

EXPERT EVALUATION OF THE BULGARIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (2018). AN INSIGHT FROM BRUSSELS.

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Abstract

This article presents one of the traditional instruments for developing a RPCEU evaluation – interviews with foreign experts based in Brussels. In pursuance of this goal, the statement is structured around the accomplishment of three research objectives. First, defending the significance of the results of the conducted interviews with external experts in relation to the integral RPCEU assessment index. Second, explaining the questionnaire for conducting interviews and the selection of respondents. Third, a brief review of the obtained results of the integral RPCEU expert assessment index.

Key words: Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of EU, external evaluation, interviews, quantity values.

The succession of crises which the European Union had to overcome during the previous decade – the Ukrainian, the financial, the refugee, and currently the Iranian one – put the Union under a great external pressure. The nearly double increase of the number of Member States after the big Eastern Enlargement, also accompanied by an increase of the significance of the intergovernmental decision-making principle, but also with an increased competition among the EU institutions, each of which has its own institutional stakes, premises the complication of the decision-making process in the EU for an effective reaction. In this situation of tension between demanding external shocks and energy-consuming reactivity of the Union, the rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU look like a stabilizing factor creating the possibility for the implementation of integration policies.

The rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU (RPCEU) are a key mechanism in the decision-making process in the EU, through which the EU integration process is implemented. After the important changes in the competencies and responsibilities of the rotating presidencies, due to the entering into force of the Treaty of Lisbon on 1st December 2009 (in particular, undertaking the presidencies' leadership functions by the figures of the President of the Council of the EU and of the High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU), the main work of the presidencies is focused on the maintenance, and in case there is possibility – in the accelerating of the legislative process, through which there is created a basic legal framework for the implementation of the EU integration policies.

The important role of the RPCEU premises the academic community's attention on them. This attention has a tradition of more than thirty years.¹ Despite the broadly shared understanding that knowing the RPCEU efficiency is an important prerequisite for improving the integration process, however, there isn't a reliable enough instrument so far, which to allow in a transparent and objective way to be made an expert evaluation – a supranational and non-party one, of each presidency. The main reason for this research is the methodological challenge to be measured, and respectively, strictly expertly evaluated such a complex political subject as the rotating presidency is (Vandecasteele, B. and Bossuyt, 2014). The scope and intensity, the phases, but also the temporal dynamics of its activities are not a constant, but they depend on many circumstances, which at that are not always under control of the RPCEU state (for example, unevenness of the law-making process in the EU; established states of the work process on the legislative and non-legislative initiatives from the previous presidency; international political situation; unforeseen events, etc.).

The limited set of instruments for researching the RPEU leadership potential premises an opportunity for giving politicized and respectively, quite often diametrically opposite evaluations of the presidencies, which besides being with a problematic scientific credibility, also have the potential to erode the meaning of the institution.

This article aims at contributing to the abovementioned problems by introducing one of the traditional instruments for developing a RPCEU evaluation – conducting interviews with foreign experts based in Brussels. They have been participants in the work of our presidency in some specific quality and at the respective level of commitment, ensuing from the particularities of the work on the dossiers for which Bulgaria has been responsible. The scholarly novelty in this case is two-sided. First, the own content of the registered evaluations is important, which are presumably objective, interested mostly in the result of the work, and not in the positive evaluation of a concrete national rotating presidency. The second quality, however, is not less important – it is about reviewing these

¹ Vandecasteele, Bruno, and Fabienne Bossuyt. „Assessing EU council presidencies: (Conditions for) success and influence.“ *Comparative European Politics* 12.2 (2014): 233-247.

interviews and the total „external evaluation“ contained in them as an addition to the result of the application of the original integral index developed by our team for expert measurement of the performance of the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU in 2018 in quantity values². In short, here both the content parameters of the external evaluation, and also the evaluation of the cognitive potential of the methodological instrument itself is going to be significant – conducting interviews with external experts having specific „added value“ to the evaluation of the Bulgarian Presidency as well.

In pursuance of this goal, the statement is structured around the accomplishment of three research objectives. First, defending the significance of the results of the conducted interviews with external experts in relation to the integral RPCEU assessment index. Second, explaining the questionnaire for conducting interviews and the selection of respondents. Third, a brief review of the obtained results of the integral RPCEU expert assessment index.

The exposition is based on primary informational and methodological documents related to the performance of the Bulgarian Rotating Presidency in the first half of 2018, collected and/or developed in the implementation of the research project *Developing an Index for Expert Assessment of the Rotating Presidencies of the Council of the EU on the Basis of the Bulgarian Case*.³

The significance of conducting interviews with external experts for the RPCEU evaluation

The interviews with experts that are institutionally based in Brussels – no matter whether at the EC, EP or the Council (we are going to provisionally indicate them with the IEB abbreviation) give the opportunity for obtaining information about the RPCEU evaluation from a point of view that relatively lacks national involvement. The integral index, through which there has been

² Велева-Ефтимова, М. (2020), Оценка на политическите инициативи на ротационното председателство на Съвета на ЕС, В: Юбилеен сборник в чест на доц. Юлия Захаријева, София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“; Тонева-Методиева, Линка (2020), Да оценяваме Ротационното председателство на Европейския съюз на база на доказателства: Защо и как, сп. Дипломация, брой 23; Linka Toneva-Metodieva (2020), Evaluating the Presidency of the Council of the EU: towards a comprehensive evidence-based framework for performance assessment, European Politics and Society, DOI: 10.1080/23745118.2020.1712539.

³ The project was implemented within the third year of the action of the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at the European Studies Department of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ (2016-2019) and with the considerable financial support of the „Research Activities“ at the Science Fund, Faculty of Philosophy of Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“ - 2019 under Agreement № 80-10-143 with Project Manager Assoc. Prof. Mirela Veleva. The interviews with the external experts were conducted by Yoana Borissova, who enthusiastically and very actively assisted the research team, especially in the extremely complicated preparatory work for their conducting, additionally hampered by the moment of transition from Juncker's Commission to that of Von der Leyen.

made the expert⁴ evaluation of the Bulgarian Rotating Presidency, except on extracting data from published official EU and Presidency documents, has as a main information resource the content of the answers from the standardized interviews of a representative sample of Bulgarian participants in the Presidency work. That is why the IEB show an alternative expert point of view on the presenting of the presidency in a specific sectoral policy, as well as in a comparative perspective in relation to the experience from the work with previous presidencies in the respective sphere of competence.

The national neutrality is a considerable advantage of the IEB, which makes the results of their conducting an important addition to the evaluation made on the RPCEU. At the same time, namely because of these characteristics the IEB results remain only and particularly an additional instrument to the index developed on the basis of an integral approach towards the RPCEU content, reflected when developing and applying the index. The basic assumption in the development of this index is the understanding of an exclusive complexity and multidimensionality of the RPCEU – multifacetedness (interaction in relation to a set of different sectoral policies), multilaterality (a large number of participants in the interaction, who at that work at different levels), different phases of interaction, variable interaction dynamics. Holding all these variables in a single framework requires a high level of comparability between the different work instruments, which at that have to provide the optimal quantity of reliable information. The external point of view is hard to be compared with these work instruments due to its exclusiveness and namely because of this remains an external additional.

We again emphasize that from a methodological point of view the IEB is a traditionally used instrument for measuring the performance of a rotating presidency, because it allows the application of a comparative perspective in relation to other presidencies. Meanwhile, the results obtained from IEB cannot achieve the high syntheticity of meaning of a specific numeral result, as is with the other facts about the RPCEU included in the index, but they remain at the level of content analysis and narrative presenting of their specificities. This gives the opportunity for comparing the obtained results in terms of different assessment scales.

The combination of the advantage of the external point of view and the methodological IEB characteristics create enough prerequisites for using the

⁴ It is important to be noted that the term „expertise“ is used with a dual meaning within the whole research. First, a great part of the information on which the integral index is constructed has been obtained through standardized interviews with the Bulgarian participants in the work groups on the respective legislative, non-legislative and political initiatives (dossiers). In these groups, the Bulgarian participants have worked namely in their capacity as experts on the respective sectoral policies. Second, the expertise of the evaluation is guaranteed also by the very strict following of the methodological standards, providing reliability and representativeness, and also a strict methodological control on the procedures leading to the final quantitative result from the integral index application.

results from this instrument as a means for control and verification of the integral index result. In this way, the IEB contribute to enhancing the scientific credibility both of the evaluation itself and of the instrument of its creation.

Developing a questionnaire and selecting the respondents

Through the IEB, the authors team aims at revealing whether there is a prevailing „averaged assessment“ or there has occurred a considerably differentiated picture in terms of content, which hypothetically could express even sharply polarized, contradictory assessments in the external expert evaluation of the Rotating Presidency. This additional information from the external experts could enhance the content density of the assessment obtained from the integral index. Subject of research were the assessments of the external experts on the Bulgarian Presidency, who under the undertaken institutional position to a higher extent could be carriers of valid statements. Of interest are not the individual opinions, but the points of intersection between them, so that there could be revealed the content and the structure of the prevailing opinion on the Rotating Presidency performance. This aggregate opinion consists of two main components⁵:

- evaluation of the RPCEU performance in a specific sectoral policy, supported by a concrete illustrative example, as a control question overcoming the respondent's possible proneness to „politically correct“ speaking or other pre-assumed tendency;
- evaluation of the RPCEU in a comparative perspective, again with the support of an illustrative example.

Namely in relation to these meaningful emphases have been constructed the main questions to the respondents, formulated in a way that supports the establishment of an environment of trust and commitment between the interviewer and the respondent/expert (Appendix 1).

The selection of respondents has been made on the basis of the obtained results about the RPCEU performance in the individual legislative dossiers by the integral index set of instruments. There have been selected an equal number of dossiers, i.e. fields of sectoral policies from three main categories of efficiency – such with a high value of the result, with a medium value and with a low value. Put in other words, the point of reference in the selection hasn't been the rank or the specific institutional position of the respondent, but the policy field in which such should be searched. The table with the names of the legislative dossiers compiled on this basis has been used as a list for searching respondents (Appendix 2).

With a view to providing the maximum diversity of points of view, there has been recommended a broad scope of possible institutional positions of

⁵ The respondents were also given the opportunity, at their own desire, to highlight some meaningful emphasis of their impressions from the work of the Bulgarian RPCEU.

potential respondents: EP – rapporteur for the dossier, a shadow rapporteur from another party family, different from that of the ruling party in Bulgaria; EC – responsible director or a GD director in the respective policy field of the selected dossier; GSC – directors or deputy directors in the portfolio directorate, in accordance with the policy areas⁶.

A brief review of the obtained results

The prevailing general evaluation of the work of the Bulgarian Presidency in a specific sectoral policy is predominantly positive, but it is very hard to be emphasized that this total evaluation is considerably variable – from „satisfactory“ to „very good“. This is very important, rich in content information, the value of which is additionally increased by its structural parameters. As early as when conducting the work on the application of a unique integral index for expert assessment of the Bulgarian RPCEU we ascertained that there are many considerable differences in the efficiency of the work of the numerous Bulgarian experts work groups. In the first place, the differences have been namely sector-based. Accordingly, namely the internal differentiation of the evaluations obtained by interviews in Brussels is a proof that they are based primarily on the specific reality of the work and efficiency in the work groups, and not on general considerations and some „political correctness“. It is also obvious that the total evaluation is conditionally averaged under a value that would be *particularly in the middle* of the possible, not discussed in the terms of a specific type of scale – three-score, four-score, five-score, one hundred-score, but a clearly implied assessment metrics.

Besides, it is important that the abovementioned predominant content grounds of the mentioned evaluations are confirmed by the fact that in most of the cases are given arguments in support of the evaluation. Some of these arguments are concrete examples of successful cooperation. For example, the characteristic evaluations of the Bulgarian Rotating Presidency are of that type:

- „[it] was highly committed to closing the file (the dossier) and undertook a pro-active position in order to achieve a compromise“;
- „it was expected the file to be closed before the Bulgarian Presidency, when the dialogue during the Estonian Presidency failed, the Bulgarian

⁶ Within this list there have been found over 200 potential respondents and at least an initial contact has been established with them. Due to a number of various reasons, the majority from the contacted experts refused to give an interview. There have been planned 20, from which there have been accomplished 17 interviews that cover the three types of values of the result from the work on the dossiers. As there has been expected, the largest number of the responding officials is from the EP, which is an institution often preferred for research - namely because of the relative transparency of its work. The counterpoint is the number of the officials working in the Council formats who have responded to the invitation, which confirms the often made conclusion about the limited transparency and accessibility of/to the work of this institution.

state was surprised, but promptly appointed an expert who could consult us informally. He was highly committed and this turned to be decisive for the successful dialogue“.

Another part (we emphasize that it is about a large part of the arguments for the RPCEU evaluation) are more general impressions – good preliminary preparation, prompt reaction in unforeseen situations, readiness for cooperation and searching for compromises. For example, the Bulgarian Presidency was „wonderfully prepared, committed and actively working“, „I cannot give a concrete example, but I wasn’t disappointed in any moment“.

The unconditionally predominant evaluation (with a single exception!)⁷ of the Bulgarian Presidency in a comparative perspective is explicitly positive. Moreover, almost all the respondents have declared to have previous experience in the work with rotating presidencies. This definitiveness or, more precisely, the very strong coherence of the obtained results, however, has been balanced by the relative decrease of evaluation value. If in the above case, when there is discussed the general impression from the work of the Bulgarian RPCEU, this value is in the „good“ category, in comparison with other national presidencies – it falls to predominantly „average“⁸.

There is almost a complete lack of arguments in support of the evaluation, with two exceptions. The one of them, however, puts it under suspicion, rather than supporting it. Most of the respondents who have declared previous experience with other presidencies have answered negatively to the question whether their specific work has been affected by the Bulgarian Presidency. This dominating tendency poses the question about the basic reference framework, in relation to which the respondents evaluate a presidency and to what extent actually their answers carry unilateral and strictly factual content density. The RPCEU exercising of power on the work of the EU institutions can be also interpreted as an indicator for accomplishing success (Vandecasteele, B. and Bossuyt, 2014)⁹.

⁷ Interview with a political advisor from ENVI Committee in charge of the „Proposal for a DIRECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources“.

⁸ A possible explanation for the contradiction between the evaluation and the impressions from the work of the Bulgarian Presidency and of the same but in a comparative perspective, is the presence of preliminary low expectations towards the efficiency of the Bulgarian Presidency, about which witnesses the general tone of the media publications on the topic of the forthcoming at the beginning of 2018 Bulgarian Presidency. Hence, the absolutely logical evaluation construction – as Bulgarian it is high, as European it is average, but exactly as such, it is high because it cannot be said that this is the rule...

⁹ The two authors who make a review and evaluation of the available literature on the RPCEU summarize that four main issues are subject of active academic debate, beyond the theoretical constructivist-rationalist dispute – whether the RPCEU can exert influence at all; what are the definitions of „influence“ and „success“ (often the „influence“ is contrasted with the „success“); what is the definition of „interest“; whether it is possible to have objective evaluation with such causal complexity.

Conclusion

As a result of the so presented results from the interviews with foreign experts, there can be drawn several conclusions. First, in a content perspective, the obtained results closely approximate those that we have obtained through applying the integral index. The external expert evaluation of the Bulgarian Presidency work is predominantly average. This evaluation gives additional credibility to the assessment obtained from the quantity analysis and practically confirms it.

Second, from a methodological point of view this evaluation is valuable due to the advantages of the external, relatively independent expert view. At the same time, it is difficult to be achieved due to logistic reasons, but also mostly due to its dependence from the personal attitude of the approached respondents, because of which representativeness cannot be guaranteed. These disadvantages can have a cumulative effect when they are combined with the limited clarity of a factual unambiguousness, as the grounds for the evaluation inherently contain a subjective moment. The listed specificities unequivocally justify the value of the information obtained in this way, but only as additional to the result of the integral index.

Appendix 1

Questions to foreign experts working at the European institutions based in Brussels

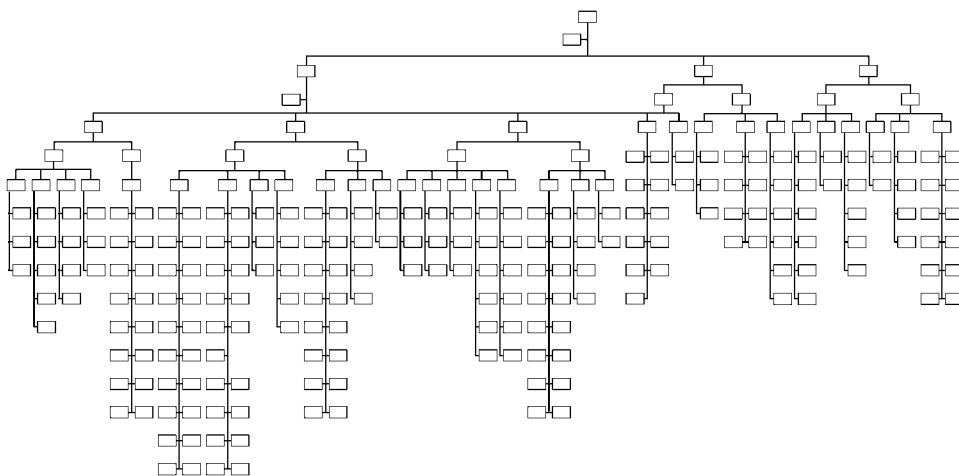
The Bulgarian rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU ended approximately a year ago.

1. Would you recall your work with your Bulgarian partners? On which topics did you have interactions with Bulgarian partners?
2. Who did you interact with the most - with persons in Brussels or in Sofia?
3. What is your overall opinion on the way your Bulgarian colleagues were handling their jobs?
4. Could you please provide a few examples on which your standpoint is based? Do you remember an occasion when you were pleasantly surprised by the work of a Bulgarian colleague? What about an occasion when you were disappointed by something in their work?
5. Do you have experience working with colleagues from other countries who have worked for the rotating Presidency of their countries?
6. From a comparative perspective, did the Bulgarian experts achieved average results, below or above average
7. Do you remember what were the preliminary expectations of the Bulgarian Presidency? In your opinion, what is the ratio between expectations and end results?
8. Had there been any occasions when your work was directly influenced by the work of the Bulgarian government? What happened in these occasions? *(Please give examples)*
9. Is there something you would like to recommend to your Bulgarian colleagues?
10. Is there something else you would like to share with us?

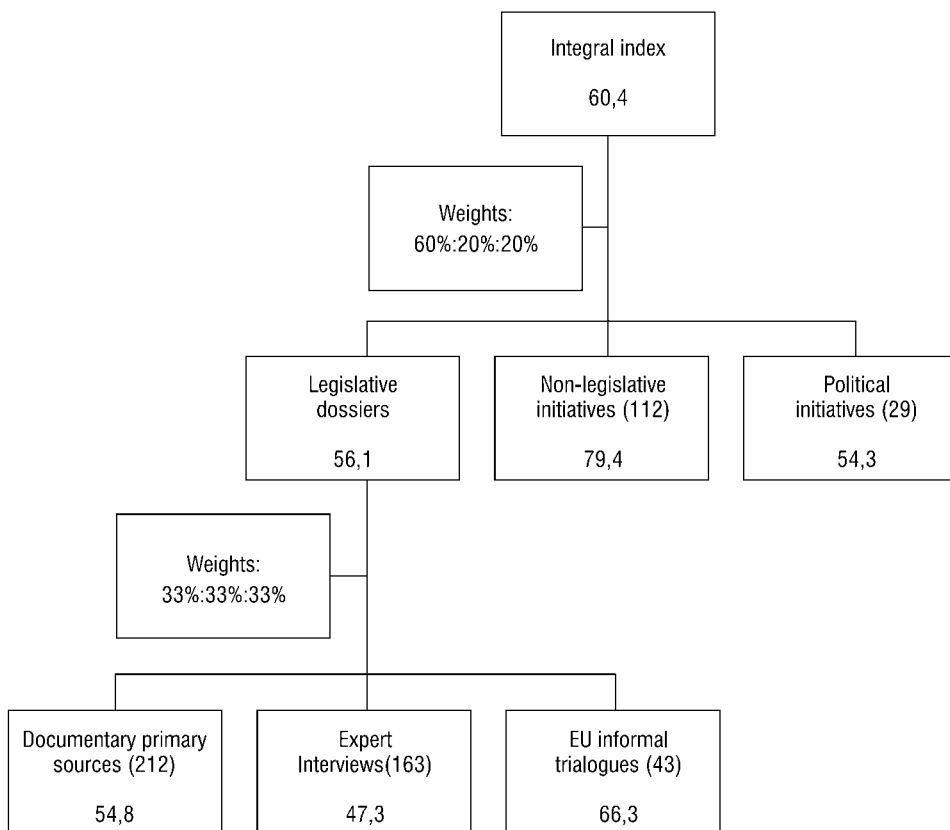
Appendix 2

	High values
2016/0231	Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on binding annual greenhouse gas emission reductions by Member States from 2021 to 2030 for a resilient Energy Union and to meet commitments under the Paris Agreement and amending Regulation № 525/2013
2017/0224	Draft Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union
2016/0409	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment, operation and use of the Schengen Information System (SIS) in the field of police cooperation and judicial cooperation in criminal matters, amending Regulation (EU) № 515/2014 and repealing Regulation (EC) № 1986/2006, Council Decision 2007/533 and Commission Decision 2010/261
2017/0334	Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2017/825 to increase the financial envelope of the Structural Reform Support Programme and adapt its general objective
2016/0389	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on integrated farm statistics and repealing Regulations (EC) № 1166/2008 and (EU) № 1337/2011
2017/0116	Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on safeguarding competition in air transport, repealing Regulation (EC) № 868/2004
2017/0063	Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council to empower the competition authorities of the Member States to be more effective enforcers and to ensure the proper functioning of the internal market
	Medium values
2018/0061	Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code)
2016/0152	Regulation (EU) 2018/302 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 February 2018 on addressing unjustified geo-blocking and other forms of discrimination based on customers' nationality, place of residence or place of establishment within the internal market and amending Regulations (EC) № 2006/2004 and (EU) 2017/2394 and Directive 2009/22/EC
2017/0056	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down management, conservation and control measures applicable in the Convention Area of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO)

2018/0104	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on strengthening the security of identity cards of Union citizens and of residence documents issued to Union citizens and their family members exercising their right of free movement
2017/0230	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) № 1093/2010 establishing a European Supervisory Authority (European Banking Authority); Regulation (EU) № 1094/2010 establishing a European Supervisory Authority (European Insurance and Occupational Pensions Authority); Regulation (EU) № 1095/2010 establishing a European Supervisory Authority (European Securities and Markets Authority); Regulation (EU) № 345/2013 on European venture capital funds; Regulation (EU) № 346/2013 on European social entrepreneurship funds; Regulation (EU) № 600/2014 on markets in financial instruments; Regulation (EU) 2015/760 on European long-term investment funds; Regulation (EU) 2016/1011 on indices used as benchmarks in financial instruments and financial contracts or to measure the performance of investment funds; Regulation (EU) 2017/1129 on the prospectus to be published when securities are offered to the public or admitted to trading on a regulated market
2018/0113	Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive (EU) 2017/1132 as regards the use of digital tools and processes in company law
	Low values
2018/0101	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council implementing the safeguard clauses and other mechanisms allowing for the temporary withdrawal of preferences in certain agreements concluded between the European Union and certain third countries
2018/0123	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) № 952/2013 laying down the Union Customs Code (as regards the inclusion of the Italian municipality of Campione d'Italia and the Italian waters of Lake Lugano in the customs territory of the Union)
2017/0353	Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing a framework for interoperability between EU information systems (police and judicial cooperation, asylum and migration)
2018/0111	Directive on the re-use of public sector information
2016/0382	Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources (recast)



***Complete scheme of the integral index
for expert assessment of the Bulgarian RPCEU work***



Scheme of the integral index, the general indices and sub-indices

СЛЕДВАЩИТЕ СЕДЕМ НА ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЯ СЪЮЗ

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