

FIELDWORK - The rice fields of Brăila



After three days of project meetings in Bucharest, it was time to go out to the field! On Friday afternoon, we travelled with 25 people by coach in a few hours to Stăncuța, a small town near the Danube Delta, where we stayed for the night. This is one of our European study areas where we will interview farmers about landscape change during the past 25 years. Stăncuța is located in the open flood plains of the Danube: farmland, some pastures and forests.

Our student Merit Snoeijer analyses landscape change based on interviews and topographical maps from 1900, 1980, 1997 and 2013. During the communist era, all land was owned by the collective. Large changes took place during the 1960s, in particular, like the

development of rice farming with large square parcels of land with irrigation channels. The saline soils that are often flooded are highly suitable for this, and farms up to 7000 ha were developed. Many small orchards, natural areas, and small landscape features like tree rows, parcel boundaries, unpaved roads and ditches disappeared in that same period.

The largest change in land ownership occurred in the post-Soviet period due to decollectivisation. This meant that land was returned to the former owners. Farmers had, on average, only 3 ha, which was often spread over 7 to sometimes 20 plots! Some farms were abandoned, since the former owners moved to towns, and they were taken over by other farmers. Although land use has intensified, visible

changes are very limited. The parcellation and built-up areas hardly differ from the Soviet period.

There are still many horses and carts on the streets in Stăncuța, some of which are loaded with hay or corn stalks. In front of the town hall, we were welcomed by the mayor. From her basket, an old lady served us local pies with her own distillate palinca, plum brandy, which we couldn't resist! After we had come inside, Bas Pedroli gave a speech on behalf of the Volante project and presented the mayor with a book about European landscapes. We then enjoyed a sumptuous lunch with local products: peppers, tomatoes, cottage cheese, fruits, local meat and local red wine.

In the afternoon, we travelled by boat from over the Danube towards Brăila. It was late October and we sheltered behind the cabin from the icy wind. We observed groups of ducks and cormorants competing with the small fishing boats. While we were shivering and watching the reflection of the autumn leaves from the crumbling river banks where poplars and willows fall into the river, we longed for the fortifying palinca that had come a bit too early in the morning!

THEO VAN DER SLUIS