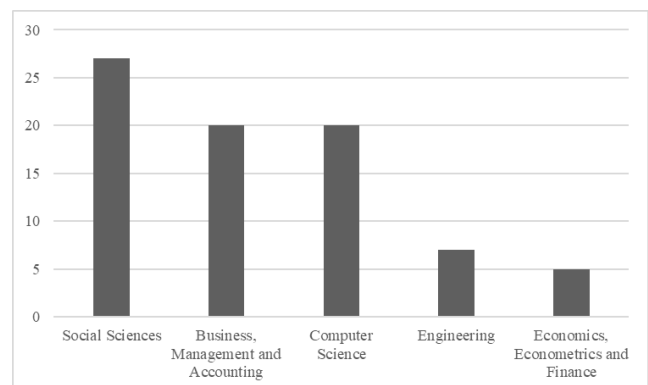


Fig. 3. Subject area of examined papers

As for the geographical distribution, a majority of the publications report on the experiences from the United

States (10), followed by Italy, the United Kingdom and India (7), and Spain (3), as shown in Fig. 4. This geographic distribution of findings is provocative in sense that it depends not only on the size of the public sector and economy, but also on the level of the democratization and citizens' participation.

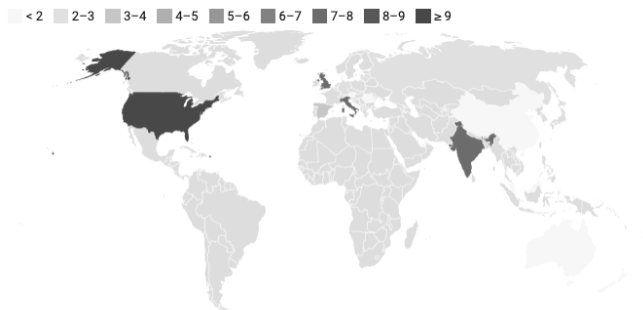


Fig. 4. Geographical distribution of reports

Finally, when it comes to the citations of the selected publications, the greatest popularity is associated to the meta-analysis [10], followed by the skepticism and provocations of civic crowdfunding, explored in [8].

B. Systematic Literature Review Findings with Challenges and Opportunities for Civic Crowdfunding Projects in Serbia

Following the bibliometric findings, we further systematically analyzed concurrent body of knowledge in order to developed interrogatives, challenges and opportunities for the future agenda of the Serbian civic crowdfunding initiatives. The main challenges and opportunities are presented as follows.

Societal considerations of civic crowdfunding:

- Civic crowdfunding initiatives have potential to boost 'non-mainstream' projects. Even though the only civic crowdfunding initiative had two healthcare and one non-healthcare projects, the non-healthcare project received funding. From a grand scheme of things, the theme of the project plays an important role in funding projects via civic crowdfunding [23]. Nonetheless, engaging citizens in civic crowdfunding is not only affected by how 'hot' the topic is.
- The data on civic crowdfunding initiatives might be the promise for new societal actions as advocated in [24].

Technology-based considerations of civic crowdfunding:

- Civic crowdfunding might augment the digital divide and propel projects that attract digital rather than offline community. Even though concurrent body of knowledge emphasizes the bi-directional mechanics in offline-online community co-creation of public services [12], we have witnessed lately strong influence of online communities in public decision-imposing agenda (i.e. pet-loving communities during the pandemic lockdowns).
- Civic crowdfunding might affect the use of novel voting and novel payment methods. A number of

prerequisites are required for the novel voting systems [25]. For the payment on the other side, an SMS-based payment received a popularity in Serbia. However, pandemics has to some extent altered and improved various e-payment mechanisms which could simply be used and contribute to civic crowdfunding development [2526]. In this term, the development of country-specific platform for civic crowdfunding seems to be the best code of conduct.

Economic considerations of civic crowdfunding:

- Civic crowdfunding is a transparent and crowd-based approach to alternative financing. As such, it is advantageous to the self-imposed contribution in terms of the size of the local community. Thus, it can easily be used in large cities, following the good practices prescribed in [27-28].
- On the other side, this approach is not legally constrained to the financial plans and reports required for the public administrations. Local communities ('mesna zajednica' in native) is not recognized as a public financial entity and meaning that they are not entitled to carry on community projects [29]. Civic crowdfunding, however, is not constrained with planning and reporting.
- Tax-deductions are another economic factor of a major importance. As demonstrated in [30], the selection of heterogenous projects on crowdfunding platform is highly affected by the quality of tax deductions for the donor.

Environmental considerations of civic crowdfunding:

- Since the background of the Civic crowdfunding initiative is a digital platform, project initiation, voting and funding are cost-efficient [3310]. As for the cost efficiency, some effective models have already been delineated in the literature, such as the case of co-financing at the Russian local and regional levels [32].

Policy-related considerations of civic crowdfunding:

- Civic crowdfunding is by nature open, inclusive and participatory, and can accordingly allow for 'wider participation, stimulating citizens' ownership and sense of belonging to a community' [33]. Not only that it can tackle citizens' activism, but it can allow for the proliferation of civil society organizations and tech-savvy and specialized NGOs. Ultimately, the success of any initiative is determined by the citizens' interest to invest in it [34], the mechanisms that makes a fertile soil for new engagements of civil society organizations within the online spectrum [35].
- Additionally, civic crowdfunding allows for a better utilization of public funds as in the case of Spain [36]. This might be particularly important in a highly consistent political distribution of power at the local level, as is the Serbian case.
- A challenge posed by the Serbian context is that indigenous initiatives and innovations in the public sector have higher rate of success than the 'imported' ones [37]. Accordingly, experiences from other countries in public finance and administration always

require modifications related to the specific geographical and cultural context.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A. Key Findings and Contributions

The most important theoretical and practical finding is that the field of civic crowdfunding is in an infantile phase in scholarly terms. By searching through scholarly browser (Scopus), we identified only 71 publications that diligently elaborate on the topic. Nonetheless, the body of knowledge is steadily growing in the last seven years. As the results of the bibliometric analysis indicate, the number research radars are pointed at the field of civic crowdfunding.

The papers analyzed in this study cover a number of different fields. Not surprisingly, citizens' involvement is the most covered topic [38-39]. A vast majority of the publications use mixed-method approach [40-41] and report on good practices from a myriad of geographical areas [42-44].

Given the humble efforts and a parsimony of evidence on civic crowdfunding initiatives in Serbia (we isolated only one representative initiative with three projects), international practices were elaborated against the potentials rather than real national civic crowdfunding projects. Additionally, we compared the international practice to the efforts of local self/governments in Serbia related to the 'analogue' type of crowdfunding – citizens' self-contribution.

B. Implications, Limitations and Further Recommendations

Classified in accordance to the STEEP framework, the main implications for the future civic crowdfunding in Serbia are listed below:

Civic crowdfunding can alleviate the financing of particular public services. In societal terms, these initiatives are supported in a 'down-top' manner and do not require political support from ruling parties in local communities. Also, the transparency and deliberate nature of the civic crowdfunding processes might accelerate public participation in decision-making processes. From the technology-related perspective, civic crowdfunding has a potential to encourage the development of online societies. The most promising solution would be the creation of the country-specific civic crowdfunding platform. From the economic point of view, civic crowdfunding is not necessarily connected to the entity of local self-government and could be used in both large cities and smaller communities. Any further practical development of civic crowdfunding is generally based on the premise of tax deduction for donors. From the environmental and policy-based perspective, civic crowdfunding might strengthen citizens' involvement and the sense of the ownership of public goods and services. Moreover, the concept of crowdfunding should encourage the development of civil society organizations.

This study has a number of flaws. The first limitation is the number of international practices from scholarly publications used to derive main conclusion and implications for Serbia. An avenue for further research is the inclusion of papers from other scholarly browsers. Other limitation is the vague assumption of self-imposed

contribution being and 'analogue' crowdfunding scheme. As the number of initiatives and projects in civic crowdfunding grow in Serbia, a more prolific and accurate conclusions could be derived. Accordingly, this is another recommendation for further research in Serbia.

C. Concluding Remarks

Civic crowdfunding is a specific sub-class of crowdfunding aimed at providing alternative financing for various public goods and services initiated in a 'down-top' manner. It provides an opportunity for local communities to directly engage citizens in co-creation activities. This article, in particular, organizes the findings from concurrent body of knowledge and best international practices and paths the way for the proliferation of civic crowdfunding in Serbia. The paper outlines the major societal, technological, economic, environmental and policy-related recommendations for the development of the concept in Serbia. Future platforms that would host civic crowdfunding projects might benefit from the conclusions of our paper.

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