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THE ROLE OF PUSH AND PULL FACTORS IN THE SELECTION OF DESTINATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: SERBIAN CONTEXT

Abstract

Many countries, especially small and underdeveloped countries of the world, increasingly search for new models that would help them attract young highly educated professionals to educate themselves in the high education institutions within their borders, thus influencing their better position on the global market. Relying on the push and pull factors' theory, this research investigates the motives for studying in the host country, as well as international students' intention to stay or leave the host country after finishing their studies. The paper uses a mixed methods approach to analyse the data received in all three phases of the research with Serbian students who are studying or studied abroad and foreign students who are studying or studied in Serbia.

Keywords: host country, international students, academic migration, push-pull factors, Serbia

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

International mobility of students assumes academic movement which involves many challenges, obstacles and uncertainties for its actors. International students are defined as those students who acquired their previous education in their native country, or some other country, and they are not residents of the country in which they are currently studying (OECD, 2017; Vasojević, 2024b). More accurately, they are "individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination is different from their country of origin." (OECD, 2017: 38; UNESCO, OECD & EUROSTAT, 2018). This population of students, globally speaking, mainly moves between the popular student destinations of the Global North (Anglo-America, Europe, Japan, Australia and New Zealand) (Ђоровић, 2006), while others move from South to North, from North to South, or within South (Bitschnau, 2023; Maringe & Carter, 2007). When we perceive the "global model" from the perspective of the international students, citizens of Serbia who are studying or studied abroad, the most

frequently these are countries of the Global North. On the other side, the international students who are studying or studied in Serbia originate mostly from countries of the Global South.

International student mobility is connected to the increase in personal skills that are supposed to facilitate employment of highly educated professionals on the global market (Albien & Mashatola, 2021; Ravasi, Salamin, & Davoine, 2015). However, when we talk about international studying, one should differentiate between the population of international students who earn a full degree outside of their native country (long-term temporary migration) and those who enter a student exchange program for a number of months (short-term temporary migration) (Васојевић, 2024b). The difference between these two populations of international students is perceived by Brooks and Waters (2011) when talking about motives for schooling outside of one's native country, and they note that the students that attain full degrees abroad have different motives for studying abroad than the students participating in exchange programs (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023). Students go abroad to achieve something that would contribute to their experience, or career opportunities. Education abroad is motivated by different social and academic factors, which in the migration theory, are classified in push factors, which include negative economic, political, cultural and ecological factors (World Economic Forum, 2024; Black, et al, 2011), such as unemployment, bad living conditions, etc., which push populations, i.e. students to leave their country of residence, or those factors in the country of immigration, which make entry of potential migrants into this country difficult (Тудић Ђурчић и Станишић, 2023: 199–200). On the other side, pull factors are totally opposite to the push factors, i.e. these are positive factors attracting people to a better location. Better living conditions, well-regulated social system, etc., are the factors that influence potential migrants to stay in the country of reception, but they also attract potential migrants to come to that country (Тудић Ђурчић и Станишић, 2023: 199–200), in order to satisfy their living, existential and labour needs, enjoy political or religious freedoms, or acquire better higher education, and use a better system of social protection and healthcare (Butaga Sao & Reuben Mwandilawa, 2023: 42), as well as the stress-free environment, attractive and safe, that they do not have in their country of current residence (Bansak, Simpson & Zavodny, 2015). Social and cultural factors also have an important role in the migration process. Striving for independence, family conflicts, better communication services (transport, media influence), urban-oriented education and the resulting changes in attitudes and values, also promote migration (Тудић Ђурчић и Станишић, 2023: 199–200, 2014).

The push-pull theory is rooted in studying human migrations which indicate the flow of migration between the region of origin and region of destination

(Lee, 1966; King, Gomes, Shannon, & Lu, 2024). Thus the native country, or the country of current residence, as well as the country of destination are marked with both positive and negative factors that determine whether the migration will occur. Lee (1966) conceptualised the factors connected to the decision on and the process of migration in four categories: (1) Factors connected to the region of origin, (2) Factors connected to the region of destination, (3) Intervening obstacles (such as distance, physical barriers, migration laws, etc.), and (4) Personal factors (Lee, 1966; Van, Bakewell & Long, 2017). All four categories indicate that there are numerous factors in every field that act in driving people from that region, maintaining them in, or attracting them to that region (Lee, 1966). In this respect, differences are perceived between the factors connected to the country of origin, or country of residence, and those connected to the region of destination. Migration can occur in both these cases, but in the cases when the positive results of the country of destination exceed the negative ones in the country of residence, migration is likely to occur (Ibid, 1966). In the context of international student mobility, the push factors concern motives of an international students to leave their native country, i.e. country of residence (Sevenhuijsen, 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and continue their education in some other country of reception. Thus the push motives mainly concern low level quality of education and lack of studying opportunities, possibility of career building, or political/cultural freedoms in the native country (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023). These very push motives determine migration and based on these, “weak spots” of the native country may be identified, which influence students’ decisions to study abroad. Among the students from Asian countries and developing countries who study in the West, the push factors often exceed the pull factors (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023). African students recognise political instability and the lack of educational chances as the dominant reasons for leaving their native countries (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Unlike this population, students from continental China quote poor quality of institutions as a major reason for studying in Hong Kong and Macao (Li & Bray, 2007). Similarly, Nghia (2019) reveals that low quality of education and unavailability of desired programs push Vietnamese students to study abroad. On the other hand, there are pull factors mainly connected to the country of reception (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2022) where international students continue their education at some foreign university. The pull motives mainly concern high quality education (Cubillo, Sanchez & Cervino, 2006; Mazzarol & Souter, 2002), which leads to better prospects for international career (Mpinganjira & Rugimbana, 2009), possibility to improve one’s language skills, develop cultural skills, or use scholarships (foreign or domestic) to finance their education abroad (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2023). Accordingly, it is possible to perceive academic migration as a result of the way

in which the push and the pull influence the movement (Chang et al., 2014) of international students from one “place” (destination) to another “place” (destination). In this paper, the considered theoretical frameworks (Lee, 1966; Van, Bakewell & Long, 2017; Bansak, Simpson & Zavodny, 2015; Heckert, 2015) would be used in investigating push and pull factors, which would enable us to discover which factors have “pushed” and “pulled” international students in the context of Serbia to select the destination for their studies, as well as which “push” and “pull” factors have impact on (de)motivating students to stay in, or leave their country of studying.

TEMPORARY STUDENT MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SERBIA

From the times of the first pioneers to the modern era of educational globalisation, one can trace the tradition of educating the international students from the Serbian context¹. The first Serbian pioneers were sent by the government of the era to study at European universities as early as in 1830 (Васојевић, 2024b; Васојевић, 2024a). However, Serbia also boasts a long tradition of schooling international students and intellectuals at its universities, dating back to 1950s (Васојевић, 2024a; Васојевић 2024b; Bondžić, 2014). The fact that the number of these students has been substantial is evidenced by the information that 15,364 foreign nationals from 119 different countries were enrolled in Serbian universities from 1950 to 1990 (Meridijani, 1990; Васојевић, 2024b). Majority of the students in this period originated from 12 countries (see: Васојевић, 2024b). Observing both these populations through a temporal prism, we get the insight that Serbia has a long history of educating domestic students (through scholarships) abroad, as well as educating foreign students at domestic universities all the way to 1990s (*Ibid*, 2024). The available data, but also rare scientific papers, indicate that this internationalisation was planned on the national level (Тривчевић, 2003) with the purpose of adopting global trends in the Serbian society. Also, this was evidenced by the existence of the state infrastructure of the Republic Institute for International Scientific, Educational, Cultural and Technical Cooperation up until the 1990s. (Информативни билтен, 1982; Vasojević, 2022). Today, in the 21st Century, the concept of internationalisation had been revived only after the regime change in 2000, and was institutionalised in 2005 through the establishment of the Fund for Young Talents “Dositeja” (Fond za mlade talente

¹ Serbian context is defined as Serbian** students, recipients of scholarships, who studied or are studying abroad, as well as foreign students who studied or are studying at Serbian universities.

** Serbian students as a term for a wider context, from the Principality of Serbia to the Republic of Serbia.

“Dositeja”), with the idea to educate best students at renowned international universities, through scholarships. In addition to this program, in 2010, the Government of the Republic of Serbia initiated the project titled “World in Serbia” (“Svet u Srbiji”), which has involved education of international students through scholarships provided by the Government at universities all over Serbia. These initiatives show that in recent years, Serbia has increased the efforts to attract foreign students through these programs, as well as via additional scholarships secured by means of bilateral agreements (Vasojević, 2024b). The initiatives and projects that have as their goal education of students and scientists from both these populations, are mainly stimulated by socio-economic factors and political motives that pertain to the “creation” of cultural ambassadors. The number of international students who study in Serbia is on the rise, which can be concluded according to the budget funds allocated each year, as well as based on the data by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (Vasojević, 2024b). However, the statistics concerning the number of Serbian students studying abroad is unavailable, and the Department of Education Statistics of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia does not process all the data crucial for monitoring of the academic trajectory of international students. The focus of this paper, however, is on the push and pull factors, since the Serbian academic community and wider public do not have full access to the data and databases concerning the population of international students.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

For the benefit of this paper and the defined research aim, we shall consider the results obtained in all three phases of the research. More accurately, the paper uses the mixed methods approach which secures integration of quantitative and qualitative data (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015; Guetterman & James, 2023), where crossed methods enable consideration of multiple dimensions (Creswell, 2008). Also, the population described in this paper will be considered from two aspects: 1. *International Serbian population* consisting of students, citizens of Serbia who are studying, or have studied abroad, and 2. *International population in Serbia* consisting of foreign students who are studying or have studied in Serbia. The criterion for consideration of the two populations is based on the Serbian context analysed in the previous section, but also on relevant international sources, where population of international students from developed and under-developed countries is considered within the context of *North-South* (Bitschnau, 2023). As the distribution of the respondents in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics has been presented in the first chapter, this chapter uses the same

model, yet the results are provided and considered only for the sample for which there are full socio-demographic responses to identify the respondents (N=211). Table 1: Interpretation of the data for the first and third phase of the research relies on the respondents’ narratives which we analysed based on thematic analysis (Kuckart, 2014; Mayring & Brunner, 2010). The quantitative data from the poll are presented by using frequency and share. The qualitative contents of the first and third phases of the research have been analysed by using the method of qualitative analysis. By implementing thematic analysis, common topics have been identified and the relevant original quotes provided.

Table 1: Characteristics (socio-demographic²) of the respondents from the Serbian context* ((n(S³)=122 + n(M⁴)=89 = n (211)⁵)

International Serbian population			Foreign population in Serbia		
Gender	Number	%	Gender	Number	%
Male	40	(32.8)	Male	49	(55.1)
Female	82	(67.2)	Female	40	(44.9)
Total	122	100	Total	89	100
Age Structure	Number	%	Age Structure	Number	%
Up to 20 years	8	6.6	Up to 20 years	10	11.2
21–30 years	69	56.6	21–30 years	66	74.2
More than 30 years	45	36.8	More than 30 years	13	14.6
Total	122	100	Total	89	100
The highest level of studies finished abroad	Number	%	The highest level of studies finished abroad	Number	%
College	0	0	College	6	6.7
Basic academic studies (Bachelor’s degree)	22	18.4	Basic academic studies (Bachelor’s degree)	44	49.4
Master/specialisation	65	53.5	Master/specialisation	27	30.3
Doctoral studies (PhD)	34	28.1	Doctoral studies (PhD)	12	13.5
Total	121	100	Total	89	100

² The sample is shown according to the variables of age, gender, the highest level of education acquired abroad, manner of funding the studies abroad, Table 1.

³ n(s) – the total number of the students who are citizens of Serbia.

⁴ n(m) – the total number of foreign students studying in Serbia.

⁵ n – the total number of the respondents from both populations, observed according to the criterion of full socio-demographic data.

Costs of education	Number	%	Costs of education	Number	%
My country's government, with a conditioned country of destination	3	2.5	My country's government, with a conditioned country of destination	11	12.4
My country's government, without a conditioned country of destination	6	4.9	My country's government, without a conditioned country of destination	6	6.7
My country's government and international donors	13	10.7	My country's government and international donors	9	10.1
International donors	46	37.6	International donors	20	22.5
I covered the costs on my own	54	44.3	I covered the costs on my own	43	48.3
Total	122	100	Total	89	100

The obtained data show that studying abroad is more frequently opted for by female students when we observe the sample of Serbian students studying outside the country. Also, based on the obtained data, it can be seen that students that are citizens of Serbia opt for studying abroad after they have finished their basic academic studies, so they most frequently enrol master's (specialist) and doctoral programs abroad. Also, the greatest number of the respondents has had support by their country's government (68%) for studying abroad, which can be defined as one of the motives that may have had impact on their decision to study abroad. Scholarships play an important role in determining students' readiness to migrate, which is supported by the Push-Pull theory of migration created by Lee (Lee 1966, in: Usman, Hasan & Nurul Alam, 2025). These data are in agreement with earlier data (Vasojević, Kirin & Marković, 2018), so the presently obtained data indicate that there have been no changes in the "profile" of students who are citizens of Serbia when compared to the earlier period. On the other hand, among the international students who study in Serbia, the most numerous are male students, and they come to Serbia having finished their basic university education, which is in correlation with the age of the respondents, but also with earlier research (Vasojević, 2022). Based on the obtained data, it may be said that the greatest share of the respondents have been studying in Serbia with the Government's support. However, because of the rare pieces of research (Vasojević, 2024b) made on this population, and the specific project "World in Serbia", future research needs to address the manner of financing and the relationship between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the foreign partners (beneficiaries). The research has identified 32 countries as the countries of study for Serbian students in school years of 2020/2021-2022/2023. The most represented educational destinations are European countries, where the English speaking area is the dominant one. On the other hand, the foreign students

studying in Serbia have been mapped to originate from 48 countries in the same period of 2010/11-2022/2023 school years. These data can be traced to the existence of the “World in Serbia” project, “Serbia for Serbs from the Region” (“Srbija za Srbe iz regiona”) project, as well as numerous bilateral agreements. It should be emphasised that these data should be perceived as having limitations in terms of the theory of academic migration and academic route of international students, as the instrument did not contain the data that concerned the field of studying, university, or study programs that the students had enrolled, or mapping/identification of the donors (funds). To collect these data was perceived by the Ethical Committee as jeopardising the identity of the respondents and enabling their identification, which had not been perceived as problematic in earlier relevant international research projects, or the national ones that dealt with temporary and lasting migrations of highly educated professionals from their native countries.

Interpretation of the Results of the Thematic Analysis

Pull Factors: Qualitative Results

The results shown in Table 2 represent the motives that caused the respondents to opt for studying abroad. Looking for recurring topics in the narratives of international students in the Serbian context, we reached the five key topics (categories) presented in the following table.

Table 2: Overview of the main topics and subtopics: Motives for studying abroad

Key topics –category’s name	Examples of the used codes	Statements by international students
Superior quality studies	Different learning perspective; programs of higher quality; better teaching conditions;	<i>“...Their way of working is quite superior, especially at doctoral studies. You can’t even compare doctoral studies there and here, we are much behind. The UK system is good because you can finish the studies quickly. You can get the PhD degree in the envisaged time and everything is subordinated to this. You have three or four years and you have to finish it all within that timeframe, so you just make yourself do it on time, otherwise you fail.” (M, 37, Serbia/United Kingdom)⁶</i>

⁶ In this paper we use the following to mark socio-demographic characteristics: M (male gender), F (female gender); respondents’ age is expressed numerically, and we first cite the native country, followed by the country of destination of the international student)

Key topics –category's name	Examples of the used codes	Statements by international students
		<i>"...journalism is a profession specific that way... it absolutely does not exist almost anywhere in the world. You have this type of studies in two or three places in the world. This is something completely different. Here at the faculty we would learn by heart some unnecessary subjects, wasting time and not doing what we were supposed to, while here we have practice, practice, practice. You learn only how to work, and all other subjects are optional, so if you want them." (F, 33, Serbia/United Kingdom)</i> <i>"So coming to Serbia, this was my first expectation that I'd be able to learn from a different perspective than what my country had to offer." (M, 26, Suriname/Serbia)</i> <i>"For me, I think that compared to Azerbaijan, and also Iran, I think that Iran has a good education system. However, I think that the Serbian system is more practical than that of other countries. I refer to the countries in which I studied, so I have the experience." (F, 31, Islamic Republic of Iran/Serbia)</i> <i>"Not in Belgrade, nor anywhere else in Serbia at the time, was there a research infrastructure of any kind to support my interests. You have no neuroscience studies, no interdisciplinary science in Serbia. I think they deal with clinical neuroscience that deals with treating some mental issues, but in the context of medicine, which has not been something that interested me. Somewhere in my third year I realised that, if I wanted to work on that, then Serbia was not an option, because of that." (F, 32, Serbia/Germany)</i>
Socio-economic factors	Better economic conditions (salary); Green policy; More opportunities on the labour market; Political situation; Better living conditions	<i>"More opportunities, much higher salary in Germany. Finally, the air is also cleaner, that's what bothered me a little also in recent years. This is a factor for me. In recent years the air has been awful. I started thinking about all these things. I am not a child. I'll have family in the next couple of years, I'd want to... A part of the reasons is scientific, a part has to do with the living." (M, 30, Serbia/Germany)</i>

Key topics –category's name	Examples of the used codes	Statements by international students
		<i>"My motive for leaving was not initially political, or because of the situation in the country, but simply this opportunity came, so I said, let's do it, why not." (M, 34, Serbia/Germany)</i> <i>"The decisive factor for Germany was that they had the most favourable offers in terms of finances. So master studies here have been 250 euros per semester, apartments are a bit more expensive than in Belgrade, living is a bit more expensive than in Novi Sad, maybe I would compare it to Belgrade prices and on top of that they have very good master's programs, so from that socio-financial aspect, Germany was the most attractive country." (M, 34, Serbia/Germany)</i> <i>"Truth be told, I always wanted to study abroad and stay there, because the salary they get for the identical job, if I working here as an intern earn more than a software engineer in Serbia as a senior, then it didn't make sense staying in Serbia. I can work here for ten years, get retired at 30 and never ever work again." (F, 22, Serbia/United States of America)</i> <i>"Germany was our number one choice because the education is relatively cheap, and prices are sometimes lower than in Serbia. Germany was one of the options and then I looked for different options, which cities, what I might like, where I knew someone in the vicinity. There were a couple of options that I applied for." (F, 29, Serbia/Germany)</i>
Scholarships	Studying financed by a domestic or international donor	<i>"I applied for the scholarship by following the process of a colleague who had received it a year earlier and told me this would be great for me. Give it a go. So I applied, received the scholarship, but I was on hold. It was already late July when I found out that I'd be going in September. Had it not been for the scholarship, I would not have gone, I would have enrolled a master program in Belgrade, a similar course." (F, 40, North Macedonia/Serbia)</i> <i>"Before applied for Serbian scholarship, I applied to American universities. I got 4 acceptance letters from American universities. Yeah but I cannot go due to restrictions on Syrians they don't give me visa because of restrictions on Syrians. It was my dream to study in a distinguished degree in American University and pursue my studies there..." (F, 20, Syria/Serbia)</i>

Key topics –category's name	Examples of the used codes	Statements by international students
		<i>"I applied for a scholarship in Cuba. When the phone rang, they said that I didn't get that scholarship, but that they could offer me something else. Then they mentioned Serbia. I didn't even know where it was, but they said that if I didn't accept the offer, I wouldn't be able to apply for any scholarship. So I accepted." (F, 22, Suriname/Serbia)</i>
Experience of another country	Wish for new experience; Getting to know different peoples and cultures; "Beauty" of another city	<i>"It was not some flaw in the Serbian system, but more your need for a new experience." (F, 22, Hungary/Serbia)</i> <i>"I found it interesting to see how others handle what they had, how they preserved their culture, unlike us who destroy ours daily. This was interesting to me, how versatile people were." (M, 32, Serbia/Italy)</i> <i>"The reason for me going to Austria is that I fell in love with Graz in 2008, when I first went there... And then I got extremely boring, I was always repeating this, over and over, and in 2012 a friend of mine enrolled a singing program at the academy there and I went to visit her. I was still in love with Graz... So I collected one document here, another there, then translation... So I went in December 2011 and submitted all the documents that they asked of me and they said see you in February. I asked them what about the February, and they said, you enrol then, congratulations, you're in." (F, 33, Serbia/Austria)</i>
Other people's influence and experiences	Friends' experiences abroad; Motives of one's parents and friends	<i>"I had a friend who wanted to go. These are three academies that used to be united into one school, but divided. He wanted to go to one of these schools. These studies are quite expensive... Up to that point, I had not heard for this school, I heard it from him. When I saw their works, people were painting like the masters, my idols, Paja Jovanović, Rembrandt, etc. This was interesting to me so I spoke to my mother... That's how I went there." (M, 32, Serbia/Italy)</i> <i>"I must say that the major influence on my decision had my mother, who had finished the same faculty as me. When I told her that I was more interested in urban planning than architectural design, she suggested I should think about studying abroad and Delft in Holland was at that point a highly renowned school in this sense, but also British universities, as the majority of the literature that she had given me during</i>

Key topics –category’s name	Examples of the used codes	Statements by international students
		<i>my bachelor studies to learn about urban planning had been written by professors from British universities, so they were always a kind of inspiration.” (M, 35, Serbia/Italy)</i>
		<i>“I used to hear it from my older siblings, the people who went to primary school with me, they used to go here and there, helped by this and that man, so I got interested, realised this was possible. Now how was I supposed to achieve this?” (F, 22, Serbia/United States of America)</i>

Push and Pull Factors: Quantitative Results

The results presented in Table 3 provide insight in the attitudes by the respondents – international students – about the possibility of returning and the conditions that are offered to them in their native countries.

Table 3: Distribution of the respondents according to the motive of staying in the country of destination or return to the country of origin

International Serbian population			Foreign population in Serbia		
I plan to return to the country of origin as soon as I finish my studies	Number	%	I plan to return to the country of origin as soon as I finish my studies	Number	%
I disagree completely	32	26.3	I disagree completely	16	17.9
I disagree	21	17.2	I disagree	12	13.5
Not sure	32	26.2	Not sure	23	25.8
I agree	19	15.5	I agree	13	14.6
I agree completely	17	13.9	I agree completely	25	28.1
No response	1	0.8	No response	0	0
Total	122	100	Total	89	100
Material circumstances are much better here than in my country	Number	%	Material circumstances are much better here than in my country	Number	%
I disagree completely	6	4.9	I disagree completely	22	24.7
I disagree	4	3.3	I disagree	14	15.7

Not sure	17	13.9	Not sure	26	29.8
I agree	40	32.8	I agree	15	16.8
I agree completely	54	44.3	I agree completely	12	13.5
No response	1	0.8	No response	0	0
Total	122	100	Total	89	100
What would motivate you the most to return to the country of origin after you finish your studies?			What would motivate you the most to return to the country of origin after you finish your studies?		
	Number	%		Number	%
Secured and well-paid job in my profession	37	30.3	Secured and well-paid job in my profession	33	37.0
Favourable conditions for starting my own business – state support	12	9.8	Favourable conditions for starting my own business – state support	15	16.9
Family reasons	26	21.3	Family reasons	28	31.5
Regime change	12	9.8	Regime change	6	6.7
Affordable housing loans	0	0	Affordable housing loans	1	1.1
Other	34	27.9	Other	6	6.7
No response	1	0.8	No response	0	0
Total	122	100	Total	89	100

Based on the results presented in Table 3, we have looked for recurring topics in the narratives of international students from the Serbian context, which cast light on the quantitative results that concern the motives for (non-)returning to one's country of origin. Family reasons have been identified as an important factor for both populations when it comes to returning to one's native country. In literature, the link of a diaspora member to his/her family is defined as a place of extending trust, collective action and the sense of community (Karayianni, Hadjilias & Glyptis, 2023). The respondent states:

"I felt really lonely there. I don't have family there. Here I have my family when I need help. I am not alone. I know that I can do anything on my own, but I don't want to do everything on my own." (F, 27, Turkey/Serbia)

Or other, social, economic and ecological conditions in the country of origin and country of reception have an important role, which is evident from the following answers by the respondents:

Ecological: *"The air prevents me. When I come I can hardly breathe, because I have asthma. Especially in winter, I can't breathe in Belgrade. Care for one's environment in general, and that's something I think of more and more as I get older."* (F, 32, Serbia/Germany)

Economic: *"I have a couple of reasons for now to stay in Germany, I have a steady job OK. In this sense, there are prospects that everything will be great economically, there's this hope, that Serbia often lacks, but I think that the main and no.1 reason that I'll be staying in Germany in the following period is the healthcare system."* (F, 29, Serbia/Germany)

Economic: *"I would return if the living conditions were the same, if I got the same salary. If there was a financial equivalence, I'd be in Serbia."* (F, 22, Serbia/United States of America)

Socio-economic conditions of the host country and the reception country dictate international students' stay (Nikou & Luukkonen, 2024). In this research, socio-economic factors have been identified as prominent, and as such have a direct impact on many aspects in the lives of individuals, dictating opportunities or employment, as well as securing favourable ecological conditions for living.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The obtained results have shown that the motives i.e. pull factors that predispose an individual to opt for studying abroad may be divided in 5 dominant topics when we observe Students from Serbia. The international students in the Serbian context leave the country in search of better quality education. Other studies have determined that the quality of educational systems is in correlation with the global labour market, as well as the labour market in the country, and that it can have a positive impact on incoming and outgoing mobility of students (Cerqua et al., 2022; in: Cherusheva & Parkhomenko, 2019). The decision on academic migration is also influenced by the possibility of continuing education through scholarship programs, socio-economic factors, wish to acquire experiences in another country, as well as experiences of other persons who supported them in their decision. However, it needs to be highlighted that among the students (scholarship-holders) citizens of Serbia, the most represented is the socio-economic factor which pushes them to go to study abroad, where better opportunities await them. In some earlier pieces of research (Vasojević, Kirin and Marković, 2018), similar push and pull factors were recognised when we talk about the international population of students, citizens of Serbia, which is symptomatic for the countries on a similar level of development, i.e. the countries that do not

have a developed economy and wide employment opportunities. The paradigm of mobility calculates the role of employment opportunities and professional capital as the critical indicators of academic mobility and emphasises the role of economic factors in students' decision to migrate (Carlsen et al., 2013). These are followed by the motives concerning better study programs, experiences or influence of other people, mainly family members and friends, as well as support to studying through some form of scholarship. On the other hand, majority of the foreign students studying in Serbia, do not perceive Serbia as a place where economic conditions are better than in their country of origin, but they still recognise the country of destination, i.e. Serbia, as a place where they can get better education. The second most represented motive is scholarship and the opportunity that they received to educate themselves with the help of institutional support (different funds). It is interesting that in a very small percentage of these students, the migration was encouraged by the experience of their friends or parents. When we observe the motives for (non-)returning to one's country of origin, only 29.47% of Serbian students saw themselves as returnees to their native country after finishing their studies abroad. Among those students that have made their decision on returning, or they think about it, the main motives stated include nonmaterial factors such as relationship with one's family and friends and sense of being accepted. The reasons that they do not see themselves in their native country originate in the poor socio-economic situation, which concerns ecology, poorly paid jobs and more expensive living standard. These data are also connected with the motives that the respondents have stated for studying abroad. On the other hand, 42.7% of the foreign students studying in Serbia see themselves in their native country once they finish their studies. As the reason for return, they cite the opportunity to work in their own country, which is also connected with the given opinion concerning the statement – *Professionals who studied abroad are not at all respected in my country*, where as much as 73.03% of the foreign students disagree with this statement, while as much as 40.98% of Serbian students agree with it. The factors that pull foreign students to study in Serbia indicate that the narrative of education within educational and migration policies has not changed from the earlier tradition of attracting, when international students were welcome and respected as potential migrants. On the other hand, the obtained results also offer a new theoretical framework for investigating international academic mobility of students from the perspective of the Serbian concept of "South-North-South". Also, these insights reveal the factors that need to be improved so that Serbia could secure its role of a global player in international higher education, which can be achieved only by re-examining national migration policy.

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