

**MAPPING IDEOLOGICAL PREFERENCES FOR WELFARE
POLICY IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND INTEREST GROUPS**

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Abstract

This study examines the ideological orientations and welfare policy preferences of political parties and interest groups in North Macedonia. Drawing on quantitative data from 360 respondents representing party members and civil society actors, the research explores how ideological values shape perceptions of the welfare state across multiple policy domains. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses (t-tests, ANOVA, and Chi-square tests) were applied to examine differences across political affiliation, gender, organizational type, and key social policy areas, including education, health care, social protection, employment, and pensions. The findings indicate that ideological distinctions along the traditional left-right spectrum are relatively blurred. Although political parties formally identify with different ideological positions, respondents' perceptions tend to cluster around moderate-left and social-democratic welfare orientations. Differences between political parties and interest groups emerge in several policy domains, with interest groups expressing stronger support for universalist welfare principles in education, social protection, employment, and pensions, while broad consensus is observed in health care policy. Overall, the results suggest that welfare attitudes in North Macedonia are shaped less by partisan ideological divides and more by shared socio-economic realities and institutional legacies inherited from the post-socialist transformation.

Keywords: *welfare state, ideology, political parties, social policy, North Macedonia, interest groups, post-socialist transformation*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, North Macedonia has undergone profound political and socio-economic transformations, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a democratic and market-oriented system. These transformations have had a significant impact on the country's welfare state model and the ideological orientations that underpin social policy. As a post-socialist country, North Macedonia represents a compelling case for examining how political parties and interest groups conceptualize the role of the state, the market, and civil society in welfare provision. The dynamics of ideological preference in such transitional contexts remain complex, influenced by historical legacies, European Union integration processes, and evolving patterns of political competition.

The intersection between ideology and social policy design continues to be a central topic in welfare studies. Classical frameworks such as Esping-Andersen's (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* and later extensions of his theory have provided typological lenses for understanding how welfare regimes reflect underlying political and ideological principles. However, these models were developed primarily in Western European contexts, whereas post-socialist societies have followed more hybrid trajectories, combining elements of social-democratic, conservative, and liberal welfare traditions (Deacon, 2000; Cerami & Vanhuyse, 2009). Within this evolving landscape, North Macedonia's experience illustrates how welfare politics are shaped not only by formal institutions but also by ideological narratives and public perceptions among key political and social actors.

Building upon previous research, including Bajrami Ollogu's (2021) doctoral dissertation on *Ideological Preferences for a Social Policy Model in the Republic of Macedonia*, this study seeks to deepen the empirical and theoretical understanding of how ideological orientations manifest in the country's welfare discourse. Bajrami Ollogu's research identified the coexistence of left-oriented rhetoric with pragmatic and centrist policy attitudes, highlighting the persistence of welfare state expectations inherited from the socialist period¹. The current paper extends that work by analyzing more granular data from political parties and interest groups, exploring how ideological preferences vary across specific social policy domains such as education, health care, social protection, employment, and pensions.

In recent years, the political landscape of North Macedonia has been marked by ideological ambiguity and convergence, as parties from both the left and right have adopted overlapping welfare narratives emphasizing social

¹ For more see: Bajrami Ollogu, E. (2021). *Идеолошките преференции за моделот на социјална политика во Република Македонија: перцепции на различни групи на интерес*. (Ideological preferences for a social policy model in the Republic of Macedonia. Perceptions of interest groups). [Doctoral dissertation, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje]. Translated in Macedonian by Biljana Stramsak. Repository of UKIM. <https://repository.ukim.mk/handle/20.500.12188/15314>

solidarity and state responsibility. At the same time, interest groups, especially trade unions, NGOs, and employers' associations, have played an increasingly visible role in shaping public debates about social reforms and the balance between public and private provision. Understanding the interplay between these actors is essential to grasp how policy ideas evolve and how the welfare state adapts to new social and economic challenges.

The present study therefore examines ideological preferences for welfare models among political parties and interest groups, aiming to identify both shared tendencies and ideological divergences. The analysis focuses on the major political parties that have shaped the North Macedonian political landscape in recent years, with particular focus in the last decade, such as, VMRO-DPMNE², SDSM³, DUI⁴ and DPA⁵, BESA⁶, ALTERNATIVA⁷, AA⁸, LEVICA⁹, NSDMP¹⁰, LDP¹¹. The study combines quantitative analysis with interpretive insights to reveal how actors perceive the role of the state, market, and family in social policy. By focusing on ideological orientations rather than formal policy programs, the research contributes to a broader discussion on the nature of post-socialist welfare regimes and the diffusion of social-democratic values in the Western Balkans. The findings have implications not only for understanding North Macedonia's political discourse but also for situating the country within regional patterns of welfare transformation and ideological realignment.

² VMRO-DPMNE, abbreviation used for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity founded in 1990, which represents one of the major political parties of Macedonia. It is a right political party and describes itself as a Christian Democratic party.

³ SDSM - Social Democratic Union of Macedonia that represents one of the two major political parties of North Macedonia founded in 1991. It is a left political party and the successor of the League of Communists of Macedonia.

⁴ DUI - Democratic Union for Integration, which represents the major political party of ethnic Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, and is considered a center-right political party. In this research we will include it at the "other" cluster (this is explained further at the methodology and findings session).

⁵ DPA - The Democratic Party of Albanians is the second major political party of ethnic Albanians in the Republic of North Macedonia, is a right wing party

⁶ BESA - is a center-right ethnic Albanian political party in North Macedonia, founded in 2014

⁷ ALTERNATIVA - is a political party that was created in 2019 as a detachment from the BESA movement. It is considered a center-right political party

⁸ AA - The Alliance for the Albanians is a center-right political party founded in 2015.

⁹ LEVICA - is a socialist political party in North Macedonia founded on November 2015 considered a far-left party.

¹⁰ NSDMP - The New Social Democratic Party is a center-left, social-democratic political party in North Macedonia, founded in 2005, is considered a left-centered political party.

¹¹ LDP - The Liberal Democratic Party is a social-liberal political party in North Macedonia founded in 1997.

Literature review

The relationship between political ideology and welfare state development has long been central to comparative social policy research. Classical welfare regime theory, particularly Esping-Andersen's (1990) typology, links social policy design to partisan and ideological alignments, suggesting that left-oriented political actors are more likely to support universalist and redistributive welfare arrangements, while right-oriented actors tend to emphasize market mechanisms and subsidiarity. In established Western European democracies, ideological competition between parties has historically structured welfare reform trajectories along clear socio-economic cleavages. However, subsequent scholarship has shown that this relationship is less stable in post-socialist contexts. Deacon (2000), Cerami (2006), and Cerami and Vanhuysse (2009) argue that welfare states in Central and Eastern Europe evolved as hybrid formations, combining inherited socialist universalism with market-oriented reforms introduced during transition. These hybrid models often blur ideological distinctions, as parties adapt pragmatically to fiscal constraints, public expectations, and Europeanization pressures. In such contexts, formal ideological self-identification does not necessarily translate into sharply differentiated welfare preferences.

Studies of party competition in post-socialist Europe further emphasize the phenomenon of ideological convergence. Aidukaite (2011) and Vachudova (2020) show that parties frequently moderate their socio-economic positions to appeal to broad electorates, especially where political competition is shaped by identity politics, electoral volatility, and weak partisan institutionalization. Rather than representing clearly polarized ideological camps, parties may cluster around centrist or moderate welfare positions. This literature provides the theoretical basis for expecting limited differentiation among political parties in North Macedonia along the left-right spectrum.

The North Macedonian case reflects many of these dynamics. Research on party competition in the Western Balkans (Bieber, 2018; Bartlett, 2009) indicates that socio-economic ideology often plays a secondary role compared to ethno-political mobilization and pragmatic governance concerns. At the same time, public opinion studies suggest persistent support for state-centered welfare provision inherited from the socialist period (Matković, 2019; Stubbs, 2020). Bajrami Ollogu (2021) highlights that party members in North Macedonia frequently articulate moderate-left or social-democratic welfare preferences regardless of their party's formal ideological label. This empirical pattern supports the expectation that ideological distinctions among parties may be perceived as fluid and overlapping.

Beyond party differentiation, welfare state theory also predicts that left-oriented actors are more likely to emphasize state responsibility in financing and delivering social services (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Pierson, 1996). In post-socialist societies characterized by strong expectations of public provision, this inclination may be particularly visible among members of left-leaning parties. Accordingly, it is theoretically plausible to expect that respondents affiliated

with left-wing political parties will express stronger support for state-centered welfare arrangements.

Gender has also been examined in welfare state scholarship as a potential determinant of redistributive attitudes. Comparative research suggests that women often demonstrate stronger support for universalist and protective social policies, partly due to differential exposure to labor market risks and caregiving responsibilities (Matković, 2019; Stubbs, 2020). Although evidence in the Western Balkans is mixed, theoretical expectations derived from social policy literature justify examining whether female respondents are more inclined toward social-democratic welfare values.

In addition to political parties, interest groups play a significant role in shaping welfare discourse. Trade unions traditionally advocate redistributive and state-centered policies, whereas employers' organizations tend to favor market flexibility and cost containment (Pierson, 1996). Civil society organizations and think tanks may occupy intermediate positions, often endorsing mixed welfare arrangements that combine public oversight with plural service provision (Stubbs & Zrinščak, 2015). These theoretical distinctions justify examining whether ideological preferences differ among types of interest groups and whether civil society actors prefer a welfare-mix model emphasizing shared responsibility.

Finally, welfare preferences may vary across specific policy domains. Comparative scholarship suggests that health care often commands broader consensus due to its perceived universal necessity, whereas domains such as pensions, employment, and social protection are more susceptible to ideological differentiation (Cerami & Vanhuyse, 2009; Aidukaite, 2011). Therefore, differences between political parties and interest groups may become more visible when examined across sector-specific policy areas rather than through aggregate ideological measures.

Nevertheless, from an empirical perspective, this research focuses on perceptions rather than differences in ideologies themselves.

Theoretical expectations and hypotheses.

Existing research on post-socialist party systems highlights ideological convergence and weak programmatic differentiation (Aidukaite, 2011; Vachudova, 2020). In contexts where party competition is shaped more by pragmatic or identity-based politics than socio-economic cleavages, ideological distinctions are often blurred. Taken together, the literature suggests several theoretically grounded expectations: (1) ideological convergence among political parties in post-socialist contexts; (2) stronger support for state-centered welfare among left-oriented actors; (3) potential gender differences in redistributive attitudes; (4) differentiated preferences among types of interest groups; and (5) possible variation between political parties and organized interests across specific social policy domains. These theoretical considerations inform the research hypotheses formulated in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive, and comparative research design to examine the ideological preferences and orientations of political parties and interest groups in North Macedonia regarding the social policy model. The design integrates descriptive and inferential statistical methods to identify differences and relationships between variables such as political affiliation, gender, and organizational type in shaping respondents' welfare policy preferences. This study does not assess formal party manifestos or official programmatic documents. Instead, it examines perceived ideological orientations among party members and organized interests. Perceptions are treated as indicators of internal ideological coherence and diffusion of programmatic identity within parties.

Sample

The population of the study included two main categories of respondents: members of political parties active in the Republic of North Macedonia, and representatives of interest groups, including civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, and think tanks. The sampling frame for interest groups was constructed using official registries of active civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, and policy institutes in North Macedonia. Organizations were contacted directly and invited to participate. The study focuses on nationally registered and publicly active organizations.

On the other hand, it is important to highlight that respondents from political parties included active members holding formal membership status within party structures at local or central levels. The sample includes party officials, municipal board members, and rank-and-file members engaged in party activities. Efforts were made to ensure representation across party hierarchies; however, the study does not aim to proportionally reflect internal party structure. The study does not differentiate systematically between leadership and regular membership; responses reflect self-reported ideological perceptions of active party members.

The final sample consisted of 360 respondents, including 226 from political parties and 134 from interest groups. Female participants represented 61% of the total sample, reflecting the current gender distribution in political and civil society structures.

The study does not claim representativeness at the party population level; rather, it examines ideological perceptions among active members who voluntarily participated in the survey.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing items measured on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was designed to measure:

- respondents' ideological identification on the left-right political spectrum,
- attitudes toward the role of the state, market, and family in welfare provision, and
- support for universalist and social democratic values associated with welfare pluralism.

The questionnaire was distributed using the Survey Monkey platform. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity was guaranteed. The research adhered to ethical standards of social science research, including informed consent and data confidentiality.

Data and variables

The empirical part of this study is based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to respondents representing political parties and interest groups in North Macedonia. The analysis focuses on identifying ideological orientations and preferences regarding welfare state models. For the analysis of policy domains, composite indices were constructed by summing multiple Likert-scale items within each domain (education, health care, social protection, employment, pensions). Higher values therefore reflect stronger support for state-centered and universalist welfare orientations.

Main analytical constructs: the dependent variable in this research is the perceived ideological orientation of respondents regarding welfare state and social policy models. This construct reflects the degree to which respondents favor state-centered, market-oriented, or mixed approaches to welfare provision. It was operationalized through a set of Likert-scale statements measuring attitudes toward:

- the role of the state in financing and providing social services,
- the importance of the market in welfare delivery, and
- the contribution of family and civil society to social welfare.

Higher mean values on the scale indicate stronger support for state responsibility and universalist principles; while lower mean values reflect market-oriented or individualist preferences.

Grouping Variables: the study includes several independent variables reflecting both socio-demographic and organizational characteristics:

- Political Affiliation: categorical variable identifying respondents' party membership (e.g., SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, DUI, DPA, AA, Levica, Alternativa, LDP, etc.).
 - Interest group type: categorical variable distinguishing among civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, and think tanks.
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- Gender: binary variable coded as 1 = Female and 2 = Male.
- Ideological self-placement: measured on a five-point continuum from 1 = Far Left to 5 = Far Right.
- Perceptions of welfare responsibility: Likert-scale variable assessing the perceived role of the state, market, and family in welfare provision.

Background characteristics: to ensure analytical rigor, several background factors were considered as control variables, including:

- Age,
- Educational level, and
- Professional sector (public, private, or civil society).

These variables were used to test whether socio-demographic characteristics influence respondents' ideological perceptions and welfare attitudes.

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis primarily examines mean differences and associations between groups rather than estimating causal multivariate models. Data were analyzed using SPSS. The following statistical procedures were employed:

- Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize the data;
- Independent-samples t-tests examined differences in ideological perceptions by gender and political affiliation;
- One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to test mean differences among broader ideological blocs rather than individual political parties, in order to ensure adequate subgroup size and statistical validity. Smaller party subsamples were included descriptively but excluded from inferential testing when they did not meet minimum sample size thresholds.
- Chi-square tests were used to assess the association between political blocs and welfare attitudes.

Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. The results were interpreted to identify whether ideological distinctions and welfare policy orientations correspond to declared party or organizational ideologies.

Research Objectives

- To identify the ideological orientations of dominant political parties in North Macedonia within the left-right political spectrum.
 - To examine whether members of political parties are aware of their party's ideological position and whether these values influence their social policy preferences.
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- To analyze gender-based differences in ideological perceptions and welfare attitudes among political party members.
- To investigate the ideological orientations of interest groups (trade unions, employers' organizations, think tanks, and civil society organizations) in relation to their preferred social policy model.
- To determine whether respondents from civil society organizations favor a welfare mix model emphasizing shared responsibility between the state, market, and civil sector.

Research Hypotheses

H1: There is no clear perceived distinction among political party members along the left-right ideological spectrum.

H2: Respondents from left-wing political parties recognize the role of the state as central in welfare provision.

H3: Female respondents from all political parties are more inclined toward embracing universalist (social democratic) values regarding welfare state ideology.

H4: Respondents from civil society organizations prefer a welfare mix model characterized by shared responsibility between the state, market, and civil sector, but with a stronger role attributed to the state.

H5: There are no statistically significant differences in ideological preferences among interest groups (trade unions, employers' organizations, think tanks, and NGOs) concerning their vision of the welfare model.

H6: There exist different perceptions between the two major groups (interest groups and political parties) regarding ideological preferences in Social Policy domains (in education, health, social protection, employment, pensions).

FINDINGS

1. Differentiation of Political Parties along the Left-Right Spectrum.

The first hypothesis examined whether there are differences in perceptions regarding the ideological differentiation among political parties along the left-right spectrum, despite their official ideological declarations.

Due to unequal subgroup sizes across individual political parties, respondents were grouped into three main ideological blocs (Left, Right, and Other) based on the declared or public programmatic orientation of respective political parties. Parties with fewer than 10 respondents were excluded from inferential comparison and are reported descriptively only.

Table 1 Party bloc

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Valid	LEFT	47	20.8	29.9	29.9
	RIGHT	48	21.2	30.6	60.5
	OTHER	62	27.4	39.5	100.0
	Total	157	69.5	100.0	
Missing	System	69	30.5		
Total		226	100.0		

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for respondents' perceptions regarding the ideological orientation of the political party in which they are members. The mean values indicate relatively similar perceptions across the three ideological blocs. Respondents affiliated with left-oriented parties report slightly lower mean scores ($M = 2.13$) compared with respondents from right-oriented parties ($M = 2.67$) and those grouped in the "other" category ($M = 2.43$). However, the differences in mean values are relatively small and the confidence intervals overlap, suggesting that ideological perceptions among party members are broadly similar across blocs.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for perceptions of ideological orientation by political bloc

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
LEFT	46	2.1304	1.48487	.21893	1.6895	2.5714	.00	5.00
RIGHT	45	2.6667	1.43019	.21320	2.2370	3.0963	.00	4.00
OTHER	56	2.4286	1.48761	.19879	2.0302	2.8270	1.00	5.00
Total	147	2.4082	1.47470	.12163	2.1678	2.6485	.00	5.00

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

The political party in which I am a member shares the following values

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.713	2	144	.492

To address unequal subgroup sizes across individual political parties, the analysis was conducted using broader ideological blocs rather than individual parties. A one-way ANOVA was performed to examine differences in ideological perceptions across the broader political blocs (Left, Right, and Other). The results indicate that differences between the groups are not statistically significant ($F = 1.523$, $p = .221$), suggesting that respondents across ideological blocs express similar perceptions regarding welfare ideology,

supporting the argument that ideological distinctions among political parties are blurred.

Table 3 ANOVA test for ideological perception across political blocs

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.579	2	3.289	1.523	.221
Within Groups	310.932	144	2.159		
Total	317.510	146			

These findings support Hypothesis 1: although political parties may have distinct ideological labels, their members' perceptions are largely similar.

2. The Role of the State in Welfare Provision

H2 examined whether members of left-leaning political parties perceive the state as the central actor in welfare provision.

To ensure valid statistical estimation, the analysis was conducted using broader ideological blocs rather than individual political parties. Additionally, Likert responses were collapsed into three categories (disagree, neutral, agree) to avoid small expected cell counts.

Table 4 Crosstabulation between respondents' attitude and question: The state should finance all social services

			Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Total
Party bloc	LEFT	Count	36	6	3	45
		% Within Party bloc	80.0%	13.3%	6.7%	100.0%
	RIG HT	Count	30	9	7	46
		% Within Party bloc	65.2%	19.6%	15.2%	100.0%
	OTH ER	Count	48	8	2	58
		% Within Party bloc	82.8%	13.8%	3.4%	100.0%
Total	Count	114	23	12	149	
	% Within Party bloc	76.5%	15.4%	8.1%	100.0%	

A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the association between political bloc affiliation and attitudes toward state financing of social services. The results indicate that the association is not

statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 6.439$, $p = .169$), suggesting that respondents across ideological blocs express broadly similar attitudes toward the role of the state in financing social services. Although a small number of cells had expected counts below five, the overall distribution pattern remained sufficiently balanced to allow cautious interpretation of the results.

Table 5 Association between political bloc affiliation and attitudes toward state financing of social services

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.439 ^a	4	.169
Likelihood Ratio	6.256	4	.181
Linear-by-Linear Association	.435	1	.510
N of Valid Cases	149		

a. 3 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.62.

The result suggests that respondents across ideological blocs share broadly similar attitudes toward state responsibility in welfare provision. Therefore, H2 is not supported.

3. Gender Differences in Welfare Ideology

The third hypothesis explored whether female respondents are more inclined toward universalist and social-democratic values in welfare ideology.

Results from an independent-samples t-test revealed mean differences between female ($M = 196.28$) and male ($M = 188.44$) respondents. Despite this numerical variation, the result was not statistically significant ($p = .097 > .05$).

Table 6 T-test for perceptions regarding the gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Perception	Female	220	196.28	40.411	2.725
	Male	140	188.44	48.326	4.084

This suggests that while women expressed somewhat stronger support for inclusive and state-centered welfare principles, these tendencies do not represent a consistent or statistically relevant gender-based difference within the sample. Therefore, H3 is not supported by the data.

Table 7 Significance for T-test - perceptions regarding based on gender - Independent Samples Test

t-test for Equality of Means							
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Perception	1.661	358	.097	7.842	4.720	-1.440	17.123
	1.597	257.82	.111	7.842	4.910	-1.826	17.510

4. Preferences among Interest Groups

This part of the empirical analysis focuses on the perceptions of interest groups to examine their orientation toward different welfare models and analyze possible statistically significant differences in ideological preferences among interest groups (trade unions, employers' organizations, think tanks, and NGOs) concerning their vision of the welfare model.

An ANOVA test compared mean scores on ideological perceptions across five types of organizations: trade unions, employers' associations, think tanks, civil society organizations, and other interest-based entities. While minor variations were observed (with trade unions showing slightly higher means than other groups), the results were not statistically significant ($p = .146 > .05$).

Table 8 Descriptive statistics of welfare mix perceptions across interest groups

Interest Group	Subject	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
	Other	17	35.29	3.478	.844	33.51	37.08
	Workers organization (Trade Union)	17	37.24	3.456	.838	35.46	39.01
	Organization of employers	11	34.91	4.888	1.474	31.63	38.19
	Think-Tank	11	36.64	4.273	1.288	33.77	39.51
	Civil society organization	78	34.54	4.526	.512	33.52	35.56
	Total	134	35.18	4.346	.375	34.44	35.92

The absence of significant differences implies that interest groups share similar ideological leanings, predominantly favoring social-democratic principles and recognizing the state as a central, though not exclusive, welfare actor. Thus, the hypothesis that civil society organizations distinctly prefer a “welfare-mix” model with shared responsibility among state, market, and community actors is not empirically confirmed.

Table 9 ANOVA test for differences in welfare mix perceptions across interest groups

	Subject	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Interest Group	Between Groups	128.274	4	32.069	1.736	.146
	Within Groups	2383.427	129	18.476		
	Total	2511.701	133			

Overall, respondents from different interest-group types displayed similar ideological preferences, emphasizing social-democratic principles and a moderate “welfare-mix” orientation, where the state remains a leading but not exclusive actor in welfare provision. Consequently, H4 is not supported. In addition, no statistically significant differences were observed among interest groups, therefore H5 is supported.

5. Differences between Political Parties and Interest Groups in Social Policy Domains

The final part of the empirical analysis examines overall perceptions between the two major groups (interest groups and political parties) regarding ideological preferences in Social Policy domains (in education, health, social protection, employment, pensions).

The sixth hypothesis explored whether significant perceptual differences exist between political parties and interest groups regarding ideological orientations across key social policy domains, namely, education, health, social protection, employment, and pensions. This hypothesis carries particular relevance because it simultaneously assesses (a) each group’s internal preferences within individual policy domains and (b) inter-group differences in their broader ideological positioning toward welfare provision.

As displayed in Table 10, the mean values for both groups indicate generally high levels of agreement regarding the importance of state involvement in social policy. However, the magnitude of these means varies across domains. Interest groups consistently reported slightly higher mean scores than political party respondents, indicating a somewhat stronger inclination toward state-centered and social-democratic approaches.

Table 10 Descriptive statistics for composite scores of policy domain preferences

Subject		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Education	Interest Group	134	42.47	5.044	.436
	Political party	220	40.27	5.922	.399
Health care	Interest Group	134	10.28	2.185	.189
	Political party	217	10.30	2.007	.136
Social protection	Interest Group	134	46.22	7.328	.633
	Political party	217	42.46	6.832	.464
Unemployment	Interest Group	131	26.98	3.720	.325
	Political party	216	25.06	4.448	.303
Pensions	Interest Group	130	10.98	1.741	.153
	Political party	216	10.00	2.172	.148

The results of the independent-samples t-tests (see Table 11) reveal statistically significant differences in four of the five domains. Values represent summed scores of multiple Likert-scale items (1-5) within each policy domain.

- Education ($t(352) = 3.58, p < .001$)
- Social protection ($t(349) = 4.87, p < .001$),
- Unemployment/employment ($t(345) = 4.13, p < .001$), and
- Pensions ($t(344) = 4.36, p < .001$).

In contrast, no statistically significant difference was observed for Health care ($t(349) = -0.09, p = .928$), suggesting that both groups share very similar perceptions in this domain.

Table 11 Independent samples t-tests for differences in policy domain preferences

	t-test for Equality of Means						
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Education	3.577	352	.000	2.197	.614	.989	3.406

	3.71 8	315. 166	.000	2.197	.591	1.035	3.360
Health care	-. .090	349	.928	-.021	.228	-.469	.428
	-. .088	263. 568	.930	-.021	.233	-.479	.438
Social protection	4.87 2	349	.000	3.760	.772	2.242	5.278
	4.79 1	266. 756	.000	3.760	.785	2.215	5.305
Unemployment	4.13 3	345	.000	1.917	.464	1.005	2.829
	4.31 6	311. 565	.000	1.917	.444	1.043	2.791
Pensions	4.35 5	344	.000	.977	.224	.536	1.418
	4.59 8	316. 977	.000	.977	.212	.559	1.395

In detail, both interest groups and political party members strongly favor a publicly financed and state-administered health care system, with nearly equal proportions (44% and 46%, respectively) supporting the continuation of health services financed through national health insurance. The mixed model, combining public and private providers but publicly financed, emerged as the second-most-preferred option between both groups.

In education, interest group representatives ($M = 42.47$) showed a stronger adherence to universalist, social-democratic values than did party respondents ($M = 40.27$). They emphasized education as a universal right and a public good that should be accessible to all regardless of socio-economic status. A majority supported increased public expenditure and prioritized public over private education. Interestingly, respondents affiliated with political parties also expressed similar attitudes, indicating that education enjoys broad ideological consensus across the spectrum, even among those aligned with market-oriented parties.

In social protection, the mean difference between the two groups (46.22 vs. 42.46) was statistically significant, though conceptually both favored a universal and flexible social protection system emphasizing state responsibility. Respondents from both sectors supported a mixed model of social services, combining public provision with partnerships from non-state actors, but with the state retaining a coordinating and regulatory role.

Regarding employment/unemployment, interest groups again exhibited higher support for state intervention ($M = 26.98$) than political party respondents ($M = 25.06$). Both agreed that the government should ensure employment opportunities for all citizens, but party members expressed slightly

more conservative or centrist orientations, assigning greater weight to market mechanisms and individual initiative.

In the pension domain, mean scores (interest groups $M = 10.98$; political parties $M = 10.00$) also differed significantly ($p < .001$). Both groups favored a partnership model in which pension financing combines state and private contributions; however, they stressed that the administration of pensions should remain under public institutional control, ensuring reliability and social equity.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that perceptual gaps exist between political parties and interest groups across most social policy domains, except in health care, where consensus prevails. Interest groups consistently display a stronger commitment to social-democratic and universalist principles, whereas political party members exhibit more moderate or centrist orientations. Therefore, H6 is supported, showing that the two sectors differ significantly in their ideological preferences in education, social protection, employment, and pensions, while converging only in their shared endorsement of a publicly financed health system.

So, **H6**: There exist different perceptions between the two major groups (interest groups and political parties) regarding ideological preferences in Social Policy domains (in education, health, social protection, employment, pensions), is supported.

Taken together, the findings indicate a general pattern of ideological convergence among political actors in North Macedonia, accompanied by domain-specific differences between political parties and interest groups.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a nuanced landscape of ideological perceptions in North Macedonia, where the proclaimed political divisions between left and right appear blurred in practice. The empirical results show limited statistical differentiation among political party members across ideological blocs, confirming that ideological convergence characterizes much of the welfare discourse in the country.

Taken together, the empirical results reveal that ideological differentiation among political parties and interest groups in North Macedonia is considerably less pronounced than formally declared in their platforms. While statistical evidence points to variation in perceptions across parties and policy domains, the general tendency among respondents, both in political and civil sectors, leans toward center-left, social-democratic orientations. This finding is consistent with the previous results of Bajrami Ollogu (2021). The findings further show that gender and organizational type exert no significant influence on welfare attitudes. Overall, these results indicate that policy preferences in North Macedonia are shaped more by pragmatic socio-economic expectations and shared historical experiences of welfare policy than by strict ideological divides. This echoes the broader observation that in post-Yugoslav societies, welfare state debates tend to be framed through practical concerns such as employment, pensions, and poverty reduction, rather than through

deeply institutionalized partisan ideologies (Bartlett, 2009; Stubbs & Zrinščak, 2015).

The results support the notion that ideological differentiation among political parties is less a product of doctrinal commitments and more a reflection of pragmatic responses to socio-economic conditions. This convergence toward moderate, state-centered welfare values mirrors broader tendencies identified in post-socialist European societies (Cerami & Vanhuysse, 2009; Deacon, 2000; Bohle & Greskovits, 2012), where the legacy of state intervention continues to shape citizens' expectations of social protection. Scholars have noted that such convergence stems from a shared post-communist path dependency, where political elites, irrespective of ideological label, prioritize social stability and incremental reform over radical ideological differentiation (Inglot, 2008; Aidukaite, 2011).

In the context of Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime typology, North Macedonia's ideological orientation aligns most closely with the conservative-corporatist model, albeit with residual features of post-socialist welfare hybridization. The empirical results presented in this study support this interpretation, as respondents consistently favor a strong state presence combined with elements of welfare pluralism. The findings illustrate a public preference for a strong, redistributive state combined with emerging pluralism in welfare provision, a pattern that reflects both historical legacies of socialist welfare and contemporary pressures from market liberalization and European integration (Petreski & Gacov, 2018; Matković, 2019). This hybridization resonates with the arguments of Leibfried (2000) and Cerami (2006), who emphasize the emergence of "semi-liberal corporatist" models in Eastern and Southern Europe, characterized by fragmented reforms, low fiscal capacity, and persistent public reliance on state welfare guarantees.

The lack of significant gender differences in welfare ideology is consistent with previous regional research (Matković, 2019; Stubbs, 2020), suggesting that attitudes toward social policy are shaped more by collective socio-economic realities than by gender-specific experiences. Similarly, the absence of statistically significant differences among interest groups suggests that civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, and think tanks largely share similar expectations regarding the role of the state in welfare provision. Despite their differing institutional positions, these actors converge around moderate social-democratic principles and a welfare mix model in which the state retains a central coordinating role. This aligns with findings from Western Balkan comparative studies that highlight the weak programmatic differentiation of political and civic actors concerning welfare reforms (Bartlett & Prica, 2016; Stubbs, 2020).

While ideological convergence is visible at the general level, the analysis reveals more pronounced differences when specific social policy domains are examined. Statistically significant differences between political parties and interest groups were observed in education, social protection, employment, and pensions, while health care emerged as an area of broad consensus.

Another key insight from the analysis is the ideological fluidity observed among political actors. While parties such as Levica publicly embrace radical-left positions, members' self-perceptions situate them closer to the ideological center. This internal inconsistency suggests that ideological identification in North Macedonia may function more as a symbolic political marker than as a determinant of policy orientation. Such a pattern resonates with the argument that party competition in the region often revolves around ethno-political or pragmatic issues rather than socio-economic cleavages (Vachudova, 2020; Bieber, 2018). It also underscores the role of Europeanization pressures in reshaping ideological narratives without necessarily altering welfare preferences (Stubbs & Zrinščak, 2015).

Overall, these findings underscore a gradual ideological depolarization of North Macedonia's welfare discourse. Although formal political narratives reference left-right distinctions, both elites and organized interests appear united in supporting a welfare model anchored in social solidarity and state responsibility. This ideological convergence may provide short-term policy stability but also limits the scope for programmatic differentiation and innovation within the political spectrum. As Petmesidou and Guillén (2017) argue, such "constrained convergence" is typical for semi-peripheral European states seeking to reconcile fiscal discipline with social legitimacy.

Future research could extend this analysis by comparing North Macedonia's ideological dynamics with those of neighboring Western Balkan states, exploring how EU accession processes, economic restructuring, and social policy reforms interact with ideological perceptions. Comparative analyses with Croatia, Serbia, and Albania could provide deeper insights into how welfare state preferences evolve in transitional democracies balancing between market pressures and social expectations (Stubbs, 2020; Bartlett, 2009; Cerami & Vanhuyse, 2009).

In this sense, the North Macedonian case reflects a broader regional pattern in which welfare preferences are shaped less by ideological polarization and more by shared socio-economic expectations and institutional legacies.

Taken together, these findings suggest that welfare ideology in North Macedonia is shaped less by partisan polarization and more by shared institutional legacies and socio-economic expectations.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this study mapped the ideological preferences that shape welfare policy perceptions among political parties and interest groups in North Macedonia. The results demonstrate that ideological convergence coexists with selective divergence across specific policy domains, illustrating the hybrid nature of welfare state debates in post-socialist contexts.

The findings reveal that, despite formal ideological labels and political rhetoric, both groups exhibit a significant level of convergence toward moderate-left and social-democratic orientations. Across most policy domains, the state is viewed as the principal actor in ensuring welfare provision, while the role of the market and civil sector is seen as complementary rather than

substitutive. This reinforces the notion that, within post-socialist contexts, ideological differences are often less rigid and more pragmatically negotiated.

At the same time, the analysis identified domain-specific divergences that nuance this general pattern. Interest groups consistently expressed stronger support for universalist and redistributive policies, particularly in education, social protection, employment, and pensions, whereas political party members demonstrated more centrist and mixed orientations. Health care emerged as an area of broad consensus, with both groups favoring publicly financed systems. These variations underline that ideological alignment in North Macedonia's welfare politics is not uniform but conditional, reflecting institutional histories and policy-specific experiences.

From a broader perspective, the results support existing arguments about ideological fluidity and hybrid welfare regimes in post-socialist societies (Cerami & Vanhuysse, 2009; Deacon, 2000). North Macedonia's welfare discourse appears to balance inherited expectations of state responsibility with gradual pluralization of welfare delivery mechanisms. This blend of continuity and adaptation situates the country within the spectrum of hybrid welfare states characterized by moderate redistribution, incremental reform, and constrained resources.

These findings carry broader implications for policy development in North Macedonia, suggesting that welfare reforms may be shaped more by pragmatic consensus than by ideological polarization.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of research on welfare ideologies in transitional democracies by empirically demonstrating that ideological convergence coexists with selective divergence at the policy-domain level. Future research could expand this analysis through longitudinal or comparative studies across Western Balkan countries to explore how evolving political structures, EU integration pressures, and socio-economic reforms continue to reshape ideological preferences in welfare policy.

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