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Article

# Eco-Discourses in a Virtual Rural Community

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**Abstract:** This case study explores social media discourses of a virtual ecovillage community based in Central Romania, in a Hungarian speaking region of Transylvania. The investigated virtual community embraces the idea of ecovillage as a local constructive answer to the challenges of the global ecological crisis, based on strategies of revitalizing local ethnic traditions, promoting sustainable development solutions, and innovations. Our key question is the relationship between tradition and innovation—as revealed by the discursive practices of the ecovillage Facebook group most active members. Using ecolinguistic as a frame of reference, the investigation unveiled the role social media played in fostering the formation of a virtual intentional community, and in clarifying the shared values of the group. We found that the local ecovillage is part of a larger regional and global movement, unfolding the organic connection between the Hungarian and the Romanian intentional communities, and the reframing of traditional values within innovative, sustainable everyday practices.

**Keywords:** ecovillage movement; eco-discourses; ethnic traditions; innovation; intentional community; social media, Romania

## 1. Introduction

The focus of this study is community—a certain type of it—and its discourses: environmentalist narratives centred on ecovillages. In postmodern times—as Blackshaw put it—“community has transformed from a way of life into a narrative” [1] (p.27): a social media construction open to interpretation. With medialization, the digital turn [2] and the rise of networked individualism [3], our sense of belonging becomes an anchor, be it real or virtual. During pandemic times, virtual communities have an even stronger appeal, and environmental concerns an even louder voice. Our aim is to explore, compare and contextualize environmental narratives of an open Facebook group called “Szekely Ökofalu” (Szekler Ecovillage)—a Hungarian speaking virtual community rooted in Central Romania’s historic region of Transylvania—Szeklerland. An unobtrusive netnographic research has its benefits and challenges: flexibility and open-endedness allow a broader range of interpretations grounded in context—however, it limits our ability to go beyond what is available and accessible online in the research timeframe. In-depth analysis is possible through alternative data sources, by incorporating previous research results, and by secondary data analysis. Revisiting interview data from previous research gave us the missing dimension of a netnographic data gathering strategy.

Virtual interactions facilitated by social media platforms are at the centre of today’s communications and environmental movements research. Current studies highlight the role digital communication plays in the environmental movement field, either as means of active engagement [4,5], as hub of leadership manifestation [6,7] or as a space of rhetorical [8] and dynamic [9] utopias. It was never easier to get connected and engaged into a green campaign, a local food purchase, or an environmental educational activity online. Movements have expanded both across geographies, generations, income groups, and cultures. It is important to see the ways in which the Szekler Ecovillage group is similar and different from other intentional virtual communities, the level of its

members' engagement into conversations and activities, as well as the types of messages they convey. Ecovillages are forms of intentional communities that have more than a two decades history of research and practice internationally [10,11,12,13], but still remains a new topic in Romania [14].

The main aim of this investigation is to explore the relationship between tradition and innovation—as it unfolds through eco-discourses within the group. When talking about innovation as a shift from unsustainable lifestyles to an environmental-friendly, locally rooted model, Deborah Frieze [15] conceptualizes four types of actors: *protectors*—those who promote the new, non-consumerist values from within the old system; *hospice workers*—concerned with helping the helpless of the old, unsustainable status-quo; *illuminators*, who spread the word about the new, localist paradigm, and the few *trailblazers*: those who implement the innovative, green and local lifestyles.

## 2. Theoretical background

Analyzing ecovillages we find a complicated field of discourse. The most important keyword of this discourse is environmental awareness, environmentalism. This way of thinking has a long history, well mapped by Indian sociologist Ramachandra Guha in his work entitled Environmentalism: A global history [16]. He differentiates between two great waves of environmentalism. The first wave appeared in the 19th century during the industrial revolution—when a few sensible minds foresaw the damages and searched for solutions. The second wave starting in the 20th century identified the emerging and deepening ecological problems as global crises. Such environmentally conscious thinking does not limit itself to acknowledging the crises: it works on finding solutions.

This line of thinking reveals that environmentalism has both a theoretical and a practical aspect. The theoretical aspect includes the totality of philosophical and ethical thoughts encompassing new attitudes towards the environment and nature. The most important trend in ecosophy is deep ecology—highlighting self-worth of nature and the equal value, interdependence of all beings [17,18]. Another important line of thought is eco-ethics, focused on the new responsibilities we all have in a damaged world. Hans Jonas [19] has a groundbreaking ethical theory, transcending the old anthropomorphic approach by introducing the concept of nature's self-right and by extending human responsibilities to the natural environment. Land ethics states that the environment's well-being takes precedence over individual interests [20], and spaceship or lifeboat ethics puts forward similar ideals [21]. The practical side of environmentalism—focused on finding solutions to the environmental crisis—catalyzed green movements, dealing with several problems: how can humanity cope with the growing problems of the environment and society; how to change ways of thinking and behaviour for a more sustainable future. The keyword is 'sustainable'—a search for balance between society and the environment.

Ecovillages emerge as possible solutions to the environmental problems by creating self-sustaining communities aimed at mitigating the negative effects of globalization. Robert Gilman defines an ecovillage as „a human scale, full-featured settlement which integrates human activities harmlessly into the natural environment, supports healthy development and can be continued into the future indefinitely”[22](p.23). The goal is to reach long term environmental sustainability of a given place—an ideal yet to be reached by real-life ecovillages.

Most ecovillages are intentional communities created by the common will of a local group, and yet connected to global movements [23]. Ecovillages try to be an answer to the global ecological and spiritual crisis and as such are markers of the modernity crisis—an age focused on unlimited growth, science and innovation. Behind the creation of ecovillages there are various counter-narratives to mainstream views based on extrinsic values—market economy, capitalism, statehood, traditional education,

historical religions. Ecovillages are caught in the middle between global and local, traditional and new, with broad social and political value systems.

Wagner [12] has identified three areas of research on ecovillages: those concerning the individual, the community, and those focused on culture. Today's investigations are mapping the birth of ecovillages, their energy consumption, and environmental sustainability solutions of specific cases [24,25]. Our case—a virtual ecovillage—is an opportunity to examine the online identity construction discourses, accessible to all. Some ecovillages are built around a specific spiritual idea—such as Krishna Valley in Hungary—while most do not have a commonly shared view. They are created around the founder's views, rooted in religious views, farming and production alternatives, medicinal practices, and teaching strategies. Ecovillages display pluralism, syncretism and the technique of mixing and matching or bricolage [26]. Such conceptual blending is part of the virtual ecovillage discourses as well: alternative religiosity, localism and traditionalism.

Although mainstream religions have recently adopted an environmentally conscious thinking, we tend to consider it more impersonal, whereas nature-oriented spirituality is less formal. Hungarian ecovillage researcher Judit Farkas notes that we tend to associate spirituality with personal experience and growth, and the deeper understanding of the individual's place in the world [27]. The nature-centered spirituality related to ecological activism is called eco-spirituality by Bron Taylor [28]. The central idea of eco-spirituality is the understanding of humanity as part of nature, the equal value and interdependence of all beings. Followers adopt an ecocentric ethics which does not put humans above nature but considers them part of it, and greatly dependent on it, and interlinked with all other beings. Bron Taylor interprets eco-spirituality as the religious thinking adapted to environmentalist thinking. The idea of nature as a sacred entity is also present in other doctrines such as animism or pantheism, New Age movements, new pagan movements and other nature religions—another generic term introduced by Catherine Albanese [29]. A related concept is eco-paganism, a form of neo-paganism. The doctrine is rooted in environmental philosophies, neo-paganism and tribal or native religions. Lechter [30] defines a typical eco-pagan person as one who believes in energy lines, neo-shamanic cosmologies and reincarnation. According to their own spiritual eclecticism, eco-pagans might borrow from theosophy, buddhism, hippie movements, local folklore and organize them around a central pagan belief [31].

The legitimacy discourses of eco-villagers are not reduced to specific spiritual doctrines: place and local traditions also play a role. Roger Scruton—a conservative green philosopher [32] emphasizes that the love of home motivates us to preserve the environment because it includes our deepest connection to the surrounding world. Such environmentalism prioritises local initiatives, civic self-organization and small, friend-based networks to global organizations. Conservative green philosophies show that locality and regionalism—as well as nationalism may have an environmental aspect [33].

A bioregionalism-related concept gaining popularity in Hungary and in Romania is *organic culture*: rituals, habits and actions of the Hungarian people adhere to the structure of the Wheel of the Year epitomising the interconnectedness between all creatures [34]. There are several international examples of organic culture, such as the Transition Movement, permaculture and the Anastasia Movement. The Transition Movement founded by Rob Hopkins [35] focuses on sustainable solutions in order to mitigate climate change and energy crisis. Permaculture, a movement initiated by Austrian farmer Sepp Holzer, develops human settlements and agricultural systems by copying, mimicking natural ecological processes [36]. The Anastasia Movement originates in Russia and builds small self-sustaining organic farms, family estates—the so-called dachas, with an eco-spiritual touch: reverence to Mother Earth [37]. Such global movements are similar endeavours to ecovillages.

The centre of our investigation is the Szekler Ecovillage virtual community—with a significant amount of local heritage incorporated in its discourses. Historical heritage of

Szeklerland—a distinctive region of Transylvania—Central Romania includes the institution of Szekler village community (Latin: *communitas villae*) as a relatively autonomous, self-sustaining community that survived feudalism. The economic basis of the village community was the jointly owned land, and the social basis was the large family embedded in a clan. The public ownership was the association responsible for the jointly owned woodland or pasture. This co-ownership institution is still existent in many Szekler villages to this day [38]. A prominent researcher of Szekler village communities, István Imreh [39] describes the Szekler as an environmentally aware person, responsible for future generations, rooted in traditions and hardworking. Such values are promoted by the virtual eco-villagers under study as well, with a touch of new practices and eco-pagan rhetoric.

The phenomenon of ecovillage movement has called the attention of scholarship in Central-Eastern European countries since its emergence [40,41,42,43]. Meanwhile international academic interest focuses on the medialization of eco-villages [44,45] whereas Romanian and Hungarian cases are yet to be covered. This study is aimed at bridging the knowledge gap.

### 3. Methods

We analyze the Facebook-group active members' discourses in two ways: a descriptive content analysis aimed at mapping topics, controversies and genres, and an in-depth ecolinguistic interpretation of key messages [46], by looking at frames, contexts, and stories unfolded through social media interaction. An ecolinguistic approach to discourse analysis fits both the aim and the scope of our research: to highlight the ways in which community members under study contextualize their values, attitudes and actions related to sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles [47]. Keywords of this approach incorporated in our analysis are *framing* and *reframing*, *stories*, *intrinsic* vs *extrinsic values*, and *conceptual blend*.

According to netnographic data collecting principles [48s], we adjusted the key units of analysis—opinion leaders' discourses—to the aim and scope of the investigation, and to the research questions. From 1 December 2020 to 11 January 2021 Facebook posts and comments of the "Szekler Ecovillage" Facebook group opinion leaders have been collected, stored as screenshots, classified and coded, in line with the research framework developed through May—December 2020. Among the 710 Facebook group members, three user categories have been identified, following the *cascade model* of information diffusion in networks from nodes to periphery [49]: opinion leaders (abbreviated OL), active contributors (AC), and silent observers (SO)—shown in table 1 below. OL and AC appear in their order of registration, with key information.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the Opinion Leaders and Active Contributors

Name	Position	Registered	Gender	Residence	No. of posts	Main interests
OL 1	founder, admin	24 Sep 2014	male	urban	200+	ecovillage, sustainability, community, architecture, organizing, networking
OL 2	core member	Sep 2014	male	urban	44	technology, innovation, gardening, spirituality
OL 3	core member	March 2015	male	urban	18	preservation, community, ecovillage, volunteering, organizing, herbs
OL 4	core member	Apr 2015 (left Apr 2016)	male	urban	64	ecovillage, gardening, bartering, self sustaining, permaculture, spirituality, knowledge sharing
OL 5	core	June 2015	male	urban	29	technology, innovation,

	member						preservation, permaculture, spirituality, community
OL 6	member	Dec 2019	male	urban	12		folk healing courses, tradition, books, spirituality
AC 1	member	Sep 2014	male	urban	8		agriculture, biodiversity, gardening, composting
AC 2	member	Sep 2014	male	urban	1		rules, principles
AC 3	member	Oct 2014	male	urban	1		Denmark eco-villager family experience
AC 4	member	2015	male	urban	2		offering own paintings for the benefit of the community
AC 5	member	2015	male	urban	4		permaculture speciality literature, books
AC 6	member	2015	male	urban	5		gardening, permaculture
AC 7	member	2015	female	urban	6		governmental programs, project and tender opportunities
AC 8	member	2015 - 2017	female	urban	8		gardening, alternative bio-cultivation, self sustainable settling possibilities
AC 9	member	2015	female	urban	3		operating ecovillage initiatives
AC 10	member	2015	female	urban	6		practical solutions, gardening
AC 11	member	2016	male	urban	5		settlement model, autonomy, tradition, spirituality, anti-vaccination protest
AC 12	member	2016	female	urban	6		home schooling
AC 13	member	2019	male	urban	6		eco-farming, conferences, farmer organization initiatives,, history

The focus of our discourse analysis is the corpus of 367 posts and comments of the six OL, complemented with posts and comments of the 13 AC.

#### 4. Results and discussion

##### 4.1. Empirical findings

Being an exploratory research, this case study is based on non-intrusive observation. The authors registered as members into the investigated Facebook group without actively partaking in the communication activities, ongoing debates. The applied methodology is based on a qualitative approach. Given the limited nature of the Facebook group both in temporal aspect and in the relatively comprehensible number of elements, the research operates with a full content investigation. The textual and media materials of the group are investigated by content analysis and discourse analysis in an ecolinguistic approach. While the ideological background and topical content circulating in the group are essential, the main focus is on the social media determined communication of the virtual community. More closely, the investigation pays special attention to the communication processes in which the topics of localism and environmentalism, the prospect of founding a real ecovillage and living in it, shape the discussions of the "Székely Ökofalu" Facebook group, thus involve and activate the participants contributing to a genuine virtual community building.

The study is dedicated to the investigation of the representation, adoption and interpretation of global environmental ideas – in other words eco-discourses – in a local

setting, within a virtual rural community; every research question is subordinated to this premise. The starting point is grounded in the triad of the three terms that define the object of the research: virtual rural community, which best describe the investigated Facebook group 'Szekler Ecovillage' (in Hungarian: „Székely Ökofalu”). Here 'virtual' denotes the digital online platform, namely Facebook as a social networking medium where participants of the group communicate. The term 'rural' refers to the off-line setting or environment where the participants are dwelling and/or towards where they orient themselves in their intention of creating an ecovillage: Szeklerland, a traditionally rural region with relatively small and medium provincial towns. 'Community' in the present case, beyond denoting a Facebook group, means a loose network of users (including devoted environmentalists, ecovillage supporters, agroecological operators, enterprising families, as well as a majority of interested bystanders) sharing common values and ideals and united by their explicit intent or interest in creating an ecological settlement. It must be put forward that although the group has originally been created as a virtual communication platform for an existing ecovillage, in its present state remains indeed a virtual ecovillage community. This too is an important aspect in formulating the research questions.

Thus, the main research questions regard the various aspects of the group's communication. Who are the main participants, opinion leaders of the "Székely Ökofalu" Facebook group? What are the main driving forces (motivations) that operate the group's activities? Why do the participants organize themselves into a virtual intentional community (objectives), and with what success? Where do they seek their place and role (online, within the group, and off-line: within the larger community)? The issue of 'when' poses several questions related to the temporal aspect: having several years' history (est. 2014 Sept.), apart from the creation and duration, the dynamics of the group may also offer valuable insights. How do the members partake in, contribute to the group interactions and how do they communicate? How do they organize themselves into a virtual community? What are the main topics, values, principles or interests of the group? (Which are the topoi of tradition and those of innovation? Are the community's online eco-discourses fed mainly by tradition or rather by innovation?) How are they represented? In what ways are they communicated? How do these topics, values, principles relate to each other (also in terms of their importance and proportion) in the group's communication? Do they form a coherent discourse? How do they integrate into a greater master narrative?

Knowing the "Szekler Ecovillage" ("Székely Ökofalu") Facebook group's central issue and general orientation we can expect the dominant presence of several major discourses, such as environmentalism, sustainability, localism, traditionalism, restoration and innovation. From the aspect of group communication it is foreseeable that members (even if not equally active) would be interested generally in all the mentioned discourses, posting entries, materials, expressing their opinions in reactions, comments, unfolding debates related to each topic. In the hundreds of posts and comments of the virtual community issues of tradition and innovation will be balanced, just as topics of local and global interest. The various discourses present in the contributions of the group members will presumably show a basic characteristic worldview built on pluralism and eclectic bricolage or syncretism of ideas.

The "Szekler Ecovillage" Facebook group was selected as the subject of the case study because previous netnographic research has shown its involvement and contribution to discourses related to the reinforcement of ethnic identity, preservation of folk traditions, sacralization of the nation. These narratives termed together as "new national mythology" turned out to be closely intertwined with a rhetoric of healing, where threads of the above mentioned spiritual trends "mingle with ecologist ideas turning towards the environment, building on the concepts of organic culture, and together they create lifestyle models and working communities oriented towards both traditions and the future" [50] (p.135). The Facebook group provides an ideal virtual

community building platform where communication around the care for tradition meets an enthusiasm for the future based on environmentalist ideas, translating into concrete actions to create a living ecovillage.

As an investigation method we chose full manual data collection, with content and contributor categorization.

#### 4.2. Group description

The “Szekely Ökofalu” (“Szekler Ecovillage”) is an open, public Hungarian language Facebook-group founded on 26 September 2014 with 710 members (as of 11 January 2021). Its founder, admin and moderator, Áron Kovács architect formulated the description of the group as following:

This group was created to give impetus for the formation of sustainable communities in Szeklerland. We would like to encourage those people who plan to move into rural regions, and organize themselves consciously by connecting to each other. This is an instrument for the interested to find each other, to form teams, for us to find adequate locations, to plan together, and to start off on the way of realization. We can share here ideas, thoughts, experiences, and desires. (reformulated on 11 October 2018)

The symbolic identity of the group is represented by the group's header photo showing an idyllic image of a traditional old Transylvanian mountain village landscape with green orchards and small wooden cottages. (The photo actually represents a view from the open-air Village Museum of Maramures - a historical rural region in Transylvania with ethnically mixed Romanian, Hungarian, and Rusin population; far away from Szeklerland, but nevertheless bearing much resemblance both in geographical features and cultural heritage.)

The group is characterized by vivid activity and lively communication (however as we will later point out the timeline shows a particular dynamic), with hundreds of posts, entries, media materials, and dozens of debates. A short overview of the media content archived in the group shows more than 460 posts, 317 pictures, two albums (one about Krishna Valley eco-village with 50 photos). Among the relevant posts we can find 44 events, 18 calls for action, seven polls, ten seed market or change announcements, 16 lectures (9 internal, 4 advertised external, 5 linked videos), five announced trainings, seven announced workshops, seven brainstorming sessions, six presentations, and most importantly, 126 posts (nine less relevant) of various genres and lengths presenting model ecovillages, community initiatives, self sustaining families, individual farmers, or ecohomes.

The group's membership shows multiple dynamics. From its founding on 26 September 2014 to 11 January 2021 the group grew to a number of 710 members, with the following thresholds: by the end of January 2015 it reached 100, in the following three months rising to 200, then three months later, at the end of June 2015 to 300; and the symbolic 500 was reached in March 2016, while the number of 700 was stepped over on 12 December 2020. The membership is not equally active: we propose a hierarchization according to their participation. Three main categories may be distinguished: highly involved opinion leaders (with dozens of posts and comments) (six members, including the group founder); active contributors (20 members with sporadic posts but usually engaged participation through comments), and finally, silent observers (with scarce or no participation in the group communication). For the purposes of this study we have selected for analysis mainly contributions from the opinion leaders (OL) and from the more prolific active contributors (AC) of the group (see Table 1. above). Although the “Szekely Ökofalu” is an open, public Facebook group, and all posts available on its timeline are public posts, nevertheless, from research ethical considerations we chose to anonymize them.

#### 4.3. Content categorization

Given the orientation of the “Szekler Ecovillage” Facebook group, we could expect—and the data analysis confirmed—that in spite of the large number and variety of personal and media content posted on the group’s timeline, these materials show a relative coherence along a restricted number of genres, topics and value systems. Although with varying relevance over time, the entries pertain mainly to the spheres of environmentalism, spirituality, tradition and innovation, with a special focus on community and practical implementation. When building the primary excel database during data collection we could observe a remarkable variation in both the frequency and the relevance of the posted materials. For the purposes of this investigation, posts are considered relevant if they refer closely to one or more of the topics of the spheres mentioned above, and within it—having in mind the objective of the Facebook group expressed in its name—they are essential, if they deal with the idea of ecovillage or with the aim of community building towards this goal.

**Table 2.** Frequency and relevance of posts

Year	No. of posts	Relevant posts	Essential posts	Main theme
2014 (four months)	25	24	14	founding, definition, description, models of, polls for ecovillage, community building, networking meetings, lectures, workshops, brainstormings, visits, models of, polls for ecovillage, community building, networking, practices, possible locations
2015	157	138	47	meetings, lectures, trainings, brainstormings, visits, models of ecovillage, community building, networking, practices, possible locations
2016	110	85	20	networking, practices, possible locations, funding possibilities
2017	71	68	11	trainings, visits, beeing, location seeking, funding possibilities
2018	26	17	5	mission restatement, location seeking, plans, funding possibilities
2019	22	14	5	workshops, programs, university specialization started, possible locations
2020	43	10	1	question related to existence of Szekler ecovillages

As we can see from Table 2, although the number of members keeps continually growing, still, over the years there is a decreasing tendency not only in the number of relevant posts, but also in the number of closely environmentalist themed entries. It must be noted that the overwhelming majority of these latter ecovillage- and community-related posts, that we may call the master narrative of the Facebook group’s discourses, belong to OL 1, the founder and admin of the group. One could expect that, in turn, tradition- and ethnic identity related posts become more frequent, but although rising somewhat in proportion to the former, this growth is not really characteristic if we look at the topics of the entries.

The subjects of entries are highly varied, nevertheless they can be classified under seven main topical groups, each containing several subtopics. Often, the subjects of the posts imply multiple topics, for example those related to self sustainable farming practices or eco-settlement location seeking are strongly related to ethnic traditions,

cultural heritage, or mystical nature-spirituality, and organically, to community building strivings. Thus, in a good number of cases, the entries may be listed under several different topics, which results in the number of items under categorizations exceeding the actual number of posts in the group's timeline.

The seven main topical categories can be summarized as follows. The first, and most important topic, given the orientation of the "Szekler Ecovillage" Facebook group, may be termed 'ideology', meaning primarily environmentalist ideology. It comprises various subtopics, such as sustainability, preservation, biodiversity. It also includes entries expressing criticism (sometimes political) of contemporary social, economical systems, and generally, of modernity. Criticism is directed against globalization, urbanization, industrialization, economy, capitalism, pollution, and the modern way of life in general. It must be noted however, that in spite of the implicit subversiveness, the overall picture and intended message of these entries expresses constructivism and an optimistic, self-confident view of the future. Also, as stated above, these entries often merge environmentalist worldview and future-orientedness with discourses of tradition, rediscovery and preservation of old ways of agriculture and husbandry, as well as the praise of local rootedness and landscapes.

The second main category bears a double label: 'tradition and culture'. Originally intended as two topical groups, it was necessary to blend them into one, since in most cases the occurring (or implied) term of 'culture' refers to some traditional element or aspect of culture, and vice versa. This category comprises entries that may be grouped under subtopics as: revivalism/ traditionalism, meaning the rediscovery, reviving of old traditions; architecture, denoting built heritage and settlement (village) organization and architecture; ethnic and regional identity involving national history, local folk characteristics, customs; as well as regional interethnic and intercultural relations, traditions. Last, but most importantly, this category includes the subtopic of organic culture, a term explained above in the theoretical framework. Not to be confused with eco-culture and permaculture, with which shares many essential characteristics, organic culture refers not to the organic ways of agricultural production, but to the organic unity of traditional folk culture with nature and the universe - this is the ideal which drives the members of the "Szekler Ecovillage" virtual community strive to implement in practice, in reality. This latter subtopic, together with all its practicality, already points towards the next category.

The third category is 'spirituality' - it comprises religious ideas in the classical meaning; mystical ideas, such as the above mentioned doctrine of organic culture in its spiritual aspect, but also eco-pagan, ethno-pagan elements, various new religious spiritualities. The subtopic of eco-spiritual movements also belongs here, the most prominent example being the Russian Anastasia movement which is very popular among the group members.

The fourth category contains entries related to 'innovation': its subcategories can be distinguished as technical innovations and innovative technologies in agriculture, architecture. The fifth category may be resumed as 'practices'. In close connection, and often overlapping with the posts pertaining to the previous category, here belong entries dealing with agriculture, permaculture, wild gardening, forest gardening, architecture and settlement organization, recycling, seed markets and exchanges, formation and training. The sixth, very rich category presenting best practices contains 'models' - it may be divided into such subcategories as 'walk out' individuals, families, communities, homesteads, ecovillages. The seventh topical category is 'community', which gathers the - mostly internal, group-related - entries dedicated to virtual and real-life community building, networking with the goal of establishing an ecovillage.

#### 4.4. Discussion

From the communication of the group - however varied the posts may be - we can read a coherent worldview. Against the large number of members the essential central

discourse, or master narrative is practically formulated by a restricted number of highly engaged opinion leaders and active contributors. These communicators are the ones who define the main topics, agendas of the Szekler Ecovillage. As stated in the introduction of the study, with communities transformed from a way of life into narrative - and this is clearly the case of our virtual rural community - a large part of the strivings to create a living ecovillage in Szeklerland took the form of speech acts enunciated on social media platform. Calls for action, model settings, polls, brainstorms, debates and comment-discussions virtualized the case of ecovillage founding and community building into a veritable rhetoric utopia - not only planned, but lived as such.

The mission of the group is formulated already at the beginning by the founder, OL1 in the statement of the group description: *"We would like to establish an Ecovillage in Szeklerland. Do you also desire to live a balanced life in a community, in the proximity of nature? Join us, we can achieve the goal only together! This group was created to give impetus for the creation of a sustainable community (or more) in Szeklerland. We would like to stimulate those people who plan to move to the countryside and join an ecovillage project. It offers means for us to find each other, to organize a team, to find an adequate location, to plan, and to start off on the way to realization"* (28 Sep 2014). These general goals are translated into a more personal engagement, an ars poetica with a confession alluding to Martin Luther King's famous 1963 rhetorical speech: *"I have a dream:"* writes OL 1 *"I wish to live in an ECOVILLAGE!"* In this oratory call for action, he formulates the principles according to which such an ideal place would exist: it has to be located in Szeklerland, where he feels at home; it should be eco-, bio, healthy and environmental; it should be surrounded by a natural landscape; it should be populated with a real cooperating community; it should be rooted in the Hungarian culture, based on the hundreds of years of experience and wisdom; the inhabitants would work according to their needs for self sustainment with organic technologies; they would live in ecological houses; and (after other listed guiding principles) lastly - they would live in Love and harmony. (28 Sep 2014) On his call of making this dream reality the initial members of the group reacted with both likes and comments taking further his thoughts. Worth to be noted, that at this moment, the founder of the group was well beyond the state of dreaming: he had already a well working ecovillage initiative in the Casin microregion of Szeklerland, together with other enterprising friends and families.

The Szekler Ecovillage group was created with the aim of organizing the like minded environmentalist people living scattered in Szeklerland and elsewhere in Transylvania into a group with a definite goal. The Facebook group would offer not only means for more efficient connecting and communication, but also for coordinating activities, building community and sharing knowledge. These purposes can be clearly identified in OL 1's more than two hundred posts and countless comments along the group's timeline. He not only posted mobilizing messages, questions, polls, organizational problems, but he also shared his vast knowledge, experiences and visited and mapped models concerning ecovillages and ecological communities in Hungary and around Europe. In Deborah Friese's referred terminology he is both a trailblazer and illuminator.

From the very start of the group significant core members joined in the discussion, they may be considered illuminators too. These opinion leaders and active members keep up the lively flow of the group communication. Shortly after the founder's mission statement, an active member (AC 2) formulated some thoughts about necessary rules and principles invoking the tradition of the historical Szekler village self government, which sparked an intensive debate in the group. However such elaborated debates are rare in the group. Most opinion leaders and active members alike usually post external news, announcements, videos, articles or simple calls to action, without causing too many reactions or responsive comments. As we could see however from the overview of relevant and essential entries (the majority of which was posted by OL 1) in Table 2, the

group's resonance has slowly faded over the years. While the orientation of the group's eclectic, bricolage worldview remains unchanged, the central issue of creating a living ecovillage gradually lost primary importance. On the question (18 June 2020) of a recently registered member, whether the group knows of any ecovillages in Hungarian speaking regions of Transylvania, only negative responses arrived, and even OL 1 answered referring to - until now - failed initiatives and prospects. In its present phase the Szekler Ecovillage group remains a narrative, a rhetorical utopia with an open ended future.

## 5. Conclusions

Using the cascade model to select our units of analysis, we mapped and interpreted 421 eco-discourses of the six opinion leaders and the 13 active contributors of the virtual rural community "Szekler Ecovillage" from Central Romania. Framing and reframing environmental values of a sustainable lifestyle, these stories convey a complex relationship between tradition and innovation as an answer to our key research question. The values and principles shared by the group members rooted in both traditional culture and aspirations towards a harmonic, nature oriented future form a coherent bricolage worldview, a dynamic utopia. While the group's communication shows a descendent tendency over the recent years, still the continually growing number of members shows a viable virtual community.

Further online netnographic research is necessary for a deeper exploration of the communication dynamics of the virtual ecovillage community, and prospected field investigations would also contribute to the better understanding of the ecovillage movement locally.

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