

The Impact of Building Recreational Houses in Rural Areas. Case Study: Râncea Mountain Resort

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Keywords: recreational houses, protocol houses, mobility, amenity-rich landscape, recreational landscape

ABSTRACT

The paper aims at showing how the present-day rural space suffers modifications meant to produce different changes in terms of physiognomy and also at social and economic levels, focusing on the phenomenon of building recreational houses in rural areas, by population coming from urban areas. The case study we have chosen refers to the Râncea mountain resort, situated in the Southern Carpathians (in the Parâng Mountains). This place, which thirty years ago might have passed for a peripherally rural area, it is now characterized by incipient urbanization. It is interesting to observe that this process is not supported by the closest urban centre (the town of Novaci), but by the towns located at greater distances (the towns of Craiova and Târgu-Jiu), that have the social and economic power to extend their influence up to 150 km distance. Therefore, the flows caused, on the one hand by the urban population migrating during the week-ends to the rural areas and, on the other hand, by the investments made in utility infrastructures, have profound implications not only on the changing rural landscape, but also on peoples' perception of traditional (rural) *versus* modern (urban) way of life. Hence, a new type of landscape appears in remote rural areas, which benefit from an extraordinary natural potential, as a result of town dwellers' wish for natural surroundings and urban standards.

1. INTRODUCTION

Houses can be divided into primary (residential) houses and secondary (recreational) houses. "Second homes are those houses, cottages, cabins and condominiums (having myriad forms and being known by various names across cultures and among and within countries) that are sited in the countryside (often besides rivers, lakes and beaches) and urban locations, and used more or less sporadically for recreational and other type of activities, sometimes including work and employment" [5, p. 67].

The second home is a growing phenomenon in the contemporary society. It concerns middle and upper classes, individuals who can afford two households, owners of at least one car that facilitates their mobility. Besides, they have the desire, if not the physical need, to

escape the urban artificial areas and withdraw to the remote rural areas. These individuals project their urban desires on the rural space, transforming it in a residential and ludic area, in accordance to their ideal of relaxation.

"In the 19th century, under the impact of industrialization and urbanization, the rural space suffered obvious structural changes, development and improvements...

The expansion of the urban space, the development of the means of transportation, the setting up of non-agricultural activities, the introduction of new techniques have overloaded the rural space with new elements and relationships, enriching it quantitatively and qualitatively" (Pierre G, 1990:423) [1, p. 99].

"Under these circumstances, the rural space is most often not just the area for agricultural and

pastoral activities, an important part of the rural space serving for industrial and commercial activities, but also a recreational place, as a residential place both for the agricultural and non-agricultural population" [1, p. 99].

The phenomenon of multiple residences is the result of the process of urban decongestion. Thus, the second home ownership is a consequence of the increased mobility of individuals and capital. From another point of view, *"the reason for which people purchase a second home is to achieve some kind of lifestyle not available at the primary residence"* [4, p. 389].

In our case study, both points of view are true. Townspeople's interest in Rânca arose once they discovered the opportunities offered by this area. The main factors that made Rânca attractive are: its location (18 Km away from the town of Novaci, in the North of the Gorj County at an average altitude of 1600m, on the Râu-Şes erosion platform in the Parâng Mountains surrounded by mountain peaks over 2,000 m high: Păpuşa – 2,136 m, Setea Mare – 2,365 m, Pleşcoia – 2,250 m, Setea Mică – 2,278 m, Mohoru – 2,337 m, Dengherul – 2,069 m), its accessibility (on the national transalpine road DN 67 C), the natural potential of the area (the relief: glacial landscape, steep valleys with ski facilities; the climate: cool summers, a thick long-lasting snow layer, tonic climate for therapy; vast pine forests), the urban congestion, the price of land (less expensive in the rural areas than in the urban areas), a permissive land ownership law in Romania, people's increasing mobility and welfare and an economic trend time in which real-estate investments were considered financially secure.

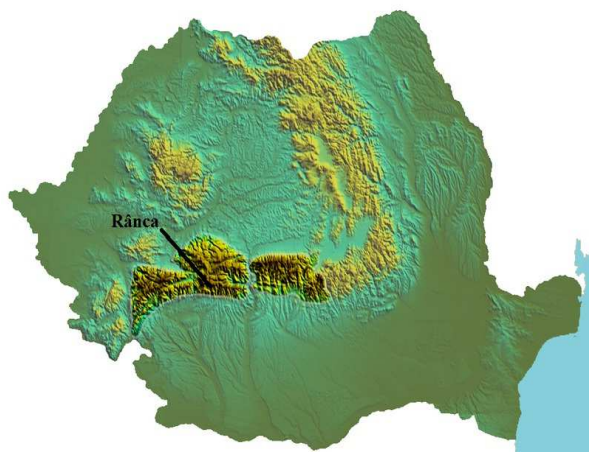


Fig. 1. The location of analysed area within the Southern Carpathians.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The current paper focuses on showing how nowadays the rural space undergoes changes intended to trigger different modifications in terms of physiognomy and at the social and economic level,

focusing on building recreational houses in rural areas, by a population coming from urban areas.

As the phenomenon of recreational houses is relatively new in our country (Romania does not have the tradition of second homes that other western European countries like Finland, Sweden and Great Britain have in terms of hunting and fishing cottages), there are not too many academic studies dedicated to the evolution of recreational homes.

In addition, the lack of statistics on second home development makes it more difficult to quantify the recreational home spread.

Therefore, it is quite a challenge to determine the location of both primary and secondary residences; to determine whether these properties are located relatively close to one another; to identify who actually uses these second homes and the amount of time spent at the second home.

In order to answer the above mentioned questions, the methodological approach we decided on is the traditional one, of field observation and inquiries, during which we evaluated the phenomenon of multiplying recreational homes in Rânca.

Some data are taken from the real-estate register of Novaci (the town which Rânca administratively depends on), for the time the documents were available and, later on, when there was limited access meaning that they became confidential, the data were collected as a result of personal inquiries in the area and direct contact with the local people.

Even if the data are not complete, the available information shows a clear pattern of increasing concentration of recreational houses ownership within higher income households. *"In other words, recreational houses ownership is strongly identified with socio-economic status and recreational houses landscapes are increasingly elite landscapes"* [2, p. 49].

In a nutshell, the survey data show the overall impact of second homes on rural areas and indicate some ownership and use specificities.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The international literature on second home ownership shows that the phenomenon has long been a part of modern tourism practices in advanced western societies. This is not the case of our country, where the second home ownership is a recent phenomenon that has developed in the past 20 years.

After the fall of the communist regime, the economic and politic conditions have changed radically in Romania (transition towards a free market and a democratic regime).

There has been a progressive growth and accumulation of wealth in Romanian households, reflected, among other things, in the purchase of cars and second homes.

Unlike the western European countries, where the pressure on land was at high levels in the '90s, in Romania there was enough available land, which, after the end of collectivization, had no longer been used for agricultural purposes. As a result, this unexploited land became a valuable resource, which has led to a significant number of newly-constructed houses in scenic rural areas. Historically an agrarian society, Râncea changed dramatically after the fall of the communist regime. The land used mostly for cattle grazing was subdivided into individual plots and leased. The location, the attractiveness of the region and its accessibility due to the Novaci-Sebeş transalpine road determined the building of recreational homes, owned mostly by the townspeople of Craiova and Târgu-Jiu.

"The second home properties tend to be clustered close to a natural amenity feature – a mountain side in our case – and also they cluster together" [2, p. 52].

At present, the built area covers 126,8 ha¹. Second homes in Râncea are mostly associated with recreational and holiday purposes. They occur within the rural landscape, yet being separate from that landscape. This separation is obvious in terms of spatial organization of properties, architectural appearance and function. The latter is highly important because a house designed for leisure purposes is different from a house designed to serve the working people in the area.

All the recreational houses in Râncea were built *ex-nihilo* as the area was poor in accommodation infrastructure – in 1980 there were only two chalets (Râncea and Bradul) and five sheepfolds. Gradually, the number of private second homes in Râncea has grown to the extent of the present 245, whereas the number of sheepfolds has diminished to two. Along with the recreational houses, corporate houses were built – accommodation infrastructure owned by Ltd.-s (Regia Tutunului Târgu-Jiu), IT companies and universities ("Constantin Brâncuşi University" of Târgu-Jiu and University of Craiova).

The problem of building recreational houses is that they were built taking into consideration the owner's wish, however disregarding any documentation of territorial planning, any environmental and city planning law. Therefore, the human intervention grew considerably, the skyline of Râncea having now an almost suburban pattern with a density of the parcels of 350 sq m. Undoubtedly, many environmental dysfunctions have appeared as a consequence of the change occurred in the destination of the area.

3.1. The description of the phenomenon

In order to understand the phenomenon of recreational house building in certain areas, we adopted

the connection and mobility patterns, using Roseman's general typology of cyclical migration (1992). He considers *"temporary movements, ranging from weekly to seasonal and to infrequent circulation over the life course, and seeks to explain movement by reference to two sets of factors: production-oriented factors (job and employment-related) and consumption-oriented factors (family and amenity-related)"* [6, p. 117].

Viewed within this framework, recreational houses are the result of a consumption-driven practice, emerged from tourism as a form of repeated mobility in a certain area. The areas that make the subject of our discussion are usually the rural hinterlands of towns. They are *"close enough to be accessed by car in a relatively short span of time. Second homes are often located within metropolitan areas' leisure peripheries, thereby allowing frequent visits"* (Müller 2002 a:173) [6, p. 122].

The figure below presents the regional context where our case study area is situated. According to the *core-periphery model*, Râncea is geographically located in the northern periphery of the South-West Region. The geographic factor has not been a favourable one until now, because of the fact that mountainous regions are hardly accessible, which has impeded connection development, even if Râncea is a crossing point at the border with Transylvania. Recently, the status of the area has changed: from a neglected periphery it has become an attractive reserve space that now can be easily used and rendered profitable.

In the South-West Region, Râncea is situated in the north peripheral part of the Gorj County, 18 km away from the town of Novaci. The main access road by which Râncea can be reached is DN 67 C Novaci – Şugag – Sebeş, a Transcarpathian road that transversally crosses the Parâng Mountains from North to South. It is actually the alternative road of DN 67 – the Subcarpathian road that connects Drobeta Turnu-Severin – Motru – Târgu-Jiu – Horezu – Râmnicu-Vâlcea, being highly important for tourist flows, as the region it crosses is well-known for its cultural sites. In terms of population, importance and development, the largest towns in the regional network are Craiova (300,182 inhab.), Râmnicu-Vâlcea (111,701 inhab.), Drobeta Turnu-Severin (109,444 inhab.), Târgu-Jiu (96,318 inhab.) and Slatina (80,282 inhab.). [8, p. 81]. As for the small towns, the majority do not have an adequate structure and level of development. It is the case of the town of Novaci, with a population of 6,105 inhabitants which was declared town without meeting all the necessary requirements, especially the required degree of development of the tertiary sector (services to the consumer).

Therefore, the origin of the households that own properties in Râncea can be explained from a socio-economic point of view. Even if Râncea is situated neither in the vicinity of Craiova's area of influence, nor

¹ The value was calculated by Marinescu, et al, taking into consideration the Zonal Urban Plan and Google Earth representations of Râncea.

in its second expanded influence zone, it is however situated within a 150 km distance, that makes it an

attractive area and easy to reach in a short span of time (three hours at most).

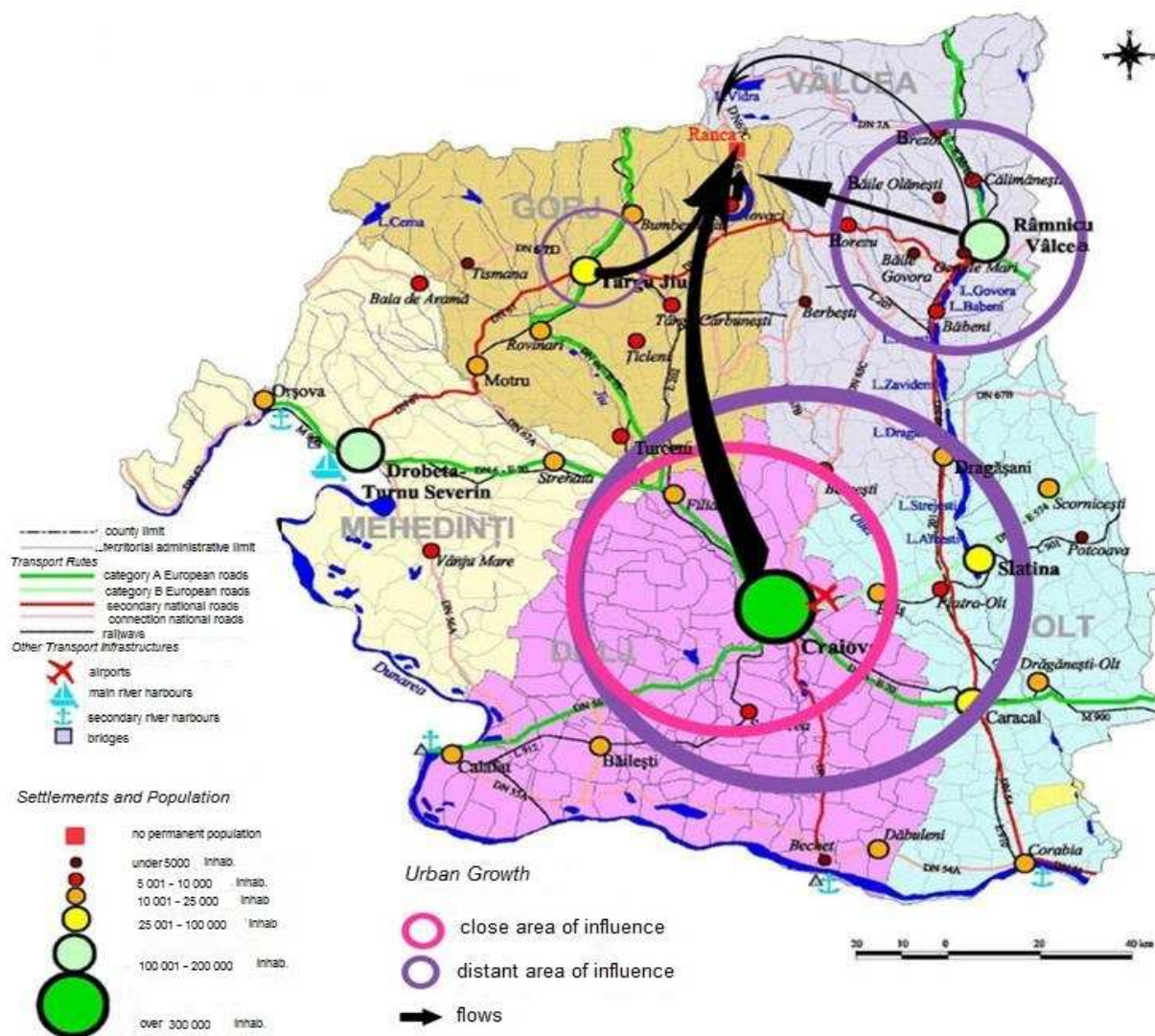


Fig. 2. Status quo. The regional context, polarizing urban areas and main flows directed to Rânca (modified by the author after the Integrated Plan of Urban Development for Craiova Urban Growth Pole. The Regional Context. Status Quo, Puiu V, Zotic V, 2009) [9].

Another factor is represented by Craiova's location in a rather monotonous landscape, at the contact between the Wallachian Plain and the Getic Plateau, thus Rânca being the closest mountainous area in the South-Western Region. Moreover, the owners of the recreational houses are people who were born in the Gorj County and had to migrate to larger cities such as Craiova for studies and work, and now, they return to the emission zone in search of identity and calmness. Others were drawn to this area by their friends and appreciated it so much that they decided to build a house here, so that they could spend some quality time with their family and friends.

Another important flow to Rânca originates from the town of Târgu-Jiu. Due to the short distance,

of 44 km, many direct investments were made in Rânca. The most important ones concern *corporate houses*. Corporate houses are a communist heritage and there is a significant difference between them and recreational houses.

Even if both are used for leisure and relaxation purposes, their legal status makes the difference. Recreational houses are the property of a private individual, while corporate houses are part of the capital of a corporate body (*The Tobacco Administration Târgu-Jiu, Constantin Brâncuși University*). Corporate houses are used by the employees in key positions (CEO, management staff) during the holidays, or for workshops, teambuilding, closing deals etc. Lately, some IT firms and newspapers

from Craiova have built chalets and holiday houses with the same purpose.

The flows coming from Râmnicu-Vâlcea are feeblers, even if this town is closer to Rânca than to Craiova, only 80 km in comparison to 130 km. The explanation lies in the rich and diversified tourism forms that can be practiced in the Vâlcea County. Here the mountain resorts of Brezoi and Voineasa are located, as well as the long tradition spas of Călimănești, Băile Olănești and Ocnele Mari, which are the major competitors in the recreation and wellness sector for the newcomer Rânca. Usually, the visitors from Râmnicu-Vâlcea are only passing by Rânca on their way home from Voineasa and they rarely choose Rânca as the first target destination for their vacation. Last, but not least, the flows from Novaci to Rânca are of vital importance for this remote area. These flows approach the principles of commuting in terms of frequency and duration. As Rânca is administratively dependent on the Novaci Township and only 18 km separate them, people from Novaci have found seasonal work in Rânca: in winter, due to the good quality skiing domain, a lot of workforce is required in tourism, along with traditional manufacturers and local farmers, who can sell their products to tourists; in summer, construction and forestry work absorb the workforce. An interesting fact to be taken into consideration is that Rânca does not have a permanent population registered as permanently living in the area. Even if it is animated all year-round, statistically speaking, there are no permanent inhabitants registered to be living in Rânca. As a result, the flows coming from Novaci are related to work and in most cases, at the end of a working day, people return to Novaci. A regular bus has been introduced on the route Novaci - Rânca since last year. Unfortunately, the lack of official collected data prevents us from showing the exact number of persons that use this service. However, taking into account the demand-offer principle, we can assume that a micro-bus which has 20 seats and does not always operate at its full capacity transports an average number of 15 persons daily. To these, we must add the persons that commute using their own car.

3.2. The pattern of the recreational house owners

The profile of a second home owner is characterized by the following traits: a middle-aged person (35-54 years old), that was either born in the region or a regular visitor and wanted to own a property here, in search for a place to relax, a place to escape from the daily routine, a place to spend more quality time with his family and friends. He also considers this second home as an investment. He uses the second house for short-stay week-end breaks and long-term holidays: Easter, Christmas, mid-term and summer. As a consequence, it is possible to apply Quinn's frequency

of usage of the second house classification on our case study area [6, p. 126]: intensive use (most weekends and throughout the year); intensive use in the summer and regular throughout the year; use on no year-round basis. In the case of Rânca, the first two frequencies of usage best characterize the owners' behaviour, because these recreational houses were built for use in the summer or at week-ends. They are owned by one family and rarely used by the family's friends also. Time-sharing is not a common practice among Romanians.

3.3. Architectural insight

The style of the recreational house varies upon: climate, topography, population, degree of urbanization, economic activity, planning, building regulations, transportation, availability of building materials and historical background. The recreational houses built in Rânca have 4 or 5 rooms, usually ground floor +1 or +2. Their style is modern, geometric and their appearance resembles a newly built district in the outskirts of the town. Wooden houses, specific to this mountain region, are very rare, partly because they were not maintained and got damaged, simply burned down or demolished in order to be replaced with new concrete houses. The new houses were built after the owners' specifications, and although they may seem unprofessional and at random, a certain style is, however, observed. The houses are constructed out of large precast concrete blocks (BCA), plastered over and painted. The window and door wooden frames were replaced by double-glazed windows for good insulation.

These houses form *"high standard residential zones, made up of holiday homes of the wealthy people. The touristic infrastructure, although valuable from the point of view of the built environment (large buildings, made of resistant, quality and expensive materials), include mainly one type: buildings for temporary dwelling, which are homogeneously distributed throughout the area"* [3]. Their layouts are broadly similar since they reproduce the concept of holiday homes published in architecture popularization magazines. The drawbacks of such houses are the neglect of local identity, the architectural style and the change of landscape. They have a bulky appearance and some have become disproportionate to the land they are built on, leaving the owner with a large house surrounded by a very small garden. Some owners have even built saunas meant to impress their neighbours. Another observation regarding the style of the recreational houses is that they reject the rustic way of life, not only in their exterior appearance but also in all the modern conveniences that the owners want to enjoy in their villa.

As Perkins and Thorns (2002:67) remark, [some] *"eschew the experience of rusticity and prefer their second home to have many of the comforts of their primary home, to have been built professionally,*

and sometimes to be located in what amounts to an urban setting, largely composed of other second homes” [5].

This is also the case of Râncea, where recreational houses began to take on some of the characteristics of suburbia, such as small-sized lots, crowded houses, identical buildings.



Fig. 3. Abandoned wooden house belonging to Râncea Forest District.



Fig. 4. Modern house in Râncea.



Fig. 5. A developing suburban landscape in Râncea.

3.4. Recreational house building – a two-sided argument

As any developing phenomenon, the building of recreational houses in rural areas has advantages and disadvantages at the same time.

Among the advantages we can refer to the introduction of facilities (running water system – centralized system of water supply, operating since 2002 on a 5.6 km distribution network; electricity – ground and underground system; communication facilities – Râncea is served by the relay broadcasting station on Cerbu Mountain and has GSM coverage) [10].

However the problems arise from the fact that the number of the disadvantages is considerably larger and some issues, such as the environmental quality, are of vital importance. Therefore, the debate can be resumed to the development *versus* conservation issue.

The disadvantages that we have identified can be divided into two categories: social and environmental negative impact. In the first category we can mention the even lower number of farmers (shepherds in particular), the increasing allochthonous population and the loss of autochthonous identity of the region along with the consumption and import of allochthonous products as a cause of the poor autochthonous offer. The impact on the environment is even more obvious as the tendency towards standardization and vulgarization has affected the skyline in Râncea, thus diminishing the diversity of the Romanian rural space.

Many environmental dysfunctions can be identified on the spot, such as: the chaotic extension of the space occupied with buildings over the natural habitats, with a direct result in the reduction of the forest area that exists in Râncea.

To this we can add the discontinuous distribution of the land-use patterns which has a fragmentary distribution of lots without any logical organization or spatial-functional division.

The cause of this random distribution is the fact that the buildings were constructed with no building licence, disregarding the environmental legislation in terms of waste management, sewage system and legal distances between buildings. In the rush of building a house people commonly chose inappropriate locations.

“Instead of the choice of location being based on aesthetics and knowledge of ecological capacities, sites were often chosen simply because they were located in places where development constraints were relaxed and where land was cheap. This resulted in [...] severe structural and environmental problems later on” (Ragatz, 1970 a; Stroud, 1995) [7, p. 137]. Architecturally, less than 30% of the constructions abide by the city planning law in terms of volumetric analysis, roofing, construction materials, orientation, and FAR-BFC (%) indices. The result is the linear-tentacular development of the hearth land area in Râncea on the N-S direction, following the DN 67 C, and many areas with active erosion.

“Since there are few flat terrains in the area, most of the dwellings were built on gentle or

sometimes steep slopes, triggering rain-wash processes that cause soil erosion and finally, gullies emerges. Since the materials used for building are not always light, there is a compaction of the soil, which further adds to the degradation processes” [3].

Pollution in its multiple forms (air, water, soil, sound pollution) affects the environment in Râncea. Because of a deficient waste management and no permanent garbage collection service, the soil and even the surface water are polluted by all sorts of inadequate garbage disposals, wood waste and litter resulted from the visitors and the constructions.

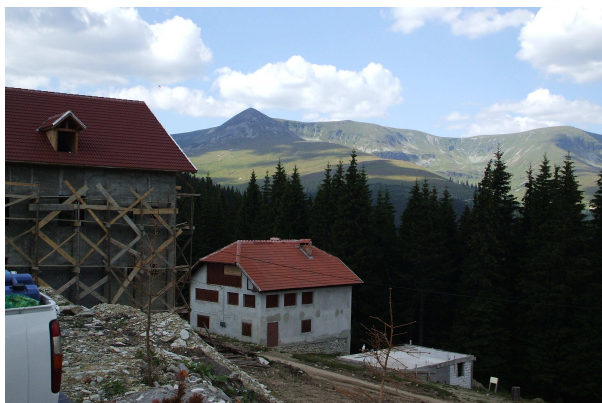


Fig. 6. Slope active erosion near the newly built recreational villas.



Fig. 7. Soil acidification and pollution determined by the debris.

The intensified traffic during the holidays and week-ends causes air pollution, sound pollution and a sudden increased pressure on the environment.

3.5. Future trends

According to the Development Strategy specified in the Spatial Planning of the National and County Territory, an enlargement of the Râncea resort up to 1800 m altitude is envisaged, along with the extension of the present water supply system, the introduction of a separate sewage system, the modernization of the electric network, the introduction of the centralized gas supply system, a better waste

management and the surfacing of DN 67 C on the sector Râncea - Obârşia Lotrului, in order to increase the Transcarpathian circulation on this road section.

In addition, in the sector of providing services to the consumer, the project mentions the provision of a permanent health service, fire unit and post office. There are regulations for the building sector too, that state the limitation of private constructions, especially second homes, in favour of larger accommodation facilities for tourists and public services infrastructures.

A future planning strategy of Râncea mountain resort should take into consideration the possibility to converse the second homes from seasonal or vacation use into year-round homes.

This would encourage the establishment of permanent residents into the area and therefore, an increased number of facilities needed and services to be provided.

4. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of building recreational houses in rural areas that we have tackled in this paper is far from being exhaustive, as the rural space in general is a fruitful research domain. Given the historic fundamental changes it went through, it remains an open debate field of action. The rapid developing society we live in, where movement, represented by flows, structures the space and determines social interactions, aroused our interest in how the urban mingles with the rural, in the causes that determine this relationship and in the evolution they enhance. Thus, in the studied area, we could identify a peripheral dynamism that is only at the beginning.

The remote rural area Râncea is situated in has been animated by the residential function, which, in return, favoured tourism development that triggers profound changes at all levels (economic development, planning, changing destination of the land-use, recreation facilities, and social implications with an impact on the traditional customs of the locals).

An uncontrolled extension of residential areas through one family villas tends to lead to an intensification of insufficiencies in the transportation system, water supply system, heating network, and, in general, in all types of municipal services.

The upgrading of facilities and the enlargement of the supply networks in the areas where they are missing are the first actions to be taken in the near future if the local authorities intend to continue the development process. Otherwise, the area will be confronted with serious environmental and planning dysfunctions that, in return, will slow down its development and even diminish its present attractiveness.

Generally, “second home development is considered an option for sustainable rural

development, which has experienced economic and population decline” [4, p. 392]. However, it is very important to monitor the impact these dwellings have on the environment and on the host community. In the case of Râncea, a stringent application of environmental and infrastructure regulation on new house development is compulsory because of the pressure of real pollution on the fragile mountain environment.

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