

JASNA PETRIĆ

Institute of Architecture and Urban & Spatial Planning of Serbia

CHANGE OF SPATIAL IDENTITY THROUGH INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MIGRATION

Abstract

Exploring the role and significance of space (city, university campus, student accommodation) as the new local or micro surroundings of international students gives a unique perspective on the (re)construction of their identity. This paper presents the most significant results regarding emotional attachment to the place of origin and the city of studying, as well as international students' evaluation of the differences between the functional attributes of the place of origin and place of studying in respect of the type of housing, the organization of public transportation, public spaces and green areas, the availability of provision services, healthcare, and the sense of safety in public space. The discussion offers a parallel of research findings on the subject analysis between two groups of international students: Serbian students attending or having attended university abroad (mostly in Global North countries) and foreign students in Serbia (from the countries of Global South). In this way, the changeability of spatial identity is observed from a twofold perspective, involving our students with the experience of studying abroad as well as foreign students in Serbia, and additionally addressing the prospects of attracting foreign students in the future, which would have positive effects on our state.

Keywords: spatial identity, migration, international students, Serbia

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Space is an influential factor in shaping the identity of the population which permanently or temporarily inhabits it, and it has been recognized as such for a long time in both geographical science and the somewhat newer discipline of spatial planning. In social sciences and humanities space also appears as a heuristic framework for determining the knowledge and discoveries of the way in which people interact with their surroundings (Salazar, 2023). At the same time, the experience of duration when residing in a certain place gives cause for researching the opposite of this concept, i.e., the migrations or mobility of the population moving from place to place. Population mobility is a crucial component of understanding space, and it contributes to people becoming more conscious of the role that (different) spaces have in forming their identity (Seamon, 2018; Salazar, 2018).

The starting point which provides a framework for this research is international student migrations and the (re)construction of identity in this segment of the population, as influenced by the migratory experience in the foreign country of studying. Student mobility with international academic experience has been on a significant increase in the 21st century, but the dynamics of academic mobility shows some unevenness and centralization strengthening for certain migration destinations, especially those in the so-called Global North countries.¹ Contextualizing discourse on international student migrations within Serbia and the development of its intellectual potential (Sokołowicz, 2019) clearly reveals a research niche regarding the (re)construction of spatial identity in the primary population of international students, which are further observed as either students from Serbia studying or having studied abroad (usually in Global North countries), or foreign students currently studying in Serbia, i.e., those who studied in Serbia and returned to their home countries upon the completion of their studies (these are usually Global South countries).

The theoretical overview which follows will present the role and significance of space (city, university campus, student accommodation, etc.) as the new local or micro surroundings for identity (re)construction of international students, using the same spatial level in international students' country of origin as the comparison reference point. To this effect the constancy and changes of international students' spatial identity are explored, which is related to the intensity of their belonging to different spatial frameworks – the place of origin and the place of studying. The methodology applied to researching international students' spatial identity is based on two modes of place bonding: 1) emotional attachment, which contains the answer to the question "Where is your home?" and 2) pragmatic attachment, which is based on the statement: "This place offers everything that a student needs as regards accommodation, transportation, service availability, sense of safety, etc."

In operationalizing research goals set through the theoretical-methodological framework, the empirical part will focus on the analyses of international students' emotional attachment to the place of origin and the city of studying, as well as their subjective evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of functional attributes of the place of origin and place of studying in respect of the type of housing, the organization of public transportation, public spaces and green areas, the availability of provision services, healthcare, and the sense of safety in public space.

¹ Global North countries are identified as developed countries. The concept of Global North usually refers to Anglo-America, Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. The rest of the world is Global South (Ђоровић, 2006).

Discussion relies on establishing a parallel in the findings on elements of fixedness and changeability of spatial identity between Serbian students with international experience and foreign students attending or having attended university in Serbia. Finally, although no recommendations will be outlined for improving the political response towards a more efficient use of the international academic mobility potential for the development of Serbia, this research will contribute to a more complete understanding of how international students' spatial identity is shaped and changed, from the perspective of actors in the changes themselves.

SPATIAL IDENTITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

The concept of identity entails "some way of describing or conceptualizing the self, which may incorporate personal roles and attributes, membership in social groups or categories, and connections to geographical locations" (Devine-Wright & Clayton, 2010, qtd. in Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013: 633). Identity is formed "through an amalgamation of experiences, memories, perceptions, and actions" (Marginson, 2014, qtd. in Wee, 2019: 386). The characteristics based on which individuals, categories, or groups of people are individualised and recognised are their identity determinants.

The way in which space influences international students' identity refers to the part of their individual identity which is shaped by and depends on the locality² (*place identity*), i.e., to international students' attachment to the space (place) from which they come or their bond with the place in which they study. Starting from the premise that "identity is always in the process of becoming" and "is never complete" (Vesković Anđelković, 2024: 464), this fluidity, which exists in spatial identity as well, can be put in parallel with international student migrations.

What is it, then, that forms or reconstructs spatial identity or identification with place, according to our research subjects – international students? Part of the answer to this question is certainly feelings (emotions) as regards the space with which an individual identifies. According to Relph, identity with place depends on whether an individual feels as an "insider" or not, that is, whether they feel comfortable, safe, and cozy in a given space (Relph, 1976: 49). The category of "emotions" is often elusive even in everyday life, and any discussion about new surroundings, life circumstances, and points of reference related to international student mobility

² Focusing on spatial, that is, place-based identity points out its capability of being multiple based on the hierarchy of belonging to different territorial levels – local, regional, national, and global, which does not imply that people have them all equally developed (Бацковић & Спасић, 2014: 179).

can additionally claim with certainty that their emotions are also “mobile” (Lero, 2023). However, in including this important mode of place bonding, i.e., spatial identity, into our research, we apply the already known concept of ‘emotional attachment.’ Emotional attachment to a space, which merges the “empathic” with the “existential” experience of a place from the inside (Spasić & Backović, 2017: 128), is influenced by factors such as age, sex, the duration of one’s stay in a place, and interpersonal contacts one has made (Talen, 2001). In our view it is primarily the answer to the question about feelings for the place considered home, which indicates the existence of emotional attachment to the place of origin (primary difference) of individuals – here, group representatives of international students. Considering that this research is framed within an analysis of international students’ change of spatial identity, it is also important to establish their emotional attachment to the place (city) of studying. Bearing in mind that our student respondents already migrated abroad and spent at least a year there, our hypothesis is that they developed the foundation of emotional attachment to the place/city of studying.

The second part of the answer to the question about spatial identity factors for international students lies in their pragmatic attachment to the place. Namely, in addition to emotional reasoning, the international academic population also resorts – perhaps to an even greater extent – to the pragmatic evaluation of relative advantages and disadvantages of the functional attributes of their place of origin and place of studying. This kind of evaluation gains importance through a comparison of these two places as regards student housing space, the amenities of private accommodation or collective residence halls; the appearance of university campus; organisation and reliability of public transportation; appearance, functionality, and hygiene of urban public spaces; service availability, especially access to healthcare; last but not least, the question of safety in public spaces.

From the point of view of international students’ migratory experience and their belonging to a space/place, what transpires is the dialectical unity and simultaneity of these processes. Emigrating abroad (and to another city), international students develop a polyvalent belonging, adapting to new cultural and value norms and experiencing their own transformations through interaction with the new (micro) surroundings and new people (Petrić, Maričić & Basarić, 2012; Petrić & Lukić, 2023).

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The analysis of research results shown in the following paragraphs indicates a tendency towards mapping both modes of place bonding: emotional and pragmatic attachment of international students.

Emotional attachment

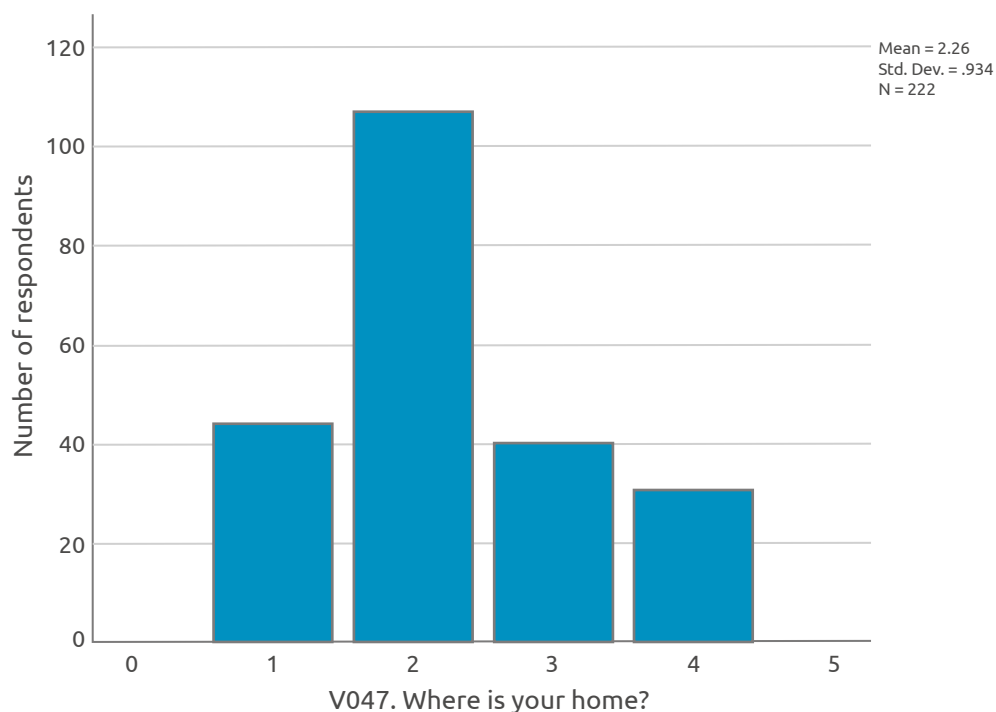
The first stage of data gathering (see Chapter 1 of the Monograph, on Methodological Characteristics) already yielded qualitative findings about the “sense of home” as well as the emotional attachment to the city in which the students with international academic experience have studied.

“My home is where my parents are. That is my house to this day. Now that I live, sometimes I am in Palić at my boyfriend’s, or in Belgrade for business, or... I never say that I go home, I go to my apartment. My home is where my parents are, and where I currently live is in Palić, in an apartment.” (F, 29, Hungary, Austria)

The same respondent goes on to discuss her emotional attachment to the city abroad where she studies.

“In Vienna I fit in, in the sense that I left my heart there, and I return there every year for my studies.” (F, 29, Hungary, Austria)

In the second stage of data gathering, the emotional attachment to the place of origin and place of studying was additionally researched through an electronic questionnaire and interpreted through quantitative findings regarding the question: “Where is your home?”



Graph 1. The place considered home

Columns numbered from 1 to 4 in graph 1 represent the following statements related to the “sense of home”: 1 = “Where my parents live,” 2 = “Where my family is,” 3 = “Where I currently dwell,” 4 = “Other.”³

These findings (Graph 1) lead towards the conclusion that the largest percentage of respondents, observed as the total of international student population covered by research, consider that *Home is where their family is*, and that the percentage of the respondents thinking that *Home is where their parents are* is almost the same as of those who believe that *Home is where they currently dwell*.

Considering the hypothesis on fluctuating spatial identity in relation to the migrations of international student population, emotional attachment to the city of studying was researched through the Index of emotional attachment to the city. This Index was formed based on previous research on bonding with the city (Spasić & Backović, 2017), from which a set of questions was taken for the electronic questionnaire. The set included the following statements:

- When I am away from this city (hereinafter refers to the city of studying – authors’ note), I can’t wait to come back.
- I wouldn’t find it hard if I had to move away from this city.
- I would like my children to live in this city too.

The following three statements were added to the set:

- I trust the people who live in this city.
- I feel close to the people from this city.
- I feel safe in this city.

The Emotional Attachment Index formed in this research consists of the 6 above-given statements, where necessary consistency regarding all the statements is not entailed, and the degree of attachment to the city is summated. The Index sums up the respondents’ scores regarding the 6 mentioned statements. The electronic questionnaire uses five-level Likert scale, which measures results in the following way: 1 = “completely unattached,” 2 = “unattached,” 3 = “undecided,” 4 = “attached,” and 5 = “completely attached.”

Table 1 shows the values of emotional attachment to the place of studying, in total and in the four groups of international students.

³ The most common answers listed as “Other” included: a) Where I grew up; b) Where I feel best and most loved, where I am at my ease, where I feel safe, and where I most authentically and to a largest extent feel like MYSELF; c) I feel I have many homes – all the answers offered by the questionnaire apply; d) I am not attached to any option.

Table 1. Emotional Attachment Index

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Total	10 (4.6)	26 (11.9)	86 (39.3)	80 (36.5)	17 (7.8)	219 (100)
Students from Serbia studying abroad	4 (5.3)	10 (13.3)	28 (37.3)	27 (36.0)	6 (8.0)	75 (100)
Serbian citizens who had studied abroad and returned to Serbia	2 (3.9)	8 (15.7)	20 (39.2)	21 (41.2)	0 (0)	51 (100)
Foreign citizens studying in Serbia	3 (3.4)	8 (9.2)	36 (41.4)	30 (34.5)	10 (11.5)	87 (100)
Foreign citizens who had completed their studies in Serbia and returned to their home country	1 (16.7)	0 (0)	2 (33.3)	2 (33.3)	1 (16.7)	6 (100)

Summarily, the results presented in Table 1 might lead to the conclusion that about 45% of respondents are partly or entirely emotionally attached to the city abroad in which they study or studied. There is a smaller percentage of those emotionally unattached to the city of studying abroad, spanning from 13% of foreign citizens studying in Serbia to about 20% of Serbian citizens who studied abroad and returned to Serbia.

Pragmatic attachment

Pragmatic attachment to space on a micro and local level was analysed based on the evaluation given by foreign students as they compared the following differences in the way of life at home and at the place of studying abroad (Tables 2–10).

Table 2. Type of housing (accommodation)

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	20 (9.1)	36 (16.4)	59 (26.9)	64 (29.2)	40 (18.3)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	9 (7.1)	21 (16.7)	30 (23.8)	38 (30.2)	28 (22.2)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	11 (11.8)	15 (16.1)	29 (31.2)	26 (28.0)	12 (12.9)	93 (100)

Table 3. The appearance of university campus

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	15 (6.8)	19 (8.7)	30 (13.7)	55 (25.1)	100 (45.7)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	4 (3.2)	2 (1.6)	11 (8.7)	32 (25.4)	77 (61.1)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	11 (11.8)	17 (18.3)	19 (20.4)	23 (24.7)	23 (24.7)	93 (100)

Table 4. Residence hall amenities

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	15 (6.8)	23 (10.5)	55 (25.1)	65 (29.7)	61 (27.9)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	5 (4)	13 (10.3)	29 (23)	38 (30.2)	41 (32.5)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	10 (10.8)	10 (10.8)	26 (28)	27 (29)	20 (21.5)	93 (100)

Examples of the respondents' opinions given in the qualitative interview are complementary to the previous analysis.

"Yeah, so I live in a private property near the centre basically. Boulevard Oslobođenje. (...) So last year I lived with a friend but this year I live alone." (M, 27, Serbia) – Within the campus they usually placed us international students together within these smaller units, apartments, and each of these units had a shared bathroom and kitchen, and each of us students had their own little room where we could work, a desk, a single bed, perhaps also a washbasin and a closet. We met in these shared rooms. What was interesting was that they mostly placed the British to stay together in those units, apartments, there were 6–7 students per apartment. And my experience most often was that, say, Chinese, Indian, Greek women and I were, say, together in this Hall in Newcastle." (F, 35, United Kingdom)

Table 5. Organisation of public transportation

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	16 (7.3)	16 (7.3)	30 (13.7)	44 (20.1)	113 (51.6)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	3 (2.4)	10 (7.9)	7 (5.6)	27 (21.4)	79 (62.7)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	13 (14)	6 (6.5)	23 (24.7)	17 (18.3)	34 (36.6)	93 (100)

The following statements substantiate the illustration of international students' evaluation of public transportation in the city of studying as compared to the place of origin.

"So where I live in Bournemouth, it's quite, it's not hard but it's not easy without a car to travel different areas. But I like in Novi Sad that you can cycle everywhere. And maybe the downside also is the transport can be a bit of an issue because sometimes the buses are late." (M, 27, Serbia) – *It is very good here that the public transportation system is extremely good, the whole city is extremely well interconnected, so we didn't have any bigger problems although the city is bigger than Novi Sad, we didn't have any bigger problems when it comes to crossing long distances."* (M, 34, Germany)

Table 6. Urban public spaces (squares, green areas...)

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	17 (7.8)	25 (11.4)	42 (19.2)	63 (28.8)	72 (32.9)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	7 (5.6)	11 (8.7)	21 (16.7)	41 (32.5)	46 (36.5)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	10 (10.8)	14 (15.1)	21 (22.6)	22 (23.7)	26 (28)	93 (100)

The following example testifies to the importance and symbolism of urban public spaces for the life of an international student:

“Vukov spomenik (...) it’s become a microcosmos for me. Like I come to the Faculty here, but then when I need to go out and rest, I go to this park, and then when I come back from the tram, I go under Vukov spomenik to come to Faculty. So yeah, it’s like just a landmark.” (F, 30, Serbia)

Table 7. Service availability (self-service markets, pharmacies, etc.)

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	19 (8.7)	37 (16.9)	74 (33.8)	41 (18.7)	48 (21.9)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	8 (6.3)	27 (21.4)	45 (35.7)	21 (16.7)	25 (19.8)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	11 (11.8)	10 (10.8)	29 (31.2)	20 (21.5)	23 (24.7)	93 (100)

Table 8. Access to healthcare

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	32 (14.6)	32 (14.6)	63 (28.8)	51 (23.3)	41 (18.7)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	17 (13.5)	16 (12.7)	42 (33.3)	26 (20.6)	25 (19.8)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	15 (16.1)	16 (17.2)	21 (22.6)	25 (26.9)	16 (17.2)	93 (100)

Among various services which the city provides to foreign students, the importance of healthcare accessibility is especially emphasised. This is sustained by the following research findings from the qualitative interview:

“Healthcare services are very important to me. I had the opportunity to use them twice. Among other things in front of my place there is a health centre, and in this health centre there are specialized fields on each floor, they even have a surgeon in the health centre. That caught my attention because I had a

minor intervention so we headed for the health centre, and over there in five minutes we get to the surgeon and he takes care of everything. So, there is no process which takes so much time in our country, making an appointment and waiting for three months.” (F, 23, Hungary)

The question of the hygiene of urban public spaces was raised by international students during the first stage of data gathering, as can be illustrated by the following qualitative opinion of a respondent:

“So about the negative, I think I’m sorry, but Serbian is a little bit dirty compared to another European country. I don’t know. I compared it. (...) Yeah, the garbage. Sorry. Yeah, the garbage. I mean, sorry. But I don’t know, in Serbia and in velvet, maybe it’s good. But when I travel to another city, why it’s very dirty? And then why it’s like that? Because they said that we already clean it. But again, some people make it.” (M, 29, Serbia)

Table 9. Hygiene of public spaces

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	20 (9.1)	13 (5.9)	53 (24.2)	63 (28.8)	70 (32)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	4 (3.2)	6 (4.8)	28 (22.2)	36 (28.6)	52 (41.3)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	16 (17.2)	7 (7.5)	25 (26.9)	27 (29)	18 (19.4)	93 (100)

Table 10. Sense of safety in public space

	Much better in home country	Better in home country	No difference	Better abroad	Much better abroad	Total
Students with international experience	20 (9.1)	33 (15.1)	64 (29.2)	46 (21)	56 (25.6)	219 (100)
Serbian students abroad	10 (7.9)	24 (19)	47 (37.3)	17 (13.5)	28 (22.2)	126 (100)
Foreign students in Serbia	10 (10.8)	9 (9.7)	17 (18.3)	29 (31.2)	28 (30.1)	93 (100)

As regards the sense of safety in urban public spaces, the opinions of female students are particularly important (gender perspective), and an illustrative example is given by a respondent from Argentina, where women's safety is on a far lower level than in Serbia.

"Something that I think we most, at least the people from the program, we valued and it was something that we comment a lot is the safe, especially for ladies, you know. The fact of being able to walk like out at night and don't be worried if they're gonna be, I don't know, assaulted, robbed, killed, etc." (F, 30, Serbia)

DISCUSSION

In respect of the (re)construction of their spatial identity, the following common denominators can be observed from the comparative analysis of the results obtained from the electronic questionnaire filled out by Serbian students with international experience (mostly residence in Global North countries) and foreign students studying or having studied in Serbia (most often coming from Global South countries):

- The greatest percentage on the scale of emotional attachment to the city of studying is occupied by undecided international students – those whose total score shows neither attachment nor non-attachment. Additionally, both Serbian and foreign students express more positive than negative feelings for the place of studying, which forms the basis for the conclusion that, staying abroad, the international academic population still largely develops the emotional side of identification with the place/city of studying.
- As regards the elements of pragmatic attachment, the greatest degree of overlapping is present in both groups of students when comparing healthcare accessibility in the country of origin and the country of studying. It should be mentioned here that in both groups the greater number of students consider this factor of rational attachment to the place of dwelling is better in the foreign country of studying.

Nevertheless, there seems to be more solidity in the findings related to the differences and departures in opinions regarding certain elements of pragmatic attachment, which can also be observed in the comparative perspective of Serbian students residing or having resided in Global North countries and foreign students from Global South countries studying or having studied in Serbia.

- The type of housing for foreign students is better evaluated by Serbian students with international experience (about 22% of the respondents from Serbia believe that student accommodation is much better abroad than in their home country). As regards foreign students in Serbia, the respective percentage of those who estimate that their accommodation is much better in Serbia than in their home country amounts to about 13%.
- The difference in evaluating the appearance of university campus is even more drastic because the results given in the previous segment clearly indicate that as much as 61% of Serbian students who studied abroad consider that campus looks much better there than in Serbia whereas the respective percentage of foreign students in Serbia is about 25%.
- When it comes to international students' evaluation of public transportation in the place of studying, the greatest percentage of both Serbs and foreigners consider that this element of pragmatic attachment is much better abroad than in the home country, whereby the percentage of Serbian international students who believe so is as much as 63% and that of foreign students in Serbia is 37%.
- A similar trend can be observed in both groups of international students as regards public spaces (squares, green areas, etc.), which are evaluated as much better abroad than in the home country by 36.5% of Serbian students and 28% of foreign students in Serbia.
- Some commentary can be given on the difference in evaluating service availability (self-service markets, pharmacies, etc.) abroad, which is considered better or much better than in the home country by some 46% of foreigners studying or having studied in Serbia, as compared to 36.5% of Serbian students with the experience of studying abroad.
- The difference between the two observed groups of international students is striking as regards their evaluation of the hygiene of public spaces in the place of studying. Whereas as much as 41% of Serbian students who study or studied abroad evaluate the hygiene of public spaces as much better abroad than in Serbia, only 19% of foreign students in Serbia evaluate the hygiene of public spaces as much better in Serbia than in their home country.
- Serbia scores better than foreign countries in foreign students' evaluation of the sense of safety they have in our cities' public spaces. Statistics has shown that as much as 61% of foreign students in Serbia feel safer or much safer in public space in Serbia than in their home country whereas the respective percentage of Serbian students abroad amounts to 36%.

CONCLUSIONS

Referring to the subjective aspect of changing spatial identity through international student migrations, the findings of our research confirm the postulation that, generally speaking, international students' emotional attachment to the places where their families live is more deeply rooted. Migrations of the international student population might cause ambivalent feelings and undecidedness, measured through the Index of emotional attachment to the city of studying. Our research results have shown that on average the greatest percentage (about 39%) of international students is undecided in this respect. However, an explanation for such a score might also be found in certain deficiencies of the instrument used in the quantitative research. Namely, the methodological background did not stipulate prerequisite consistency in respect of all 6 statements forming the Index of emotional attachment to the city of studying, mostly to avoid leading the respondents to the same kind of answers throughout the questionnaire. As compared with foreign students in Serbia, the results for Serbian citizens who studied abroad show, in as much as 41% of cases, the presence of emotional attachment to the city in which they studied abroad prior to returning to their home country. This can be argued with the greater possibility of choosing the place of studying for Serbian students abroad than for foreign students in Serbia. The fact should not be neglected that the possibility of obtaining a scholarship might give cause for compromise in accepting the city of studying, with emotional detachment from that city as a merely temporary dwelling place.

As might have been assumed, the results of analyses presented in this paper indicate that international students' pragmatic attachment to local and micro surroundings is greater in Global North countries than is the case with international students in Serbia coming from Global South countries. This mode of spatial identity is more prone to reconstruction in the case of our students abroad. However, this does not imply a one-sided conclusion that international students studying or having studied in Serbia cannot achieve a reconstruction of their spatial identity under the influence of staying abroad. Moreover, comparing evaluations of the elements of pragmatic attachment to the place of origin and the place of studying, it transpires that both analysed groups of international students are more critical of their homeland, which might be sublimated through the view that "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

The new approach this paper offers is the comparison of (re)shaping spatial identity between international students from Serbia who study or studied in Global North countries and foreign students in Serbia coming from Global South countries. There also lies a guidepost for a better understanding of how Serbia could improve the integration of international students, to whom our country at this point might represent a stop on their way to the more developed Global North countries.

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