Different Ways of Thinking Globally: The Unlikely Return of the Noosphere in Russian Environmental Discourses

Victoria Myznikova

Summary

The concept "Noosphere," introduced by Vladimir Vernadsky (1863–1945), features frequently in Russian environmental legislation and is used by senior officials and business actors alike. This paper argues that the current usage of the concept shifted away from Vernadsky's materialistic and universalistic approach towards a more esoteric and particularist definition.

After the term "Anthropocene" was introduced by Eugene F. Stoermer and Paul Crutzen in 2000, myriad discussions sprang up about its predecessors. One of them, the noosphere concept introduced by Russian, Ukrainian, and Soviet geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863–1945), is of particular interest—first, for its influence on Silicon Valley's narratives of a techno-utopian future, but particularly for its growing role in Russia's environmental policies and legislation.

Developed during Vernandsky's stay in Paris from 1922 to 1925, the noosphere concept resulted from an intellectual exchange between Vernandsky and the two French scientists Edouard Le Roy and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

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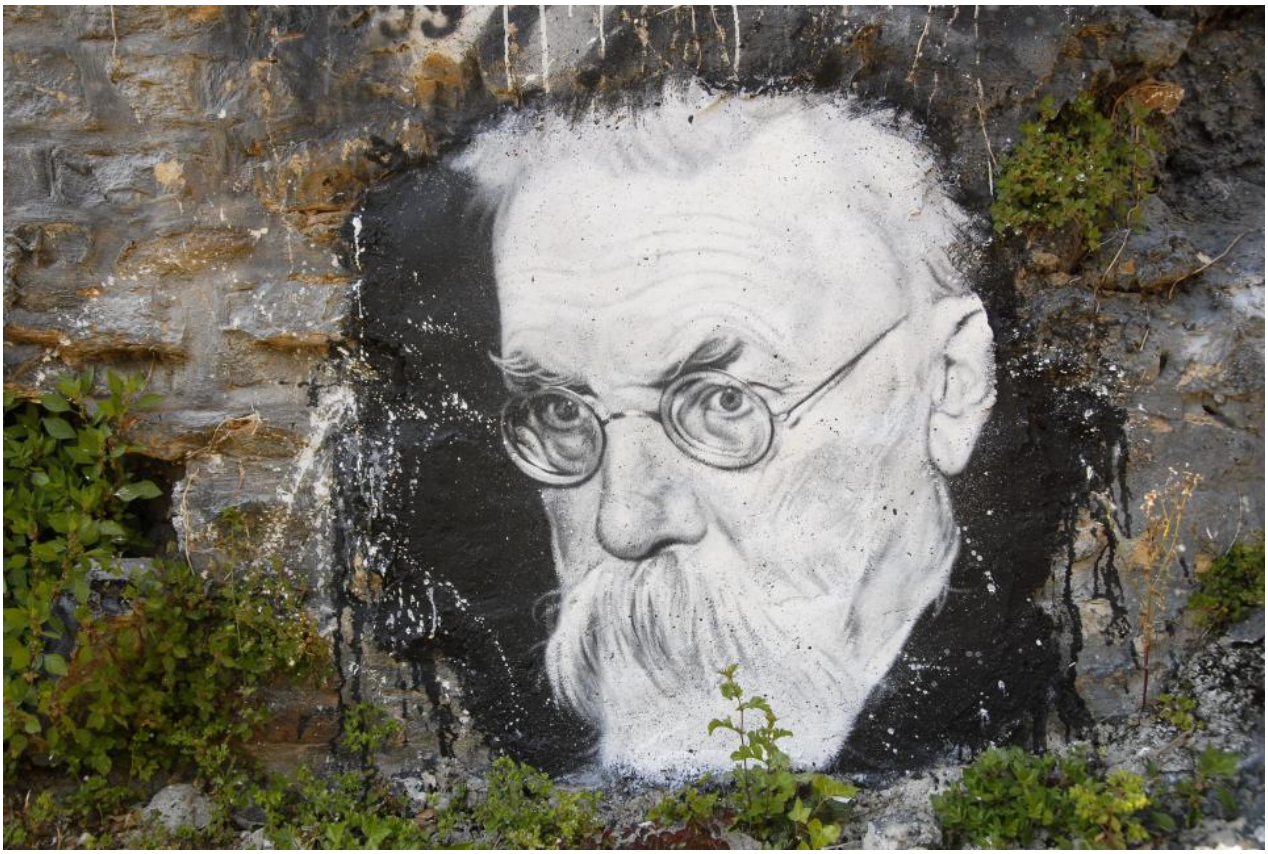

Painted portrait of Russian and Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky.

Photograph by Thierry Ehrmann. Click here to view source.

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In the works of Vernadsky, the noosphere is a continuation of the biosphere, the "new state" of it, in which humankind "becomes a large-scale geological force." For Vernadsky, the main implication of this is the emergence of the potentiality to rebuild the biosphere "in the interest of freely thinking humanity." At the same time, he argues that the noosphere is "not an accidental phenomenon dependent on the will of humankind." There is a tension between Vernadsky's optimism about humankind's ability to "manage" the planet and objective evolutionary forces which drive its actions, J. Oldfield and D. J. B. Shaw point out. Vernadsky died before further developing his ideas.

In the 1960s, the noosphere concept became popular among Soviet scientists, who tried to underscore the "scientific nature" of communism by linking it to geological evolution, writes J. DeBardeleben.

It wasn't until the 1990s that "noosphere" made an appearance in a policy document, the 1996 Presidential Decree on Sustainable Development. In it, the realization of the principles of sustainable development was equated with the emergence of the noosphere, "when the spiritual values ... of humankind, existing in harmony with the environment, will become the principal criterion of national and individual wealth." Four years later President Putin mentioned the noosphere as the "foundation of the concept of sustainable development" at the APEC Summit, one of his first international appearances.

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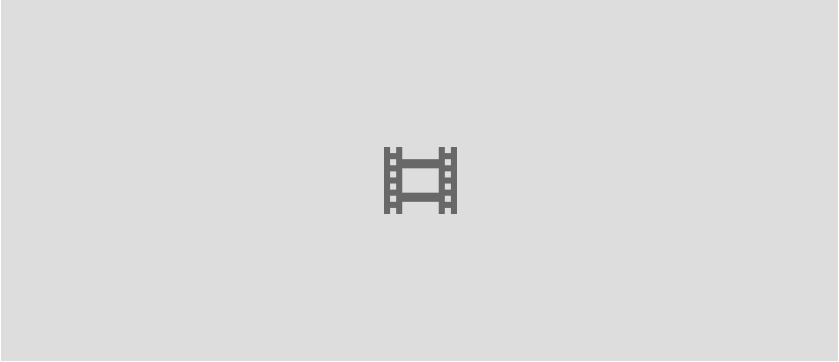
This interpretation differs from Vernadsky's concept. Sustainable development is an organizing principle for policies aimed at the preservation of ecosystems. It is not a theoretical concept, nor an evolutionary one. Moreover, the noosphere in Vernadsy's interpretation is not connected to "spiritual" values; it is the continuation of the biosphere in all its materiality. The mention of noosphere in the decree and by Putin seems driven by a desire to connect the term "sustainable development" with the local context.

Russian energy corporation Gazprom also showed interest in the noosphere concept, establishing the Vernadsky Ecological Foundation to "implement socially significant projects in the interests of sustainable development." The foundation publishes a journal "Noosphere"—a mix between corporate media, specialist periodical, and scholarly journal. At an event organized for Vernadsky's birth anniversary in 2003, Kirill Stepanov, then-director of the Gazprom foundation, noted: "Gazprom and Vernadsky have a lot in common—they fight for the environment ... Vernadsky wrote that the world would be global, and believed this was very good for mankind. Gazprom fully enjoys the onset of globalization ... Large corporations worldwide, even if they harm the environment, do it consciously, always calculating the amount of damage in advance." Here, the concept of "noosphere" found its manifestation in a multinational energy corporation.



After a brief moment of popularity, "noosphere" has disappeared from policy documents. A notable exception is the draft of the Strategy for Development of Nature-Like Technologies, published in summer 2022. It includes the definition of the noosphere, closest to Vernadsky's own—"a new, evolutionary state of the biosphere, in which the scientific and technological activity of man becomes the determining factor in the development of the biosphere." According to the draft, the cause of the current environmental crisis is "antagonism between nature and the man-made technosphere." To solve this, "the creation of a technosphere based on nature-like technologies" (including "nature-like nuclear reactors") is proposed. The return of the noosphere in high-level legislation might signify a renewed interest in it.

Another development is the integration of the "noosphere" concept into business discourses on ESG (environmental, social, and governance) strategies. After the start of the Russian war in Ukraine, the question arose if ESG programs adopted by Russian companies should continue. The supporters of ESG invoke Vernadsky to prove that "ESG is a native Russian topic, not imposed by the West." Vernadsky is being called "the pioneer of ESG, who introduced its principles in Noosphere doctrine."

Finally, the mention of the noosphere can be found in an article by Anton Vaino, the current head of the Presidential Administration, one of the most powerful institutions in Russia, whose head is appointed by the

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president and only answers to him. In this obscure text dated from 2012, Vaino describes a new device "nooscope" that can "register changes in the noosphere." The device is compared to the systems of global environmental monitoring. Since Vaino's arrival in the office in 2016, Russian environmental and climate policy programs have put emphasis on the creation of Russian analogs of these monitoring systems—aiming to achieve a "greater information sovereignty."

Over 30 years, the noosphere has become a "floating signifier" in Russian environmental discourses, detaching itself from Vernandsky's ideas. This is partly due to the incompleteness of the concept, and partly due to the broad engagement with it. Different actors approach it from their specific perspectives to suit a particular viewpoint. Most recently, it became associated not just with a utopian perspective of harmonious coexistence of humanity and nature but with a "sovereign" and ultimately nationalist way of achieving it—in sharp contrast with Soviet narratives of objectivity.

Further readings:

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Related links:

- "Ghost in the Cloud: Transhumanism's Simulation Theology," by Meghan O'Gieblyn
  https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-28/essays/ghost-in-the-cloud/
- "Nooscope Mystery: The Strange Device of Putin's New Man Anton Vaino" (BBC).
  https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37109169
- "Perviy russkiy globalist," *Kommersant*, 13 March 2003 [in Russian].
  https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/370587
- Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii "O Kontseptsii perekhoda Rossiiskoi Federatsii k ustoichivomu razvitiyu" [in Russian].
  http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/9120
- Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii "O strategii razvitiia prirodopodobnyh (konvergentnyh) tehnologiy" [in Russian].
  https://regulation.gov.ru/projects

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- “Ustoichivoe razvitie: chto bylo i chto budet?” [in Russian]. https://dprom.online/mtindustry/ustojchivoe-razvitie-chto-bylo-chto-budet/

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Victoria Myznikova is an environmental journalist and researcher with BA and MA degrees in philosophy and religious studies from Moscow State University. At the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, she is working on a project about Soviet science towns, their relationship with the environment, and their change after the transition to a market economy in the 1990s and early 2000s.

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