

# URBAN SPRAWL AND RESIDENTIAL MOBILITIES IN THE BUCHAREST AREA – RECONFIGURATION OF A NEW RESIDENTIAL GEOGRAPHY

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**Abstract.** *Efect direct al eliminării restricțiilor privind stabilirea domiciliului și extinderea limitele spațiului construit al localităților la sfârșitul perioadei comuniste, expansiunea urbană peste zonele rurale înconjurătoare a devenit o realitate spațială dificil de limitat și de gestionat. Transformările socio-economice din ultimele două decenii sunt martori și factori ai acestui proces de dezvoltare a construcțiilor, rezidențiale sau cu destinații industriale și de servicii, în zonele ce înconjoară Bucureștiul, sub presiunea și influența sa. Sub presiunea mobilității rezidențiale a cetățenilor în noile zone de expansiune urbană, se produce permanent o reconfigurare a teritoriilor afectate de acest fenomen. În contextul noilor relații urban-rural, se pot identifica elemente care contribuie la fundamentarea principiilor unei noi geografii rezidențiale.*

**Key-words:** *urban sprawl, residential mobility, residential choice, metropolitan zone, urban policy*

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## Introduction

Urban sprawl over the surrounding rural areas of Bucharest is a phenomenon which can be precisely dated. In the context of restrictive regulations concerning place of residence and the sprawl of the limits of the built space of communities from the communist period, their abrogation by the first law of 1989 built the framework for a new type of development of urban or rural localities.

The transformations of the last two decades witness this constructions' development process, residential or being either industrial or tertiary buildings, in the areas which surround Bucharest, under its pressure and influence. Nowadays the clear-cut and stable limits of the built areas of the localities from the communist period are replaced by fragmentations and perpetual transformations of these ones. There is an intense construction activity, the built perimeters are extending, being more and more fragmented, the former perimeters are

transformed by densifications and replacements of the ancient buildings. But the most obvious phenomenon is the multiplication of the constructions and the extension of the built areas and implicitly the diminishing of the agricultural area.

The new residential developments are functionally linked to the presence of the big city, being the reflection of its socio-professional transformations and the result of the incoherence or even of the lack of public politics concerning urban housing.

This study aims at pointing out the way in which residential areas surrounding Bucharest have been transformed and modelled during the post-communist period, under the pressure of the residential mobility of urban dwellers, as well as the social modifications and their residential aspirations. We will equally study the reasons which lead to the urban sprawl and the reconfiguration of the territories touched by this

phenomenon. In the context of the new urban-rural relationships, one can identify elements that contribute to the set up of the principles of a new residential geography in the studied area.

The phenomena of urban sprawl and residential mobility analysed in Bucharest, the capital of the country, are representative for any of the cities in Romania, their intensity being directly proportional with the demographic size of the city and its economic dynamics during the last two decades.

### **The invasion of the city on the neighbouring rural communities – a report**

During the post-communist period, the political changes allowed the modification of the construction and housing allocation mechanisms and principles, with immediate effects in the reconfiguration of the socio-spatial structures in Bucharest and of the residential relations between Bucharest and the neighbouring areas.

The elimination of the mobility restrictions, of those linked to the access to property, to the liberty to build using own means, the freedom of choosing the desired place of residence, are fundamental elements which transformed the city structure and that of the cities around. The legalizing of the free housing and land market, the diminishing of the State role in the production of urban housing, the disappearance of the control system and the housing allocation by the State or enterprises induced an accentuated dynamics of free exchange of dwellings, of the real estate market and, implicitly, of the residential dynamics inside Bucharest but also in its surroundings.

After 1990, the state role in building and allocating new dwellings reduces gradually and becomes insignificant. The monopoly of its control

on the evolution of the real estate market or on the dwellings exchange inventory in the city was replaced by the decisions of each family or person involved. The administrative barriers disappear and the freedom of moving, exchanging or building induces new fluxes and new principles of territorial development. The usual residential mobility patterns, specific for the former decades, will be replaced by new methods of search and relocation, as a result of new offers and market conditions, of new desiderata and financial-social characteristics of involved individuals.

Immediately after the change of the communist regime, the rules concerning the unique property, the restriction of urban housing as well as the one regarding the sprawl of the built space of cities and towns have been abrogated<sup>1</sup>. Many of those targeted by residence restrictions, who had previously been constrained to obtain a legal residence or even to live in the villages or little towns around Bucharest, could thus legalize their residence in the town. The effect of this “return”, in fact of the possibility of a free residence settlement, was recorded as a big “wave of migrants” only in the statistical recordings. According to the published information, in 1990, 165304 citizens settled down in Bucharest, the rate of arrivals being of 86.4%, and that of migrations of 83.9%. It is obvious that the phenomenon was out of ordinary, taking into account the recorded values in the years before and after this moment.

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<sup>1</sup> The law number 1/1989 regarding the abrogation of laws and other normative acts, published in the Official Gazette nr.4 from 27 December 1989; among others there were abrogated the Law nr.68/1976 regarding the change of the official address from other localities in the declared cities, according to the law, big cities\*) Published in the Official Gazette nr. 24 from 20/03/1976, and the Law nr.58/1974 regarding the urban and rural systematization, published in The Official Gazette nr. 135 from 1st November 1974.

We should specify that the effect of free movement and the freedom of settling down was visible only in the statistic recordings, among the 165304 new habitants the majority were already living in Bucharest, but without being able to render their domicile legal, administratively. These ones had their legal address in the localities around Bucharest, but were living in the city as tenants. Legally, they could renew their administrative urban visa. During 1990-1991 there were negative growth rates of population in most localities in the study area, except for the two cities nearby (Buftea and Otopeni), as well as the commune of Balotești

which, even if they lost a part of the non-resident population, they were targeted for the first residential projects outside the town. In the next period analysed, there are positive values in the population dynamics in the localities situated in the first ring of communes around the capital in the north, which were interesting due to their accessibility and their environment conditions. Most residential complexes appeared in these localities (Ștefăneștii de Jos, Corbeanca, Balotești, Snagov) as well as in the city of Bolintin Vale, situated in the proximity of Bucharest-Pitești highway.

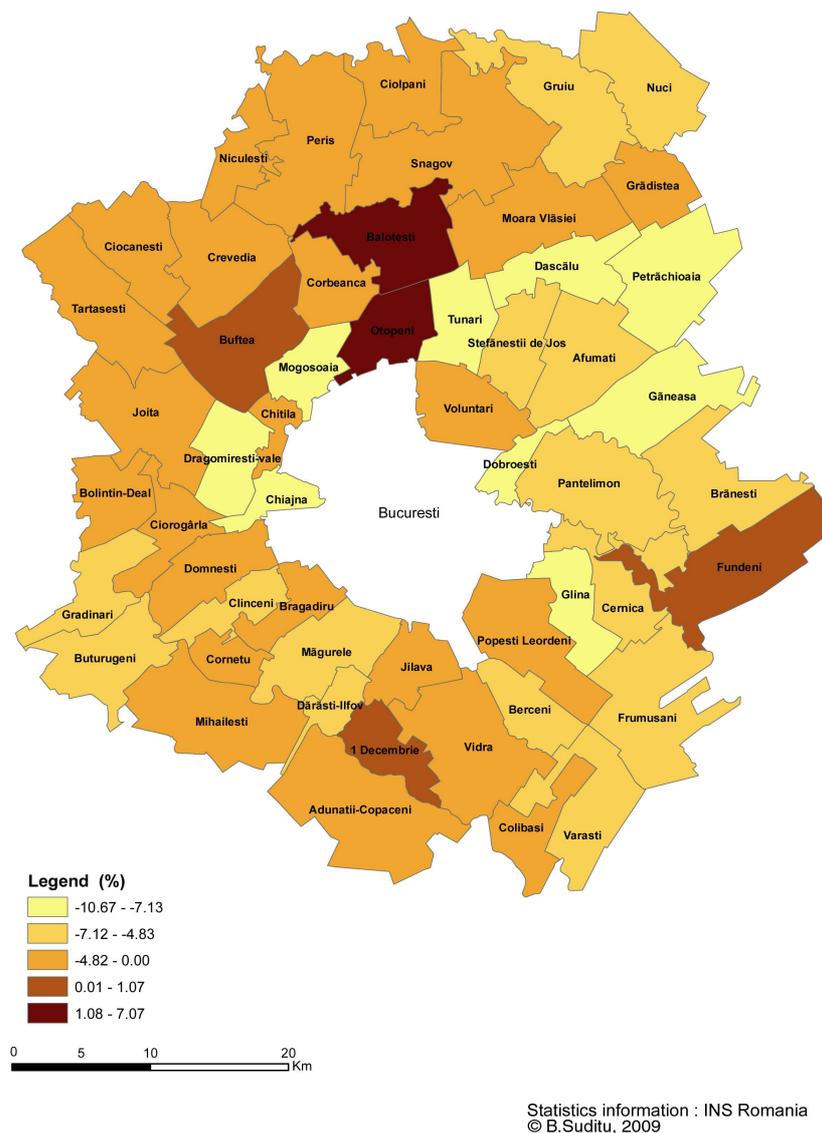


Fig. 1. The population growth rate in the Bucharest area in the post-communist period (1990-1991)

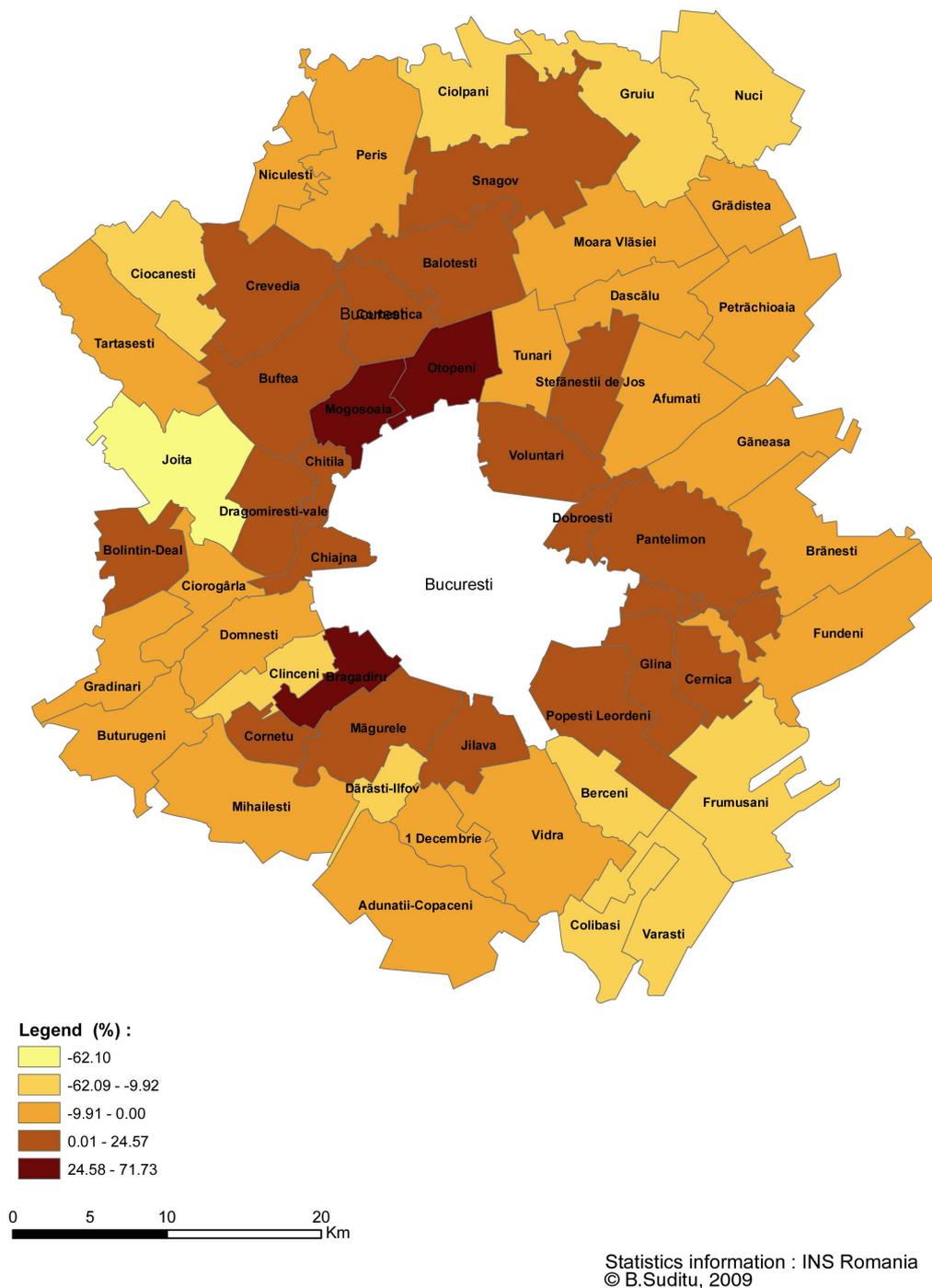


Fig 2. The population growth rate in the Bucharest area in the post-communist period (1991-2007)

The change of this rule allowed some people of Bucharest to acquire new dwellings on the free market. This permitted the flourishing of the real estate market and the modification of the previous practices concerning the housing purchase and the adaptation to the family size. The dwelling becomes

now more than a shelter, a patrimonial good, an investment, and by its own characteristics and position, a sign of social fame, a symbol of success. As we previously showed, the number of actors on the real estate market multiplies constantly, as well as the differential demand of dwellings. The system

of housing repartition, through the enterprise or directly through the specialized state institutions, disappears gradually at the same time with the diminishing of the number of dwellings in execution. Buying or exchanging dwellings will be consequently made after 1990 on the free market, under the new conditions of the real estate market. The number of dwellings built in the localities around or in the marginal areas of Bucharest increases.

After a first stage, which corresponds to the period 1990-1992, when the majority of the occupants of the apartments built from the state funds were able to buy the apartments they were occupying inside the city, there will be a shift to a dynamic stage of selection and adaptation of the housing characteristics to the needs and aspirations of those involved. After this moment, the choice of the dwelling will be made by free choice according to the personal wishes and the offer of the real estate market. The former reasons of residential mobility of the Bucharest people will be replaced with new ones. The '90s, which correspond to the residential mobility development according to the market rules, will require a structure transformation and diversification of the Bucharest habitat, as well as a diversification of the dwellings types. The new social-financial categories oriented and adjusted their aspirations specifically towards these dwellings types.

The human and financial resources of Bucharest look constantly for alternatives in the areas around. The implementation of enterprises of production and services, the development of isolated dwellings or of residential parks, the permanent solicitation of fields for new constructions, are the result of the land and residential needs of the capital population.

The area around the capital, administratively known as the Ilfov Agricultural Sector, is gradually transforming from a periurban area, which assures a residential "buffer" zone and agricultural resources to the capital, into an area of re-urbanization where discontinuous, dispersed and low-density residential areas appeared and developed on lands with agricultural destination situated in the immediate proximity of the city or of other localities. In the absence of urban planning and strategic documents concerning residential development around the capital, the new residential developments correspond, according to the sustainable development criteria, to an anarchic way of occupying the space.

Following the logic of interesting areas inside the city, the first residential developments were realized in the northern area of Bucharest. This area, which benefits from the opportunity of the most important road which links the capital to the airport and the north of the city (DN1 Bucharest Ploiesti Brasov), was an interesting one for the secondary residences located outside the city for the economical and political elites between the two world wars and during the communist period. The Snagov area, designated in the 50s as a working resort of national interest, developed in the 30s as a locality of secondary residences for some rich families from Bucharest.

The villas built by these families were nationalized since the first years of the communist period becoming secondary residences for the communist leaders. During the communist period, the Snagov village, situated on the homonym lake, became an upgrading social reference, fact that mobilized and marked the localisation of the new secondary residences in the first post-communist

years. Moreover, the northern area of Bucharest, in addition to a high accessibility rate and a good social image, benefits from the presence of attractive natural elements which play an important role in the residential choices: forests and lakes. In time, the sprawl towards north becomes the most desired area for the main or secondary residences outside the city.

### **Patterns and stages in Bucharest's urban sprawl**

During the analysed period, the evolution of the residential areas formed by the urban sprawl into the neighbouring areas was achieved in a few stages. Each one is strictly linked to stages in the economical restructuration and the new locations of enterprises, to the policy of credits for housing access, to development of the construction sector, as well as the evolution of the legislation concerning the urbanism and land management. The main stages of Bucharest urban sprawl are the followings:

- 1990-1992: regulations concerning the settle down at a legal address in "closed cities" by which residents with false papers from the localities around Bucharest legalize their administrative status; the law concerning the systematisation of rural and urban localities is abrogated. This involved the elimination of any plans and legal instruments concerning urban planning and land management for over a decade; the restriction which allowed the owning of only one property is eliminated, fact which favours the appearance of the real estate market and revitalizes the appearance of the first secondary residences outside Bucharest; the law concerning the retrocession of agricultural fields is approved, fact which leads to the creation of a land market and to the possibility of purchasing

agricultural fields whose use will be subsequently changed into land to be built on.

- 1992-2000: the people from Bucharest, as well as the inhabitants of the small towns and villages around buy or inherit pieces of land in the neighbourhood of localities and, starting with 1991, on the basis of the construction authorization, recently certified, new dwellings will be built; along or near the main roads and the surrounding peripheral road of the city, in the limits of neighbouring communes, new enterprises and commercial buildings will settle down, fact which will transform the perspective on the peripheral urban areas, as well as the economic structure of the localities surrounding Bucharest; residential constructions are built on newly bought agricultural pieces of land; the appearance of a population group with sufficient resources to require a certain quality of the dwelling, will determine the appearance of individual residences outside Bucharest in the context of land abundance induced by the generalization of the car use. During this period, in the absence of a general or zonal urban plan, dwellings are constructed on agricultural lands and on extensions of the built space of the localities following the rules stipulated by the general urbanism regulation approved in 1996.

- 2001: present: the appearance of the urbanism and land planning law, which regulated the urban plans and the framework of urban sprawl; the development of the construction sector and the appearance of the real estate developers; the appearance and the sprawl of residential complex closed in the first ring of communes around the city; people income's increase and the return in the country of important sums of money from Romanian citizens working abroad; the multiplication of housing loans etc.

With different intensities, all the mentioned elements reflected themselves in each of the mentioned stages in the new residential developments around Bucharest. As we previously mentioned, if during the first decade, individual dwellings were built on pieces of land taken out of the agricultural circuit, without a coherent housing development plan, starting with 2000, the closed residential complex, most of them situated in the communes in the north area, start to proliferate. A lot of housing units are built on individual plots and in the residential complexes of Voluntari, Otopeni, Mogoșoaia and Corbeanca, situated up north very close to Bucharest, but also in the communes alongside the main connection roads to the territory: towards Târgoviște, in Buftea and Târtășești, towards Urziceni in Afumați, alongside the highway to Constanța, in Pantelimon and Brănești. Toward the south the phenomenon intensity is more reduced, the number of construction authorizations and consequently, the number of housing units being significant only in the communes nearby Bucharest: Popești-Leordeni in south-east, towards Oltenița and Bragadiru, in south-west, towards Alexandria. We must underline that, from an administrative and statistical point of view, in order to build a residential complex, a single request is recorded, regardless the number of housing units that are to be built within the respective complex. In this context, we must accept that the construction authorizations' statistics has to be read considering the previously mentioned limitations.

The pressure of the city and the lack of comfortable alternative dwellings at accessible prices led to the research of solutions in the rural areas around. The dream of a "country residence" close to the city, but also to the nature, spacious and

with a minimal courtyard determined many Bucharest people to buy lands or even dwellings, that they will subsequently build on or renovate, according to their own aspirations or resources. Except that individual initiatives regarding the construction of dwellings in rural areas in the neighbourhood of Bucharest were not accompanied by public initiatives linked to the development, improvement or sprawl of the transport network, sewage, water or gas. In this context, many of the persons who built and moved in the neighbouring rural areas, realized that the initial residential project and the expected benefits are not the same in real life, compared to the promised ones. The dwelling, irrespective of the comfort conditions it offers, is placed in most of the cases in rural areas poorly developed from an urban point of view and the technical infrastructure is lacking. The dream of a comfortable "country residence" became for many people a difficult reality to cope with and frequently very expensive (in terms of time and money). Their attempt to combine the advantages of the city and of the rural areas, by their emplacements in the new areas of urban sprawl contributed to their transformation or destruction, and sometimes, to both of them.

The specific legal framework allows, following some minimal urban regulations, building on agricultural lands, at the initiative of the owner and with the agreement of the Local Councils. The laws regarding the urbanism and the constructions does not stipulate that the inclusion of agricultural lands of localities in the category of areas allowed for building should be realized by urban operations of coherent plotting. Any agricultural field, after the accomplishment of some administrative procedures and the obtainment of some authorizations, with the agreement of the local council can transform an

agricultural plot into a field for constructions. It is not compulsory for the land owners to associate in view of the reorganization of agricultural plots that are to be transformed. Equally, nor does the owners

who are real estate developers at the same time, or the local authorities have the obligation to pay an equipment tax or to achieve the necessary technical infrastructure (paved roads, water, gas, sewage).

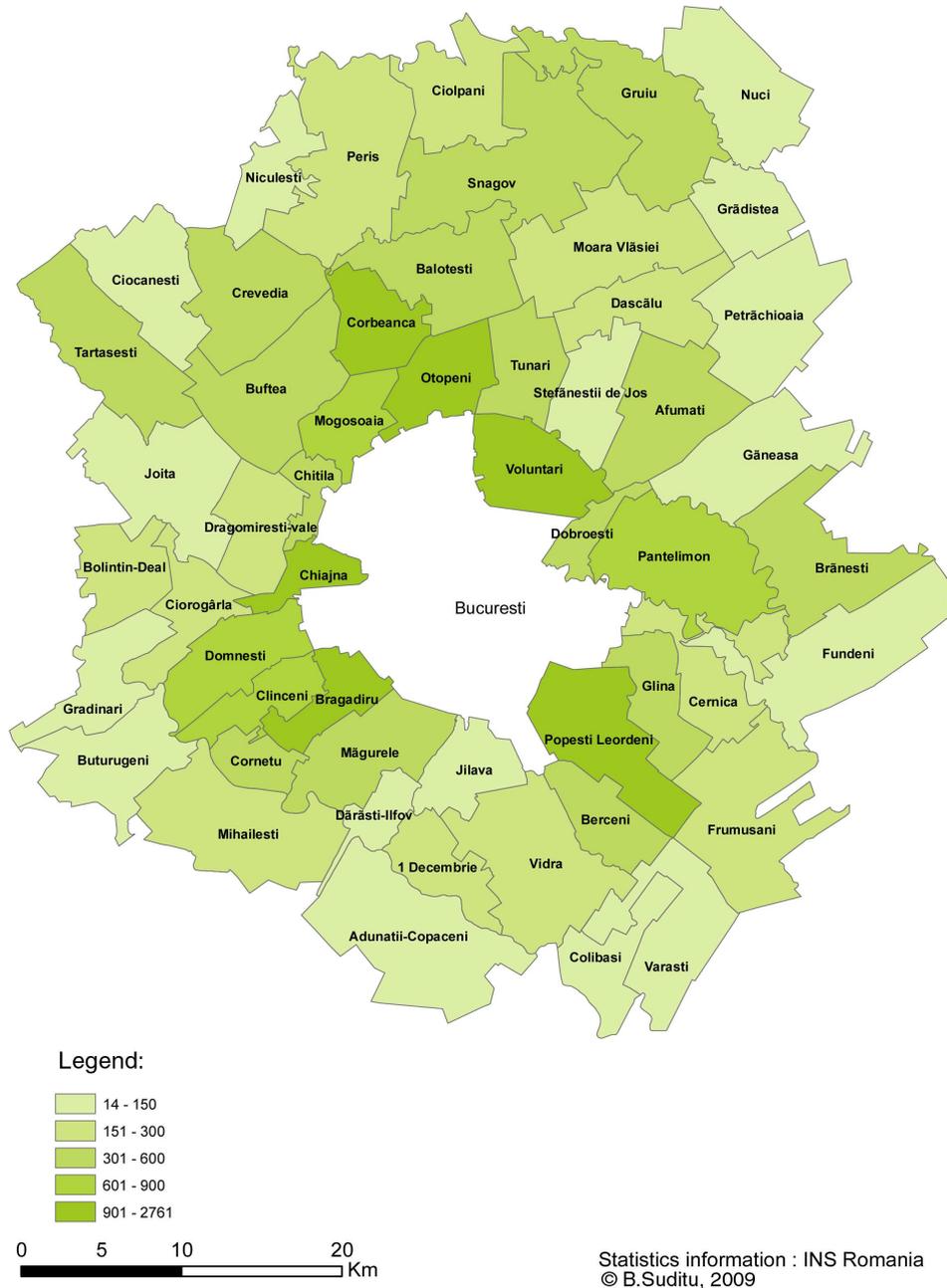


Fig. 3. The number of construction certificates for residential buildings (2002 –2007)

**Dwellings outside the city: aspirations and constraints**

The urban sprawl, in the context of the previously mentioned urban regulation, led to the

multiplication of built surfaces, of the number of built dwellings, without nevertheless bringing fundamental elements which would improve the quality of life for the people involved, the new rur-

urbans. The statistical analysis of the approved construction authorizations number and their dimensions, compared to the number of settlements in these areas confirm the fact that there is no direct correlation. The number of constructions is far more important than that of the persons who settled in these areas. In the absence of any appropriate official statistical instrument the phenomenon is obvious on the field, many dwellings being unoccupied or being used only during week-ends or during short summer holidays periods.

The number of construction increases, but there are no proportional fluxes of mobility recorded. The construction and relocation initiatives in the rural vicinity of Bucharest were made by persons with sufficient resources to mobilize in order to build these dwellings, without necessarily having the experience of living in an isolated individual dwelling, outside the locality or in an area under construction. This is the reason why many dwellings were built to be used at the retirement, the recorded mobility being one of departure from the city. It should be mentioned that during the first post-communism decade, the construction of dwellings was made under the coordination of the owner and with his own resources. This is reflected in the constructions' delays, the newly developed areas resembling to a continuous building site, visually polluted and polluting by the intense traffic of equipment and material residues of the construction materials.

After 2000, many residential complexes situated in the north: Băneasa, Otopeni, Voluntari, Pipera, Balotești, were realized. The first ones were built with the direct involvement of the future

owners and this led to their occupation in important proportions when finishing the works. The increased demand for this type of dwellings and for the sector of constructions led to, on the one hand, their multiplication and on the other hand to their construction in other areas and at growing distances from Bucharest. Many residential complexes start to be built in the east, south and south-east area at the limit of the first ring of communes, and in the north at about 20 kilometres distance (Corbeanca, Petresti). A relevant element for the characteristics' evolution of the periurban private residential parks is the development, starting with 2007, of multi-stories residential complexes for the purpose of economical efficiency of investments: as an alternative to the urban multi-family buildings, the suggested alternative are the multi-family buildings located in the rural area, with poor transport links to the city and the neighbouring areas.

#### **Direct and indirect effects of urban sprawl**

Urban sprawl is the result of the search for alternatives to the urban housing and environment. By constructive or mobility initiatives, those involved looked for a housing solution as closer to nature as possible. But through their actions, in the absence of public coordination (transport infrastructure, technical infrastructure, urban planning), they contributed to the transformation of the rural zones, to the destruction of some natural elements and to excessive urban planning of the qualified areas as rural by chaotic or high-density constructions. They do not respect the specificity of the place, situated inside and outside the villages.

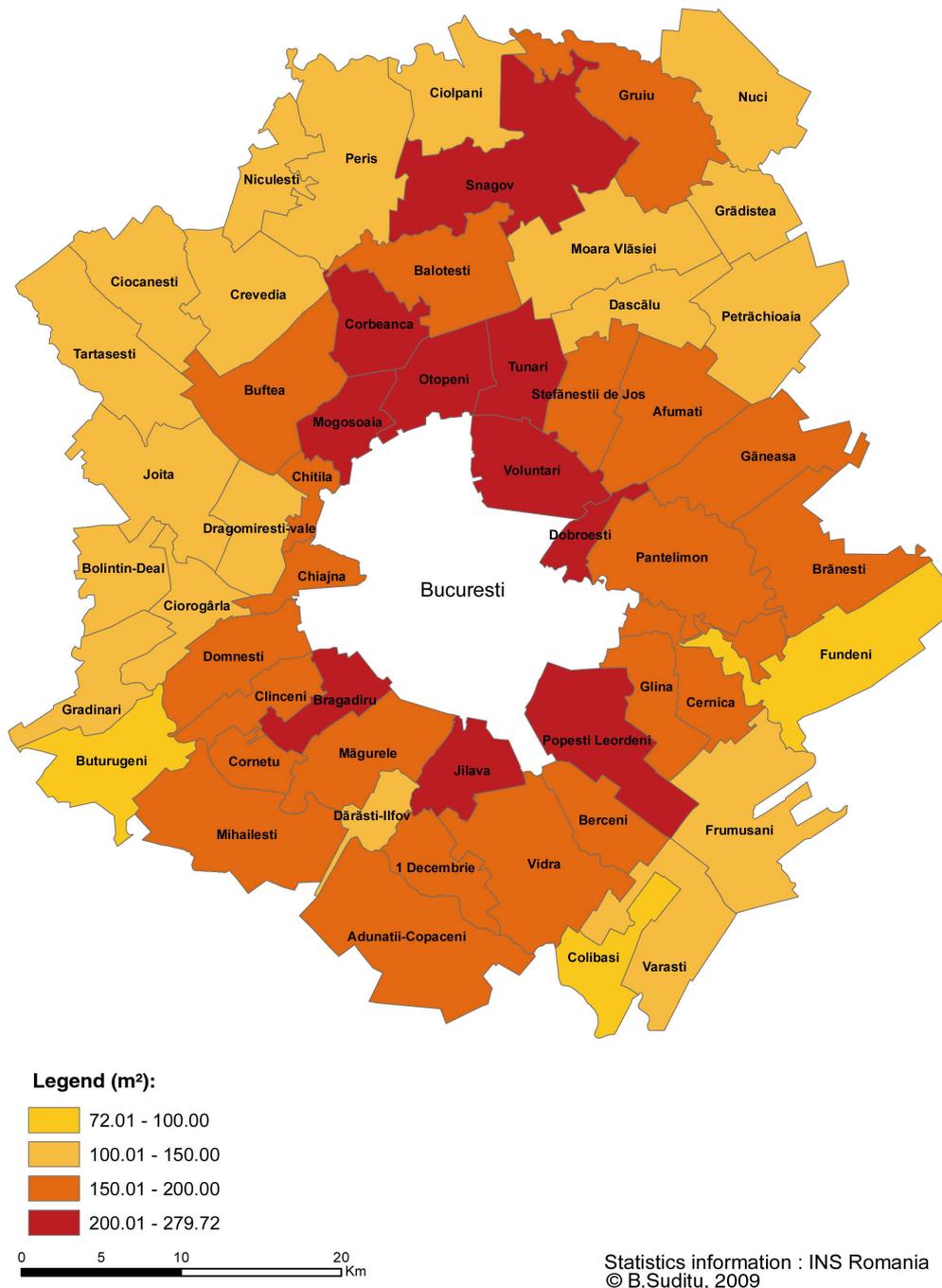
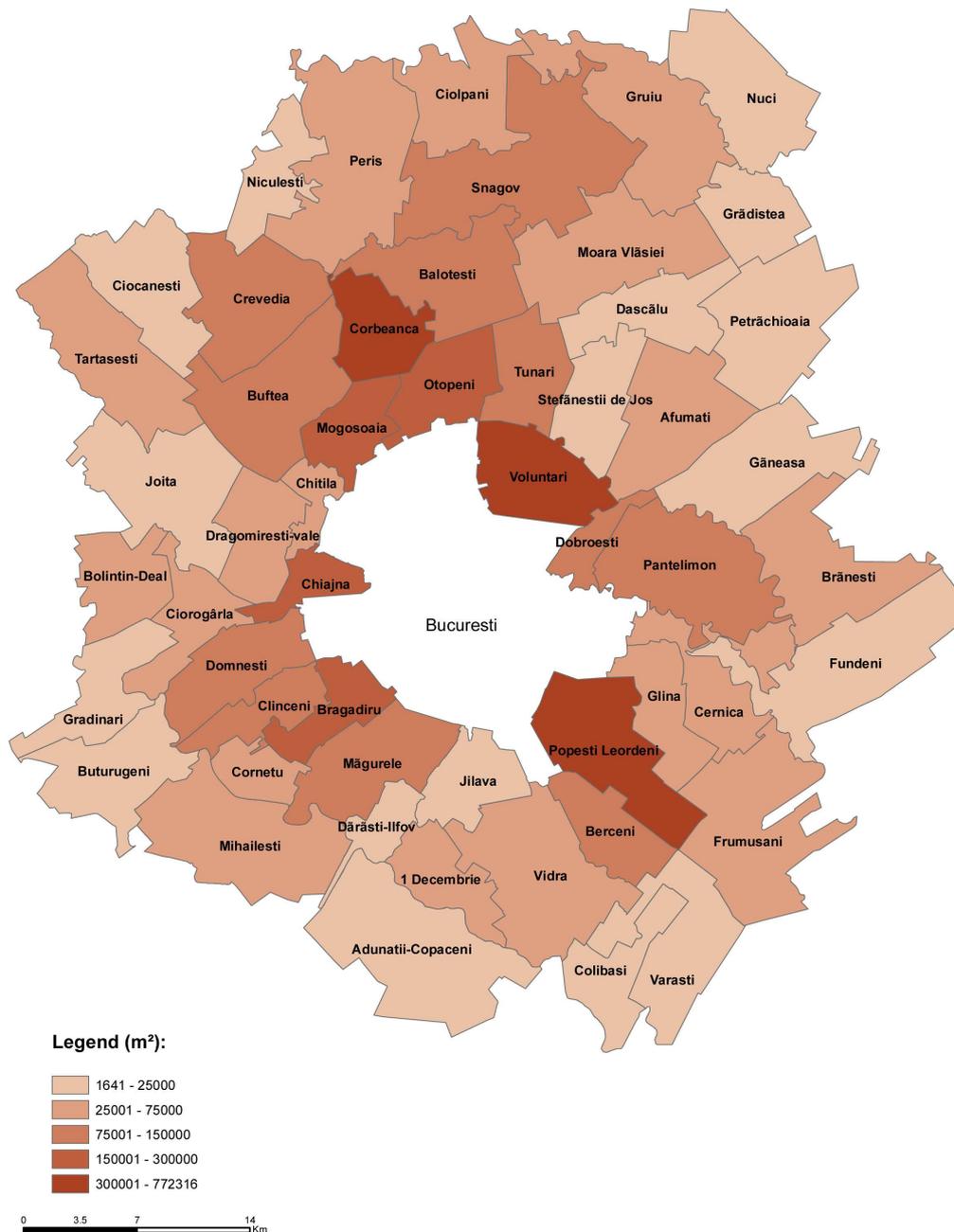


Fig. 4. The medium size by certified residential buildings (2002-2007)

Practices of residential mobility outside Bucharest and the new residential developments modified the social-economic and organizational elements from the concerned area, with consequences on the way of life of all those involved, either new ex-urban residents or former rural inhabitants. The attempt of coming closer to

nature led to its destruction. The agricultural fields are fragmented and transformed in built plots. The pressure of the agencies and real estate developers on the owners of these fields makes their values to be evaluated only in square meters of future residential development, and agriculture not to be profitable at all.

**SUPRAFATA UTILA CONSTRUITA  
IN PERIOADA 2002-2007 (mp)**



Statistics information : INS Romania  
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*Fig. 5. The net area of certified residential buildings (2002-2007)*

Agricultural fields entered the commercial circuits for a mere speculative purpose. The result is that agriculture is no more practiced on an important area around Bucharest. Lacking a specific legislation, any field has a value only in the

perspective of a real estate action. The rural landscapes are modified by the appearance of big dimensions villas which keep nothing from the architecture specific to the areas they are situated on, and the areas designed for building are

fragmented ones or along the main roads. All communes extend the limits of the built surfaces, their size reflecting the pressure of the real estate market and the advantages of the geographical position in relation to Bucharest: Buftea from 707

ha in 1990 to 1457 ha in 2008; Mihăilești, from 412 ha to 850 ha; Popești Leordeni, from 613 ha to 970 ha; Măgurele, from 442 ha to 4298 ha; Bragadiru, from 420 ha to 901 ha; Snagov, from 811 ha in 1990 to 2515 ha in 2008 etc.

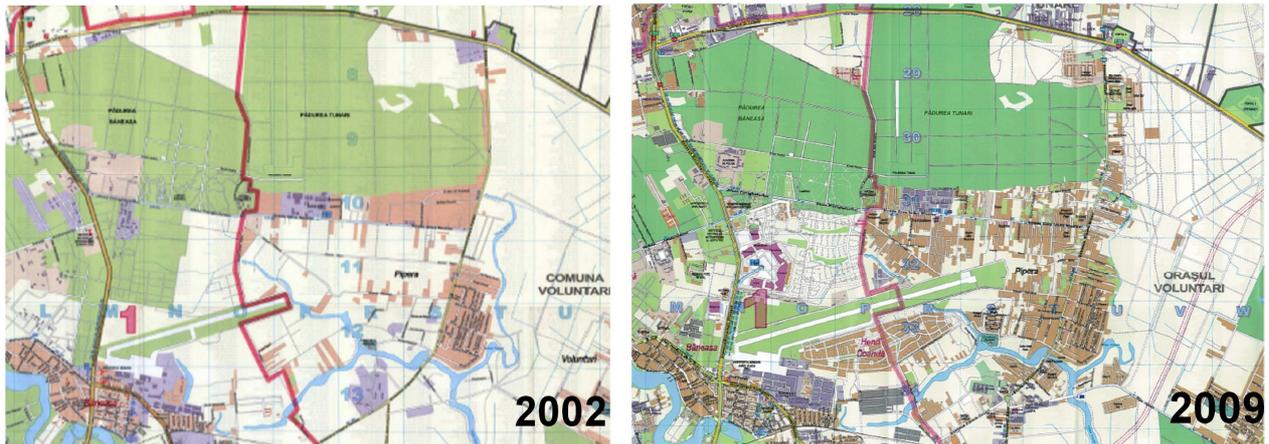


Foto.1. The evolution of the urban sprawl in the area of the village of Pipera, situated in the north of Bucharest, in the neighbourhood of Baneasa airport



Foto. 2. Satellite image of Pipera village; which points out the unorganised character of the sprawl and of the residential assemblies

The plots for building on, except for the case of residential complexes, fits the specificity of the agricultural fields, being very long and extremely narrow. This leads to the limitations in the accomplishment and the disposition of constructions, to the construction of very narrow roads specific to agricultural roads (max. 5-7 m), but also to a very poor rate of use of these fields, by the lack of servitudes and of access roads and, implicitly, by blocking the fields behind the first line of construction. The unorganised sprawl way of the built spaces leads to the construction of buildings in the areas affected by floods, but also to a waste of lands in the absence of legal instruments for reorganizing the plots and the land associations in the view of land planning and achievement of future residential developments.

Spatial and economic transformations, result of the city dwellers' mobility in the surrounding rural space, can be evaluated from a double perspective: of the new residents and of the inhabitants.

For the former, the effects of mutilation and the transformation of rural spaces are assessed through the point of view of the costs and benefits brought by this change of residences and environment: expenses for the dwelling purchase, for its maintenance, for the security, for transport (number of cars by family, the percentage of expenses with gas in the budget of the family), for the time needed to get to work, at the commerce areas, at the kindergarten or the children's school.

For the old residents, the flows of migrants and the development of constructions in their villages have a double economical importance: on the one hand, they will find work during the building of the new dwellings, but also for their administration and maintainace, and on the other hand, their

agricultural fields get economical value, being valued as fields one can build on. This double perspective led to the transformation of the former communities and to the separations within the locality between the old and the new inhabitants. In the new economical functional and spatial context, the relationships and the geographical structures inside the localities suffer an important change. The same phenomena transformed the entire analysed area, being a source of social and economical components reorganizing of residential geography.

### **What engendered and what solved the city dwellers' mobility or why is urban sprawl a problem?**

The explosion of mobility from the beginning of '90 was a response to the housing needs that Bucharest could not satisfy at the end of the communist period. In the previously mentioned context of the strictly regulated relationships between Bucharest and the neighbouring areas during the communist period, the adopted legislation or the individual actions initiated by the city dwellers were the sign of the beginning of normality, of compensation of restrictive elements from the past, of initiative in urban planning and housing constructions. The legislative void in the urban and housing field created by the complete abrogation of a legal framework, even if it was communist, regulated the land use, the density and way of organizing the residential areas, by defining minimal compulsory densities for the housing investments to be economically efficient, as well as the elements needed by the social, cultural, scholar infrastructure for a qualitative housing.

The lack, for a decade, of minimal urban rules in designing and building of new constructions in

Bucharest and the localities around favoured the development of an uncontrolled urban sprawl. The urban legal framework adopted in the post-communist period, even if it stipulates the role of the actors and the plans for the future residential developments, was not and is not rigorously applied. The intensity of urban sprawl and the forms it takes are the sign for the lack of success and lack of coherence of urban and housing policies in Romania. The realities of the new residential geography in Bucharest translate the applying of the ante-mentioned regulations, explaining at the same time the authority's defensive character and the public interest minimization in favor of the private interest, with the endorsement of the local elected representatives the local authorities. Moreover, solving the problems linked to the urbanising of

rural environment and to ensuring the necessary technical elements of comfort, require important investments, as well as an efficient correlation of the involved public authorities, including cooperation between Bucharest and the localities around.

The opportunity of geographical location in the context of the free market made many administrations value the advantages of proximity and accessibility, becoming interesting areas for new sprawls. The effect was an important difference in terms of budgets for the nearby localities and implicitly the lack of interest of the richer ones to cooperate in order to establish intercommunal associations or the metropolitan area. The new approaches regarding the administrative decentralizing push the localities even further away from a joint development vision.



*Foto. 3. New residential developments at the western limit of Bucharest, between the communist real estate Drumul Taberei and the Domnesti village*

The urban sprawl in Bucharest was generated by private initiatives, without a public coordination. In all European states there is an attempt to stop it because it's very expensive and it determines profound changes in the environment: the densities are reduced and the agricultural land consumption is very important, the energy costs are very high for heating the individual dwellings, there are huge costs for the connection to the public services, huge costs for individual transportation and also for the efficiency of expending the public transport services, etc.

The evolution of the Romanian society and economy led to powerful transformations and segmentations within the income and socio-professional categories. The same situation can be noticed in the structure of mobility options and the residential choices. The pioneering of the first town

residents whose construction and mobility initiatives contributed to the urban sprawl in early 90' is presently replaced by decisions cross-checked by costs-benefits analysis in the context of an increase of living costs outside the city. Nevertheless, the residential mobility and the urban sprawl phenomenon will continue. The involved municipalities must assess the medium and long term effects of these phenomena and develop policies aimed at ensuring the accessibility and decent life conditions to all the mobility candidates, to ensure the urban sprawl control as well as an efficient management of already urbanised spaces. In a joint action, the municipalities must also establish a vision of the Bucharest of tomorrow: a densified town or a town characterised by a constant sprawl.

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