

The Rational Choice Theory as the Explanation of Coalition Formation in Germany 2017-2018

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Abstract. The present article offers an explanation of the coalition negotiations and government formation in the German Federal Republic based on the rational choice theory and coalition formation theory. Despite numerous prognoses of the process failure and significant electoral defeat the Chancellor Angela Merkel has found the ways and arguments to convince political rivals on the Coalition Agreement. The success was immediately explained by some observers as the “conspiracy theory” practical realization. Nevertheless there is a deeper reasoning in the Merkel’s arguments first of all of the rational character. This article presents a description of the rationale from the Eastern Europe researchers’ point of view. The results of this study might be used as a methodological approach to complex political processes analysis.

Keywords: elections in Germany, coalition negotiations, Great Coalition, rational choice theory, coalition theory.

1. Problem statement

In the history of United Germany the formation of the government never lasted so long. It took almost 7 months to form a new government. Despite significant electoral defeats, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has managed to form a "Great Coalition" ("Große Koalition" in German) for the third time¹. The question remains whether the decision to form a "Great «Great Coalition»" was rationally and strategically correct?

¹ Foundation Democratic Initiatives. (2018). *Coalition in Germany: victories, losses, and results*. [online] Available at: <http://dif.org.ua/article/koalitsiada-v-nimechchini-peremogi-porazki-i-rezultati-bataliy> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

Coalition talks in Germany have now become a very popular topic for research and analysis, and although the lack of full information about the decision-making process of the parties and their preferences in open access from the point of view of rational choice theory, coalition formation is covered in German media, publications, scientific articles, etc.

In this article, the formation of a coalition government is considered from the point of view of the rational choice theory. Assuming that the parties that formed the coalition used the rule of minimizing costs and maximizing benefits, it can be argued that an explanation of the coalition formation is possible in terms of this theory. The main actors who will be considered as rational members of the coalition formation are parties, whose efforts contribute to the formation of a coalition. First, a brief description of events describing the course of "coalitions" in Germany will be provided. The next part will give a brief description of the rational choice theory and the theory of coalitions, which closely linked to the latter. In the practical part, possible models of the process of making political decisions on the coalition formation will be considered, taking into account the interests of each party in terms of the rational choice theory and the theory of coalitions. The conclusions will suggest the predictions of further developments.

2. The course of events

On September 24, 2017, parliamentary elections were held in the Federal Republic of Germany. There were elected 598 members of the 19th Bundestag – the Federal Parliament of Germany. The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) remained the two largest parties in the Bundestag, but both received far fewer votes than during the elections in 2013. The SPD has shown the worst result in its history and announced its withdrawal into

opposition². In addition, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and Alternative for Germany (AfD) received enough votes to become participants in the Bundestag. These were the first federal elections in which the AfD received a sufficient number of votes to be represented in the Bundestag. Following the withdrawal of the SPD in the opposition, it was anticipated that a new coalition called "Jamaica"³ would be created (an idiomatic expression of the German political lexicon on the designation of the coalition of the three parties CDU / CSU, FDP and Alliance 90 / The Greens). The colors of the flag of Jamaica correspond to the party colors of the above-mentioned parties).

On the night of November 20, 2017, the FDP came out of negotiations on the creation of a new government coalition. In turn, the chairman of the FDP, Christian Lindner, said that "It is better not to govern than to govern badly"⁴. In a special congress of the SPD in January, 56 percent of delegates expressed support for the talks on a "Great Coalition", and a large number of the youth members wing of the party were strongly opposed⁵. On February 7, after lengthy negotiations, German conservatives headed by Merkel agreed with the leadership of the Social Democrats an agreement on the formation of a new government coalition. But the leaders of the SPD have put forward a condition: this agreement can be signed only if it is approved by ordinary party members – almost 460,000 party members. Voting by mail began on February 20 and lasted until March 4. During the March 4, 2018 mail voting, members of the Social Democratic Party spoke in favor of creating a "Great Coalition" with the Chancellor

² RBK Ukraine. (2017). *In the parliamentary elections in Germany, Merkel's conservative bloc won*. [online] Available at: <https://www.rbc.ua/ukr/news/parlamentskih-vyborah-germanii-oderzhal-pobedu-1506309039.html> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

³ Monath H. *Jamaika-Koalition - Ein regionales Experiment* [online] Tagesspiegel. Available at: <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/saarland-jamaika-koalition-ein-regionales-experiment/1614812.html>

⁴ Fried N. *FDP bricht Jamaika-Sondierungen ab* [online] Süddeutsche Zeitung. Available at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/sondierung-fdp-bricht-jamaika-sondierungen-ab-1.3755800>

⁵ Glavcom.ua. (2018). *Social Democrats in Germany supported the creation of a coalition with Merkel*. [online] Available at: <https://glavcom.ua/world/observe/social-demokrati-nimechchini-pidtrimali-stvorenniya-koaliciji-z-merkel-478291.html> [Accessed 4 Jun. 2018].

Angela Merkel CDU / CSU⁶. "For" the creation of a "Great Coalition" voted 66.02 percent of party members, and "against" – 33.98 percent. This decision opened the way for the creation of a new government in the Federal Republic of Germany⁷.

3. Theoretical background

The classical economic theory of utilitarianism (Smith, Bentham)⁸ played a decisive role in establishing the methodology of the rational choice theory. This theory derives from the classical concept of "homo economicus," whose supporters argue that this concept is absolutely adequate for solving social problems. Becker⁹ believes that this approach reveals the essence of any human behavior¹⁰. According to the ideas of the Chicago school of economics, in politics, as well as in the economy, people operate in conditions of market competition, where each individual aspires to achieve its own goals¹¹.

In the rational choice theory one can distinguish the following basic "axioms":

- actors are trying to maximize their own benefits while minimizing costs;
- actors have conscious interests and specific goals that they try to achieve with the help of optimal means;

⁶ Glavcom.ua. (2018). *Social Democrats in Germany supported the creation of a coalition with Merkel*. [online] Available at: <https://glavcom.ua/world/observe/social-demokrati-nimechchini-pidtrimali-stvorenniya-koaliciji-z-merkel-478291.html> [Accessed 4 Jun. 2018].

⁷ Evropejska Pravda. (2018). *Merkel began new coalition talks*. [online] Available at: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2018/01/7/7075762/> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

⁸ Smith G., May D. 1980. *The Artificial Debate between Rationalist and Incrementalist Models of Decision Making*. — *Policy and Politics*, № 8.

⁹ Becker, G. (1976). *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 171.

¹⁰ Dekhtyarov, A. (2003). *Methodological foundations and conceptual models in the interpretation of political decisions (I)*. 167-169.

¹¹ Dekhtyarov, A. (2003). *Methodological foundations and conceptual models in the interpretation of political decisions (I)*. 167-169.

- actors have information about possible alternatives and their implementation;

- actors make choices between alternatives on the basis of stable preferences and rational rules.

When researching the formation of coalitions, the theory of coalitions¹² is often used. The theory of coalitions and the coalition of political forces is one of the most developed areas in political science, which is related to the theory of rational choice. To understand the process of a coalition government, it is not enough to confine itself to ideological and political frameworks. The rational interests of the parties must be also taken into account. According to Grofman, the behavior of parties can be estimated in three dimensions: office-, policy-, and vote-seeking¹³ dimensions.

Office-seeking parties aim to get seats in the government and create their own program in accordance with the programs of potential partners so that political senses do not become an obstacle in creating a coalition after the elections. At the same time, they are relatively flexible in the negotiations and are ready to give way to separate provisions for the entry into the government¹⁴. The main problem of this dimension is that it does not take into account the political component of the coalition, offers many options that cannot be realized in practice (for example, the union of the extreme left and right parties). In addition, this dimension cannot be explained by the emergence of minority coalitions.

Policy-seeking – parties are trying to get into the office, as this is the only opportunity for them to implement their policies, which are in their program. Accordingly, their negotiating position is more rigid, because work

¹² Oberreuter H. Stimmungsdemokratie. Zürich: 1987. 426-429.

¹³ Grofman B., Straffin P., Noviello N. The Sequential Dynamics of Cabinet Formation. Stochastic Error, and a Test of Competing Models // Schofield, N., Collective Decision-Making: Social Choice and Political Economy. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996. 281-293.

¹⁴ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 75.

in the government for them is not an end in itself, but only a way to implement their program provisions and fulfill the promises they gave their voters¹⁵.

Vote-seeking – the main task of the party is the maximization of votes in the next election. It is this fact that determines their behavior in the process of coalition negotiations, the willingness to join or not to join the coalition¹⁶.

A Model of coalition formation

In terms of the rational choice theory and coalition theory, one can construct a model that explains the prediction of coalitions. The starting point for using this model is the need for an absolute majority of votes in the parliament to form a coalition¹⁷. This model was developed by Klimovich, who used it to explain the formation of a coalition after the elections to the Bundestag in 2013. According to the model of Klimovitsch, there are 4 levels of coalition formation:

Level 1: The coalition must be minimal winning. At the same time, at this stage, those parties that are not in line with the winning principle that is, when it is impossible to form a government without an absolute majority, as well as minimal, allows them to include those parties that are necessary to ensure this absolute majority¹⁸.

Level 2: The coalition must be minimally linked to winning (*minimal connected winning*). At this level, from all variants of minimal winning, those

¹⁵ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 76.

¹⁶ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 76.

¹⁷ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 78.

¹⁸ Klimovich, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 76.

coalition that do not conform to the principle connected, are discarded, that is, they are not created on the principle of "left-right"¹⁹.

Level 3: The coalition is formed only by those parties that agree to join the coalition (that is, "not against"). At this stage, the parties that are not able to create a coalition and who denied entry into the coalition were withdrawn²⁰.

Level 4: The coalition is formed only by those parties that are mutually ready to enter the coalition. At this level, those parties that, 1) do not match the positive signals of the coalition, are shattered; 2) do not enter the opposite ideological blocks²¹. As a result, the most successful option for coalition remains.

4. Coalition formation 2017-2018

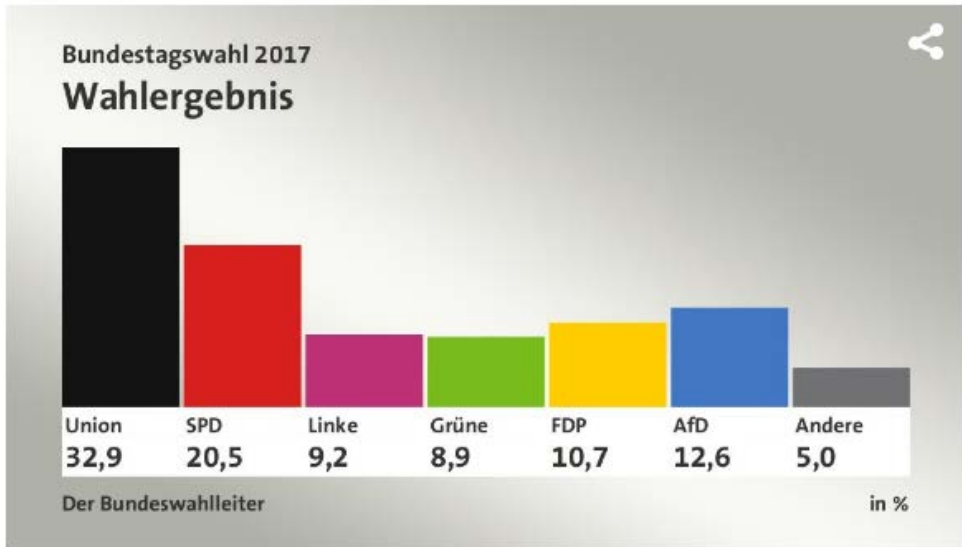
In 2017, the CDU / CSU again put forward a candidate from his party to the acting Chancellor of Germany – Angela Merkel. Martin Schulz represented the SPD. Less than a year ago, Martin Schulz, without exaggeration, triumphantly returned to German politics from the pan-European. He was almost unanimously elected chairman of the Social Democrats who were tired of the role of junior partner in the "Great coalition" and sought to take revenge at the parliamentary elections of 2017²². The real challenge for the party system of Germany was the rapidly growing popularity of the right-populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD).

¹⁹ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 70-87.

²⁰ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 70-87.

²¹ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 70-87.

²² Fond Democratic Initiatives. (2018). *Coalition in Germany: victories, losses, and results*. [online] Available at: <http://dif.org.ua/article/koalitsiada-v-nimechchini-peremogi-porazki-i-rezultati-bataliy> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

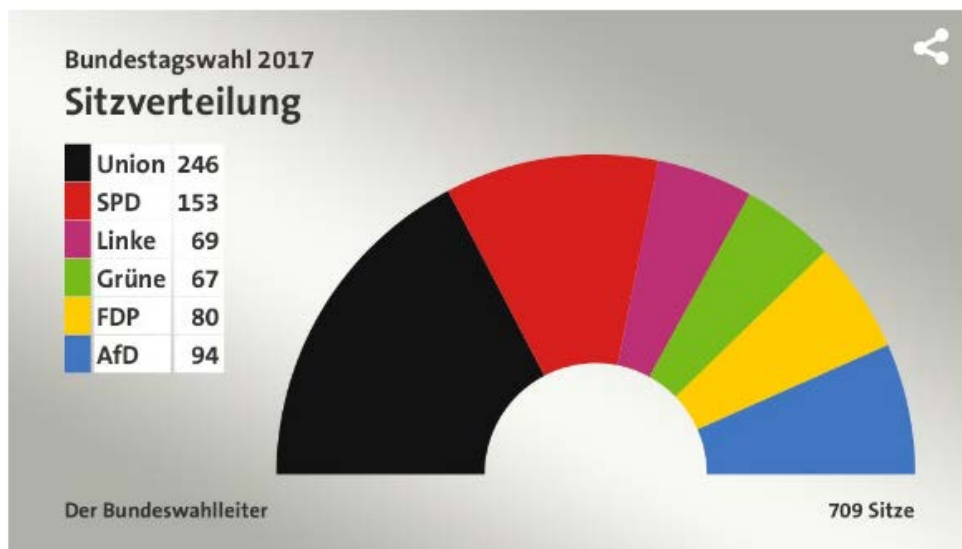


Germany's election result, %

Source: <https://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2017-09-24-BT-DE/index-content.shtml>

The party bloc of the CDU / CSU won the election, gaining 33 percent of the vote. In comparison with the 2013 elections, the CDU lost 7.3 percent of votes, while the CSU dropped 1.2 percent. The SPD gained 20.5 percent of the vote. This is the worst result for the Social Democrats all the time after the Second World War. Compared with the 2013 elections, the Social Democrats worsened their results by 5.2 percent. The SPD intended to go into opposition. The right-wing AfD won 12.6 percent of the vote and got the third place in the elections. The FDP gained 10.7 percent of the vote and re-entered the Bundestag. The Left party gained 9.2 percent of the votes, Green – 8.9 percent²³. The turnout of voters was 76.2 percent. The distribution of seats between parties is presented below.

²³ Hrabka, A. (2017). *Germany has announced the preliminary results of the elections to the Bundestag*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/у-німеччині-оприлюднено-попередні-результати-виборів-до-бундестару/a-40666991> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].



Seat distribution in the German Bundestag post-election 2017

Source: <https://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2017-09-24-BT-DE/index-content.shtml>

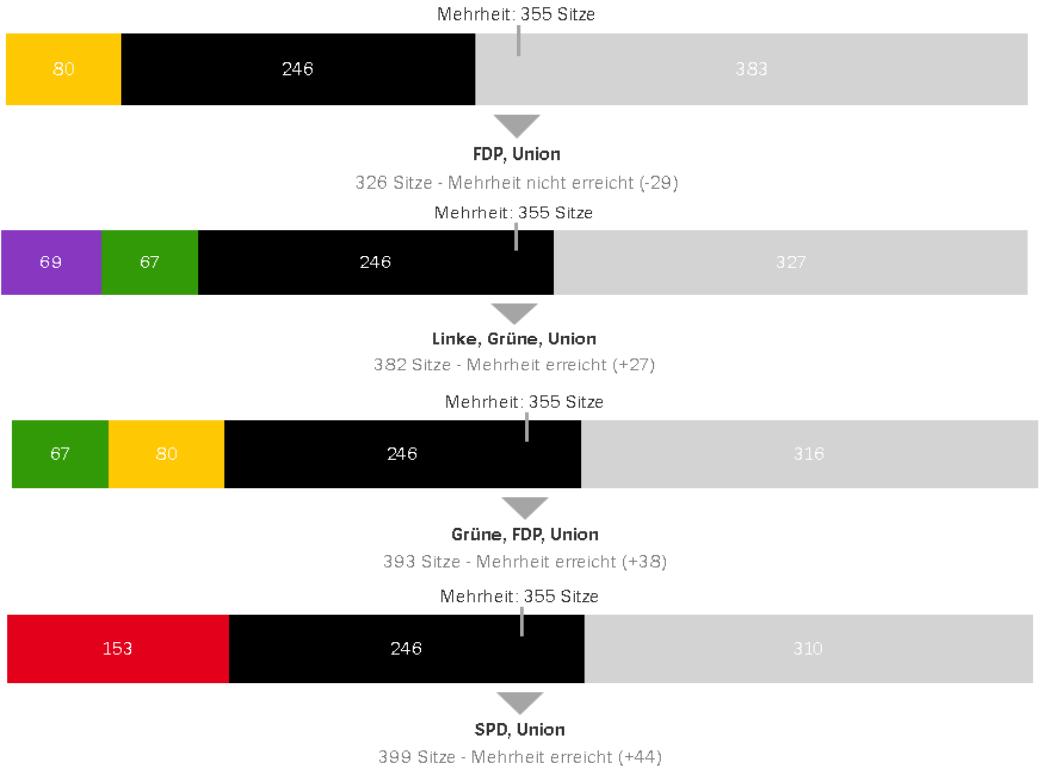
According to the peculiarities of the German electoral system, 709 deputies may enter the new Bundestag. This is the largest number of deputies in the history of Germany. The Parliament of the previous convocation consisted of 630 deputies²⁴. Thus, the CDU / CSU alliance received 246 seats in the Bundestag of the new convocation, the SPD - 153 mandates, and AfD - 94. Free Democrats gained 80 seats in parliament, Alliance/The Green - 67, The Left - 69²⁵.

Let us consider the possible coalitions that could be created after the election.

²⁴ Hrabka, A. (2017). *Germany has announced the preliminary results of the elections to the Bundestag*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/у-німеччині-оприлюднено-попередні-результати-виборів-до-бундестару/a-40666991> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

²⁵ Hrabka, A. (2017). *Germany has announced the preliminary results of the elections to the Bundestag*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/у-німеччині-оприлюднено-попередні-результати-виборів-до-бундестару/a-40666991> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

Level 1: Of the 4 possible coalition options, only 3 would meet the “*minimum winning*” requirements: the CDU / CSU coalition, the Left and the Green, the Jamaica coalition or the "Great Coalition". Graphically, all possible coalitions are presented in the diagram:



Coalition generator 2017

Source: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl-2017-alle-ergebnisse-im-ueberblick-a-1167247.html>

Level 2: Since the CDU / CSU, the Left and the Green parties are not on the right-left scale and have political contradictions, they also disappear at this stage. “*Minimal winning coalitions*” are "Jamaica" or "Great Coalition".

Level 3: The presence of negative coalitions signaled that, despite the openness of the representatives of the CDU / CSU to the cooperation

with the FDP, the latter decided to withdraw from the negotiations and thus excluded the possibility of a coalition with the CDU / CSU Union. There remains only one single option - "Great «Great Coalition»".

Level 4: Already at the stage of dropping out of coalition projects, it became clear that in addition to the option of the "Great Coalition", there would be no more options. Reflecting on whether the decision to create a "Great Coalition" was strategically correct, it should be noted that the decision was correct in general for Germany. The option of new elections was possible, and the SPD representatives, in their turn, could well benefit from re-election, but only if they did not change the transition to the opposition declared during the election campaign. Therefore, it can be argued that new elections would significantly degrade the reputation of the CDU / CSU and the SPD and strengthened the support of the right-populist party AfD²⁶.

The vote split delegates in late January almost equally to those who were openly opposed to a new coalition and those who were "for". The break in favor of the green light of a new alliance with the Christian Democrats in many respects occurred not even thanks to, but to the price, more precisely, the victim, the authority of Martin Schulz both in the party and in the political arena. That is, de facto Schultz really lost or lost as a politician not when his party suffered a crushing defeat in the elections, and when he began to stress that the "Great «Great Coalition»" suddenly became necessary and was the best of possible solutions²⁷. Martin Schulz wanted to compensate his authority for the post of German Foreign Minister, who is usually given to the "junior" coalition partner (in this case, the SPD because it has fewer votes). Therefore, the voluntary refusal of the

²⁶ Fond Democratic Initiatives. (2018). *Coalition in Germany: victories, losses, and results*. [online] Available at: <http://dif.org.ua/article/koalitsiada-v-nimechchini-peremogi-porazki-rezultati-bataliy> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

²⁷ Hrabka, A. (2017). *Germany has announced the preliminary results of the elections to the Bundestag*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/у-німеччині-оприлюднено-попередні-результати-виборів-до-бундестару/a-40666991> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

chairmanship of the party was forced, since it raised a wave of dissatisfaction with the policy of Schulz, and looked beneficial to the politician himself. However, Martin Schulz's proposed transition to the future government has come in opposition to the acting Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel. Thus, Martin Schultz himself became hostage to the situation he promoted and, due to the split within his own party of the SPD, on the principle of supporting the "Great «Great Coalition»", was forced to leave the office²⁸. It can be argued that this move was effective, since more than 66% of the SPD members voted in favor of the creation of a coalition with the CDU / CSU just after its abandonment.

For Angela Merkel, the "Great «Great Coalition»" looks like a logical step, but there were some contradictions within the bloc as well, due to the fact that most of the coalition agreement was in favor of the SPD.

There are notable changes in the new government: in particular, the head of the CSU Horst Seehofer heads the updated the Ministry of the Interior; Heiko Maas, the member of the SPD, the former Minister of Justice, became a Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the temporary acting head of the Social Democrats Olaf Scholz became a Minister of Finance. Particularly important for the SPD was the reduction of taxes and the abolition of the tax surcharge; citizens who receive the minimum wage should be exempted from paying taxes²⁹. In several steps, the so-called "surplus of solidarity" will be abolished in the tax on profits, which by 2021 will give German taxpayers savings of 10 billion euros. The healthcare sector has also become a stumbling block to the signing of a coalition agreement. SPD insisted on implementing Insurance (Bürgerversicherung), but the CDU / CSU rejected the proposal, as the introduction of equal pay for private insurance and

²⁸ Hrabaska, A. (2017). *Germany has announced the preliminary results of the elections to the Bundestag*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/у-німеччині-оприлюднено-попередні-результати-виборів-до-бундестару/a-40666991> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

²⁹ Schuler K. *Keine Zeit für 177 Seiten? Worauf sich SPD und Union verständigt haben* [online] Zeit Online. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-union-spd>.

medical care services. Instead, a commission should be set up to create proposals for doctor payments³⁰. The SPD insisted on creating 8,000 jobs in older homes, raising wages for elderly people and people with disabilities; the average salary for patients' care should be 10.55 euro per hour. The CDU / CSU and SPD's aim to stabilize the ratio of pensions and average wages to 48% by 2025. Those who work will not have to deduct more than 20 percent of their income to the pension fund. Starting next year, the contributions of employees and their employers to the sickness cash desk will again be pared, which will slightly increase the financial burden on entrepreneurs³¹. The new government of Angela Merkel, at the request of the Social Democratic Party, has pledged, for example, to raise the monthly allowance for children at 25 euros per child, which is now 194 euros for the first two children, 200 euros – the third, and 225 euros for the fourth. Given the significant increase in rent in major German cities, the new government promises to help families build or buy their own home. In the first decade, they will be paid for such purposes 1,200 euros per year, if the total annual family income does not exceed 75,000 euros plus 15,000 euros for children³². Both parties have agreed in the field of migration policy and are aiming to prevent the influx of refugees by more than 180,000-220,000 people a year.

The situation shows that despite the formal victory of the CDU / CSU in an election, it might be the last cadence for Angela Merkel. There is no successor to her in the party today. And hence, the party's task for the next

³⁰ Schuler K. *Keine Zeit für 177 Seiten? Worauf sich SPD und Union verständigt haben* [online] Zeit Online. Available at: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2018-02/grosse-koalition-koalitionsvertrag-union-spd>

³¹ Jolkver, M. (2018). *Priorities of Merkel's Fourth Government*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/приоритети-четвертого-уряду-ангели-меркель/a-42934451> [Accessed 8 Jun. 2018].

³² Jolkver, M. (2018). *Priorities of Merkel's Fourth Government*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/приоритети-четвертого-уряду-ангели-меркель/a-42934451> [Accessed 8 Jun. 2018].

years will be not only the struggle for the return of the lost electorate but also the upbringing of a new party leader³³.

Conclusion

The article considered the formation of a coalition in Germany in 2017-2018 through the prism of the rational choice theory, namely through the theory of coalitions. The peculiarities of the theory of coalitions, namely, its four-stage coalition formation process, increase the explanatory force of the rational choice theory and allows it to be better used in explaining the formation of coalition governments. The main problem of the coalition theory is that it does not take into account the political component of the coalition, offers many options that cannot be realized in practice (for example, the union of the extreme left and right parties). In addition, this theory cannot explain the emergence of minority coalition or coalition surplus³⁴.

As a result of the study, it was found that besides the option of the "Great Coalition", there would be no more options. Reflecting on whether the decision to create a "Great Coalition" was strategically correct, it should be noted that the decision was correct in general. Nevertheless, the rational choice theory remains promising for use in political science and to explain the process of coalition formation.

So, the coalition agreement is an example of how the politicians can balance political forces to satisfy the needs of different electorates. The Social Democrats were able to defend their own interests in such socially important areas as: reviewing legislation in the area of pensions, migration policy, social policy, etc. In addition, portfolios of ministers of finance, labor, and social policy, and the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs were proposed

³³ Jolkver, M. (2018). *Priorities of Merkel's Fourth Government*. [online] Deutsche Welle. Available at: <http://www.dw.com/uk/пріоритети-четвертого-уряду-ангели-меркель/a-42934451> [Accessed 8 Jun. 2018].

³⁴ Fond Democratic Initiatives. (2018). *Coalition in Germany: victories, losses, and results*. [online] Available at: <http://dif.org.ua/article/koalitsiada-v-nimechchini-peremogi-porazki-i-rezultati-bataliy> [Accessed 5 Jun. 2018].

to the representatives of the SPD, which is uniquely important for the promotion of the SPD at the international level.

As for future prospects, the predictions are disappointing: leaders will either lose political ground under their feet (like Martin Schultz) or they will understand that the highest point of their political career has already passed and time is gradually being prepared to give way to new leaders from their camp (as Angela Merkel) . One can agree with the opinion of Maria Zolkina³⁵, the political analyst of the Ilk Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, that "the parties themselves losing against the background of populism, suffering from the disappointment of voters who, from one, and from another camp," go "nowhere, but before radical "Alternatives to Germany". But with all this, German politics cannot be denied in a clear strategic sense, which the Social Democrats and the CDU / CSU are still practicing. Even if the German voter was tired of them."

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³⁵ Klimovitsch, S. (2014). Coalition formation in Germany: process algorithm, prediction of consequences. *The Journal of the Perm State University*, 4(2014), 74.

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