

Inclusion and integration of disadvantaged groups in society through para swimming

(ParaSwInclusion)

**ERASMUS-SPORT-2024-CB
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**A report from
performed analysis
in Croatia and
Serbia**

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1. ParaSwInclusion identification data

Project acronym	ParaSwInclusion
Project full title	Inclusion and integration of disadvantaged groups in society through para swimming

Action	ERASMUS-SPORT-2024-CB
	101183975 - ParaSwInclusion - ERASMUS-SPORT-2024-CB
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Coordinator Institution	Paralympic Committee of Bosnia and Herzegovina (NPC B&H), Third country not associated to the Programme
Coordinator	Selma Karčić
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EU Partner Institutions, Member state	The Croatian Para Swimming Association (HPPS), Croatia
Partner Country Institutions	Faculty of Sports and Physical Education, University of Niš (FSFV)), Serbia, Third country associated to the Programme Swimming club for persons with disabilities "MAKO" (PKOSI MAKO), Montenegro, Third country not associated to the Programme Swimming club SPID, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Third country not associated to the Programme The Faculty of Sports and Physical Education at the University of Sarajevo (FASTO UNSA), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Third country not associated to the Programme Verlab Research Institute (VI), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Third country not associated to the Programme Bosnian Representative Association for Valuable Opportunities (BRAVO), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Third country not associated to the Programme
Duration of the project	24 months (started in April 2025)
Project web address	https://paraswinclusion.com/



Executive summary:

The analysis of para swimming in Croatia and Serbia highlights both progress and ongoing challenges in the development of the sport. In Croatia, para swimming benefits from an established structure of regional, national, and international competitions, access to adapted swimming facilities, and availability of sports equipment. Training programs for coaches and officials, including national initiatives and Erasmus+ projects, provide valuable capacity-building opportunities, although formal university programs in paraspot remain limited. Clubs report active international participation, and classification systems are generally accessible, reflecting a solid integration into the global para sports community.

Despite some challenges, para swimming in both Croatia and Serbia demonstrates significant strengths and potential for growth. The sport benefits from an established network of regional, national, and international competitions, well-structured training programs for coaches and officials, and access to adapted facilities and sports equipment. Athletes actively participate in international events, and classification systems are generally accessible, reflecting a solid integration into the broader para sports community. These achievements highlight a strong foundation and growing professionalization within the sport.

To build on these successes, continued investment, expanded educational opportunities for coaches, and targeted initiatives to increase inclusivity and accessibility will further strengthen para swimming. Enhancing public awareness, promoting athlete achievements, and fostering collaboration among clubs, government bodies, and international partners will ensure sustainable development, long-term athlete progression, and the continued advancement of para swimming at both the national and international levels.

1. Introduction

The survey used for data collection was carefully designed and prepared in close collaboration by all project partners. This joint effort ensured that the questionnaire reflected the objectives of the project and captured the most relevant aspects of the current situation in Croatia and Serbia. By combining the expertise of different partners, the survey was structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the key issues, while maintaining clarity and accessibility for respondents.

The survey was officially launched in May 2025 and made publicly available online. Throughout the one-month period during which it remained open, all partners played an active role in disseminating the survey. This was achieved both through their established professional networks and through wider outreach on social media platforms, thereby maximizing visibility and encouraging broad participation from various stakeholders.

After the closing of the survey at the end of the one-month period, the responses were collected and systematized. The project team then proceeded with a detailed analysis of the data, focusing on identifying patterns, challenges, and opportunities relevant to the Croatian and Serbian contexts. The outcomes of this analysis, which provide insights into the current

situation and form the basis for further project activities, especially the determination of the way analysis will be done in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, are presented in the sections that follow.

2. About the questionnaire

The survey named ***Analysis of the Current State of Para Swimming in Croatia and Analysis of the Current State of Para Swimming in Serbia*** administered in named countries consisted of 29 questions designed to capture a comprehensive overview of the current state of para-swimming in both countries. The questions covered a wide range of topics, including club membership, the number of male and female paraswimmers, and the presence of coaches or technical staff with or without disabilities. Furthermore, the survey addressed the classification categories of para-swimmers, their age groups, and the availability of pools and infrastructure adapted for persons with disabilities.

In addition, respondents were asked about access to classifiers and were invited to identify specific areas of para-swimming that require improvement. The structure of the survey was intended to ensure the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, providing valuable insights into organizational capacities, accessibility, and developmental needs within the para-swimming community in Croatia and Serbia.

3. Summary of the results for Croatia

3.1 Distribution of membership in para-swimming clubs and federations

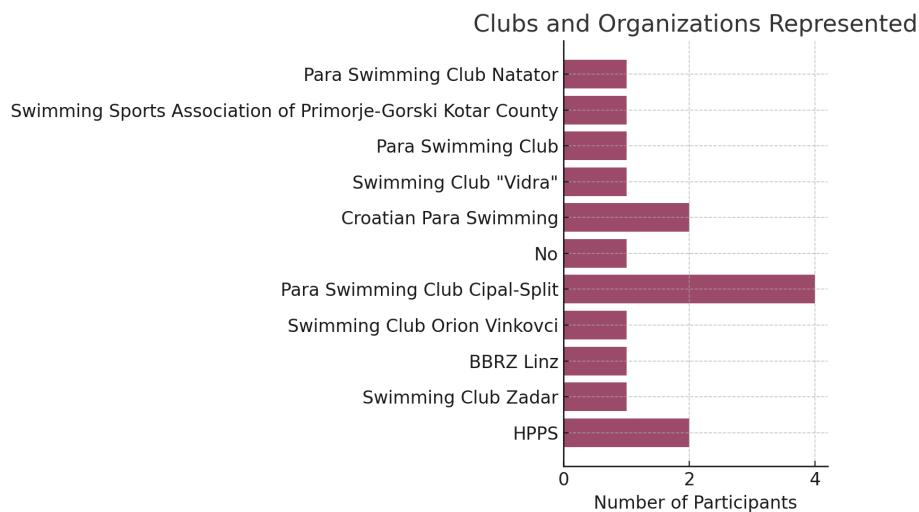


Figure 1. Distribution of membership in para-swimming clubs and federations

A total of 15 respondents provided answers regarding membership in para-swimming clubs and federations. To better understand the distribution of members across different organizations, the responses were grouped and presented graphically. The following bar chart illustrates the number of members per club and federation, offering insight into the most active and prominent organizations within the para-swimming community.

3.2 Distribution of male paraswimmers by disability categories

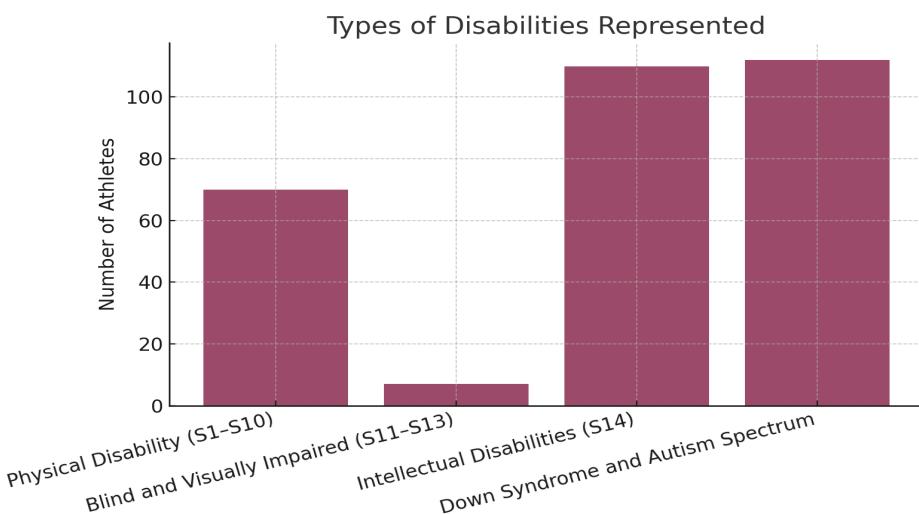


Figure 2. Distribution of male paraswimmers by disability categories

Based on the data collected from respondents, an analysis was conducted on the number of para-swimmers categorized by disability: physical disabilities, blind and visually impaired, intellectual disabilities, and Down syndrome and autism spectrum (from left to right on the figure). The results indicate notable differences among categories, with the highest number of para-swimmers observed in the intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum categories. The following bar chart visualizes the distribution of para-swimmers across these categories, providing a clear insight into the membership structure of the organizations analyzed.

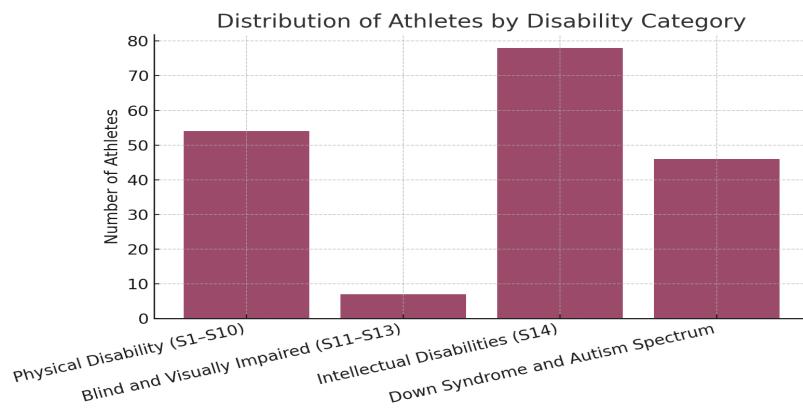


Figure 3. Distribution of female paraplegic swimmers by disability category

The analysis of female para-swimmers in clubs across the Republic of Croatia included classification by disability categories, encompassing physical disabilities, blindness and visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, and the autism spectrum (on the figure from left to right). This categorization provides a comprehensive view of the diversity within the female para-swimmer population and facilitates a better understanding of their representation and specific needs within each category. The analysis of female para-swimmers in clubs across the Republic of Croatia included classification by disability categories, encompassing physical disabilities, blindness and visual impairments, intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, and the autism spectrum. This categorization provides a comprehensive view of the diversity within the female para-swimmer population and facilitates a better understanding of their representation and specific needs within each category.

3.4 Number of junior and senior paraswimmers (females and males) in clubs

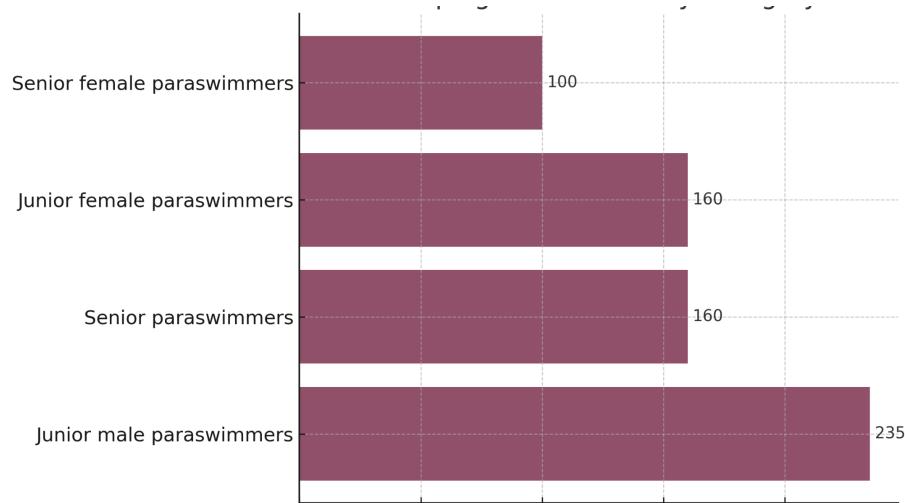


Figure 4. Number of junior and senior paraswimmers (both females and males) in clubs

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of male and female paraswimmers across age categories (juniors and seniors). The data show that the largest group is junior male paraswimmers, with a total of 238 members, while the smallest group is junior female paraswimmers, numbering 99. Among seniors, there are 163 male paraswimmers and 101 female paraswimmers. This visualization clearly highlights the higher representation of male paraswimmers compared to females across all age groups, as well as the notable difference between the number of juniors and seniors.

3.5 Staff engaged in working with paraswimmers

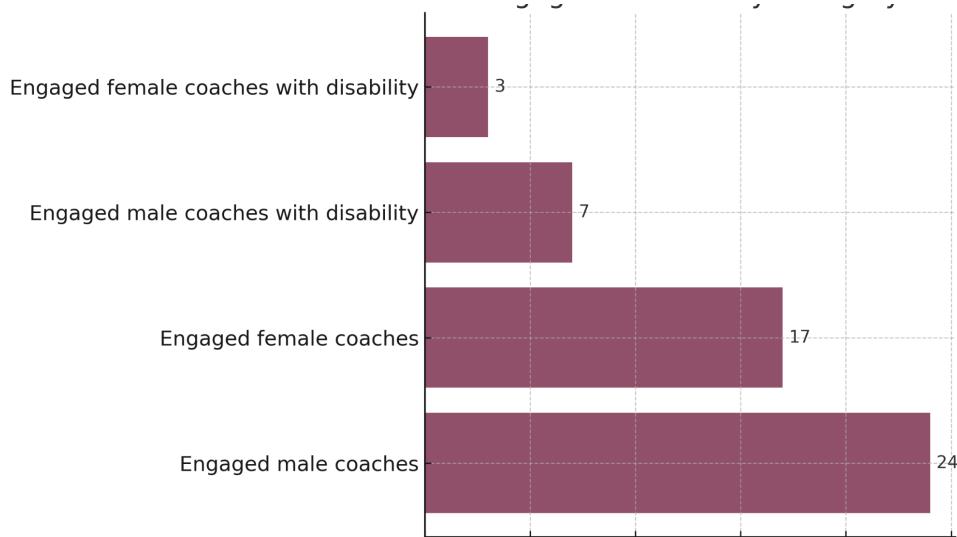


Figure 4. Staff engaged in working with paraswimmers (from top to bottom: engaged males trainers, engaged female trainers, engaged male trainers with invalidity, engaged female trainer with invalidity)

The bar chart illustrates the number of coaches working with para-swimmers, with a breakdown by gender and disability status. The largest group consists of male coaches without disabilities, totaling 24, while the number of female coaches without disabilities is slightly lower at 17. Regarding coaches with disabilities, 8 male and 3 female coaches are involved in working with para-swimmers. These data indicate the presence of inclusivity within the coaching staff, while also highlighting the potential to further increase the representation of women and individuals with disabilities among professionals.

3.5 National classification of paraplegic swimmers

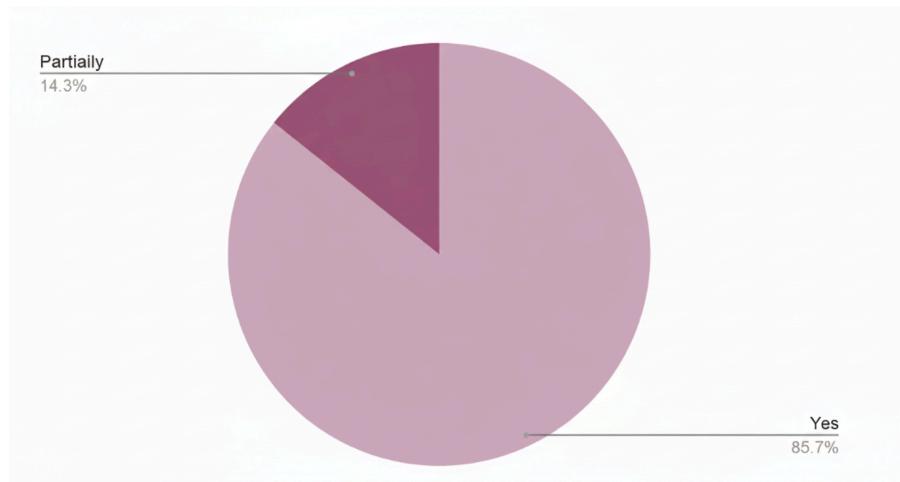


Figure 5. National classification of the paraplegic swimmers

The pie chart presents club responses to the question of whether their paraplegic swimmers have access to national classification upon request. The vast majority of respondents (85.7%) indicated that their athletes have this access, while 14.3% reported that classification is only partially or occasionally available. These results suggest generally good access to national classification, while also highlighting certain barriers or limitations present in some clubs.

3.6 Training programs

Based on all responses, educational programs and training for para-swimming coaches and officials between 2022 and 2025 were identified. The most frequently mentioned organizers are the Croatian Para-Swimming Federation (HPPS) and the Croatian Swimming Federation (HPS), which regularly conduct educational sessions and conventions. Notable among these are programs under the “Strengthening the Paraport System” project (ESF+) as well as specialized training sessions such as Halliwick courses, athlete conditioning programs, the Summer School for Kinesiologists, and the Symposium for Training Non-Swimmers.

Several international Erasmus+ programs were also highlighted, including LETSWIM, POSTCOVIDSWIM, SPORT FOR ALL, and JOB Shadowing, reflecting ongoing international collaboration and opportunities for knowledge exchange in the field of paraport. These initiatives demonstrate a comprehensive and structured approach to capacity-building for coaches and officials, contributing to the overall development and professionalization of para-swimming in Croatia.

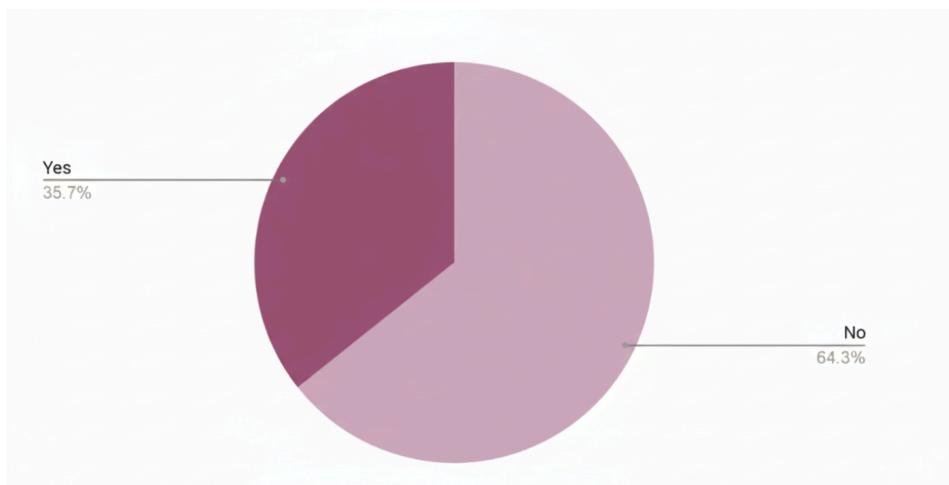


Figure 6. Faculty programs related to parasports/paraswimming

The majority of respondents (64.3%) indicated that there is no formal education in their academic system that includes parasport or para-swimming, while 35.7% reported that such university programs or similar formal training sessions do exist. These results suggest that the integration of parasport into formal educational programs remains limited, which may pose a challenge for the development of qualified professionals in this field.

Where formal programs are available, they include: regular courses at the Faculty of Kinesiology (KIF) in Osijek; elective courses at KIF Zagreb; parasport courses at KIF Split; the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation; and para-swimming lectures within the “Sport of Persons with Disabilities” course at KIF Zagreb by PK Natator.

3.6 Para-Swimming Competitions in Croatia

Based on survey responses, regional and national para-swimming competitions in the Republic of Croatia are primarily concentrated in major cities such as Zadar, Rijeka, Zagreb, and Split. These events include a variety of formats, such as swimming festivals, team championships, and open regional competitions. Most competitions are held in spring and autumn, with some events taking place at the end of the year. Clubs such as Natator report active participation in approximately 15 competitions annually within the national para-swimming system.

Key national competitions include the Individual Croatian Championships in Split (commonly held at the beginning of the year, also known as Croatia Open), the Team Croatian Championships in Zagreb (summer), and various swimming meets and festivals, including the Swimming Festival in Zagreb at year-end. Other notable events, such as the Para-Swimming

Festival in Rijeka and the Zadar Open, though regional in scope, have national significance and wide club participation. On average, 4–5 major national competitions are organized each year, primarily in Split, Zagreb, Rijeka, and Zadar.

3.7 Access to adapted pools for persons with disabilities

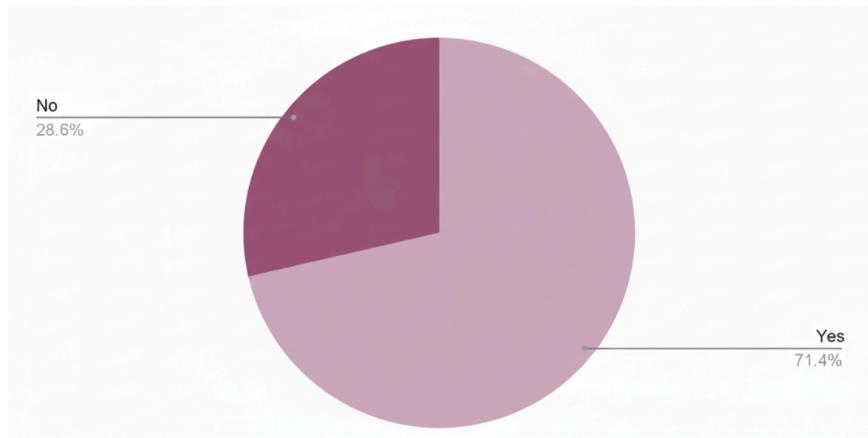


Figure 7. Access to adapted pools for persons with disabilities

The pie chart illustrates the proportion of clubs with access to technically adapted swimming pools for persons with disabilities. According to survey responses, 71.4% of clubs reported having access to such facilities, while 28.6% indicated that they do not. These results reflect a relatively good level of accessibility; however, they also highlight the need for further investment in infrastructure to ensure equal conditions for all athletes with disabilities.

3.8 Availability of medical and psychological support

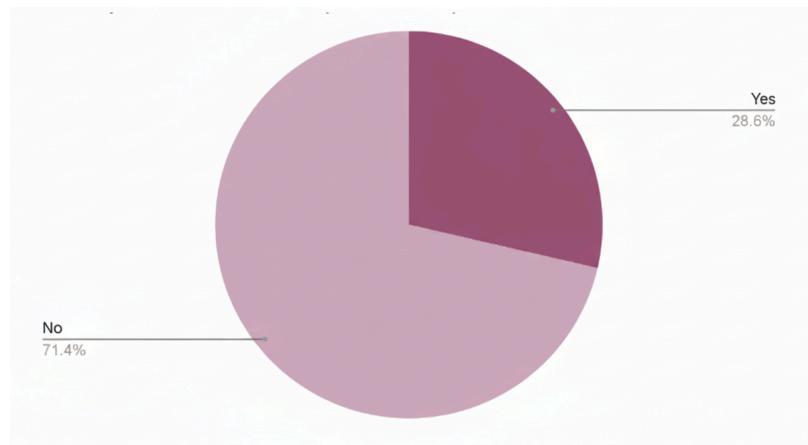


Figure 8. Availability of medical and psychological support

The pie chart shows the proportion of organizations providing medical and psychological support to athletes. According to the results, only 28.6% of organizations offer these services, while 71.4% do not. These findings highlight a significant need to improve the availability of medical and psychological support, which is essential for the health, well-being, and athletic performance of para-athletes.

3.9 Availability of sports equipment

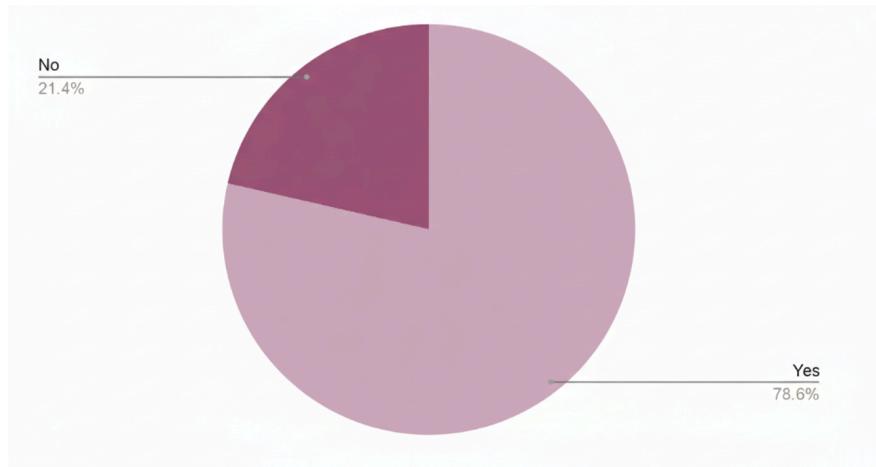


Figure 8. Availability of sports equipment

According to the results, the vast majority of organizations (78.6%) reported having sports equipment available for para-swimmers, while 21.4% indicated that such equipment is not

available. These findings suggest that equipment for para-swimmers is generally accessible, which is crucial for the effective training and development of athletes, although there remains room for improvement in some organizations.

3.10 The greatest challenges in working with paraplegic swimmers in clubs

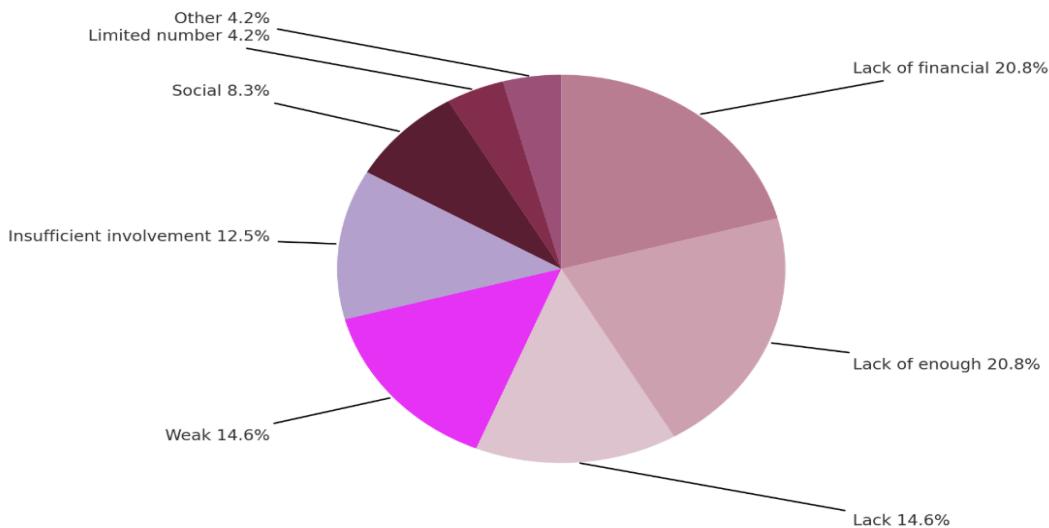


Figure 9. The greatest challenges in working with paraplegic swimmers in clubs

The analysis of responses indicates that the greatest challenges for paraplegic swimming in the region are linked to a lack of financial resources and insufficiently trained professional staff, which together accounted for as much as 20.8% of all responses. The next key issues identified were inadequate infrastructure and limited visibility and media promotion, each representing around 14.6% of the responses. Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents highlighted the insufficient involvement of government bodies in shaping paraplegic sport policies (12.5%) as an obstacle to further development.

Social stigmatization was also recognized as a significant problem (8.3%), while a limited number of competitions and other categories had a smaller but still notable share (4.2% each).

In the “Other” category, respondents specifically emphasized:

- that although support for para-swimming exists at the national level, local authorities must take more active measures to strengthen it;

- the lack of sufficient national or EU-funded projects that could finance salaries;
- the need for more intensive training of professionals on disability classifications;
- low societal awareness of opportunities for persons with disabilities;
- the absence of public campaigns promoting the achievements of paraspot athletes;
- and the importance of providing salary supplements for paraspot coaches, given the complexity and demands of their work.

These additional comments underscore the importance of adopting a systemic approach to the development of para-swimming, where financial, educational, and social components must advance in parallel to ensure improved conditions for both athletes and coaches.

3.11 Conclusion

The analysis of available data on para swimming in the Republic of Croatia indicates that the sport has a solid foundation, reflected in the existence of regional, national, and international competitions, as well as relatively good access to national classification procedures and technically adapted swimming pools. Most clubs report having access to the necessary sports equipment, and a significant number of athletes regularly or occasionally compete at international events, highlighting a notable level of integration into the global para sports community.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal several challenges. The most pressing issues include insufficient financial resources and a lack of adequately trained professional staff, alongside limited infrastructure and low visibility and media coverage of para sports. The lack of medical and psychological support, as well as the restricted number of competitions, further hinder the development of para swimming. Respondents also emphasized the need for stronger engagement of local authorities, a greater number of national and EU-funded projects, more intensive education of coaching staff on disability categories, and public campaigns aimed at reducing social stigmatization.

Overall, para swimming in Croatia demonstrates important progress, yet sustainable advancement requires a systematic and coordinated approach that integrates financial, educational, and social dimensions. Such an approach would help create better conditions for athletes and coaches, strengthen the visibility of para sports, and ensure long-term development and success.

4. Summary of the results for Serbia

4.1 Distribution of paraswimming organisations reported by participants

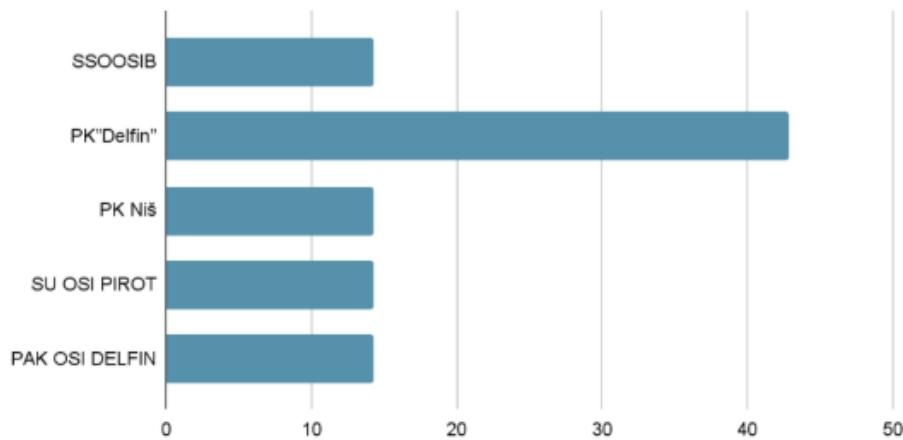


Figure 10. Distribution of paraswimmers in paraswimming organisations

The bar chart presents the distribution of para swimming organizations identified by survey participants. Out of a total of seven responses, **PK DELFIN** emerged as the most frequently mentioned organization, accounting for approximately 43% of all responses. The remaining organizations—**PK NIŠ, SSOOSIB, SU OSI PROT, and PAK OSI DELFIN**—each represent around 14% of the total. This distribution underscores the central role of PK DELFIN within the sample, while also reflecting the presence of a diverse range of other organizations engaged in para swimming.

4.2 Distribution of male paraswimmers by disability categories

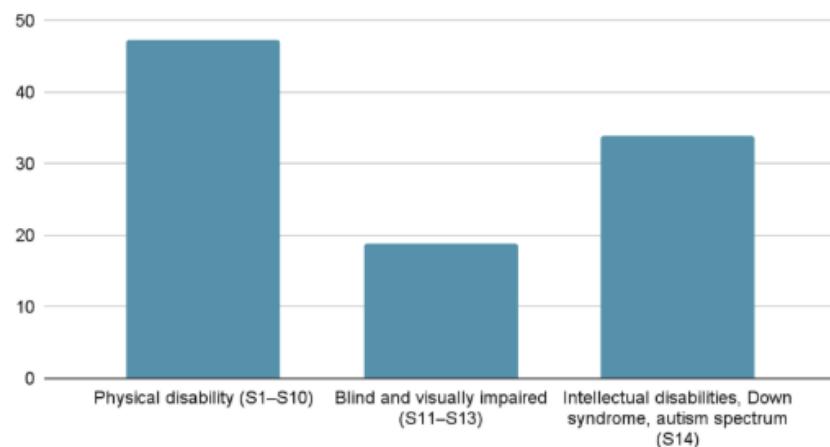


Figure 11. Distribution of male paraswimmers by invalidity categories

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of male para swimmers across three disability categories within the surveyed organizations. Nearly half of the swimmers (47.2%) are classified within the physical disability categories (S1–S10). Athletes who are blind or visually impaired (S11–S13) represent approximately 18.9% of the total, while swimmers with intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, or autism spectrum disorders (S14) account for around 34.0%. This distribution emphasizes the diversity of athletes participating in para swimming and underscores the varying levels of representation among different disability groups within the sport.

4.3 Distribution of female paraswimmers by invalidity categories

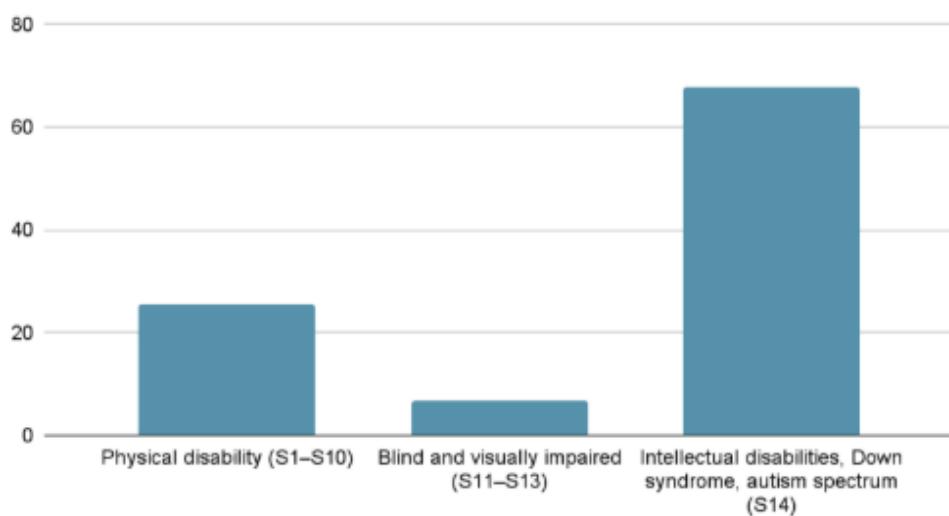


Figure 12. Distribution of female paraswimmers by invalidity categories

The bar chart presents the distribution of female para swimmers across three disability categories within the surveyed organizations. The majority of athletes (67.8%) fall within the category of intellectual disabilities, Down syndrome, or autism spectrum disorders (S14). Swimmers with physical disabilities (S1–S10) comprise approximately 25.4% of the total, while those who are blind or visually impaired (S11–S13) account for 6.8%. This distribution highlights the predominance of athletes with intellectual disabilities in the sample, alongside a comparatively smaller representation of swimmers with physical and sensory impairments.

4.4 Distribution of junior and senior male and female paraswimmers

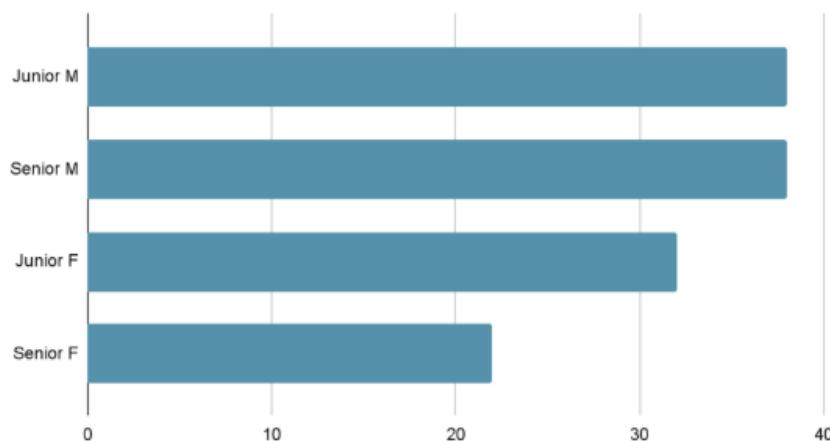


Figure 13. Distribution of junior and senior male and female parawimmers

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of junior and senior para swimmers, disaggregated by sex. Among male athletes, participation is evenly divided, with 38 junior and 38 senior swimmers. In contrast, female representation declines with age, with 32 junior swimmers compared to 22 seniors. Overall, male athletes outnumber females in both age categories, with the most pronounced disparity observed at the senior level. These findings underscore the importance of implementing targeted strategies to support the retention and continued engagement of female para swimmers as they transition to higher age categories.

4.5 Distribution of male and female coaches with respect to invalidity

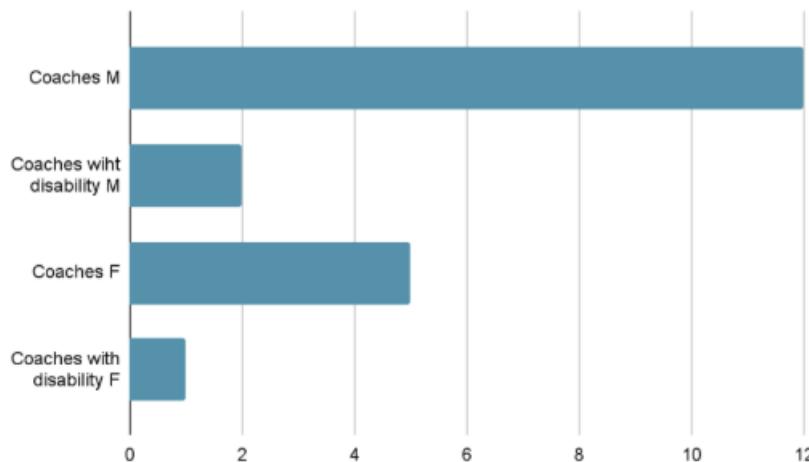


Figure 14. Distribution of male and female coaches with respect to invalidity

The bar chart illustrates the distribution of male and female coaches engaged in para swimming, with an additional distinction based on disability status. The data indicate that there are 12 male coaches, including 2 individuals with disabilities. Among female coaches, a total of 5 were reported, of whom 1 is a person with a disability. Overall, male coaches are more numerous, while individuals with disabilities remain underrepresented across both groups. These findings highlight the need to foster greater inclusivity and to strengthen efforts aimed at increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in coaching roles.

4.6 National classification of paraswimmers

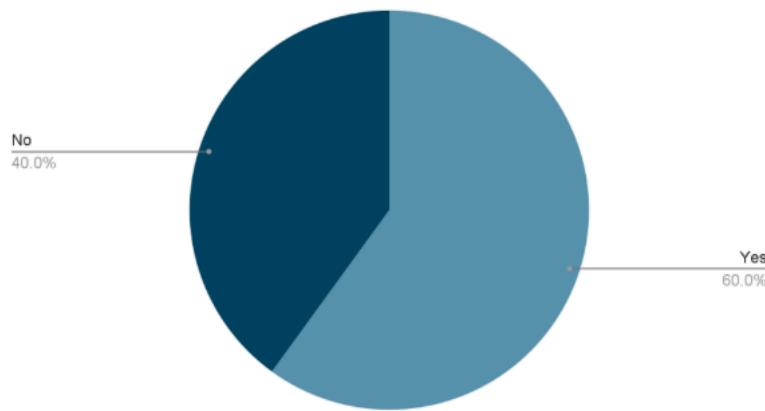


Figure 15. National classification of paraswimmers

The pie chart presents responses concerning access to classifiers and the regularity of the national classification process for para swimmers. According to the data, 60% of respondents reported that classification is conducted regularly and is readily accessible, whereas 40% indicated limited access to classifiers or irregular implementation of the classification process. These findings underscore gaps in the consistency of classification practices and point to the need for enhanced accessibility and more structured, standardized procedures at the national level.

4.7 Attendance on the training or educational programs

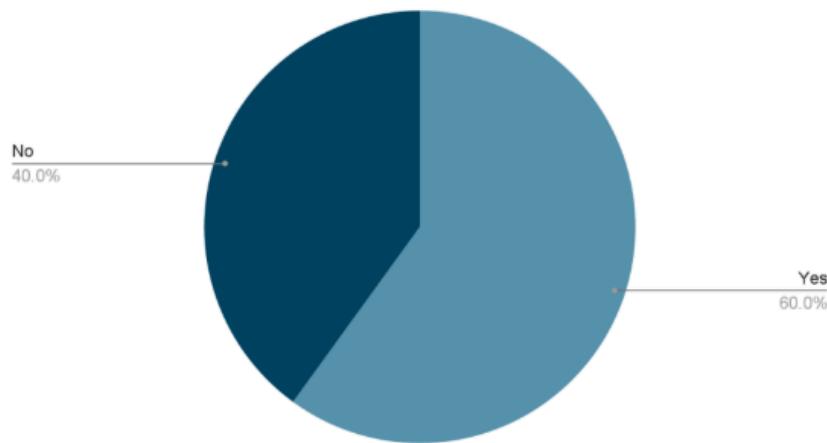


Figure 16. Attendance on the training or educational programs

According to the survey results, 60% of respondents reported having attended or being aware of training and educational programs for coaches and referees in para swimming over the past three years. The only program specifically mentioned was the Halliwick training held in Zagreb, indicating a limited availability of local educational opportunities within Serbia.

Furthermore, all respondents unanimously emphasized the critical importance of ongoing education and professional development for those working with athletes with disabilities, assigning the highest possible rating on a 1–5 scale. These findings underscore a strong recognition of the value of specialized knowledge and continuous learning in supporting inclusive sports practices.

Out of the five respondents, four indicated that their educational system includes formal programs (e.g., university courses) covering parasport or para swimming, while one respondent reported that such programs are not available. A summary of the educational programs identified by respondents provides an overview of where parasport-related content is formally integrated into higher education curricula.

The programs mentioned include:

- **Coach in Para Sports**
- **Differentiated Physical Education (Dif)**
- **Sport for Persons with Disabilities**
- **Adaptive Physical Exercise**
- **Holistic Approach to Adaptive Physical Exercise**

These findings highlight current academic efforts to incorporate inclusive sport into higher education and underscore the importance of formal training for professionals working with athletes with disabilities.

4.8 Competitions

The table provides an overview of national and local para swimming competitions held in Serbia. Local-level events include the Belgrade Championship, Serbia Open, and Pobednik Open, while national-level competitions feature the Serbia Championship and the Novi Sad Meeting. This summary highlights the structured competitive opportunities available to para swimmers at both regional and national levels within the country.

4.9 Organizational support and accessibility for paraplegic swimmers

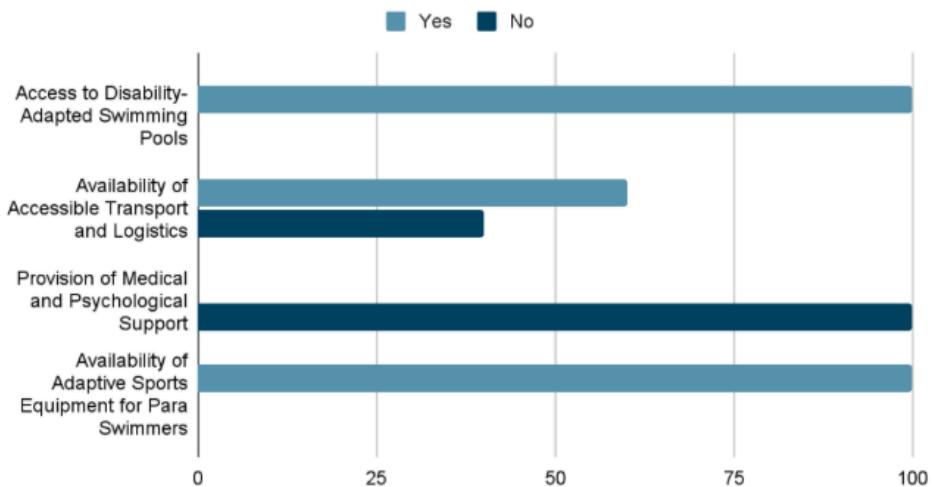


Figure 17. Organizational support and accessibility for paraplegic swimmers

The bar chart presents the availability of essential support services and infrastructure within para swimming organizations. All respondents (100%) reported access to disability-adapted swimming pools and adaptive sports equipment. Medical and psychological support was also universally available. However, only 60% of organizations indicated having accessible transport and logistical support, highlighting a gap in mobility provisions for athletes with disabilities and underscoring the need for improved accessibility measures.

4.10 Key barriers to the development of paraswimming in Serbia

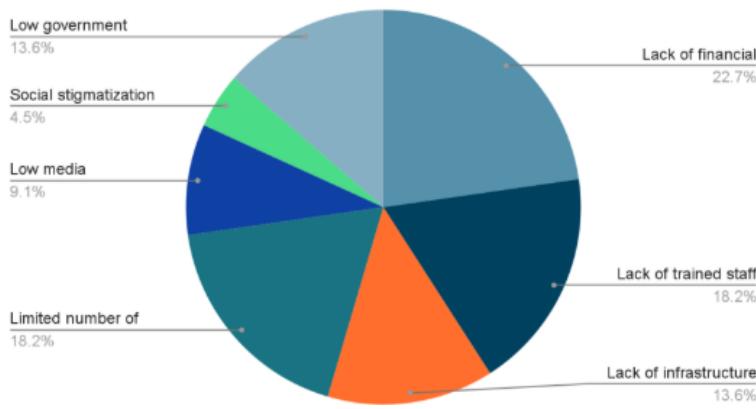


Figure 18. Key barriers to the development of paraswimming in Serbia

The bar chart depicts the primary obstacles identified by respondents as limiting the growth and development of para swimming in Serbia. The most frequently cited challenge was a lack of financial resources, reported by all respondents. This was followed closely by a shortage of trained personnel and a limited number of competitions, each mentioned by four participants.

Infrastructural limitations and insufficient engagement of government bodies in policy development were also highlighted as significant concerns. Additional barriers, including low media visibility and social stigmatization, were noted less frequently. These findings underscore the need for targeted investment, professional development, and awareness initiatives to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for para swimmers.

4.11 Conclusion

The analysis of para swimming in Serbia highlights both strengths and areas for improvement within the national system. The sport benefits from the presence of regional and national competitions, structured educational programs for coaches and referees, and access to adapted infrastructure, such as disability-accessible swimming pools and adaptive sports equipment. There is also a clear recognition among respondents of the importance of professional development and specialized knowledge in supporting athletes with disabilities.

However, several challenges constrain the growth and development of para swimming. The most prominent barriers include insufficient financial resources, a shortage of trained personnel, limited competition opportunities, and gaps in infrastructure and mobility support. Additionally, there is a lack of formal educational programs locally, underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in coaching roles, and limited involvement of government bodies in policy-making. Social stigmatization and low media visibility further hinder broader engagement and awareness.

Overall, while para swimming in Serbia demonstrates important foundational elements, advancing the sport will require a coordinated, systemic approach. Priorities should include increased investment, expansion of educational and training programs, targeted inclusion of athletes and coaches with disabilities, improved accessibility, and initiatives to raise public awareness. Such measures are essential to foster sustainable growth, enhance athlete development, and strengthen the national para swimming community



ParaSwInclusion



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