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## Original Article

# A threat called Turkey: Perceived religious threat and support for EU entry of Croatia, Switzerland and Turkey

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**Abstract** European Union (EU) enlargement evokes strong opposition among its citizens. Meanwhile, EU citizens' opinions are likely to become increasingly important in determining the future of the European project. Countries aspiring to EU membership must therefore take public opinion in the EU into consideration. What determines public support for EU entry? A factor that has been ignored in the relevant literature is perceived threat posed by a candidate country's religion. On the basis of data derived from a voter survey fielded in the Netherlands (N = 1394), we show that perceived religious threat is not very relevant for public support for EU access of Croatia or Switzerland. It is, by contrast, a major predictor of opposition to Turkish entrance to the EU. In the Turkish case, religious threat overshadows all other factors suggested in the literature except for immigration threat. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for Turkey's EU accession bid, and that of other Muslim countries.

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## Introduction

The European Union (EU) has expanded several times during its existence. Some EU enlargements were uncontroversial, such as the accession of Sweden in 1995. Other expansions were widely contested, such as the accession of the United Kingdom, which eventually took place in 1973. No EU candidacy, however, has been as contested as Turkey's candidacy. Meanwhile, EU citizens'

opinions are likely to become increasingly important in determining the future of the European project (for example, Hooghe and Marks, 2009). Countries aspiring to EU membership, such as Croatia and Turkey, must therefore reckon with public opinion in the EU.

What explains public support for EU enlargement? The main aspects recent research has focused on are threat perceptions towards immigrants (McLaren, 2007; De Vreese *et al.*, 2008; Azrout *et al.*, 2011). These studies have shown that unfavourable attitudes towards immigrants (De Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2006) and threat posed by immigrants in EU citizens' eyes (McLaren, 2007) predict opposition against EU enlargement. The threat perceptions that have been studied include perceived threats to *economic* resources available to EU citizens, and to their *culture and traditions* (De Vreese *et al.*, 2011). The scholars mentioned argue that EU citizens who perceive threat from immigrants also feel threatened in economic and cultural respect by the prospect of new members entering the EU.

Unlike economic and cultural threat perceptions, perceived *religious* threats have not been investigated in isolation thus far. In this article, we argue that it makes a considerable difference for public support whether an EU candidate is Christian or Islamic. On the basis of data derived from a voter survey fielded in the Netherlands ( $N = 1394$ ), we demonstrate that perceived *religious* threat is not very relevant for public support for EU access of Croatia or Switzerland. It is, by contrast, a major predictor of opposition to Turkish entrance to the EU.

Our findings on this point are in accordance with those of previous studies explaining opposition to Turkey's EU entrance (McLaren, 2007; De Vreese *et al.*, 2008). To the existing body of knowledge, we add empirical evidence in support of the argument that it is mainly perceived religious threats that make EU citizens disapprove of Turkish membership. We show that fear of Islam is a major predictor of opposition to Turkish entrance to the EU. This factor overshadows all other factors suggested in the existing literature except for immigration threat. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for Turkey's EU accession bid, and that of other Muslim countries.

The scientific relevance of our study lies, first, in the questioning of a major conclusion drawn in the most prominent previous study on the nature and origins of mass opposition to EU accession of Turkey, the study by McLaren (2007). McLaren's conclusion implies that there is no difference with regard to economic or cultural group threats between (Christian) countries that were allowed to enter the EU in 2004–2007 and the only (Islamic) candidate that was not, Turkey. McLaren explains the difference between Turkey and other countries in terms of popular opposition to entry by the numbers of migrants who have come from the country to the EU in recent decades. She posits that if Turkey had not sent so many migrants to the EU, opposition to its entry to the EU might not have been so high. Conversely, 'if the other candidates had been sources of such large-scale migration, opposition to those candidacies could



have been far higher than it was' (McLaren, 2007, p. 273). We argue and demonstrate empirically that Turkey is also different because of a third group threat perceived by EU citizens: a religious threat.

The findings of this study are, second, important for society more generally. The reasons for the widespread opposition to Turkey's EU access may stem from factors that substantially vary over time and/or may easily be remedied. If, for example, they were related to labour market concerns, measures to tackle these problems might be designed – such as temporary restrictions of the freedom of movement from Turkey to other member states after accession. Such measures would likely meet some of these concerns, thereby perhaps removing substantial parts of the opposition. This also holds for other concerns, but *not* for perceived problems related to Turkey's Islam identity. To the extent that EU citizens' religious threat perceptions drive opposition to Turkey's EU entry, it is difficult to see how opposition can be countered in the short run. Public opinion in the EU is likely to remain both relevant with regard to EU enlargement and quite hostile to Islam countries. Our findings, therefore, do not bode well for the chances of Turkey, or other Muslim countries, joining the European Union.

### **Public Opinion towards Turkey**

Determinants of public opinion regarding Turkey's EU access have remained uncharted territory thus far, with five notable exceptions. This handful of recent studies takes different perspectives and provides important building blocks for the argument advanced in this article. First, McLaren (2007) shows that *individual economic self-interest* does not predict support for EU membership of applicant countries very well. She demonstrates that perceived *group* threats play a role. Both threats to *economic* group resources and threats to *cultural* resources are important here. The greater EU citizens' fears of economic malaise as a result of immigration, the more they oppose enlargement of the EU. Opposition to EU expansion also increases as perceived threats to EU citizens' culture and way of life intensify. Interestingly, although opposition towards Turkey's membership is widespread compared with other applicant countries, McLaren finds very similar effects of these threat perceptions for all applicant countries, including Turkey. She argues that the difference in level of support for accession is due to different numbers of migrants coming from the applicant countries. In this article, we build on McLaren's (2007) work by examining perceived threat to economic and cultural group resources, but argue that differences in level of support can be accounted for by perceived threat to *religious* group resources.

Second, and focusing on only the case of Turkey, De Vreese *et al* (2008) find that support for Turkey's accession to the EU is more a function of

'soft factors' such as identity and attitudes towards immigrants than of 'hard factors' such as economic and utilitarian considerations. The more anti-immigrant citizens' attitudes, the less support they tend to have for Turkey's EU entry. Findings in a third study, by Azrout *et al* (2011), corroborate this conclusion. Azrout and colleagues explain the effect of immigrant attitudes on support for Turkey's membership by making a two-step argument. First, attitudes towards immigrants are a result of the degree to which people are likely to see the world in terms of 'us' and 'them'. Second, citizens who see the world in terms of 'us' and 'them' tend to show a negative bias towards the other.<sup>1</sup> And thus it is the defining of Turks as 'others' that drives these effects.

Fourth, Van Spanje *et al* (2011) show that, with regard to Muslim countries, Islam is an important determinant of support as well. Van Spanje and colleagues investigate attitudes towards the EU accession aspirations of Bosnia–Herzegovina. They show by way of a survey-embedded experiment that the mere knowledge that half of this country's population is Muslim is sufficient to substantially reduce public support for its membership. The study by Van Spanje and colleagues expands the recently introduced idea that religion matters for EU attitudes and for the Turkey issue, perhaps not as much one's religious denomination (see Boomgaarden and Freire, 2009) as one's (in)tolerance of other religious denominations. A fifth study, by Hobolt *et al* (2011), clearly demonstrates this in the case of support for Turkey's EU membership.

In this article, we extend the idea of the importance of fear of Islam by showing that not only actual intolerance *vis-à-vis* (other) religions matters but also perceived religious threat. We argue that religious threat can be separated from economic threat and from cultural threat, just as religious, economic and cultural in-groups are conceptually distinct, and empirically as well. For example, Dutch Catholics may see their non-Catholic fellow Dutchmen as an out-group in religious terms, and at the same time as an in-group in cultural terms. Conversely, these Dutch Catholics may consider Italians an out-group in cultural terms, whereas they may feel that they belong to the same religious (Catholic) in-group.

In previous studies (for example, Stephan *et al*, 1998), four basic threats are mentioned that may lead groups to be prejudiced towards one another: realistic threats, symbolic threats, negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Realistic threats, which revolve around (perceived) competition for limited resources, and symbolic threats, which concern group differences in norms and values, have been related to opposition to EU enlargement in general and EU enlargement with Turkey in particular (for example, McLaren, 2007). Realistic threats and symbolic threats depend on individuals' defining other groups as 'others', and by considering their own 'realistic' or 'symbolic' interests threatened by these others. We argue that religious threat perceptions, and in particular perceived threats by Muslims, not only depend on defining

Muslims as others, but also on the negative stereotyping of Muslims (see Velasco González *et al*, 2008). Stereotypes are not a threat as such. However, as stereotypes serve as a basis for expectations of the behaviour of the 'other' group, negative stereotypes are likely to predict expectations of negative interactions. We demonstrate, first, that religious threat perceptions are less important with regard to EU access of Christian countries – Croatia and Switzerland – than for an Islamic country – Turkey. Second, we show empirically that the perceived threat of Islam is a key to opposition to Turkey's EU entry.

### **Perceived Religious Threats and Support for EU Enlargement**

Insofar as religion has been used as a factor explaining EU attitudes, this has been confined to EU citizens' religious denomination (for example, Boomgaarden and Freire, 2009). Our argument, by contrast, is about explaining a certain EU attitude – attitudes towards EU enlargement – by examining the predominant religion in applicant countries, and the threat perceptions that this may result in.

Why would EU citizens perceive a religious threat posed by the accession of a candidate country to the EU? In order to explain why this may be the case, we begin from the idea, proposed by social identity theorists, that people tend to classify others in groups. In this line of thinking, people do not categorize randomly, but according to certain predefined rules: They engage in thinking in terms of 'in-groups', to which the subject him- or herself belongs, and 'out-groups' (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Moreover, they may develop a systematic negative bias towards the out-group (Allport, 1954; Brewer and Campbell, 1976), which may result in hostility towards the out-group (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999).

Classifications into in-groups and out-groups are made on the basis of various (perceived) individual characteristics. They do not necessarily follow religious lines. Historically, however, religious in-group versus out-group thinking has been endemic, as testified by the numerous religious wars that have been waged worldwide in recent centuries. This seems to be not much different in contemporary Europe. Nowadays, animosity between Christian groups, for instance, seems to have given way to animosity between Christians and Muslims. It has been argued that there is a recent trend towards stereotyping of Turks and Arabs as Muslims (for example, Marranci, 2004; Poynting and Mason, 2007). European non-Muslims often portray Muslims as 'others', as different from most (other) Europeans. Notwithstanding the critiques on Huntington's (1993, 1996) 'clash of civilizations' thesis, the general acceptance of his thesis both in public and political discourse (Marranci, 2004) illustrates that religion is currently perceived by many EU citizens as a fundamental cleavage, based on which Muslims are defined as 'others'.



Several political entrepreneurs in Western Europe have tried to capitalize on these views by repeatedly denouncing the Muslim civilization as inferior – or even as evil. Taking the Netherlands as an example, Pim Fortuyn stated that ‘Islam is a backward culture’,<sup>3</sup> and Geert Wilders described the Quran as a ‘Fascist book’.<sup>4</sup> The alleged representatives of this (allegedly separate) civilization, Muslims, are associated with terrorism and violence in the media (for example, Meer and Modood, 2009) and in public opinion (for example, Field, 2007). The terrorist attacks in Madrid, London and elsewhere that have been claimed by groups who refer to themselves as Muslims have undoubtedly fuelled this in-group versus out-group thinking along Muslim/non-Muslim lines. In addition, these bombings may have amplified pre-existing negative stereotypes towards Muslims. The same holds for the 9/11 attacks (for example, Marranci, 2004). In sum, several political and social events in the past decade have heightened the salience of religious considerations and threat perceptions.

## Hypotheses

This article sets out to test four hypotheses. First, building on previous studies, we formulate and test two hypotheses that are core to the extant literature. The first hypothesis is about economic group threat, and the second is about cultural group threat. Second, following the theoretical considerations described above, we formulate two hypotheses that relate to religious group threat. They are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the fourth hypothesis is a specification of the third one.

The first hypothesis concerns McLaren’s expectation about economic group threat. She argues and demonstrates that perceived threats to economic and cultural group resources play a role in public support for EU enlargement. Her argument is that EU citizens perceive differences in economic interests between them and Turks in terms of social benefits, housing, jobs and so on, so that they might consider Turkey’s EU entry to be threatening their economic interests (McLaren, 2007, pp. 257–258). Opposition to the accession of Turkey, but also of other applicant countries, has been found to be a function of such economic group threat perceptions (McLaren, 2007, p. 266).

**Hypothesis 1:** The more an EU citizen perceives economic group threat, the more (s)he will oppose a country’s EU membership.

Not only materialistic (economic), but also immaterialistic group threat perceptions have been argued and demonstrated to affect public support for EU enlargement. McLaren (2007, p. 258) mentions perceived threat to EU citizens’ customs and traditions. Feelings about candidate countries ‘may be strongly connected to concerns about the maintenance of the culture and way

of life of key in-groups' (McLaren, 2007, p. 258). Although McLaren (2007, p. 258) argues that 'threats to culture and way of life ... are likely to be particularly strong in the Turkish case', McLaren (2007, p. 267) finds that these threats are not any different for Turkey than for any of the 12 Christian countries that joined the EU in 2004 or 2007. We thus expect the effect to apply to support for EU enlargement with any country.

**Hypothesis 2:** The more an EU citizen perceives cultural group threat, the more (s)he will oppose a country's EU membership.

Furthermore, to the extent that EU citizens regard people of different religious denominations as belonging to an out-group towards which they are negatively predisposed and that they actually fear, it seems plausible to expect that this affects their attitudes towards candidate countries' accession bids. EU citizens are unlikely to put their bias aside and/or to overcome their fear of foreign religions when evaluating foreign countries' EU candidacy. In fact, we expect that the more EU citizens perceive a religious threat, the more they will be against other countries entering the EU. We therefore state the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** The more an EU citizen perceives religious group threat, the more (s)he will oppose a country's EU membership.

As a more specific expectation, we hypothesize that perceived religious threats affect attitudes towards EU access of countries that are predominantly Muslim more than attitudes towards the entrance of non-Muslim countries. In other words, EU citizens evaluate the candidacy of Turkey, or any other Muslim country, to a greater extent on the basis of religious threat perceptions than the potential access of Christian countries such as Croatia or Switzerland. This would be partly at odds with McLaren's (2007, p. 273) conclusion.

**Hypothesis 4:** The positive impact of religious group threat perceptions on opposition to a country's EU membership will be larger in case of a Muslim country than in case of a Christian country.

We now turn to the data on the basis of which we aim to assess the hypotheses specified above.

## Data

The data are derived from a two-wave panel survey of Dutch citizens eligible to vote.<sup>5</sup> From an online panel administrated by TNS NIPO of 143,809 citizens, 2400 persons over 17 years of age were randomly selected, and invited to fill out an online questionnaire. Of these persons, 1394 completed the questionnaire,

which yields a response rate (AAPOR RR1) of 58 per cent. The data set was weighted according to gender, age, education, household size, region of residence and vote choice in the latest (2006) national elections. The weight variable we use has a minimum value of 0.32, and a maximum of 7.48. Its standard deviation is 0.71, and over 90 per cent of respondents have a weight score between 0.5 and 2. We also report results of the analyses when not weighted.

Like that of McLaren (2007) and De Vreese *et al* (2008), our key interest in this study is explaining EU citizens' support for Turkish EU membership. We use replies to the question whether respondents would be 'strongly against' (1) or 'strongly in favour' (7) Turkey becoming a member of the EU. This improves upon existing measurements such as by a dichotomous 'against' versus 'in favour' indicator (McLaren, 2007).

We measure perceived threats to group resources<sup>6</sup> and cultural threat<sup>7</sup> (McLaren, 2007) of all these citizens. We also have information on our respondents concerning the relevant controls – gender, education,<sup>8</sup> income,<sup>9</sup> political sophistication,<sup>10</sup> ideological predisposition,<sup>11</sup> government evaluations,<sup>12</sup> economic expectations<sup>13</sup> and exclusive national identity<sup>14</sup> (De Vreese *et al*, 2008).

However, we do not confine our study to only one country. Instead, we study the broader phenomenon of which the Turkish case is only one of many manifestations: EU enlargement. We thus selected not just one, but three countries for our analysis. In addition to Turkey, we selected another candidate country, Croatia,<sup>15</sup> and one of the two non-member states that have held several referendums on the issue of joining the EU, Switzerland.<sup>16</sup> As neither of these countries is predominantly Muslim, this allows us to rigorously compare across countries and draw valid inferences on the role of religious threats in determining attitudes towards EU expansion (also see Hypothesis 4).

Our main *explanans* is perceived religious threat. This concept is measured in three ways. First, we use an indicator of the degree to which respondents feel threatened by other religions in general. For this, respondents are asked to what extent they disagree (1) or agree (7) with the statement 'immigrants' religious practices threaten the Dutch way of life and traditions'.

Second, we create an indicator for the degree to which respondents feel a religious threat from Turkey when it becomes a member. A randomly selected group of respondents ( $N = 694$ ) received these questions.<sup>17</sup> The respondents are asked to indicate in a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale to what extent they would consider Turkey's entry 'a religious threat'. We control in our models for other threats perceived from Turkey's potential membership. We, therefore, also asked respondents to indicate to what degree they considered Turkey's EU membership 'a threat posed by increased unemployment', 'a threat posed by increased immigration', 'a cultural threat' and 'a threat to decision making in the EU'.

Third, we want to know how important religious threat is for respondents as an argument to be in favour or oppose Turkish EU membership. We ask respondents to choose from a list of 17 arguments<sup>18</sup> to indicate which three reasons are important for their opinion on Turkish EU entrance. This question was asked only to the respondents in the subset. Those respondents who mention ‘a possible religious threat’, we code ‘1’ on a variable ‘Religious threat Turkey (importance)’ and those who do not mention this argument we code ‘0’ on this variable. Again, we control in our models for other threat perceptions, and therefore also score whether the other threats were mentioned.

The Dutch citizens heavily used the religious threat items. No less than 61 per cent of respondents indicated that immigrants to some degree pose a religious threat, and 49 per cent agreed to some extent with the statement that Turkish EU membership would constitute a religious threat. Of the five potential threats concerning Turkey’s entry, we asked citizens about religious threats that were most frequently mentioned (39 per cent). The other threats were mentioned by between 11 per cent (cultural threat) and 26 per cent (immigration threat) of respondents.

Note that our two perceived *religious* threat indicators are not strongly correlated with each other.<sup>19</sup> These variables are not heavily correlated with the perceived economic or cultural group threat indicators either.<sup>20</sup> The overlap between the mentioning of different threat categories, for instance, was small. As a case in point, only 15 per cent of those who mentioned a religious threat ( $N=255$ ) also mentioned a cultural threat. In our view, this justifies the distinction we make between, for example, religious threats posed by Turkey, on the one hand, and cultural threats posed by Turkey, on the other. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses.

## Analyses

We use OLS regression analysis to tease out the effect of perceived religious threat and the impact of other factors mentioned in the literature on Croatian, Swiss and Turkish EU membership support, respectively. When doing so, we control for all relevant aspects mentioned in the extant literature. We first estimate models designed to explain support for EU membership of Croatia (Model 1), Switzerland (Model 2) and Turkey (Model 3) using the full sample of 1394 observations. We then turn to a null model explaining support for Turkey’s EU entry without any religious threat perception indicators (Model 4). Finally, we estimate a model with all three perceived religious threat indicators at once (Model 5). As these indicators are not heavily correlated, it is statistically unproblematic to include them all in one model.

Models 4–5 are estimated on the basis of half the sample ( $N=694$ ). Apart from a loss of statistical power, this is unproblematic, as the random reduction

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analyses

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Support for entry: Croatia	1394	1	7	3.65	1.61
Support for entry: Switzerland	1394	1	7	5.63	1.31
Support for entry: Turkey	1394	1	7	2.88	1.70
Economic threat	1394	1	7	4.67	1.23
Cultural threat	1394	1	7	4.36	1.52
Gender	1394	0	1	0.49	0.50
Education low	1394	0	1	0.29	0.45
Education middle	1394	0	1	0.41	0.49
Income low	1394	0	1	0.21	0.41
Income middle	1394	0	1	0.45	0.50
Income do not know/refused	1394	0	1	0.15	0.36
Political sophistication	1394	0	28	12.40	7.30
Left	1394	0	1	0.11	0.32
Right	1394	0	1	0.15	0.36
Government evaluations	1394	1	7	3.92	1.43
Economic evaluations	1394	1	7	3.26	1.10
Exclusive Dutch identity	1394	1	7	2.51	1.28
<b>Religious threat immigrants</b>	<b>1394</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4.82</b>	<b>1.66</b>
Cultural threat TR (pos)	694	1	7	3.99	1.50
Decision threat TR (pos)	694	1	7	4.71	1.36
Immigrant threat TR (pos)	694	1	7	4.90	1.35
Unemployment Threat TR (pos)	694	1	7	4.33	1.42
<b>Religious threat TR (pos)</b>	<b>694</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4.43</b>	<b>1.66</b>
Cultural threat TR (importance)	694	0	1	0.11	0.31
Decision threat TR (importance)	694	0	1	0.20	0.40
Immigration threat TR (importance)	694	0	1	0.26	0.44
Unemployment Threat TR (importance)	694	0	1	0.20	0.40
<b>Religious threat TR (importance)</b>	<b>694</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.39</b>	<b>0.49</b>

of the sample size by half did not affect the representativeness of the sample. Respondents who were confronted with the Turkey questions did not significantly differ ( $P=0.01$ , two-tailed) in terms of age, gender, household size, region, education, income, employment status or party choice in the last Dutch Parliamentary Elections held before this study, in November 2006.

In so doing, we assess our first two hypotheses by examining the impact of perceived economic and cultural group threats, as proposed by McLaren (2007), on support for three countries' possible EU entrance (Models 1–3). Each of the two threat perceptions should decrease public support for each country's EU membership. The third and fourth hypotheses are put to the test by examining the effect of religious threat perceptions on support for each of these countries entering the EU (still Models 1–3). In line with our third hypothesis, we expect religious threat perceptions to negatively affect this support concerning each of the countries. We test our fourth hypothesis by

**Table 2:** Models explaining EU membership support: Croatia, Switzerland and Turkey

	<i>Model 1</i> <i>Croatia</i>			<i>Model 2</i> <i>Switzerland</i>			<i>Model 3</i> <i>Turkey</i>		
	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$
Constant	4.61**	(0.27)	—	4.26**	(0.23)	—	5.80**	(0.27)	—
Gender	-0.10	(0.08)	-0.03	-0.01	(0.07)	-0.01	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.02
Education low	0.09	(0.11)	0.03	0.11	(0.10)	0.04	0.24*	(0.11)	0.06
Education middle	-0.17*	(0.10)	-0.05	0.02	(0.09)	0.01	-0.06	(0.10)	-0.02
Income low	-0.03	(0.13)	-0.01	-0.13	(0.11)	-0.04	-0.17	(0.13)	-0.04
Income middle	-0.09	(0.11)	-0.03	-0.12	(0.09)	-0.05	-0.12	(0.11)	-0.04
Income do not know/refused	-0.38**	(0.14)	-0.09	-0.39**	(0.12)	-0.11	-0.08	(0.14)	-0.02
Political sophistication	0.02**	(0.01)	0.07	0.04**	(0.01)	0.21	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.04
Left	0.05	(0.13)	0.01	-0.07	(0.11)	-0.02	0.05	(0.13)	0.01
Right	0.17	(0.12)	0.04	0.22*	(0.10)	0.06	-0.18	(0.12)	-0.04
Government evaluations	0.18**	(0.03)	0.16	0.07**	(0.03)	0.08	0.10**	(0.03)	0.08
Economic evaluations	0.06	(0.04)	0.04	-0.00	(0.03)	-0.00	0.05	(0.04)	0.03
Exclusive Dutch identity	-0.22**	(0.03)	-0.18	0.05	(0.03)	0.05	-0.19**	(0.03)	-0.14
Economic threat immigrants	-0.09*	(0.04)	-0.07	0.15	(0.04)	0.14	-0.27**	(0.05)	-0.19
Cultural threat immigrants	-0.10**	(0.03)	-0.09	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.05	-0.19**	(0.03)	-0.17
<b>Religious threat immigrants</b>	<b>-0.10**</b>	<b>(0.04)</b>	<b>-0.10</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>(0.03)</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>-0.15**</b>	<b>(0.03)</b>	<b>-0.15</b>
<i>N</i>	1394			1394			1394		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.162			0.090			0.273		

Note: \* = significant at  $P=0.05$  level (one-tailed); \*\* = significant at  $P=0.01$  level (one-tailed).

comparing the *magnitude* of the (negative) impact of religious threat perceptions across countries. We expect the effect to be more negative with regard to Turkey's accession bid than with regard to Croatia and Switzerland.

After this, we proceed to measure the impact of fear of Islam on Turkey support (see Models 4–5) in three ways. We expect to find empirical support for our key argument each time. We expect a negative effect of perceived religious threat posed by immigrants on support for Turkey's EU entry, a negative impact of considering Turkey's EU entry a religious threat and a negative effect of mentioning a potential religious threat as an argument in the evaluation of Turkish membership. That is, controlling for all other factors mentioned in the relevant literature (McLaren, 2007; De Vreese *et al*, 2008).

## Results

We begin from an assessment of economic, cultural and religious group threat perceptions' impact on public support for three countries: Croatia, Switzerland and Turkey. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 2.



We see from Table 2 that the specification of our models is sub-optimal. Our standard model explains 16.2 per cent of the variance in support for Croatia (Model 1), a mere 9.0 per cent for Switzerland (Model 2) and 27.3 per cent for Turkey (Model 3). This said, we can still safely conclude that economic group threats are important for support for EU entry of two of the three countries under study. A 1-unit increase on the 1–7 economic group threat perceptions scale yields a negative effect of 0.09 in Croatia and 0.27 in Turkey on a 1–7 public opposition versus support scale. All these effects are highly significant ( $P < 0.05$ , one-tailed). These findings are in accordance with Hypothesis 1 and with results reported by McLaren (2007). In the Swiss case, however, economic group threat unexpectedly yields a *positive* effect. This impact would have reached commonly used levels of statistical significance if we had applied two-tailed significance tests.

Switzerland is also the odd one out regarding our second hypothesis. Perceived cultural threats decrease support for the EU accession of Croatia ( $b = -0.10$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and Turkey ( $b = -0.19$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) but not significantly so for Switzerland. Just as the first hypothesis, Hypothesis 2 is partly supported by the data.

The impact of the indicator of religious threat perception varies in a similar fashion between the models (Hypothesis 3). Swiss EU entry has nothing to do with perceived religious threat, whereas for Turkey it is the strongest predictor along with McLaren's economic and cultural group threat indicators as well as exclusive Dutch identity. Perceived religious threat yields an effect on Turkey support that is significant at the  $P < 0.01$  level (one-tailed). The coefficient ( $b = -0.15$ ) indicates that a 1-unit increase on the 1–7 religious threat scale leads to a 0.15 drop in support for Turkish membership, also measured on a 1–7 scale. The strength of the effect with regard to Croatia ( $b = -0.10$ , significant at  $P < 0.01$ , one-tailed) is about two-thirds of that concerning Turkey.<sup>21</sup>

By comparing Models 1–3, we can say that the effect of perceived religious threat from immigrants is larger for Turkey than for Switzerland. This is in accordance with Hypothesis 4. We should also find that the impact is substantially greater for Turkey than for Croatia. Additional analyses (not shown) demonstrate that this is also the case.<sup>22</sup> The evidence thus supports our fourth hypothesis: Religious threat perceptions are more important for the Islam country, Turkey, than for the Christian countries, Croatia and Switzerland.

Now that we have established that perceived religious group threat is important for public support for EU enlargement in general (Hypothesis 3), and even more so for Turkey in particular (Hypothesis 4), we focus on the Turkish case and turn to more sophisticated tests of the impact of religious threat perceptions on Turkey's EU entry – see Table 3.

**Table 3:** Models explaining EU membership support: Turkey

	Model 4			Model 5		
	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	( <i>SE</i> )	$\beta$
Constant	6.84**	(0.36)	—	6.58**	(0.32)	—
Gender	-0.13	(0.10)	-0.04	-0.16	(0.10)	-0.05
Education low	0.16	(0.14)	0.04	0.22	(0.14)	0.06
Education middle	-0.19	(0.13)	-0.06	-0.15	(0.12)	-0.04
Income low	-0.25	(0.17)	-0.06	-0.17	(0.17)	-0.04
Income middle	0.09	(0.14)	0.03	0.11	(0.13)	0.03
Income do not know/refused	0.17	(0.18)	0.04	0.21	(0.18)	0.04
Political sophistication	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.05	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.05
Left	-0.15	(0.17)	-0.03	-0.18	(0.16)	-0.04
Right	-0.09	(0.14)	-0.02	-0.02	(0.14)	-0.00
Government evaluations	0.03	(0.04)	0.02	0.02	(0.04)	0.02
Economic evaluations	0.10*	(0.05)	0.07	0.11*	(0.05)	0.07
Exclusive Dutch identity	-0.11**	(0.04)	-0.09	-0.10**	(0.04)	-0.08
Economic threat immigrants	-0.20**	(0.06)	-0.15	-0.16**	(0.07)	-0.11
Cultural threat immigrants	-0.15**	(0.04)	-0.13	-0.12**	(0.04)	-0.11
<b>Religious threat immigrants</b>	—	—	—	<b>-0.01</b>	<b>(0.04)</b>	<b>-0.01</b>
Cultural threat Turkey (pos)	-0.15**	(0.04)	-0.14	-0.03	(0.05)	-0.03
Decision threat Turkey (pos)	-0.05	(0.05)	-0.04	-0.04	(0.05)	-0.03
Immigration threat Turkey (pos)	-0.28**	(0.05)	-0.23	-0.23**	(0.05)	-0.19
Unemployment threat Turkey (pos)	0.03	(0.05)	0.03	0.02	(0.05)	0.02
<b>Religious threat Turkey (pos)</b>	—	—	—	<b>-0.14**</b>	<b>(0.05)</b>	<b>-0.14</b>
Cultural threat Turkey (importance)	-0.44**	(0.16)	-0.08	-0.45**	(0.16)	-0.09
Decision threat Turkey (importance)	-0.47**	(0.13)	-0.11	-0.43**	(0.13)	-0.10
Immigration threat Turkey (importance)	-0.17	(0.12)	-0.05	-0.21*	(0.12)	-0.06
Unemployment threat Turkey (importance)	-0.32**	(0.14)	-0.08	-0.34**	(0.13)	-0.08
<b>Religious threat Turkey (importance)</b>	—	—	—	<b>-0.41**</b>	<b>(0.12)</b>	<b>-0.12</b>
<i>N</i>	694			694		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.400			0.422		

Note: \* = significant at  $P=0.05$  level (one-tailed); \*\* = significant at  $P=0.01$  level (one-tailed).

The parameters of our null model, without any religious threat perception measure, are reported in Model 4 in Table 3. Because of the addition of position and salience measures of four types of perceived threat, the model is considerably better specified than the three previous models. The fit of the model is satisfactory (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.400$ ). We see that support for Turkish EU entry is diminished by economic group threat, allegedly posed by immigrants ( $b = -0.20$ ). In addition, the importance of threat to unemployment decreases support for Turkey's accession ( $b = -0.32$ ). Both effects are highly significant ( $P < 0.01$ , one-tailed). Although agreement with the statement that Turkish accession would threaten the employment situation does not have a significant

impact, this means that we find evidence for the first hypothesis here – in addition to the evidence shown in Table 2. Cultural group threat perceptions have negative effects for Turkey support as well, no matter how they are measured ( $b = -0.15$ ,  $b = -0.15$  and  $b = -0.44$ , respectively, all significant at the  $P < 0.01$  level). The data clearly support our second hypothesis.

Once we add any of the religious threat perception indicators separately (not shown), each of them yields a significant additional effect in the predicted direction. Each of them also significantly increases the explained variance as compared with Model 4 ( $P < 0.10$ ). In our final model, Model 5, we simultaneously include all three religious threat perception measures. Perceived religious threats posed by immigrants, often used in the relevant literature, is not significant anymore in Model 5. The two (more relevant) religious threat perceptions posed by Turkey, by contrast, retain their significance ( $P < 0.01$ , one-tailed) in the presence of all control variables and of each other. The effects are quite substantial. We conclude from Model 5 that a 1-unit increase in agreement with the statement that Turkey poses a religious threat decreases support for Turkey's entry by 0.14 on a 1–7 scale. In addition, the participants who mentioned a possible religious threat as a consideration in their evaluation of the desirability of Turkey becoming an EU member (39 per cent of all respondents) averaged 0.41 lower on the 1–7 scale – controlling for all other relevant factors that are currently known. The two religious threat indicators that are directly associated with Turkey are the strongest predictors of Turkey support, together with a perceived threat posed by immigration. The 2.2 per cent  $R^2$  change between Model 4 and the model with all three religious threat indicators (Model 5) is significant at the  $P < 0.001$  level. Thus, our data support the argument that religious threat perceptions substantially add to the existing explanations for opposition to EU enlargement with Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Extant research on what drives public support and/or aversion to enlargement has focused extensively on utilitarian factors (for example, Gabel, 1998). However, political elite discourse has developed from arguments about continental stability and studies about new markets and trade opportunities to include other factors such as culture, identity and religion (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). In this article, we have analysed data derived from a voter survey fielded in the Netherlands ( $N = 1394$ ) and shown that the more an EU citizen feels an economic (Hypothesis 1) and/or cultural (Hypothesis 2) group threat, the more (s)he opposes EU enlargement with Croatia and Turkey. This corroborates findings by McLaren (2007). Switzerland is the exception to this rule. Future studies should enquire into the reasons why attitudes towards this country are



so different on this point from Turkey, Croatia and the 12 countries that have joined the EU since 2004. We speculate that Switzerland is considered 'in-group', being economically and culturally so similar to the EU-15 that the country does not pose any threat. The same might hold for Norway.

In addition, religion-based threat perceptions shape attitudes towards EU entry (Hypothesis 3). Concerning an Islam EU candidate, this is more the case than regarding Christian countries (Hypothesis 4). Religious threat perceptions that do not negatively affect attitudes towards Swiss EU entry are moderately important for Croatia's candidacy, and are of key importance concerning Turkish EU membership. Indeed, this factor is among the strongest predictors of opposition to Turkish entrance to the EU in the Netherlands. Perceived religious threat directly associated with Turkey outperforms all other factors conducive to opposition to Turkish membership except for a (possibly related) immigration threat factor.

To illustrate the strength of this effect, we find that 49 per cent of respondents perceive a religious threat from potential Turkish EU membership. A large majority (82 per cent) of them oppose Turkey's accession, whereas only 39 per cent of those who do not perceive a religious threat do. In addition, 39 per cent of participants mention a possible religious threat posed by Turkey as a consideration when it comes to the country's EU entry. Of these respondents, 80 per cent are against Turkish membership although this figure is 47 per cent among those who do not mention a potential religious threat.

Our findings do not only vindicate McLaren's (2007) conclusions, but also contradict one of them. Where McLaren implies that it is the numbers of migrants that Turkey has sent out to EU member states that has spurred opposition to the country's EU entry, she seems to suggest that opposition to Turkey would not be higher than that to other countries if they had not been such an immigrants-sending country (McLaren, 2007, p. 273). However, our findings suggest otherwise. Although perceived economic and cultural group threat may be important for most countries aspiring to EU membership, our findings show that related, but different factor, religious threat perceptions are much less important for support for Christian countries' entry than for Turkey's candidacy. This makes Turkey's accession bid unmistakably different from Christian countries' candidacy in EU citizens' eyes, regardless of immigration waves to the EU. Indeed, we have found that economic and cultural group threats are also stronger predictors for opposition to Turkish membership than to Croatian or Swiss membership. These slight differences in results may be attributed to differences in the time and place of the data collection between the study by McLaren (2007) and this study. In this vein, it is noteworthy that De Vreese *et al* (2012) find that in the midst of recent years' financial crisis, the economic considerations were gaining in explanatory importance *vis-à-vis* cultural and religious factors.



Our analysis is limited to the citizenry of only one EU member state, the Netherlands. Moreover, it only pertains to the situation in 2008. This is 8 years after the data of McLaren (2007) were collected and 4 years after the survey by De Vreese *et al* (2008). Yet, in view of the longstanding EU-wide animosity to Turkish EU access (McLaren, 2007, p. 253), it is plausible that we can to a large degree generalize from our results to the larger parts of the EU in recent decades.

A second limitation of the scope of our research is that we investigate attitudes to EU membership of only three countries. However, we see no reason why Croatia and Switzerland would be substantially different in this respect from other Christian countries that would perhaps join one day, such as Norway or Serbia, or why Turkey would be different from predominantly Muslim countries, such as Kosovo or Albania.

To the extent that we can indeed generalize from our results, our findings are bad news for Muslim countries that have expressed interest in EU membership such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Kosovo, Morocco and Turkey. In view of the likely increasing importance of the EU citizens' opinions in the European project (for example, Hooghe and Marks, 2009) and the invariability of the aspects on the basis of which many of them evaluate accession of countries – their culture and religion – Muslim aspiring EU countries' outlook has grown dim.

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### Notes

- 1 Perhaps all people make sense of the complex empirical world by categorizing people. Even so, we assume here that some are more likely to categorize in 'us' versus 'them', and to negatively evaluate the 'other'.



- 2 We build on the 'Integrated Threat Theory' here, developed by Stephan and Stephan (1984, 1985). One might argue that we should treat threat perceptions as *mediating* factors. According to theoretical and empirical analysis by Stephan and Stephan (2000), (perceived) threats *mediate* the effects of antecedents such as in-group identity and personal relevance. However, we feel that this is not relevant for our argument. Our argument is that threat perceptions are important for attitudes towards EU enlargement, and that more scholarly attention should be paid to the role of religious threat perceptions. We feel that, to make this case, we do not have to assess how threat perceptions relate to other factors such as their potential antecedents.
- 3 Interview in Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, 9 February 2002.
- 4 Letter published in Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*, 8 August 2007.
- 5 The study was funded by a NWO VICI grant, grant # 453-07-002.
- 6 Similar to McLaren (2007, p. 265), we measure economic group threat by confronting respondents with the following statements: 'In schools with many immigrant children, the quality of education suffers', 'Immigrants abuse the system of social benefits' and 'The presence of immigrants increases unemployment in the Netherlands'. Note that our items are not about 'members of minority groups' (McLaren, 2007, p. 265) but about 'immigrants' (cf. De Vreese *et al*, 2008). Unlike McLaren's (2007, p. 265) dichotomous answers plus DK-option, respondents in our survey reply using a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).
- 7 Cultural threat is gauged based on the reactions indicated on a 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) scale, to the statement that 'Immigrants enrich Dutch cultural life'.
- 8 Three education categories are distinguished, being low (29 per cent of the weighted sample, lower secondary education followed at the most), middle (41 per cent, higher secondary or lower tertiary) and high (30 per cent, higher tertiary or academic education). The high education group serves as the reference category.
- 9 We use three categories, low income (21 per cent of the sample, gross annual household income below E 28,500), high income (19 per cent, E 56,000 and higher) and a middle category (45 per cent). The rest of the sample (15 per cent) do not know, or refuse to answer. The high-income segment is the reference group.
- 10 In accordance with the relevant literature (De Vreese *et al*, 2008, p. 525), we construct a political sophistication variable using a political knowledge indicator, based on four multiple choice questions, multiplied by a self-reported political interest score ranging from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much).
- 11 Like De Vreese *et al* (2008, pp. 524–525), we make three categories, left (0–2 on a 0–10 left–right scale) and right (8–10), and a reference group of centrist voters (De Vreese *et al* use a 1–10 scale, with 1 through 3 coded 'left').
- 12 The relevant question here is, 'Could you please indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the way the current government is doing the job?' Answers vary from 'very dissatisfied' (1) to 'very satisfied' (7).
- 13 Responses to the question 'How do you think the economic situation in the Netherlands will develop in the next twelve months?' are used, which range between 'much worse' (1) and 'much better' (7).
- 14 Building on Azrout *et al* (2011), we measure exclusive national identity by combining information from 10 items. Five items form a Dutch national identity scale (Eigen value = 1 and only component = 3.53, 70.6 per cent variance explained), which is highly reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.89$ ). The items are 'I am proud to be a Dutch citizen', 'Being Dutch means a lot to me', 'The Dutch flag means a lot to me', 'Dutch people share a common tradition, culture and history' and 'I feel close to other Dutch people'. Five other items form a European identity scale (Eigen value = 1 and only component = 3.21, 64.1 per cent variance explained), which is also highly reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). The European identity items are the same as the Dutch national identity items, except for the replacement of the word 'Dutch' by 'European'.

Respondents reported their opinion on each statement by positioning themselves on a scale varying from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). We construct the exclusive Dutch national identity measure as follows. Respondents for whom the European identity is stronger than the Dutch identity (19.9 per cent of respondents) we code '1.' In all other cases, the exclusive Dutch national identity indicator takes on the value of Dutch national identity minus that of European identity plus one. This leads to a variable with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 7 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

- 15 The other candidate countries are Iceland and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Results pertaining to Iceland may be contaminated by the fact that this country went bankrupt in 2008, resulting in opposition among the EU citizenry for mere financial reasons pertaining to the idiosyncracies of this case. We therefore decided against examining Iceland for this study, which left us two former Yugoslav countries. As Croatia is much better known among Dutch citizens than Macedonia, and Macedonia actually has a large Muslim minority that may contaminate our results, we opted for Croatia.
- 16 The other non-member state that has held several referendums on the issue of joining the EU is Norway. Among Dutch citizens, knowledge on Switzerland is expected to be higher than on Norway, which maximizes the number of informed responses.
- 17 The sample was split in half for the purpose of multiple sub-studies. Apart from a loss of statistical power, this is unproblematic, as the random reduction of the sample size by half did not affect the representativeness of the sample. The subset of the sample did not significantly differ ( $P = 0.01$ , two-tailed) in terms of age, gender, household size, region, education, income, employment status or party choice in the Dutch Parliamentary Elections in 2006.
- 18 Besides the five threat perceptions mentioned, the list included influence on the economy, on democracy in the EU, on democracy in Turkey, on the position of the EU in the world, on the position of the Netherlands in the world, on human rights in Turkey, on human rights in the EU, on peace and security in the EU, and on the Dutch labour market, as well as 'a possible cultural enrichment', 'Turkey belonging to Europe historically' and 'Turkey belonging to Europe economically'.
- 19 The variables are only moderately correlated ( $r = 0.63$ ,  $r = 0.44$  and  $r = 0.50$ ;  $N = 694$ ). As a result, all the VIF indicators in all our models remain smaller than 4, indicating an absence of multicollinearity problems.
- 20 The correlation between perceived economic group threat immigrants and perceived religious group threat immigrants is  $r = 0.69$  ( $N = 1394$ ), between perceived cultural threat Turkey (position) and perceived religious threat Turkey (position)  $r = 0.73$  ( $N = 694$ ) and between perceived cultural threat Turkey (salience) and perceived religious threat Turkey (salience)  $r = 0.10$  ( $N = 694$ ).
- 21 If our data are not weighted, religious threat has similar effects in Croatia ( $b = -0.07$ ;  $P < 0.05$ , one-tailed), Switzerland ( $b = 0.04$ ; not significant) and Turkey ( $b = -0.16$ ;  $P < 0.001$ , one-tailed).
- 22 In order to perform a formal test of the difference between the effect of religious threat for Turkish and for Croatian EU entry support, we first 'stack' the data set so that the unit of analysis becomes the individual times the evaluated country (that is, of Turkey or Croatia) combination. In the next step, we regress the Turkey/Croatia EU support on the 15 variables that are also included in Models 1–3 as well as an identifier distinguishing between Turkey and Croatia evaluations, and the interaction of this identifier and the religious threat variable. We use clustered robust standard errors so as to account for the fact that evaluations are not independent from each other, but grouped by individual. We find that the last-mentioned (interaction) variable has a significant impact at the  $P = 0.05$  level (one-tailed). This means that the difference between Croatia and Turkey on this point is statistically significant at that level.
- 23 Results when data are unweighted: religious threat immigrants ( $b = -0.02$ ; not significant), position religious threat Turkey ( $b = -0.13$ ;  $P < 0.01$ , one-tailed) and salience religious threat Turkey ( $b = -0.49$ ;  $P < 0.01$ , one-tailed).



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