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Intentional Communities Finding Space Amid Geopolitical Turmoil: Belbek Valley Case Study

Maria S. Tysiachniouk *  and Juha Kotilainen 

University of Eastern Finland, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, Yliopistokatu 7, FI-80100 Joensuu, Finland

* Correspondence: maria.tysiachniouk@uef.fi or tysiachn@yandex.ru

Abstract: The authoritarian regime in Russia represents a political context of societal turmoil in which the challenges for building sustainability can be studied. We explore intentional communities (ICs) with an environmental component that often appear with a focus on other issues such as spirituality and culture. Our focus is on Crimea's Belbek Valley, a contested space that has nevertheless become attractive for ICs. We use semi-structured and open-ended interviews to collect data, which we analyze thematically. We discuss the reasons for the emergence of the ICs in the Belbek Valley and the variety of different ICs and initiatives there and build a typology of the ICs. They stand in stark contrast with neighboring traditional villages in Crimea. The Belbek Valley's ICs are small-scale alternatives to the mainstream lifestyle, and they aim for a low carbon footprint, practicing permaculture, the application of energy and water saving technologies, vegetarianism, and yoga. The number of environmental practices adopted by each IC depends on the scale of their activities and investments in the infrastructure. We conclude by emphasizing the paradoxical nature of the Belbek Valley becoming a hub for ICs seeking long-term sustainability amid geopolitical turmoil.

Keywords: intentional communities; eco-villages; alternative lifestyles; contested territory; Crimea; Russia; sustainable communities



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1. Introduction

Sustainability in conditions of societal instability is an issue that calls for more attention: throughout the world there are places where environmental challenges are embedded amid sometimes enduring political turmoil. The authoritarian regime in Russia [1] represents such a political and societal context, and Crimea is a politically contested space. Yet small-scale initiatives for sustainability have emerged there. Why is this happening in a place like Crimea, and to what extent can sustainability initiatives thrive in such conditions?

In this paper, we explore the actions and motivations of collectives that establish new communities in which they can practice a lifestyle they see as more beneficial from an environmental perspective than how their society in general relates to its physical environment. In this regard, we wish to expand the literature on intentional communities (ICs) by investigating how such communities are being formed in contemporary Russia. Much of the literature on intentional communities has focused on societies in Western Europe and North America [2–6], where relatively stable and well-established democratic political systems are in place alongside an economic system that can be characterized as based on free markets or late capitalism, notwithstanding the presence of a welfare state. In this context, civil society actors have relative liberty to form their own ideas vis-à-vis mainstream values within the society in which they live and move to places of their choosing to form ecologically minded collectives, as long as they can find a way to get the properties into their possession through purchase or rental.

Russia's societal and political space offers a different context in which civil society has come under intense pressure from the government regime in recent years, with those

segments of civil society that are deemed to pose a politically oppositional force increasingly being eliminated by threat of imprisonment, expulsion-in-practice, or even death [1,7–9]. The space for action within civil society has therefore become extremely narrow. Yet there are examples in Russia in which citizens have been able to navigate their lives according to their own initiatives, a typical example being eco-villages, where people seek to lead their life trajectories according to principles and practices of their own choosing [10–12]. In this sense, such collectives place themselves in a similar position to communities of like-minded people in Western Europe or North America: They seek a lifestyle that diverges from the mainstream of their respective societies, thereby meriting being studied through the concept of intentional communities.

We explore how intentional communities are being formed in internationally contested spaces today. We are interested in what their characteristics are, and how intentional communities in such contested spaces may diverge from those in Western Europe and North America. With this in mind, we focus on the emergence of intentional communities in Crimea, which was annexed from Ukraine by Russia in 2014. Our focus is on the Belbek Valley, which has become a hub for intentional communities of newcomers. There have been previous waves of intentional communities in Russia, such as the Uimon Valley in the Republic of Gorny Altai in the 1980s through the 1990s and the movement in the Kuraginsky District of the Krasnoyarsk Krai in the late 1990s and early 2000s [13,14]. The Uimon Valley movement was associated with the ideas of the Roerichs and their followers, and in the Kuraginsky region of Tiberkul the participants were followers of the teacher Vissarion. However, there is no single ideology in the Belbek Valley. The ideology and activities are determined by a bizarre combination of various spiritual and environmental ideas, practices, opportunities for self-fulfillment in various fields, business interests, and the peculiarities of natural conditions.

A diverse range of intentional communities has been identified in the research literature based on the purpose of their existence [2], including religious, LGBT, and sustainable farming goals. Intentional communities may also have other aims and characteristics such as decision-making procedures. We focus on intentional communities that have an environmental component as their aim, but that can also focus on other issues such as arts and spirituality in their practices. The research questions are: Why have intentional communities emerged in Crimea? Why do people choose to live in intentional communities there? Do the members of the intentional communities seek to separate themselves and the communities from the surrounding mainstream society, or do they see the purpose of the communities as lying in the transformation of the existing societal practices around them?

2. Intentional Communities

Intentional communities are initiatives by like-minded people who settle in places where they can live close to one another and organize their daily activities in ways that differ from the mainstream routines of the surrounding society. They are formed with a certain purpose and strive for self-sufficiency. Such communities have been called intentional communities (ICs) [2,5,6,15]. In historical and archeological research, the concept of ICs has been used in research into various communities that have emerged across North America since the eighteenth century, and that were often built based on religious beliefs but later on socialist experiments, for example [16]. Such historically notable ICs include the Shaker or Hutterite religious communities, which have either existed in the past or have survived for centuries until the present [17–21]. In this historical research, ICs are clearly understood as embedded in the societal context provided by each historical era. As long as the focus is on the Americas, ICs can historically be understood as representing the fragmented nature of the continent's colonization; the historical situation enabled the establishment of such communities that sought to distinguish themselves from the religious or economic values of the societal and cultural system as a whole. This historical tradition has been seen in turn to lead to later ICs that have emphasized communal values alongside religious, social, cultural, or environmental values.

Research investigating today's ICs has had a much broader focus than research based on religion, and it has included ICs in Europe and developing countries [22,23]. The evolution of modern ICs has been viewed as starting in the 1960s with the hippies, later developing into eco-villages and even those accepting responsible forms of capitalism and practicing eco-tourism [24]). In this broader context, the IC has been defined as a purposeful creation in a particular place of a network of people who share specific ideals, and in this sense the IC stands in contrast with more traditional human settlements for which membership is mainly a function of geographical proximity [25]. Another definition maintains that ICs, being physically separated from mainstream society, are composed of voluntary members united by a common vision of an ideal society, sharing a commitment to an alternative to unacceptable conditions in the mainstream and aiming for the permanence and institutional completeness of their community [16]. It has been emphasized that intentional communities are based on face-to-face relations and that they are neither spontaneous nor developed gradually—hence the idea of intentionality [18]. Attracted by the notion of community, there have been attempts to theorize ICs in the sociological tradition through the writings of classical sociologists such as Max Weber [26]. The intentional communities' concept is wider than the concept of the eco-village. Eco-villages are one of the forms of intentional communities, and it is their main purpose to fit a human settlement in the environment in a way that minimizes harm to surrounding ecosystems. Eco-villages are formed with the purpose of implementing environmental principles in daily life, representing laboratories with a small ecological footprint [4,27,28]. In eco-villages, the settlers seek to utilize environmentally sound technologies such as organic agriculture, permaculture [19,29,30], renewable energy sources, sustainable building technologies, and waste management, creating "entrepreneurial ecosystems" resembling science parks [31].

While ICs' purposes vary [2,6], environmental practices are usually important despite a difference in the degree of commitment to the environment [5,32]. The members of those intentional communities that have been formed based on environmental issues in the same way as eco-villages feel that the mainstream lifestyles of the respective society do not offer satisfying solutions for human-nature interactions and coexistence. They therefore seek acceptable ways to deal with issues like food or energy production by joining with other like-minded people to form communities in which they share not only ideas but facilities and other resources.

It has been pointed out that a key motivation for the members of intentional communities is their perception that they cannot change the society in which they are marginalized because of their ideas of social organization and their disagreement with the goals toward which society functions. Yet their separateness remains partial, as the members still participate in and use many assets the mainstream provides [2]. Members of ICs therefore remain embedded in the prevailing society to varying extents.

The success of intentional communities has been measured through their longevity, i.e., the time they are able to exist, or through the level of commitment of a community's members. It has been proposed that an additional factor, investment, should be included in the definition of intentional communities' success [6]. While the longevity and commitment approaches have measured the success of intentional communities that no longer exist, the latter approach scrutinizes communities' satisfaction in achieving their desired ends. Research has revealed that decision-making structures within a community are decisive in determining if communities themselves feel they are making progress toward their self-proclaimed purpose [6]. Egalitarian governance structures have therefore been seen as important for the perceived success of an intentional community.

Moreover, social practice theory has been utilized to explore how intentional communities collectively create shared visions, decisions, and rules, thereby providing social and material structures so that environmentally less harmful practices (in this case, low carbon) would be supported on a daily basis in the inhabitants' daily activities in the intentional community [5,33].

Against this background, we investigate the emergence of ICs in the Belbek Valley in Crimea, using the above outline to create criteria for analyzing their activities. We use the term initiative for a larger variety of activities than ICs alone; ICs are initiatives among a larger number of activities. A key difference between an IC and other initiatives is that ICs are place-based in the sense that they aim to be permanently located in a certain place. The other initiatives tend to be either temporary or are regularly built in a new location.

3. Historical and Cultural Context of Crimea

The Belbek Valley is in Crimea's Bakhchisarai region. It is a gorge between the mountains formed by the Belbek River. The valley is 5 km wide and is host to seven villages. The history of Crimea, including the Belbek Valley, is extremely complex, involving settlements of people of different ethnic groups. Crimea's natural conditions and geographical position have attracted people for centuries and even millennia [34,35]. At the same time, people and cultures have changed radically, and Crimea has been subject to conquest and passed from one state's jurisdiction to another's, witnessing events and places such as sites of ancient peoples, the population of Crimea by the Taurus and Cimmerians, Ancient Greek cities, the Crimean Khanate, Turkish conquests, tsarist Russia from the time of Catherine the II and beyond, the creation of the Russian fleet, the Crimean War, the literary and artistic Crimea of the aristocracy of the early twentieth century, and the Russian Civil War [36–38]. This complex history has determined the Belbek Valley's main ethnic composition, with a combination of Tatar and Russian-speaking populations in the villages and the presence of two main religions, Orthodox Christianity and Islam. In the Soviet period, Crimea was transformed into a health resort, a place of recreation for people from all over the USSR. There was also some industrial and agricultural development.

The occupation of Crimea during World War II and the expulsion of the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia in 1944 belong to the tragic pages of Crimea's history. After World War II, the territory of Crimea as a whole and the Belbek Valley in particular were populated mostly by Russian residents from Russia's southern regions [39]. In 1954, as recorded in the decree (Ukaz) signed by the Chair of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, Klim Voroshilov, "Taking into account the common economy, territorial proximity, and close economic and cultural ties between the Crimean region and the Ukrainian SSR" [40], Crimea was transferred from the Russian SSR to the Ukrainian SSR. The result was that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Crimea became part of independent Ukraine. This complex history means that the territory of Crimea is home to Ukrainians, Russians, Crimean Tatars, and other ethnicities. In 2014, Crimea was exposed to the international spotlight when it was occupied by the military forces of the Russian Federation and annexed to Russia as one of its regions; however, this has not been recognized internationally. Russian society was sharply divided regarding the annexation: some saw Crimea as historically belonging to Russia; others were concerned about the violation of international law.

Since 2015, there has been an active flow of migrants to Crimea from different parts of Russia for different purposes. This flow intensified with the onset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, which reflected a Russia-wide tendency for urban residents to leave the city for rural areas during the pandemic. From the perspective of those Russians moving to Crimea, with its governance systems completely changed, it must have seemed an attractive territory with land available for purchase. As part of this larger flow of migrants, there were people who moved to Crimea to establish intentional communities. The establishing of ICs has similarities with the earlier history of ICs in the Americas, where land was not always designated by institutionalized rules and codes. These IC-oriented newcomers, propagating eco-friendly healthy lifestyles as an alternative to the mainstream, settled mostly in the mountains rather than in the villages and started to construct camp sites, collective permaculture farms, and eco-friendly buildings. Our informants reveal that since the spring of 2020, there has been a boom in people moving into these new settlements, and the number of settlers and temporary visitors has been constantly growing, with rising land prices. However, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it has

become more difficult to reach Crimea, because all flights have been canceled. The general tourist flow has decreased, but people still find ways to come to the Belbek Valley for particular events.

4. Materials and Methods

Some of the research on ICs draws on quantitative surveys [2,6], although case studies based on site visits and interviews were also carried out [5]. We used the Belbek Valley movement, consisting of several smaller ICs, as a case study (see Figure 1), with thematic semi-structured interviews and onsite observations to collect research material, carried out in 2021. Thirty-four interviews were conducted in 2021: 21 with IC representatives, 9 with volunteers and visiting experts, and 4 with representatives of the eco-villages visiting events in the Belbek Valley (see Appendix A). These were followed up and updated in social media. We undertook a detailed study of eight ICs and the Belbek Valley Fair at which all representatives gathered (see Figure 2).

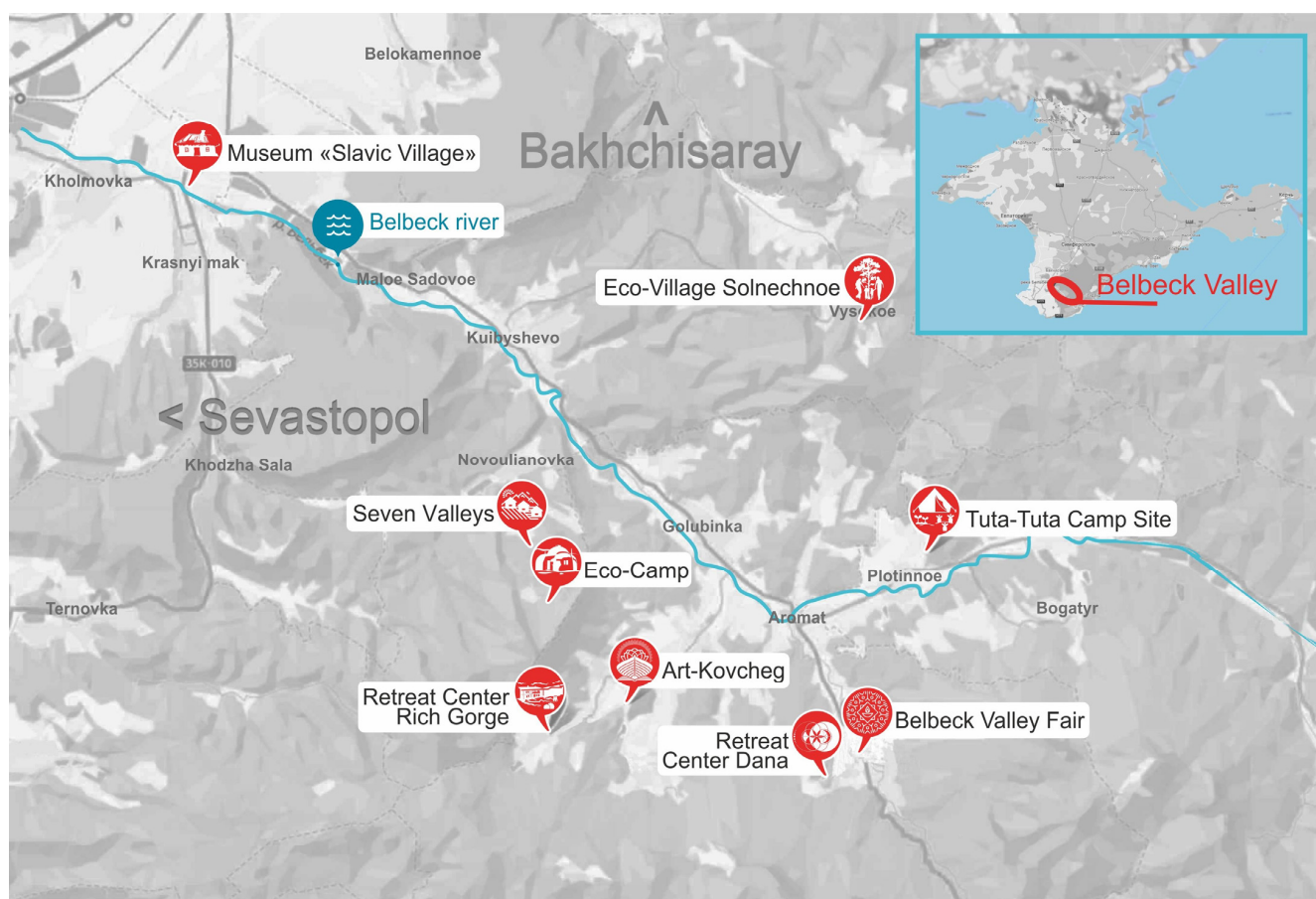


Figure 1. Belbek Valley map with intentional communities (research sites).

Crimea has been an especially contested space since its annexation by the Russian Federation in 2014, but since 24 February 2022, Crimea has become an even more contested zone because of Russia's expansion of the war in Ukraine. Yet many of the small-scale initiatives for sustainability that have emerged continue to function. In 2022, three additional interviews were therefore conducted online, two with IC representatives who had volunteered to assist refugees evacuated from Ukraine via Crimea and one with a permaculture expert who was in the process of establishing a new IC in 2022. To update our 2021 findings, we communicated with our informants via Telegram in August 2022. We also analyzed Telegram chats of people in the Belbek Valley. To update our data, we sent questions about the effect of the current war in Ukraine on people's lives to 52 chat

participants to discover if the current context influenced ICs. These questions were ignored by most informants, but we received six responses.



Figure 2. Intentional communities studied.

To analyze the research materials, we used various themes drawn both from the previous literature on ICs that has created different typologies [25,27,41] and findings. We drew from the data to complement the typologies. Accordingly, the themes we used to analyze the interviews included levels of environmental, spiritual, cultural, ideological, and business orientation (including voluntary versus hired staff and the scale of the business).

5. Results

5.1. Belbek Valley: The Intentional Communities' Movement

What is happening in the Belbek Valley according to the people who have moved to the intentional communities we have studied can be characterized by a quotation from one of the interviewees, who referred to a story by the early-twentieth-century Russian poet and writer Alexander Grin (originally Grinevsky) about Zurbagan, a town filled with romanticism, cheerful people, and creativity. One of our informants called the Belbek Valley the New Zurbagan, because he felt people were coming to the valley “to increase happiness in this land, to do arts and crafts like pottery, making clothes, and woodwork”, and “People are experimenting, they have a lot of energy, do yoga, meditation, create permaculture gardens, make cheese, run dairies, organize alternative child development. This is a magical land—the valley is a world of opportunities, a trap of civilizations—Crimea” [42].

In the Belbek Valley, a social movement for multiple intentional communities is being formed, consisting of several dozen initiatives that were not initially interconnected. However, more connections are being made as the communities are being formed. People with different ideas stay temporarily or permanently and attempt to realize their ideas, projects, and serve as volunteers. Many informants perceive the valley as a new world—environmentally friendly, creative, transformative, future-oriented, and oriented toward harmonious child development. It includes positive relations between people, new ideas, projects, a new culture, and so on. One of the informants expressed it as follows: “The challenge is to create a rebirth point of planet Earth—to set the bar higher” [43]. Another understood the valley from the perspective of a festival he had organized: “Sun Spirit is a transformational festival—it is a personal team transformation. This is a festival state.

There is a nursery, first-aid post, and security guards, and all this is built according to certain rules and structure, but it's for holidays" [44].

New residents remarked that the people coming to the valley were special. For example, people coming to the valley "are inherently nature lovers. They lead an eco-friendly lifestyle. They do not harm nature. They are the hope for the salvation of the planet" [45]. Another notes, "There are magical sunny people" [46]. Creativity with a lack of political issues is emphasized: "I see it as positive that people do not engage in political fabrications but try to live here and now and improve their surroundings" [47]. An important part is the emphasis on the interaction of adults and children and the creation of children's spaces: "The experience of the children's fair gives children the opportunity to be masters . . . The idea that children create with adults, so that they come up with an idea with adults, refine it, and get the experience of implementing their idea" [48].

In short, these quotations reveal that people in the intentional communities in the Belbek Valley see the movement as non-political, including families with children, and organize events that serve the communities' purpose. There are many linkages in people's relationship with nature and the environment. As we show in the paper, the worldview of the Belbek Valley newcomers involves separating from politics, as well as from the war in Ukraine. They may be affected by politics but do not acknowledge it. They choose not to actively engage in political activism or even discussions, except of humanitarian aid to refugees. After 24 February 2022, most of the Belbek Valley's permanent residents responded that they supported Russia's "special operation" (as the war is officially called in Russia), displaying red flags on their houses and painting the letter Z on their cars in support of the war. No such visible symbols were observed in the communities we studied. In our analysis of Belbek Valley social media, including Vkontakte, Facebook, and Telegram, there was no discussion or reflection on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, either by the IC representatives or by the villagers. This is in contrast with the harsh discussions of the current geopolitical situation in social media across Russia [49]. We received some responses to direct questions asked in chats. For example: "The Belbek Valley in 2022 lives on as before. People don't openly express their opinions on the current war situation. It's different for people here" [50] or "It is sad that people are dying—it's bad. However, I'm not into discussing political issues" [51].

However, between March and May 2022, the people of the Belbek Valley and the IC representatives responded to the humanitarian crises caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The volunteer movement for assisting refugees started with the Belbek Valley Fair, which is a communication hub for ICs. The IC representatives responded to the newspaper reports that many vehicles with refugees were waiting at the border with Ukraine for more than 20 h. Several people from the Belbek Valley prepared sandwiches, soup, side dishes, and cheese and drove to the buffer zone. "I saw broken cars, with bullet and shell holes, with the inscription 'children,' and with cars barely moving. I was deeply moved. People were very surprised that there were volunteers who weren't indifferent to refugees. We handed out food accompanied with kind words" [52]. Another volunteer from the Belbek Valley says: "I saw a call for volunteers, collected clothes for refugees around the valley, went to help. It was my personal contribution, talking to people, bringing groceries, helping plan routes for further refugee journeys, hugging, playing with children. . . If you can share bread, or hug someone who's crying, this is just humanity" [53]. Belbek Valley IC representatives and residents volunteered at the border between March and May 2022. They joined other volunteers in Crimea, finding other volunteer groups via Telegram chats. Car crews were created, Belbek Valley volunteers wrote instructions for them and checklists of what to take and the help needed. The volunteer movement in Crimea grew. "There were too many people on the border and few refugees. We realized we needed to shift the focus" [52]. Volunteers started to work in the Temporary Accommodation Point (TAP) in Dzhankoi, one of the important trans-shipment bases. People who do not have relatives or acquaintances in Russia are placed in TAPs for three months, then transported further. "Refugees are in shock, they don't know what to do, where to get medicines. . . We went there, entertained

the children, talked to people, and provided humanitarian assistance” [52]. Volunteers from the Belbek Valley and others sorted men’s, women’s, and children’s clothes donated from all over Crimea, made hangers, and helped distribute them. Volunteers found sponsors, rented a storage place, placed tents inside the storage, and organized a volunteer headquarters, which lasted for two months. Coordination was established between Crimean volunteers and the local authorities, and transportation, food, and other needs were met. “We were self-organizing, without outside help—we didn’t report to anyone, we did it of our own free will, and we felt united. Volunteers worked from their hearts. From the government side there was more PR than help” [54]. Most of the refugees decided to travel to the cities to search for work, and only some decided to stay in the Belbek Valley.

5.2. *Who Is Going to the Belbek Valley, and Why?*

It may seem surprising that people from all over Russia move to annexed Crimea and are willing to live in the contested space. Land has been available in Crimea since 2014, when the Russian state welcomed repopulation after the annexation. According to the available information, 205,559 people moved to Crimea between 2015 and 2020, attracted by the Black Sea, favorable climate, natural beauty, and opportunities to invest in and develop tourism [55]. The view of most of the newcomers the research group met was that Crimea had been returned to Russia rather than annexed. Other scholars make similar findings [56,57]. In these surveys, people living permanently in Crimea welcomed the annexation, except for the Tatar population, most of whom have moved to Ukraine. Many of the local residents argue that Crimea was historically Russian, and that Russian territories had been returned, not annexed. However, attitudes in ICs toward annexation differ. They believe Crimea will never be returned to Ukraine, so settling there does not feel wrong for them. As previously mentioned, the Belbek Valley attracted apolitical people seeking an alternative to the mainstream lifestyle. One informant argues that people who move to the Belbek Valley feel that “Geopolitics has nothing to do with personal growth and environmental and spiritual practices. It doesn’t matter to what country beautiful land belongs” [58]. Another informant says: “We live in difficult times, wartime. Everyone feels sad at their own level. But we all understand that together it is easier to survive in such times. And it’s not just us, people, who suffer! The planet and its beautiful inhabitants—plants, animals, insects—are also undergoing change. They suffer from consumerism, ignorant management, and human vandalism, from climate cataclysms. We need to help as much as we can” [59]. A Belbek Valley environmentalist argues: “Climate change and environmental degradation is a global threat. Soon climate refugees will be everywhere—a huge humanitarian crisis is emerging. We can’t change the situation with Ukraine-Russia relations, but we can help the Earth by reducing our ecological footprint, by educating people about environmental issues” [60].

Belbek Valley newcomers dissociate themselves from any state policy and perceive that “nature does not belong to people, and the environment has no borders” [58]. They seek a place they cannot find in other localities, in which they can pursue personal growth, entrepreneurship, and self-expression. The environmental, spiritual, musical, and cultural events that Belbek Valley newcomers initiates are not repressed by the state because they do not involve any political messages, so entrepreneurship in the Belbek Valley thrives. The Russian government wants to pretend that life in Russia is going on as usual in the annexed territory and during the war in Ukraine. The Belbek Valley ICs unintentionally help maintain such perceptions in wider society.

The places from which people have come cover the Russian Federation and beyond. We have no statistical data on the origins of the people who have moved to the ICs in the Belbek Valley, or who have been brought there by the initiatives, but according to the interviews we can state that at least the following locations are represented. Many of the incomers have come from Crimean cities; some fled the war in Donbas, whereas some have come from the south of Russia; Moscow and St. Petersburg are represented; there are incomers from other large cities such as Chelyabinsk, Tula, Ryazan, Novokuznetsk, and

Tyumen. Some have lived permanently or part-time in other countries such as Bulgaria, Bali (Indonesia), or India before moving to the valley. For example, a leader of the recreation space who is originally from Tyumen spent the summer and fall in the valley and the rest of the year in Bali. The COVID pandemic forced him to create a space for recreation and creativity in the Belbek Valley. He said: “We wanted to live closer to the sea. We came here and fell in love with this place. You look in all directions—the beauty is crazy, that’s why we’re here. We have already transported our parents here and built a house in the village of Putilovka” [61].

It is possible to distinguish between groups that come for different purposes: volunteers, festival participants, travelers, people who want to move to the valley because of its favorable natural and social conditions, people who come for business opportunities or who are driven by ideas, people looking for a team to implement an environmental agenda. For example: “Everyone comes to the valley mainly with an ecological idea that needs a community for its implementation” [62].

The first category of people who come to the valley is volunteers. They usually come to participate in the projects. Some wish to gain an experience of creating a permaculture garden, eco-construction, and help in the separation of waste and recycling. Others wish to visit interesting places for free or at a reduced cost. They are interested in participating in various initiatives, meeting new people, and visiting festivals. They come to the retreat centers, art spaces, and eco-camps. Volunteers are always needed at the festivals. One of the festival organizers in the valley described it thus: “We have about 100 volunteers. When we’re preparing the festival place, meals are free for them, and during the festival they cost 300 rubles a day” [63]. Most of the initiatives where much attention is paid to creating a creative self-fulfilling team rely on volunteers. Several projects have become “gates” to the Belbek Valley communities. These are festivals working with volunteers, as well as the campsites and retreat centers that actively accept volunteers. One of the managers of the retreat center talked about their volunteers: “We currently have about 30 volunteers. They work seven hours in two shifts with a lunchbreak, live in tents, pay nothing. . . They mostly help clean the kitchen, sanitary blocks, and houses. Many people wish to come as volunteers” [64].

Some volunteers stay a while; others stay a long time. They decide to join existing projects or make their own. One person described it as follows: “I came to Seven Valleys from Eco-camp, and I arrived as a volunteer. I came to Crimea for the first time in 2019. I knew there were a lot of herbs and flowers—I thought many people processed and produced things from them. I haven’t been involved in production so far, but I have been in the fields. I worked in an eco-camp at a Phyto-bar and made cosmetics. Natasha had begun to develop her project, and she invited me there. We have a common interest in homeopathy. I’ll spend the winter here” [65].

Another category is participants or trainers at festivals or fairs. Some who stay longer start their own projects or join existing ones. They are also interested in gaining new knowledge and experience. One of the informants who came to the eco-technology permaculture design course said: “I came here to see how girls organize their glamping and camping, and to listen to talks about permaculture, I’m waiting for us to organize a garden bed, because I haven’t had enough practice” [66]. It is not uncommon both among volunteers and craftspeople for someone to “feel” that their presence here is “necessary”. It helps them and the general activity. Their involvement in the valley’s projects thus happens as if “by itself”. One of the informants said: “I came to the fair a month and a half ago as a participant. I had no desire to live on the tourist coast, but I was drawn to Crimea. A man told me about the valley and said that I needed to come here, because I was clearly relevant here—everyone here is creative. And now I’m here at every fair” [48]. Another man came to the valley and decided to help conduct music sessions. He said: “I will be here as long as I feel I have business here” [67].

The third category is travelers. They come to the valley “in search of themselves”. Some stay longer and join projects. There is a vivid example in a story from an interview:

“I was born in Ukraine and lived in a village. We left after 2014 because of the war. I hitchhiked with a child across Russia. I went to Abkhazia. . . Then I drove back to Crimea and stayed. The idea of creating a camp site came. We considered what we should do. There was no money for communications—electricity and water. We wondered if we should wait until the money appeared or run it in an open field. We decided to get on with it right away” [67].

A permaculture gardener gave an example when a person “in search of himself” came and began to help her as a volunteer. “He doesn’t know what he wants. He is communicating with me; he has a chance to choose something” [68].

Another category is investors. Many people want to move to the valley’s favorable climatic conditions and start their own business. It is not only the rich who can make big investments and create large business projects; there are also middle-class people who want to buy a small piece of land and organize a small tourism business with a cultural or spiritual orientation. Two examples of such business initiatives follow.

The Slavic Village Museum is devoted to folk architecture, Slavic culture, and everyday life in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. This is a private museum. The woman who owns it said: “The houses of the middle of the nineteenth century were transported from the Gomel region in Belarus and the Zhitomir region in Ukraine. The hut came from Russia. There are objects of art, everyday life, and clothes in the houses. I’m from Sevastopol. I bought houses—they were dismantled, and the masters of folk architecture here assembled them. It was in Ukraine; I have been living here for 14 years. The craftsmen were from Ukraine and knew how to work with wood. There are ovens in every house. There are partners doing workshops during the holidays. People hold various events and festivals. We organize excursions” [69].

Another informant said that he created a small retreat center called the Rich Gorge: “Groups of yogis, esotericisms, healthy lifestyle people, vegetarians, and sportsmen come. It was built in 2015. I’m a Muscovite, and my friend Yura is a local resident, does yoga (I took a plot next to him), and wanted to build a dacha, but it grew into a retreat center. The business project turned out well. I live here almost permanently. I’m not into yoga. I’m into eco-practices. I’ve already dug a pond, a small wetland” [70].

People with the opportunity to invest a lot of money organize business in the form of larger retreat centers, art spaces, and festivals. An example is Igor Budnikov’s retreat center, which has been popularizing healthy lifestyles, meditation, pranayama, and yoga for several years. For four years Budnikov organized field camps with the same theme on Lake Ladoga near St. Petersburg. He became popular. According to one of the managers of the retreat center: “The center appeared last spring. A year ago, there were three or four guest houses; now there are 33. Construction began in May 2020. The volunteers did a lot, although the houses were built by craftsmen. We admire the dining room and kitchen. There is a bathroom, laundry room, boiler room, seven women’s toilets and showers and five men. There’s a ladder for meditation practices with a view of the sunrise from behind Mount Boyko, and a meditation hall with a warm floor” [64].

Another group of people in the communities can be characterized as semi-religious mysticism, involving believers in the myth of Anastasia. In the valley a few people are affiliated with the Anastasia movement, creating settlements of kin domains. For example: “The Solnechnoe Eco-settlement is in the village of Vysokoe. Four people live there permanently. I still live with my family in Sevastopol—I came here to build. And there’s a springboard here for a future fairytale life, to move to the mountains, away from the bustle of the city” [71].

All the categories of people who come to the valley are united by the desire to realize not just a business idea or find a favorable place to live, but their own unique path and a team to implement the project. They have their own spiritual, creative, or ecological ideas and a desire to bring it to reality (see Figure 2).

5.3. Types of Belbek Valley Initiatives and Their Characteristics

Different typologies of ICs have been provided [25,27,42]. Lopez and Weaver (2019) [25] have created a typology of ICs which includes ideological, ecological, communal, and practical ICs. In the Belbek Valley, there has been a growing boom in various civil initiatives since 2015. We utilize the ideas of Lopez and Weaver to provide a typology but do not follow it strictly. We classify the ICs according to the following criteria: the direction of activity; business orientation; accepting volunteers; and the creation of a network in the valley. Many initiatives combine several characteristics (Table 1). The ICs are not the only initiatives. The ICs can be characterized by dominant area of activity as follows.

Table 1. Initiatives and their characteristics.

Number	Initiative	Direction of Activity	Environmental Practices	Business Orientation	Focus on Self-Fulfillment	Specifics of Location	Role in the Valley Networking	Volunteers' Participation
1	Eco-camp	Combines recreational, spiritual, and environmental activities	Deep ecology, eco-construction, garbage collection, separation, and recycling, growing organic food, garden restoration, vegetarianism	Yes	Yes	Yes	High involvement in networking; one of the first initiatives served as a "gateway" to the valley	Yes—volunteers play important role in the project; special call for volunteers for season
2	Tuta-Tuta Camp site	recreational, creativity, environmental	Permaculture, garbage collection, separation and recycling, solar panels, vegetarian food	Yes, but barely achieved self-sufficiency	Yes	Yes	Due to its small scale is yet to have a significant impact	Yes
3	Art Kovcheg	Art and creativity, recreational, environmental	Garbage collection, separation and recycling, vegetarian food, no disposable tableware	Yes	Yes	Yes	A big role in the development of networking; holds cultural events for valley residents	No
4	Museum Slavic Village	Cultural and recreational	No	Yes	No	Yes	Not high, although it provides space for events	No
5	Sun Spirit Festival	Art, cultural, and recreational	Subproject Breathe, promotes environmental consciousness, love for nature, recycling, and other healthy lifestyle	Yes	Yes	Location during the festival	A big role in the development of networking, people get to know the valley through the festival, and some begin to live and/or make initiatives in the valley	The organization and making of infrastructure based on volunteer work
6	Dana Retreat Center—Igor Budnikov	Spiritual practices, recreational, tourism, environmental	Permaculture, regenerative agricultural healthy lifestyle	Yes	Yes	Yes	High importance, many visitors to the center continue with other initiatives	Yes—special volunteer program

Table 1. Cont.

Number	Initiative	Direction of Activity	Environmental Practices	Business Orientation	Focus on Self-Fulfillment	Specifics of Location	Role in the Valley Networking	Volunteers' Participation
7	Solnechnoe Eco-village	Environmental practices, spiritual, limited cultural	Organic gardening, recycling	No	Yes	Yes	Low	Limited
8	Seven Valleys	Spiritual, environmental practices	Permaculture, vegetarianism, healthy lifestyle, deep ecology	While it does not generate income, there is a focus on self-sufficiency	Special focus on self-fulfillment of participants	Yes—focus on creating space for community life	Not so high	Yes
9	Rich Gorge Retreat Center	Spiritual practices, recreational, tourism	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Due to its small scale is yet to have a significant impact	No
10	Belbek Valley Fair	Cultural, social networking	Local goods and healthy food, separation, and recycling	Yes	Yes	Location changed	Extremely high, a form of social networking in the valley	There is no special volunteer orientation, the organizers worked as volunteers
11	Not-a-kindergarten, Not-a-School	Educational	Organization of the educational process with the inclusion of environmental knowledge	The project is not business-oriented, focused on self-sufficiency	Yes (teachers and students)	Yes	Significance is not high because few children are involved	No volunteer orientation

- (1) Environmental ICs often incorporate leading a healthy lifestyle. These initiatives focus on eco-practices and often have the prefix “eco-” in their name. At the same time, some initiatives with another main direction also incorporate an important element of environmental practices, but they can only be partly attributed to environmental initiatives. The main environmental practices are a permaculture approach to development and plant cultivation, green building, alternative energy, garbage collection, waste separation, and waste reduction. Vegetarianism and veganism, the use of herbs for nutrition and treatment, and the absence of alcohol and smoking can also be perceived by the informants as an ecological practice, being at the same time part of a healthy lifestyle and some spiritual practices. Examples of environmental initiatives are the waste separation networks in the Belbek Valley: Eco-Crimea, Eco-camp, Tuta-Tuta Camp, and so on. A family village and the Solnechnoe Eco-settlement are also involved in environmental activity.
- (2) Cultural ICs and initiatives are represented by festivals and various spaces; an example is Art Kovcheg. The Valley Fair has also become a space for cultural events. For example, in Art Kovcheg waste separation takes place, concrete steps are taken to reduce waste, and green construction is underway despite the major focus being on arts, crafts, and music. Temporary spaces hosting guests include various festivals such as Sun Spirit and Wandering Stars.
- (3) Ideological ICs are characterized by a specific system of practices based on a belief system [25]. Participants are expected to adhere to a shared ideology and rules in their daily practices for housing and raising children at all times. In the Belbek Valley, one IC fits this category, and it belongs to the Russia-wide Movement of Kins’ Homesteads (Rodovye Pomestya). The ideological basis of this movement is a series of books

by Vladimir Megre on the teachings of Anastasia (a mythical character), and the followers believe in her supernatural powers. This initiative focuses on families with an intergenerational dimension; they should lead happy lives with others who share a common ideology and philosophy.

- (4) There are ICs with a primary focus on spirituality. In the teams in the Belbek Valley, people work for social and spiritual growth and self-fulfillment. The topics of these initiatives include personal development, building harmonious relationships with nature, the development of personal creativity, and the dissemination of spiritual practices. These include business-oriented projects that nevertheless see themselves as serving the common good. Business initiatives dedicated to spiritual practices are represented by retreat centers, including Rich Gorge and Igor Budnikov's center, and Seven Valleys, the initiative of the sacred gardens (see Figure 3 and Table 1).



Figure 3. Categories of intentional communities.

Certain themes cover all the initiatives. These include health, recreation, and business orientation. Most of the initiatives aim to generate income. The exception is the volunteer garbage collection network in the valley. The initiatives all focus on creative team building. They wish to build teams that implement the initiative instead of recruiting people whose priority is earning opportunities. Most of the initiatives we study have a specific purpose. A regular produce and health services fair acts as a hub for the intentional communities and is also used for networking. Various festivals and garbage collection events are also network projects often linked to the fair, and there are places for lectures on environmental issues in the communities. There are educational initiatives for children that involve several ICs, including Ne-sadik (“Not-a-Kindergarten”) and Ne-shkola (“Not-a-School”), which were created by parents for collective home education. Informants talk of their desire to hold events and create spaces for children. These are not authorized by the authorities and are only run by the parents unofficially. There is also a children’s space at the Valley Fair, where children do craft every week.

5.4. Analysis of Selected ICs in the Belbek Valley

There are several ICs in the Belbek Valley, and their number keeps changing. In 2021, we found 10 separate ICs in the area. We studied them all, but we have chosen seven examples from the total for closer analysis, which we argue represent typical yet at the same time different versions of the intentional communities in the Belbek Valley (see Figure 4). We apply an outline for structuring the findings from the fieldwork. This outline includes the following topics. We analyze the initiatives according to the following criteria: how old the initiative is; the extent of environmental thinking and practices; spirituality; the role of volunteers in the IC; the degree of business orientation of each IC; decision-making

principles within the IC; the level of networking and interaction with other intentional communities and local villages (which are not intentional communities).

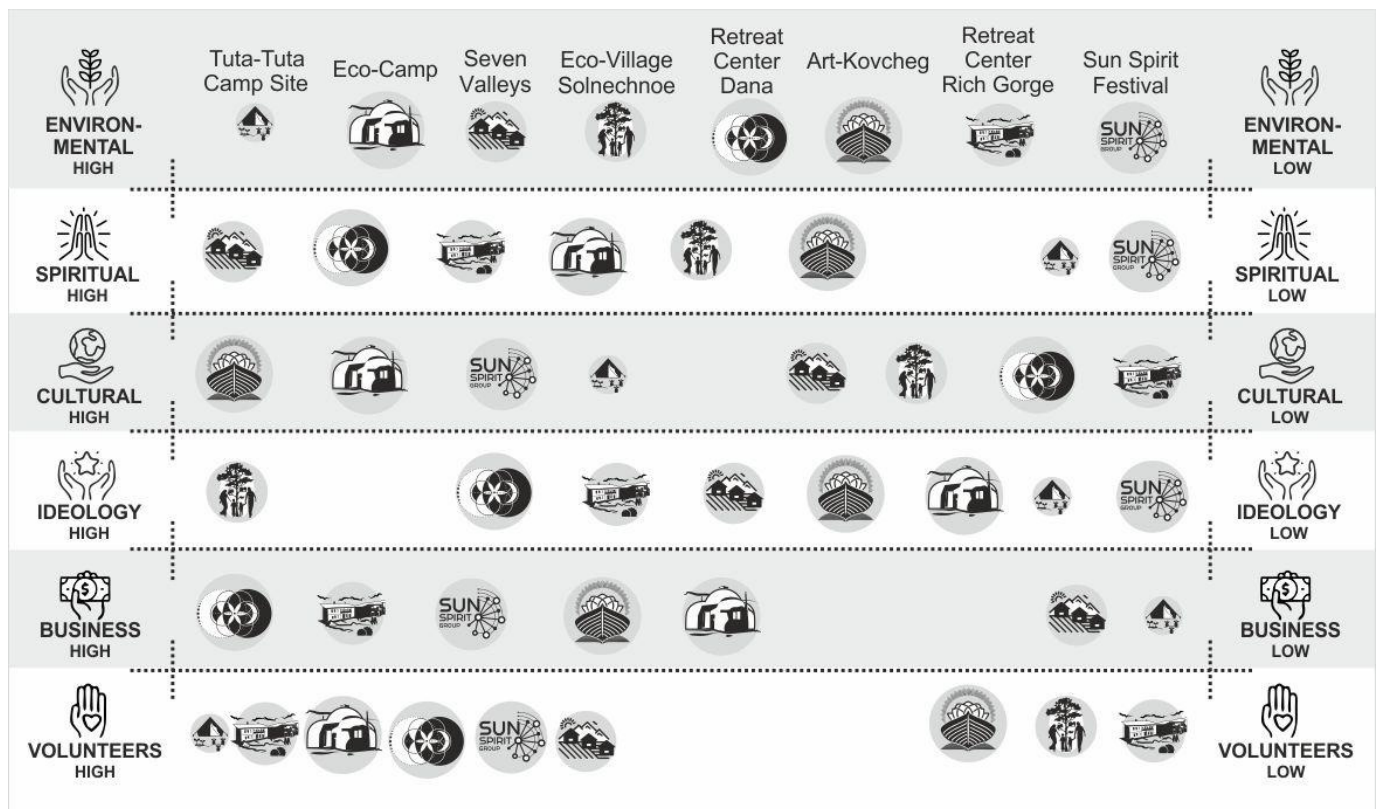


Figure 4. The ICs and initiatives in the Belbek Valley, categorized according to their orientation.

Eco-camp is an old initiative that started in 2008, before the annexation of Crimea, and has continued since. Its main investor is Ukrainian and lives in Ukraine. Before the current war, he was living part-time at Eco-camp and part-time in Kiev. Eco-houses built in Ukraine were transported to Eco-camp. During COVID, travel via the Ukraine-Russia border became complicated, and the Ukrainian owner continued to work with the Russian Eco-camp managers mostly online. This continued during Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Eco-camp is a project that combines environmental, spiritual, and recreational activities. In social networks, Eco-camp presents itself as a "Recreation and meditation center in the very heart of the Crimean Peninsula", as well as a "Large-scale project for the ecological development of a harmonious personality of a new generation" [72]. Ecology in this case is understood primarily as a psychological approach to nature and as harmony with nature. Housing practices are described as eco-construction. Garbage collection, collectively organized recycling, and solar energy are also important. Attention is paid to the environment in Eco-camp's larger territory. For example, an activist restored an old apple tree garden using organic methods. She told us: "I want to develop the Camp brand, so that they have an exemplary garden... This is my dream—that we are engaged in organic farming and have quality products. Eco-camp participates in the environmental activities of other organizations such as tree planting organized by the project 'We Are the Earth'—an online forum where people plant or donate trees, and one's named tree grows somewhere in the garden. Last fall [people] donated 150 trees to us for this project" [73].

The events Eco-camp holds are spiritual. They include yoga and "vipassana" and educational practices, dealing with issues such as self-esteem, community building, and the environment. The informant described the activity as follows: "We have a healthy lifestyle and health tours with an emphasis on oriental practices and vegetarianism" [73].

Eco-camp is a project with a permanent location for guests, volunteers, and employees. Volunteers are accepted through an application process, and the camp depends on them to function. With a team of employees, they seek to create an atmosphere that attracts new people. Volunteers find themselves in a space that helps them respond to their inner requests and find their way forward to a place where they can feel better: “I was surprised by this space, how people interact here, how they communicate. For me, it’s a culture shock that there are no obscenities, cigarettes, and this is normal—you can live in peace without them. People here are friendly, and they hug each other. People are as open as possible, there’s a family atmosphere—not even in families do they hug like that. It hooked me, because I wanted to immerse myself in something related to the spiritual development of the body and soul” [74]. The manager of Eco-camp also came as a volunteer: “I didn’t understand what to do. I Googled volunteering on the internet, and Eco-camp came up. I sent an application. They responded quickly, and on 6 June 2019, I came here” [74]. Showing organizational skills in the kitchen, he quickly became a paid kitchen organizer and began organizing tours a few months later, and eventually received an offer to become a manager. The informant describes his path not as a working career, but as self-development and movement along the path of self-fulfillment, and serving people.

Eco-camp is a business initiative with founders, owners, and investors, which is also reflected in the IC’s decision-making procedures. Decision making is coordinated between the owner, staff, and long-term volunteers. The main characteristic of such business-oriented projects is that the paid project employees represent a team that shares and conveys the meaning of the project to volunteers and guests. Employees become permanent after their successful volunteer activities. The garden manager said: “I decided to travel around Crimea. They suggested that I could go to Eco-camp as a volunteer. I was a volunteer in the kitchen for a long time. It was fall—there were guests, they told me not to leave yet because they needed help. I helped in the kitchen for a long time. Walking in the garden, I realized that no one was looking after the orchard. It was overgrown, and the trees were sick”. The informant also described how she asked for the role of gardener, but this position was not a priority. Then, through Eco-camp’s participation in the “We Are the Earth” tree planting project, a gardener was needed, and the successful results of the work led to the conclusion of a long-term working contract [73].

Eco-camp plays a big role in the development of networking in the Belbek Valley. It is one of the first camping initiatives and has been playing the role of a “gateway” to the valley for many years. Many people started their journey in the valley by volunteering at Eco-camp and then became volunteers for other initiatives, residents of the valley, and initiators of new ICs. Eco-camp organizes events for the ICs in the area. Eco-camp holds paid events, as well as events for the ICs in the Belbek Valley. The head of the garden described it as follows: “Next week we will have ‘vipassana’, and next week an ethno-DJ is coming, and I will be dancing—everyone from the valley will gather. This is a symbolic closing of the season, although there will still be guests. The season will continue. This ethno-dancing is fun, and at the same time it is not a standard disco. It’s called ecstatic dance. And there is usually a cocoa ceremony—we drink cocoa before it. Cocoa is invigorating and at the same time non-alcoholic, so everyone likes such a healthy disco” [73]. According to the information from the informants in the ICs in the summer of 2022, cultural, spiritual, and recreational events continue at Eco-camp.

Seven Valleys is a new IC, formed in 2021. It was initiated by a person moving from Eco-camp, and soon there was a team of people. This team became the basis of the IC’s organization. “It doesn’t matter for us whether this land is Ukrainian or Russian—it’s a spiritual place” [58]. Seven Valleys is mostly a spiritual settlement that incorporates ecological and psychological initiatives. A key idea for the IC is the seven valleys on the side of the mountain, each of which has its own design and corresponds to its own “chakra”. It is assumed that in each space a certain layer of problems will be worked out. According to the informants, to achieve harmony between humanity, nature, and people, environmental practices are very important. These include plans following the principles

of permaculture, landscape design, and the use of permaculture for planting gardens, trees, and vegetables, environmentally friendly construction, and recycling. Vegetarianism is understood as an environmental practice. However, according to the leader and initiator of this project: “This isn’t an eco-village. . . It’s an educational place” [58].

The IC focuses on the healing of psychological problems and mental pain. An informant spoke about two methods of working with people: those who work through their problems in a team, and those who work through being in harmony with nature: “People unblock their sufferings through tears. They come here, join the team, work, and heal. And those who want to relax simply absorb nature. In nature a person begins to feel deeper—strength appears [...] to understand the cause of pain” [58]. Additionally, to help the team cope with their potential problems, the IC has a more modern house in a nearby village that can accommodate occasional stays by team members otherwise staying in the mountains.

The Seven Valleys IC operates with volunteers whom the IC openly accepts if they are ready to work for the IC. The IC aims for self-fulfillment and people’s healing. It lacked a business orientation at the time of the research. The participants live together and work as a team to create a healing space in the mountains.

For the goals of the IC, there needs to be a team to implement the project in a particular area. As planned by the organizers, people living and working as the project team work with their problems with the aid of the spaces and themselves. The IC invites guests, volunteers, and people interested in training themselves in the team to work through their problems and sense a harmonious coexistence with nature. In decision making, this IC focuses on creating a team of people, a community that lives together and has the goal of implementing a specific jointly designed project. This initiative differs slightly from the existing eco-villages in Russia, where people come to explore environmental practices, live, build a family, and raise children surrounded by friendly neighbors. Seven Valleys is an IC that has a specific goal, a certain way of development, and mission. Broadly, this project’s mission is to work to create a more harmonious world, not through war and opposition but through acceptance and symbiosis. More narrowly, its goal is to create seven healing sites—to transform spaces for certain purposes, each of which will correspond to a specific “chakra” of the human body.

Tuta-Tuta Camp Site is a new initiative. There was no significant investment, and the camp’s development started in the spring of 2021, which distinguishes it from Seven Valleys IC. The landowner is interested in the camp and allows it to be used for free. Initially, there were two activists, but later only one was implementing the project, despite a lack of money. “We asked ourselves what we would do if there was no money this year for communications—electricity and water—wait until the money appeared? Or run as it is in an open field. We decided to run the camp. We’re planning a well. The water supply is currently delivered from outside. There’s no agricultural activity so far. Later we want to create a permaculture park” [75].

The initiators act from the desire for self-fulfillment and the embodiment of their ecological and creative ideas. Tuta-Tuta combines several areas of activity: recreational, creative, musical, and environmental. They say on their website: “Here you’ll feel alive. Relax with us in the delightful nature of Crimea and enjoy spiritual communication, family trips, and creative workshops” [76]. A permaculture garden is planned in conjunction with tourism, recycling, and solar panels for electricity production. Tents are positioned so that they help a person feel a connection with nature. “The sustainable business involves a fruit and berry garden. We want to grow herbal tea plants. Tourism will complement this. We realized that the main client was the land—we need to treat it very carefully. So, we decided on an eco-project” [75]. Volunteers are important in Tuta-Tuta. They are attracted by the possibility of communication with like-minded people and nature, staying in a very beautiful natural setting, and at the same time engaging with meaningful and useful work. Volunteers are invited to join when they are needed for specific projects such as courses on permaculture or music.

Tuta-Tuta has a small-scale business orientation as one of its goals, but they lack the investors-owners or employees of Eco-camp. The camp site, while aiming to earn an income for the organizers and its development, resembles a rural integrated ecological development initiative, because the organizers prioritize the harmony of their work with nature. A single person organizes and makes decisions in the IC. Tuta-Tuta is integrated into networking in the Belbek Valley, such as the fair and Not-a-School initiative. The originator of the IC also tries to involve people from other ICs in partnerships with Tuta-Tuta. In 2021–2022, there were courses on permaculture design, flute courses, and small theater group performances.

The Solnechnoe Family Homesteads settlement was founded in 2015 near the village of Vysokoe. It is part of the Russian Movement of Kins' Homesteads (Rodnye Pomestya). Solnechnoe attracts people interested in living in the Belbek Valley who share the views of the Ringing Cedars of Russia movement. The ideological basis of this movement is a series of books by Vladimir Megre published by the Ringing Cedars of Russia foundation, which he runs. This initiative aims to create a place for a happy life for families who share a common ideological and philosophical concept. To some extent, it can be called ecological, because its participants are guided by an environmentally friendly and healthy lifestyle. Much attention is paid to the need for positive changes in human personality that are also related to one's relations with nature. Permaculture is among the environmental practices. It is a principle and practice of working with plants and planning sites and planting trees. The initiative's participants clean up garbage, recycle, and participate in garbage collection campaigns held in the Belbek Valley. Four times a year, the community celebrates solstices and equinoxes. "Every four months we have sunny holidays—dances, songs, games, round dances, an amateur concert, a common table under an oak tree, and a bathhouse in the evening" [77].

This initiative contributes to the self-fulfillment of each participant. Self-fulfillment in this case is manifested in the creation of an estate for one's family and participation in common affairs, including festivities. According to the ideology of the initiative's participants, they are building the family estates not only for themselves, because they believe their children and grandchildren will live on the land.

The IC does not involve volunteers. However, this does not negate the arrival of individual volunteers to the IC. This initiative operates on the principles of self-organization and welcomes those who are planning to move to the village. Moreover, there are no business ideas related to this IC, because the participants have not created joint businesses to receive income from activities in the IC's territory. The IC is not active in networking, except for collective waste collection with the other ICs. In 2022, regular tours of the Solnechnoe Homestead are organized and advertised on social networks.

Another striking example of the valley's ICs is the creation of the Art Kovcheg space. There are similarities with the Eco-camp and Tuta-Tuta, but Art Kovcheg focuses on art and creativity. The Art Kovcheg project was launched in February 2021, with the main construction in April–May. The space was opened for guests in June. Unlike Tuta-Tuta camp, the initiators immediately attracted investments, built a strong team of about 15 employees and made significant progress in creating an infrastructure. The owners of Art Kovcheg also own the similar space Bali Dacha in Bali. They decided to create a new space in Crimea because of the pandemic, when it became difficult for tourists to move between countries. "We traveled and lived abroad a lot but realized that we had to go home. We've been in Bali Dacha for the last year and a half. We came here and built Art Kovcheg in four months to be in the Motherland" [46]. Initially, the team included friends who had a "powerful response" to the owners' initiative.

Art combines recreational, entertainment, and environmental activities. The environmental agenda involves basic things: "We are trying to comply with modern realities to avoid harming nature in Crimea. We sort food and non-food waste, because it is problematic to recycle the rest in the valley. A special pit has been dug for food waste. Next year, by the spring, a greenhouse will be built, and all this organic waste will go there for compost

and cultivation. . . We have abandoned using disposable tableware, although it is very, very difficult to serve many people in dishes that need to be washed at events. So far, we've only had a summer café without a separate dishwasher. We only used cardboard cups. This year there was a small session, the guys rented housing, held their own practices, for which we bought biodegradable tableware made from cornstarch and wood" [78]. The kitchen seeks to contribute to an environmental, spiritual, and healthy lifestyle. It has vegetarian, vegan, and raw cuisine and does not allow meat and fish. Art Kovcheg positions itself as "a fabulous space for life and creativity among three lakes and an endless apple orchard" [79]. It has housing for guests, fancy small houses, a bus reorganized to function as a hostel, multiple tents, and a beautiful piece of land which makes it look like a recreational housing business. A restaurant chef and business organizer said of the project: "We have an art direction, an art space. A community of attuned masters who together create good for all living beings and for those who come here" [78].

Personal self-fulfillment and joint creativity in the broadest sense underlie the idea of the Art Kovcheg: "This is a place for creativity in nature, life. . . We've gathered likeminded people. The idea is to gather attuned masters for life, so that everyone has their own location, their own home. To live year-round, share it" [46]. Art Kovcheg, unlike most other initiatives, does not focus on working with volunteers and accepts volunteers on a limited basis. One of the initiators explained: "We take those who are very congenial, with whom it's great to live, it's great to be friends. A congenial person is cultural, responsible for themselves first, knows what they want in life for themselves, and is creative" [78].

Art Kovcheg focuses on business but positions itself as a creative group. It differs from the campsites in that it provides not only a team of initiators-implementers but a large team of arts and craft people who perform music, sing, dance, and do highly artistic woodwork. "The bathhouse is under construction with a spa area, so people will be interested in coming here in the winter" [78]. Art Kovcheg combines a system of collective decision making and social entrepreneurship with common housekeeping and accommodation for craftsmen and initiators at the project site. The informant described this as follows: "Decisions are made together. There are meetings every day where we solve pressing issues. Denis [one of the founders], of course, has unquestioned authority, but he's earned it by giving people freedom of action. And then he already looks at how they dispose of their freedom. If it isn't productive, the person leaves the space. And if it is productive, the space for action expands" [78]. Art Kovcheg does not aim to develop networking in the valley. However, despite its short life, the IC already plays a considerable role in organizing entertainment in the Belbek Valley, and regular concerts and ecstatic dances for the public were organized during the summers of 2021 and 2022.

There are also initiatives in the Belbek Valley that meet the criteria of an IC despite their strong business orientation. The members of the communities themselves point out that their initiative is a community with certain aims that include spiritual development such as yoga and personal development, attention to health, and environmental orientation to permaculture, for example. Such an initiative is the Dana Retreat Center—Igor Budnikov, which began to be developed in 2018; the actual construction started in 2020. The initiator, Igor Budnikov, is a yoga teacher who is well known nationwide, a successful businessman, system manager, investment manager, eco-developer, and philanthropist. He promotes a healthy lifestyle, yoga, and vipassana and conducts training for business people with an interest in yoga.

The retreat center has an environmental component. They recruit volunteers via the Volunteer for Nature Center, which positions itself on the website as "creating an experimental platform for the development, implementation and testing of the effectiveness of innovative methods for the conservation and restoration of natural, food and agricultural systems, as well as human health improvement and the development of volunteering in Russia". The center's mission also has a pronounced environmental and healthy lifestyle focus: "Promoting the transition of society to balanced agro-bio-systems, regenerative agriculture, and efficient management of eco-resources, as well as providing a platform

for self-development and human health" [80]. In practice, the housing is supplied with all kinds of commodities and built in a conventional way. For the team and volunteers, the Dana Center is a platform for self-fulfillment and personal improvement.

Volunteers are important for holding paid events. The center's specialist said: "We have volunteers in the main building—cleaning, helping in the kitchen, sanitizing the houses. There are many who want to volunteer" [64]. Volunteers work in the permaculture project; some volunteers continue their journey in the Belbek Valley after completing their program at the center.

The retreat center project is a business-oriented initiative that generates income for the people involved. However, some money goes in an experimental direction for the restoration and creation of agro-ecosystems and qualifies as social entrepreneurship. Decision making centers on the head of the center and staff. The center is not active in networking in the Belbek Valley, but it has yoga and business-oriented networks across Russia.

5.5. Supporting Networking Initiatives for the ICs

In addition to the actual ICs, there are activities that cannot be seen as ICs themselves, but that are part of the IC scene in the Belbek Valley. First, festivals play a significant role in the Belbek Valley. They are organized annually. The Sun Spirit Festival is an example. Sun Spirit is positioned as a "multi-format festival of music and art in natural landscapes" [81]. It connects the valley with a wide audience and attracts various artists and audiences, as well as social networks. "We are gathering a large family, friends for live communication, creativity" [81]. One of the festival's organizers emphasized that "Sun Spirit is a culturally defining event for the Bakhchisaray region, because a large number of creative people from all over Russia come here" [44]. The informant argues: "We have intellectual music here" [44]. The festival involves scientific, educational, and environmental components, as well as children's programs. Because personal intellectual development is important for the festival's organizers, within the framework of the festival they organize a scientific lecture hall at which lectures are given on astronomy, physics, and psychology.

The Breath (Dyshi) project in 2021 represented the environmental component. The leaders of this movement, a married couple, "promote environmental consciousness, love of nature, recycling, and other healthy lifestyle components that make us part of nature" [44]. The festival's philosophical component attempts "to act not by trying to oppose people but by showing opportunities to grow and develop" [44]. An important characteristic of the festival is its capacity for transformation. The organizers emphasize that personal and team transformation takes place at the festival.

The festival's transformational effect happens because for several days those attending plunge into festive reality. The organizers create a festival "state" with various social structures—its own security, a first-aid post, a children's space, an information service, and a management headquarters. A clear organization of space and process is thus combined with the creative manifestation of the participants, an intense emotional and intellectual experience created by music. One of the organizers spoke about this: "The festival itself is a flash—a person finds themselves in a different time if they're at the festival all the time. This shows the subjectivity and relativity of time. The speed is so fast here that time slows down" [44].

Organizational self-fulfillment and the festival's creation are a necessary condition; the stress the organizers embrace could not otherwise be endured. Without a sense of self-fulfillment among the organizers, such a festival cannot be created. The festival is a very complex and stressful process for them. "The festival is a super-stressful space, with a maximum of creative solutions. The festival always presents something new, which is decided on the go, collectively or independently" [44].

The festival lacks a permanent venue. It is prepared for a long time in the virtual space and localized for the team, guests, and volunteers for only a few days. Like most festivals, its organization is enabled by the work of volunteers, who participate in the location's creation and serving the festival guests.

The festival is a business-oriented initiative. It must generate income for its organizers, and spending on organization is significant. The experience of 2021, when the festival was closed on its opening day because of COVID regulations despite all the approvals from the authorities, led to a big financial failure. The festival was held in reduced format; most of the participants who had paid for their tickets could not participate. Due to the large financial investment in the festival site, the organizers are still returning money to some of the participants. COVID restrictions and the unpredictability of the authorities' actions mean festivals as public initiatives pose great financial and image risks for organizers. In this respect, the reduction or even disappearance of such initiatives in the coming years has become possible. In 2022, the Sun Spirit Festival was moved to the Novgorod Region in Russia, and the venue in the Belbek Valley was taken over by the Health Energy festival.

Second, there is a hub for activities: the Belbek Valley Fair was initiated in August 2019 not only for arts and crafts and sustainable food products but for networking, communication, exchange of ideas, and setting up agreements. The fair brings together people from the ICs in the area, as well as like-minded people from outside the Belbek Valley and Crimea. One of the fair's organizers wrote on social media: "The idea of having a weekend fair in the valley came to me in August 2019. There was a lot of energy in it. . . We had a chat with the community settlers. Originally, it was 30 people. . . It became possible to buy locally produced bread from Bogatyr, chocolate from Rich Gorge, cheese from Plotinnoe. It's better to choose a day and gather in some pleasant place outdoors and meet producers. It will be possible to see all your friends at least once a week, because there is otherwise a lot of work at home, and it can be difficult to tear yourself away from them. The place was also found very quickly!" [82].

In the Belbek Valley, the fair is a hub for environmental activities, and the people coming to the fair organize plenty of pragmatic action related to environmental issues. For example, there has been a weekly cleaning activity in the surrounding mountains. The people coming to the fair participate in the recycling and organizing of the transportation of waste to recycling points in more distant locations, because there are none near the ICs. The fair's participants organize lectures on the recycling and reuse of materials; the lecturers often come from outside the Belbek Valley. The fair participants also focus on everyday sustainability in households. At the fair, there are healing practices and tents for retreats, so there is some sense of spirituality. This is usually associated with the advertising of various healing methods.

There is a lot of volunteer work in the organization of the fair, and residents or those who want to move to the valley serve as volunteers. For example, an artist who came to the Belbek Valley remained a volunteer instead of selling her work and organized the children's part of the fair. "An idea of a children's space began to spin. . . Children have the opportunity to be artists and craftsmen. We received a lot of gratitude from the parents. The children were looking for an opportunity to participate like adults. What they showed last time was very special. It was beautiful and unique. I want to support kids so that everyone has a positive experience. We don't just sell things. They can trade, gift, and sell for up to 200 rubles, so they don't start trying to build a business. The children's experience is positive" [48].

The fair creates a strong ramified social network, combined with financial benefits. It is a business-oriented initiative that plays an important role in the local economy. Residents of the Belbek Valley can talk about their local products and sell them. By the fall of 2020, the fair had expanded so much that it could no longer accommodate all the interested craftsmen. From then, the access for new producers to the fair was limited: "They brought their products, bread, pastries, all sorts of sweets. . . In a year the fair grew from five tables to 150 tables. They always have a bonfire at the finale, and events and concerts. You can ride horses, hang glide, and eat. There are very tasty pies, drinks, and snacks. The food is healthy, fresh, non-alcoholic—and there's no meat" [83]. It is called the Fair of Masters, because dwellers produce unique artistic and food products. Issues such as weather conditions, COVID restrictions, and landowners' attitudes mean the fair's location

changes frequently. It is also seasonal, concentrated in the warmer months [84]. In terms of decision making, there is a main organizer, a person who has changed occasionally. There is a council that makes decisions on major events. However, the coordination is rather loose, with no strict rules.

The Belbek Valley Fair plays an important role in networking between ICs. The fair developed rapidly with the arrival of craftsmen and musicians, and events for children were organized. "It turned out to be the main event in the valley. . . We saw the community was growing. At the fair we can arrange a meeting or give a lecture. A stage was built, and musicians can come to play now" [83]. The same informant explained that the communication space at the fair enabled new projects to start. Another informant described the role the fair played for the settler network: "The fair is the valley's central marketplace. This is reflected in the people who come here once a week. Trade turnover is 30 per cent of everything that happens here. There's communication in all areas. At the fair people see people, events take place, dialogue takes place, people find someone or something. The goods are fun. The fair is much more than it seems. It's like a confirmation that there is a cluster of unique people here" [45]. In 2022, regular tours of the Solnechnoe Homestead are organized and advertised on social networks.

Despite the fair's success for new residents and guests of the valley, the attitude of local residents toward the fair is twofold. Local craftsmen and artists come to the fair from all over Crimea and benefit from their attendance. However, the creative arts the fair broadcasts conflict with the local way of life and are not shared by and seem strange to the local population. The Muslim population does not like it when people come to the fair half-naked. Those who live near the fair are annoyed by crowds and loud music late at night. One of the informants spoke about this: "The locals don't understand our creative stories, music, practices, yoga. . . I'm not saying it's everyone, but some people aren't happy" [83]. The fair has become a brand and umbrella initiative of the Belbek Valley, a link between individual visiting residents and various initiatives, the basis for the formation of a network community of the newcomers to the Belbek Valley. However, in 2022, the spirit of the Belbek Fair changed. Some IC dwellers stopped visiting it. For example, a shish kebab and beer festival was organized by local villagers, which was strongly opposed by vegetarians and most of the ICs.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Crimea presents a surprising combination as a space in the midst of political and societal turmoil and as a location for ICs seeking autonomy from the political system and to withdraw from mainstream society. Crimea is an extremely contested space in international politics, and a large-scale war is underway in this part of Europe. At the same time, a major aim of the ICs is that they wish to build "Ecotopias" [4] that are distanced from society's mainstream life [2,5,6]. In other words, the ICs wish to avoid mingling with the mainstream (although this usually proves too complicated) having found it represents values they cannot accept. Against expectations in the Belbek Valley case, the ICs have been located in a space where they cannot avoid living close to the conflict zone. Originally, the people choosing to move to the Belbek Valley to form ICs were drawn there in part by the writings of the Russian writer Alexander Grin; the ICs were to be located in Crimea's creative space. The guiding ideas for setting up the first ICs therefore included a lucrative environment, beautiful landscapes, and nature promising an abundant harvest of ecologically grown agricultural produce. The communities' non-political nature probably helps people avoid reflecting on the overall political situation in which Crimea has been embedded since 2014, as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and focus on their own activities in the ICs.

Apart from the scale of the community, intentional communities have been viewed across various scales, including the landscape, buildings, and artifacts used in the past by the inhabitants in the communities [16]. The reasons for the ICs emerging in the Belbek Valley can be traced upward from a very personal scale. People who move to the Belbek Valley are seeking a space for their activities. They acknowledge that the

existing communities have rules, but as members of an IC, they prefer to prepare their own. Simultaneously, newcomers feel like outsiders in the existing local villages, and the existing communities do not welcome them. The incomers to the ICs want independence from the state, and in seeking self-sufficiency, states do not matter in their thinking. Only their relationship with the land matters. As Schäfer et al. (2018) note [5], ICs are excluded by the mainstream but seek to withdraw from it at the same time. This applies to the ICs in the Belbek Valley, but there is an additional twist, because the people who want to withdraw from highly politicized mainstream society are seeking refuge in a very contested space. There is an aspect of depoliticization in the Belbek Valley that seems vital for the communities themselves. The members of the communities are striving for sustainably organized communities in which international politics plays no role. They are thus also thinking about a kind of borderless world. This is in striking contrast with the political nature of Crimea in the first place and the war waging in the surroundings. At the same time, the ICs seek to help refugees from the war in Ukraine (since February 2022). The general view within the communities is pacifist and argues that it is “for nature” and outside politics. This places the ICs in a contrasting situation to the mainstream villages in their surroundings in Crimea that have posted visible signs of support for the war on their houses. The villages also like to distance themselves from the ICs, as the inhabitants in the mainstream villages practice traditional world religions and follow conservative values, accepting one another (Christians and Muslims) but not the newcomers, whom they see as having odd habits.

In this context, we can draw the following conclusions based on the topics we have described for each of the above subcases. With a few exceptions, most of the ICs in the Belbek Valley are new. It is therefore difficult to say whether they will endure. Nevertheless, there are some aspects that offer hints about the ICs’ future longevity. In some ICs, there has been considerable investment, and it seems likely that it will help these ICs to keep operating; yet there are ICs where very few people run the community, and in such cases the future durability of the IC is clearly more questionable. However, the flow of people into the ICs continues, so it is possible that there will be newcomers who boost the ICs through their involvement in activities and events and bring additional expertise to the area, and possibly to individual ICs as well. Moreover, new ICs are being established. Importantly, there are also larger-scale societal and political developments that affect the future of the ICs in Belbek Valley. In Crimea, the ICs have been established on contested land. This may affect their future evolution. Finally, there are also the larger-scale impacts of the war in Ukraine, and while the Belbek Valley has not been at the heart of the events, it is close to the warzone, which makes the future of the area politically and militarily unstable. Despite this context, in August 2022, when we were working on the updates, we have recorded no significant concerns being expressed by ICs in the Belbek Valley.

There is a striving for sustainability and environmental issues in each of the ICs. However, for some the environment is a central motivation for organizing their activities; for others the environment is a more supplementary issue. Yet those ICs for which the environment is not the key issue usually engage with some environmental activism. How engagement with environmental issues turns out with each IC also depends on the scale of its activities and the investment there has been in its infrastructure. Key examples of environmental and sustainability issues dealt with in the ICs include permaculture, which is a common activity in initiatives in the Belbek Valley. At the same time, the intensity with which the ICs adopt permaculture activities varies. Sometimes larger-scale investment has also enabled larger-scale permaculture development, but ICs with less investment have organized more carefully realized permaculture projects.

Housing in the ICs involves many environmentally sound technologies such as solar panels and sustainably harvested wooden construction materials. The shape and design of houses sometimes also follow environmental ideas. This is partly due to the lack of mains electricity, for example, but there is also a more conscious environmental dimension behind these choices. Recycling is another typical field of environmental action in the

ICs; all the ICs are engaged in it. However, there are differences in how deeply recycling is adopted. It must be emphasized that recycling in the Belbek Valley is an activity that requires considerable effort from those wishing to practice it, because no facilities are provided in the vicinity of the ICs. The ICs strongly link the environment with health issues. For example, they grow herbs for tea and collect medicinal plants in the wild. Vegetarian food is the rule rather than the exception in the ICs. The ICs also foster demand for organic produce and free-range dairy produce in the villages.

Low-carbon living has been recognized as a usual aim for ICs internationally [5,33]. Most ICs in the Belbek Valley engage in a low-carbon lifestyle. For example, hitch-hiking is a common way to get around. Energy is often produced from non-carbon resources like solar panels. In contrast to the region's permanent pre-existing villages, the ICs emphasize low-carbon energy production. Vegetarianism is a joint activity in the ICs, contributing to low-carbon living. To some extent, the landscape in the Belbek Valley is favorable for a low-carbon life but is unfavorable in some cases. Cars are a necessity for longer journeys; gardens produce abundant fruit harvests.

Spirituality is another factor the ICs in the area share. It follows a similar pattern to the environment. For some of the ICs spirituality is the main motivation for their existence; for others it merely complements the environmental activism they practice as their main activity. Different types of yoga, alternative healing practices, and ideas about personal psychological capacities are related to thinking about spiritual issues.

Volunteers constitute a significant human resource for the ICs, while at the same time, volunteering is a way of engaging with such ICs. However, not all ICs freely accept volunteers. Some are themselves lifestyle volunteers, moving from place to place. All the ICs engage in economic activity that is either underway or planned to enable them at least to make a living if not a profit. Nevertheless, for some who have come to the Belbek Valley, business is more than just a way to make everyday life possible. These ICs are motivated by profit. The principles of decision making in the ICs vary. Generally, the more business-oriented an activity, the more centralized the decision-making system. Sometimes only one person runs an IC, and in this case, decision making depends on this person.

Networking is important for the ICs, but this is place-based networking rather than global networking [85]. They network with the other ICs nearby. In Crimea, the ICs benefit from networking for their daily needs. The ICs also network nationally to advertise themselves to newcomers. They also seek to network with experts like designers and permaculture specialists who can improve their plans.

We can draw some more general conclusions in relation to the broader societal context in which the scrutinized ICs have been emerging. As Farkas notes [28] in the case of eco-villages in Hungary, the ICs in the Belbek Valley are marginal, and they can scarcely provide a solution to the larger problems of sustainability, either in the Belbek Valley or in society more broadly. They are small-scale alternative lifestyle experiments neighboring very traditional rural villages with which the ICs present a stark contrast. Because the ICs we have studied act very locally, they focus on place-making [23] rather than a larger-scale societal sustainability shift. They also invest in attracting newcomers to the ICs, which is an incentive for making the place a particular location in their cultural activities. Place-making is also intensified by the modification of the physical landscape, in which permaculture plays a key role.

We attempted to update our findings after the war began in February 2022. However, the updates are limited. The overall political context and the changes that will result from the war and its continuation and possible conclusion, which all necessarily impact the ICs, naturally raise questions that should be studied in the future. There are also questions related to the sustainability challenges that the overall political situation imposes on the ICs. There is therefore considerable unpredictability concerning the future of the ICs in the context we have studied.

Finally, we wish to conclude with a few points on what we see our research adds to the previous global IC literature. We have explored the emergence of ICs in a political

context that is increasingly authoritarian and seeks to heavily limit citizens' political choices. While pressures on people by a hierarchically organized society once led them to form communities separate from the rest of society—such communities later conceptualized as intentional communities [16]—the research has been on contexts dating decades or centuries back in history. Our research illustrates that while contemporary social and political contexts exist that place authoritarian pressure on citizens, there are specific situations in such contexts that enable people to create ICs. Our research also illustrates that such a context nevertheless places ICs' members in situations that are ethically extremely challenging. They may be drawn to the ICs in the first place as a response to perceived problems that generally resemble what we see in the current Western European or North American situations: The practices of mainstream society are not sustainable or sufficiently environmentally minded for the members of ICs. However, under authoritarian rule, there may be additional reasons for seeking an opportunity to lead a life in groups that seek to stay outside the mainstream. In aiming to create their own rules and institutionalize their own decision-making systems, the ICs may provide a partial way out of the authoritarian political context. Nevertheless, our findings do not point to that direction. On the basis of the data that we have gathered, the people moving to the ICs in the Belbek Valley have not been motivated by political pressures in a hierarchically organized society, but by an opportunity to join congenial peers, and offer their services and expand their business among these groups. Instead of seeking for isolation from surrounding society, they have sought to activate the villages to join the ICs, but with little success. Yet it must be emphasized that our opportunities to find complete answers to these issues have been limited because of the extremely challenging political context.

Additional questions arise from such settings that merit further research, but they are beyond the scope of our paper. Our research suggests that in addition to the political contexts of ICs in North America and Western Europe, which have been the focus of most research into ICs, there are other contexts that deserve to be explored for comparison. It may be that there are similarities in the motivations of those joining various ICs across North America, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe (and quite possibly beyond these regions), but the solutions to which the members of the communities need to resort may vary as a result of the various societal and political systems in place. Methodologically, conducting this research through fieldwork, although it may well be possible, may also be very challenging, as has become apparent during our fieldwork. The willingness of the respondents to give their opinions on issues that are risky to express because of the political situation in mainstream society may be limited in ways that differ from what has been observed in previous research into ICs in Western Europe and North America. Yet our research indicates the need to widen the lenses through which ICs are viewed to complete the global picture of ICs.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Table of interviews.

Number	Interview Date	Position/Volunteer	IC/Place
11	10 September 2021	Initiator of the IC, major sponsor and investor	Seven Valleys
3	11 September 2021	Organizer of the fair, participant in Seven Valleys and organizer of the online and offline school of writing, discussions about the initiatives of the valley in general	Belbek Valley Fair, Seven Valleys
4	11 September 2021	Organizer of the fair, participant in the Seven Valleys IC, and organizer of the online and offline writing school	Belbek Valley Fair, Seven Valleys
5	9 September 2021	Orchard manager, Eco-camp IC	Eco-camp
8	9 September 2021	Eco-camp manager	Eco-camp
9	8 September 2021	Permaculture expert, teacher of the permaculture course	Tuta-Tuta camp
10	9 September 2021	Guest of the permaculture course from Vedrussia eco-village, Krasnodar Krai	Tuta-Tuta camp
11	9 September 2021	Volunteer	Tuta-Tuta camp
12	9 September 2021	Expert herbalist	Village of Shchastlivoe
13	11 September 2021	Guest of festival from Svetlogor'e eco-village, Tatarstan	Sun Spirit Festival
14	11 September 2021	Entrepreneur	Belbek Valley Fair, Sokolinoe village
15	12 September 2021	Café manager	Art Kovcheg
16	12 September 2021	Art Kovcheg founder, owner of Bali-Dachi	Art Kovcheg
17	12 September 2021	Costume master	Art Kovcheg
18	12 September 2021	Volunteer, children's fair space organizer	Belbek Valley Fair
19	10 September 2021	Activist guiding environmental activities in the valley	Closed family village in the mountains
20	13 September 2021	Volunteer	Sun Spirit Festival
21	13 September 2021	Volunteer	Sun Spirit Festival
22	13 September 2021	Member of the Solnechnoe family homestead settlement	Tuta-Tuta Camp
23	8 September 2021	Musician, Music Circus organizer	Tuta-Tuta Camp
25	10 September 2021	Activist	Seven Valleys
26	8 September 2021	Founder	Tuta-Tuta Camp
27	12 September 2021	Artist	Belbek Valley Fair
28	14 September 021	Activist from the Asana Festival	Asana Festival
29	13 September 2021	Guest of Sun Spirit Festival	Sun Spirit Festival
30	13 September 2021	Volunteer	Sun Spirit Festival
31	13 September 2021	Costume master	Sun Spirit Festival

Table A1. Cont.

Number	Interview Date	Position/Volunteer	IC/Place
32	14 September 2021	Artist, expert	Asana Festival
33	13 September 2021	Organizer and founder	Sun Spirit Festival
34	13 September 2021	Volunteer	Sun Spirit Festival
35	11 September 2021	Staff member	Eco-hotel
36	9 September 2021	Founder and owner	Slavic Village—open-air museum
37	14 September 2021	Owner	Rich Gorge Retreat Center
38	10 September 2021	Initiator	Sacred Garden
39	9 September 2021	Organizers of the Wandering Stars and the School of Wizards Festival	School of Wizards
40	13 September 2021	Public relations manager	Dana Retreat Center—Igor Budnikov
41	13 August 2022	Permaculture expert, planning to set up a new IC in fall 2022	Online
42	11 August 2022	Belbek Valley organizer of aid to refugees from Ukraine	Online
43	12 August 2022	Interview with Belbek Valley volunteer helping refugees from Ukraine	Online

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