



## ANALYSIS

# THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AS A SOFT POWER TOOL: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY BY THE KREMLIN

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identity is a difficult and complex process. In the case of Russia, one should pay attention to

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## INTRODUCTION

In August 2018, an amendment to the law on education entered into force in Russia. The amendment is an example of efforts by the Russian authorities to strengthen the role of the Russian language in constructing an all-Russian national identity. The current tendency to reinforce the ethnic Russian identity is contrary to the civic, multi-ethnic national identity expressed in the Russian constitution and promoted by Russia's authorities as an official policy.

The Russian language is an important item in the authorities' toolbox that is used both to strengthen the regime inside Russia and to spread Russian influence abroad. It is important that the West follows these developments, as they can be a source of instability inside and outside Russia.

This analysis looks into the national identity of Russia as the conscious construction of this identity is undertaken by the Russian authorities. It touches upon several components of the identity, but the focus is on the issue of the Russian language, as it is one of the main symbolic elements in this process. The paper analyses the legal acts connected to the identity issue and materials on the official Kremlin website (kremlin.ru).

## 1. THE ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The formation of Russia's national identity has historically been closely connected to the state and the creation of a vast empire. It can be said that Russia has not been a nation-state in the pure sense of the term. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia could have become a nation-state, but there are many signs that it is still something else. The formation of national

the conscious attempts by the authorities to define it. Forming the identity in this case is not a grass-roots, gradual process but a project-like initiative by the authorities to unite the Russian nation. In this respect, the notions of civic and ethnic nation are important. One can describe Russia's residents in two distinct ways: either *русские* (ethnic Russians) or *россияне* (citizens of Russia). The first suggests an ethnic component, while the second is inclusive of other nationalities living in Russia.

The special character of this situation is reflected in the construction of the Russian identity. On the one hand, the Russian authorities stress that Russians are all part of the wider Russian World, whether they live inside Russia's borders or outside. On the other hand, it is important to unite different nationalities living in Russia around the "all-Russia nation". This dichotomy leads to emphasising different aspects of the identity in the official rhetoric.

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On the official Kremlin website, the term "identity" often appears in connection with the need to unite Russia around a common state identity.<sup>1</sup> It implies the unification of different nationalities in Russia and suggests that the emphasis is on the civic nation. It is stressed that the uniqueness of Russia is in the peaceful coexistence of many nationalities.

<sup>1</sup> Author's analysis of the website's messages between 2003 and 2018 (June).

Identity is defined as all-Russia, all-citizen, all-nation (*общероссийская, общегражданская, общенациональная*).

Another term that pops up in connection with identity is *самобытность*, which can be roughly translated as “uniqueness” or “originality”. It is used together with “identity”, often without going into detail about what is meant. It is connected with the protection of something unique, and is sometimes used for the whole nation of Russia. More often, it is used to define something unique about the small ethnicities residing in Russia. The language is also mentioned in the context of uniqueness: “Keeping the native language is the issue of keeping identity, uniqueness, and traditions for every nation [*народ*]. This complex, multifaceted work on studying support for the languages of Russia’s nations must be continued.”<sup>2</sup>

The dichotomy between civic and ethnic notions is indicated by the use of the concept of identity in the context of different nationalities residing in Russia, and the need to unite them. Identity is mentioned in connection with, for example, Russian Germans, Fenno-Ugric peoples and Tatars.

At the same time, the role of the ethnic Russian people and the Russian language is specifically emphasised. It could even be said that a securitisation of the Russian language takes place, as the protection and spread of the Russian language is raised. The following statements are good examples of this:

*The unity of the Russian people depends on the state and spreading the Russian language, [which] is spoken by 96%.<sup>3</sup>*

*... the issue of the Russian language is the issue of security of our great Motherland.<sup>4</sup>*

In general, identity is often mentioned in connection with education, culture and language. The term is also connected to the mention of Russia’s great history, including the need to protect historical monuments.

<sup>2</sup> Kremlin.ru, “Sovmestnoye zasedaniye sovetov po mezhnatsionalnym otnosheniyam i sovetov po russkomu yazyku”, 19 May 2015. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49491> (accessed 3 September 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Identity is mentioned in connection with the juxtaposition of Russia and the West, with “the West” here referring mostly to the European Union. This shows how the Russian identity is being constructed as opposing the “Other”. In the case of Ukraine, though, the rhetoric is contradictory. In some statements, the identity of Ukraine is accepted. For example, during the 2013 meeting of the Valdai Club, president Putin said:

*Of course, the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian culture, the Ukrainian language have outstanding specificities, which comprise the identity of the Ukrainian nation as such. And we not only respect all of this, me, for example, I love all of this, I like it. This is a part of our big Russian World, Russian-Ukrainian one.<sup>5</sup>*

*Thus the Ukrainian identity is not considered as something separate from Russia, but is seen rather as a united Russian-Ukrainian identity*

President Putin has also claimed that “Russians and Ukrainians are practically the same nation”.<sup>6</sup> Thus the Ukrainian identity is not considered as something separate from Russia, but is seen rather as a united Russian-Ukrainian identity. Ukraine is also depicted as a bridge between the West and Russia.

European identity is seen as decadent, as characterised by the famous words of president Putin at the Valdai Club in 2013. Referring to the European countries, he said:

*... the moral foundations and any traditional identity are being denied: national, cultural, religious, and even sexual. The policies put on the same level the multi-child family and same-sex partnership[s], faith in God, and faith in Satan.<sup>7</sup>*

Another important theme in the political discourse on identity is the notion of sovereignty, independence and patriotism. The

<sup>5</sup> Kremlin.ru, “Zasedaniye mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’”, 19 September 2013. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243> (accessed 18 September 2018).

<sup>6</sup> “O nastoyashem i budushem Ukrainy. Pryamaya liniya Putina”. Korrespondent.net, 7 June 2018. <https://korrespondent.net/world/russia/3978312-o-nastoiashem-y-buduschem-ukrayny-priamaia-lynyia-putyina> (accessed 14 October 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Kremlin.ru, “Zasedaniye mezhdunarodnogo diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdai’ ”.

latter is understood in many instances together with remembrance of the Great Patriotic War, and militaristic education.

The themes of the unique civilisation and Russian “civilisational code” or “cultural code” are sometimes mentioned.

In general, the main theme of messages on the Kremlin’s website is the need to unite Russia around the all-Russia identity; the role played by the Russian language is seen in the context of education, culture and history, and sometimes a unique civilisation.

## 2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN LEGISLATION

The conscious actions of the Russian state to establish the national identity also include the concrete mention of this issue in legislation. Here as well, one can see that the language plays a prominent role.

Russia’s main legal act, its Constitution, starts with the preamble, “We, the multinational people of the Russian Federation ...”, and goes on to establish the Russian language as the state language. At the same time, the Constitution states that

*The Republics shall have the right to establish their own state languages. In the bodies of state authority and local self-government, state institutions of the Republics, they shall be used together with the state language of the Russian Federation.*

The next sub-article states that “The Russian Federation shall guarantee to all of its peoples the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development”<sup>8</sup>

In 2012, president Putin signed a decree on the “Strategy of State Nationality Policy of the Russian Federation for the period till 2025”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “The Constitution of the Russian Federation”. <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-04.htm> (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “Ukaz Prezidenta RF ot 19 dekabrya 2012 goda nr 1666 ‘O Strategii gosudarstvennoy natsionalnoy politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsii na period do 2025 goda’”. <http://base.garant.ru/70284810/#friends> (accessed 27 August 2018).

Among the main goals of this strategy was the protection of minorities and their languages, and the spiritual unity of the peoples of Russia. The support of compatriots living beyond the country’s borders is also one of the objectives.

The proposal for a federal law on “forming Russian identity” (31 October 2016) was first raised by a former minister of nationalities, Vyacheslav Mihailov, and was later supported by president Putin. In 2017, it was decided that society was not ready to accept such a federal law. This decision is an example of the controversy surrounding the issue. As the head of the working group, Valeri Tishkov, said, the notion of a unified nation uniting all the ethnicities is not yet understandable to everybody. This move coincided with the decision of president Putin to have a law based on the Strategy of State Nationality Policy. The resulting draft law is for the time being called the “Law on the Foundations of Nationality Policy of the Russian Federation”.<sup>10</sup> It contains key definitions of the notions connected to the nationality issue, including identity. “The civic identity” (*общегражданская идентичность*) is defined in this project as “the awareness by citizens of the Russian Federation of their belonging to the Russian [*российская*] nation”.

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The Russian nation is defined as the “historical social-political commonality of the multi-ethnic people of Russia with a common historic destiny, common constructive activities to strengthen the unified state”. Among other things, the draft also mentions the need to protect the cultures and languages of all the nationalities of the Russian Federation.

<sup>10</sup> “Proekt Federalnogo zakona n 369190-3 ‘Ob osnovakh gosudarstvennoy natsionalnoy politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsii’”. <https://www.zonazakona.ru/law/projects/217/> (accessed 27 August 2018).

In 2014, the document “The Foundations of State Culture Policy” was approved by the president. The introduction mentions Russia’s greatness and its multinational character, and the unification of East and West. The Russian language and Orthodoxy are mentioned as having played the key role in forming the culture of Russia. The document also lists the challenges that the state must face up

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to, among them the degradation of values, distortion of the historical memory, and the spread of false information about the claimed historical backwardness of Russia.<sup>11</sup>

The state programme “Patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation 2016–2020” was approved in December 2015. Among its objectives, this programme lists activities to strengthen and develop the common national consciousness of the Russian people, high morality and civic solidarity. Among other things, citizens are to feel proud of Russia’s achievements, show respect for the culture, traditions and history of all the country’s nationalities, and respect the Constitution. Important historical events and dates are mentioned, along with explicitly military history and the popularisation of heroes.<sup>12</sup>

*Put simply, native-language instruction would be omitted from the basic educational programmes of state schools and become a form of extracurricular activity*

<sup>11</sup> Ministerstvo kultury Rossiiskoy Federatsii, “Osnovy gosudarstvennoy kulturnoy politiki”, 2015. [www.mkrf.ru/upload/mkrf/mkdocs2016/OSNOVI-PRINT.NEW.indd.pdf](http://www.mkrf.ru/upload/mkrf/mkdocs2016/OSNOVI-PRINT.NEW.indd.pdf) (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Pravitelstvo Rossiiskoy Federatsii, “Postanovleniye Pravitelstva RF ot 30 dekabrya 2015 goda n 1493 o gosudarstvennoy programme ‘Patrioticheskoye vospitaniye grazhdan Rossiiskoy Federatsii na 2016–2020 gody’”. <http://gov.garant.ru/SESSION/PILOT/main.htm> (accessed 14 October 2018).

### 3. THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AND “NATIONAL LANGUAGES” IN RUSSIA

The recent amendment of the law on education raised an important debate in Russia. The law was dubbed “the law on national languages” as the language issue was the real reason for amending it. The process of changing this law started in 2017, after a statement by president Putin to the effect that no one should be forced to study “non-native” languages. In July 2017, at a press conference in Yoshkar-Ola, capital of the Mari El Republic, Putin stated that the Russian language was “the spiritual foundation” of the country and could not be replaced.<sup>13</sup>

Teaching ethnic-minority languages would become optional, to avoid any possibility of forcing anyone to learn a language not native to them. His statement allegedly responded to complaints by ethnic Russians in Tatarstan about their children being compelled to learn Tatar in school. On 19 June 2018, the Russian Duma adopted the amendment making the study of 34 of the 35 official languages of Russia optional. Previously, native-language instruction had been within the jurisdiction of the regional governments in Russia’s 26 ethnically defined autonomous republics and okrugs.

The amendment to the law was proposed by ten members of the Duma, mainly from the United Russia party. The main idea was to *clarify that the teaching and study of state languages of the national republics in the Russian Federation is undertaken on the basis of the free will and without bringing harm to the teaching of the state language of the Russian Federation.*

Put simply, native-language instruction would be omitted from the basic educational programmes of state schools and become a form of extracurricular activity. Before the law was enacted, pupils in the national regions studied the subject “native language” (*родной язык*) compulsorily.

<sup>13</sup> Kremlin.ru, “Council for Interethnic relations meeting”, 20 July 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55109> (accessed 17 September 2018).



One of the arguments against this amendment is legal: Article 68 of the Russian Constitution states that the regions have the right to establish their state languages. If these languages are “state languages”, they must be taught at schools as a state language. Activists in the national republics who oppose the amendment thought that this was a strong argument that the law was unconstitutional.

The suppression of ethnic-minority languages has been an ongoing process. For example, in Mari El Republic – where the ethnic minority speaks the Mari language, which belongs to the Fenno-Ugric group – bilingual signs have been gradually changed to Russian-only. From 2001 to 2007 Mari El was governed by an ethnic Russian, Leonid Markelov, who was said to hate the Mari people. The locals often say that Mari El remains a republic in name only. Some commentators claim that the suppression of national identity in ethnic regions is mainly meant to keep the peace in the Caucasus region, where insurgency is historically most prominent.<sup>14</sup> The present situation and federal structure of the Russian state is believed to be the legacy of Vladimir Lenin, whose nationality policy was to divide Russia into regions and support ethnic identities in order to prevent further dissolution of the empire. The idea was to take the initiative away from local nationalists and develop their culture “from above”. Thus, Moscow would first print books in the national languages, nominate local officials and admit ethnic-minority students to universities as a priority. Hence, the republics remained connected to the centre as a source of their national “sovereignty”. The new assimilation policies of Putin’s Russia can now shake this balance.<sup>15</sup>

Criticism of the new amendment to the education law came mainly from Tatarstan, Kalmykia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Activists in the national regions were quite vocal, and the representatives of Yakutia, Tatarstan and North Ossetia turned to the United Nations. Their demands included the need for Russia to sign

the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This public outcry can be seen as quite unique in the conditions of modern Russia. Though democratic mechanisms do not work properly, the federal authorities often monitor public opinion and take some account of it. This situation led to the idea of “softening” the bill in some way. The authorities undertook

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consultations and the resulting law was passed on 25 July 2018. A compromise seemed to have been achieved. President Putin signed the new law on 4 August, and it came into force on 14 August.

But is it a real compromise? The main change was to the controversial part about the study of national languages being optional. They are now compulsory, but the Russian language can also be claimed as “native”/“mother tongue” (*родной язык*), and can be chosen for study.<sup>16</sup>

The national minorities are not happy with this result, which they consider a trick, meaning that it seems to be a compromise but in essence still leads to the decline of ethnic languages. The voices in national republics are disappointed, claiming that their concerns were not taken into account. For example, Ruslan Aisin, editor of the website “Poistine”, says that the main nuance is that Russian is studied as the state language, and at the same time can be chosen as a “native” one as well. Thus, he claims, the law is in the interests of the federal centre, which is striving to unify the education system.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that the federal authorities tried to sweeten the pill by promising new programmes

<sup>14</sup> Neil Hauer, “Putin’s plan to russify the Caucasus. How Russia’s New Language Law could Backfire”. *Foreign Affairs*, 1 August 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2018-08-01/putins-plan-russify-caucasus> (accessed 21 August 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Maksim Gorjunov, “Ni slova po-tatarski. Kreml razrushaet sovetskuyu sistemu zashity ot separatizma i ne vidit v etom problemy”. *Novaja Gazeta* No. 91, 22 August 2018. <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/08/20/77553-ni-slova-po-tatarski> (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>16</sup> *Federalnyi zakon ot 29.12.2012 n 273 FZ (red. ot 03.08.2018) “Ob obrazovanii v Rossiiskoy Federatsii”*. [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_140174/bf7fad3532c712ccd28cc2599243fb8018ed869/#dst100249](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_140174/bf7fad3532c712ccd28cc2599243fb8018ed869/#dst100249) (accessed 21 August 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Zarema Hasanova, “Etot zakon ochenj lukavyi, On zakrepljaet sostoyaniye, uhudshavshee znaniye rodnyh yazykov iz goda v god”, *On Kavkaz*, 27 July 2018. <https://onkavkaz.com/news/2362-etot-zakon-ochen-lukavyi-on-zakrepljaet-sostojanie-uhudshavshee-znanie-rodnyh-jazykov-iz-goda-v.html> (accessed 21 August 2018).

and financing in order to protect ethnic-minority languages. It is planned to create a foundation to facilitate the study of native languages. The chairman of the State Duma Committee on Education and Science, Vyacheslav Nikonov – who is also well known as chairman of the Russian World Foundation and grandson of the famous Stalin-era politician Vyacheslav Molotov – called this the start of a long road, which would draw greater attention to the study of native languages.

## 4. THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE OUTSIDE RUSSIA

Elsewhere, the Russian language is an instrument of soft power, used for example as a tool for spreading anti-Western narratives. The language is one of the main symbolic values of the “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir), a programme intended to spread Russian culture around the world. This initiative is a step beyond the so-called Compatriot programme, as it is much more inclusive while at the same time amorphous. The term “Russian World” can be traced back to medieval accounts, later re-emerging in the writings of the 19th century. Modern usage grew from an article by Petr Shchedrovitsky and Efim Ostrovsky published in 1999 (“Russia: The country that does not exist”).<sup>18</sup> In 2007, the Russian World Foundation was established under the umbrella of the ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education and Science. The notion of the Russian World has always remained ambiguous, allowing the authorities to include in its activities both ethnic Russians abroad and people just interested in Russian culture. The promotion of the Russian language is one of the initiative’s main activities.

The language holds the Russian World together and strengthens Russia’s prestige as its centre of education and culture. It is an important element in political life, whose influence spreads through the language as a channel.

The promotion of the language mostly takes the form of voluntary education programmes and participation of those interested in

<sup>18</sup> Efim Ostrovki and Peter Shedrovitski, “Rossija: strana, kotoroj ne bylo”. <http://gtmarket.ru/laboratory/expertize/2006/466> (accessed 18 September 2018).

Pushkin Institute, which follows the model of the British Council and the Goethe Institute. It is natural that the Russians of Russia consider the knowledge of their mother tongue very important (97% of Russians agree that the command of written and spoken language is an important skill).<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, there are cases of more aggressive behaviour, which can be considered attempts to influence the domestic policies of other countries. The Russian authorities understand that language is an important element of soft power. The original concept of soft power by Joseph Nye stressed the power of attraction, but in Russia it is understood rather in terms of information warfare. It is possible to measure the power of languages, as was done by the Power Language Index developed by Kai Chan of the INSEAD Innovation and Policy Initiative. This index measures many criteria, from GDP to the ability to be understood when travelling. While English and Mandarin come first and second respectively in the ratings, Russian is placed firmly in the top ten.<sup>20</sup> Russian sources estimate the number of people in the world speaking Russian at some level (including mother-tongue speakers and others who use the language) at about half a billion, and rank Russian the third language in the world after English and Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

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The policy of spreading Russian influence is reflected in a special programme called “‘The Russian language’ for 2016–2020”,<sup>22</sup> which deals directly with language policy. This document explicitly says that Russian is a global

<sup>19</sup> VTSIOM, “Russkii yazyk. Norma i praktika”. <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9145> (accessed 8 October 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Kai L. Chan, “The World’s Most Powerful Languages”. <http://www.kailchan.ca/2017/05/the-worlds-most-powerful-languages/> (accessed 27 August 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Ljudmila A. Verbitskaya, “Russian Language in Russia and Abroad”. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/v/russkiy-yazyk-v-rossii-i-za-ee-predelami> (accessed 7 October 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Pravitelstvo Rossiiskoy Federatsii, “Postanovleniye ot 20 maya 2015 goda n 481 o federalnoy tselevoy programme ‘Russkiy Yazyk’ na 2016–2020 gody”. <http://static.government.ru/media/files/UdArRuNmg2Hdm3MwRUwmdE9N3ohepqpQ.pdf> (accessed 21 August 2018).



language and is important for civilisation. The programme's financing is more than seven billion roubles – around 122 million US dollars – and suggests, among other things, an “active offensive strategy”. Russian-language teachers around the world are brought together in the International Association of Teachers of the Russian Language and Literature, of which 85 countries are members.<sup>23</sup>

Russian is still held in high regard in some of the countries that were either restored or newly established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, the Central Asian states or Armenia, where it belongs to what linguists call the “prestige domain”. The situation is different in the Baltic states, where orientation towards the West is determined by many historical factors. The influence of the Russian language is also in decline in Central Asia, and the Russian government has made several attempts to stop this trend. For example, Tajikistan has been a target of a programme to send Russian-language teachers and textbooks from Russia.

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While inside Russia the federal state language remains dominant and the protection of minority languages is declining, the Russian government is actively intervening in the status of the Russian language outside Russia. Prominent examples include the transition to titular language education in Estonia and Latvia<sup>24</sup> and the language law in Ukraine.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the Russian constitution, official Russian political discourse emphasises the civic nation over the ethnic component, stressing the importance of the all-Russia identity. It is the main theme of statements connected to identity on the Kremlin's website. The authorities often mention different nationalities residing in Russia, and the need to protect their cultures and languages. However, the importance of the Russian ethnic nation as a “state-forming” nation and its language has been stressed increasingly strongly in recent years, as indicated by the legislative and other documents analysed above. It could be said that mentioning different ethnicities and the need to protect them is paying lip-service to the constitutional federal structure of the state. The latest developments concerning the minority languages and the law to make their instruction voluntary show how the Russian language and state identity increasingly dominate the discourse.

The example of the Russian language and its instrumentalisation in the political discourse allows us to see the dual character of the policy. Russia is in a situation in which it must preserve its federal structure inside the state, while at the same time the nationalist tendencies of the authorities lead to the dominance of the Russian language and culture. This nationalism has an outlet in the form of the “Russian World” policy, which spreads Russian-ness outside the country, and which has become one of the tools of Russian foreign policy.

This dual process shows how, against the background of the suppression of democracy inside Russia, a forceful all-Russia identity is being established. At the same time, Russian foreign policy is using democratic mechanisms outside Russia to achieve its goals in Western democracies, which are more vulnerable to such attempts as they are open and free.

<sup>23</sup> Verbitskaya, “Russian Language in Russia and Abroad”.

<sup>24</sup> EUROAKTIV.com with AFP, “Latvia's school language reform irks Russian minority”. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/languages-culture/news/in-latvia-school-language-reform-irks-russian-minority/> (accessed 25 October 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Ukrainian President Signs Controversial Language Bill Into Law”, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-poroshenko-signs-controversial-language-bill-into-law/28757195.html> (accessed 25 October 2018).

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