Muslims’ support for European integration: the role of organizational capacities

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(Received 26 December 2011; final version received 5 October 2012)

What explains Islamic organizations’ differing support for European integration and the democratic reforms that it entails? The question is highly relevant in the context of European Union (EU) enlargement towards Muslim-majority countries in the Balkans as well as theoretical debates on reasons and forms of Islamic moderation. Yet, almost no comparative research has been done on Balkan Muslims’ support for European integration with the exception of the Turkish case. This article explores the role of interest- and belief-related factors in explaining Muslim organizations’ differential support for the EU accession project in Albania and Turkey. The comparison of the most powerful Muslim organizations in both countries enables a most similar cases research design – our cases are similar in all aspects of the identified theoretical framework except for organizational capacities, which we argue explain the difference of attitudes towards the EU.

Keywords: Islam; European integration; democracy; Turkey; Albania

Introduction

The Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP)’s ample victory in all three consecutive elections since 2002 has raised many questions about the rise of political Islam and the fate of European integration in Turkey. For some, the AKP epitomizes the platform of “unabashed pursuit of EU membership”\textsuperscript{1} and the most developed instance of “Muslim democracy” today.\textsuperscript{2} For others, the AKP uses a tactical reformist strategy, while harbouring hidden “red line” Islamic convictions.\textsuperscript{3} Despite the controversy, research shows convincingly that AKP has experienced a certain democratization and EU integration fatigue already during its second term in power.\textsuperscript{4} The nationwide organization of the Albanian Sunnis, the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), belongs to the same spectrum of moderate liberal Islamic movements as the AKP.\textsuperscript{5} Both AKP and AMC have also charted their way in similarly fierce secular systems and are subject to a similar pull of EU integration.\textsuperscript{6} Yet, in contrast to the AKP’s shifting attitudes,
the AMC has shown consistent support for the agenda of democratization and European integration. Why do Islamic-rooted organizations show different attitudes towards European integration and the democratization reforms that it entails? How do organizational interests and religious beliefs play out to inform support for EU integration?

Research on EU enlargement has focused on various domestic actors, but there is a lack of systematic and comparative research on the factors that condition Muslims’ support for EU integration. Yet, the question is highly pertinent in the context of EU enlargement to Muslim majority or minority populations in the Balkans. It is also relevant in regard to the wider theoretical debates on Muslims’ moderation and pro-democratic behaviour. By adopting a theoretically informed and methodologically sound comparison of Muslim organizations in Albania and Turkey, this article sheds light on the factors that explain Muslims’ differential support for the EU accession project and, more broadly, their various political choices. While focusing on the issue of EU accession, we also acknowledge that it entails a range of democratic reforms and, therefore, we treat EU accession and democratization as analytically distinct, but parallel, overlapping, and at times interchangeable reform agendas.

The theoretical framework applied here bridges interest- and idea-based explanations of religious behaviour, while proposing a contextualized account of Muslims’ diversified preferences. Interest-based perspectives focus on structural constraints and organizational or individual interests to explain Muslims’ political choices. Idea-based approaches emphasize the influence of Islamic beliefs on Muslims’ behaviour. While important for identifying the mechanisms and degrees of religious moderation, both approaches focus on macro-level factors, such as a country’s regime type or regional context, and fail to explain Muslims’ different responses to largely similar political systems and regional environments. To explain the differences, we suggest that the influence of macro factors upon Muslims’ behaviour is mediated by three meso-level factors: (1) secular arrangements; (2) organizational capacities, which confine religious actors’ broad opportunity structures and relevant options in a given country; (3) theological interpretations which translate Muslims’ ideas about politics into plausible political programmes.

The theoretical task of this article is to “weigh” the role of each factor and assess how they combine in explaining Muslims’ attitudes towards EU integration.

The comparison of the AKP and the AMC enables a most similar cases research design, which allows for the “control” of all identified theoretical explanations, except for organizational capacities. Both organizations operate under similarly strict secular arrangements and share a liberal interpretation of Islamic doctrine. They vary, however, in terms of their organizational attributes – the AMC is a rather weak civil society organization struggling to rebuild its infrastructure after decades of official atheism; the AKP is a powerful ruling political party in the Turkish political scene – which may explain the variation of attitudes towards the EU. In order to control for alternative explanations when comparing different units of analysis (a ruling party and a civil society organization) we
add a within-case comparison of two consequent periods of the AKP’s rule, which are also defined by different organizational attributes – the newly emerging and fragile AKP during its first term in power, 2002–2007; and the more consolidated AKP after the 2007 elections. Finally, we use process tracing and counterfactual analysis to investigate the hypothesized relation between organizational capacities and support for European integration; and check whether other factors contribute to or explain diverse outcomes.

The argument proceeds in three parts. The first part reviews the alternative theoretical explanations and lays out our conceptual framework. The second part elaborates on the theoretically identified attributes of our cases: secular arrangements, organizational capacities, and theological interpretations. The last section investigates how and whether organizational differences, as opposed to other factors, inform Muslims’ differing attitudes towards European integration. The analysis suggests that weak organizational capacities determine Muslims’ needs to rely on EU integration as a means of strengthening their domestic position in fierce secular contexts. The adoption of a liberal Islamic doctrine is a necessary but insufficient factor in this process to the extent that it permits Islamic actors to define their strategic interest in terms of EU integration and eases ideological divisions on the issue. It also explains instances of enduring support for the EU in the absence of organizational interests, but it is not sufficient to boost support for EU integration on its own, especially when this goes against organizational, power-based interests.

**Explaining Muslims’ support for European integration**

Explanations of Muslims’ support for democracy and European integration share contextualists’ assumptions that Islam takes diverse forms, including pro-democratic and pro-European interpretations, depending on the interaction with its surrounding context. Yet, researchers remain divided when specifying the socio-political stimuli, vehicles of change, and degrees of adjustment that it takes for Islamic groups to pursue the goal of democratization and European integration. The divisions are usually embedded in two contrasting paradigms, which emphasize either interest- or idea-based motivations of religious behaviour. After summarizing each approach, we argue that their current focus on macro-level factors inhibits our understanding of the diversity of the Islamic movements and loses sight of more contextual factors that shape Muslims’ choices. We, therefore, suggest the shift of emphasis towards meso-level factors that provide a more contextualized account of the variety of Muslims’ political options and relevant preferences.

**The religious economy school: Muslims’ strategic choice for Europe**

The so-called religious economy school relies on religious actors’ interests, strategic calculations, and structural constraints to explain their support for
democratization and EU integration projects. This approach equates the behaviour of religious actors to that of a firm, which reckons with the imperatives of (a) organizational survival and (b) market share. The domestic institutional setup and global and regional circumstances provide the broad opportunity structure, which enables certain choices but limits others. Proponents of this school also maintain that support for democracy may emerge as a fortuitous by-product of strategic choices even in environments that lack convinced democrats.

The vast scholarship on political Islam has attempted to specify the institutional structures that encourage, if not create, Islamic democrats. A wide range of studies suggests that democratic rules of inclusion and competition appeal to Islamists’ interest to participate in politics and “induce” them to moderate their programmes in order to win the electorate. Hence, democratic rules “tame” Islamists through the necessity of pursuing organizational survival and, if needed, voters’ support. Aside from domestic incentives Islamists respond to “enticements” offered at the international/ regional level. The offer of EU enlargement, together with a net of conditional rewards for candidate countries, creates additional incentives for domestic actors to support EU-required democratic reforms. EU-related incentives might stem from the utility of EU rules in solving domestic issues at the advantage of certain actors; or more generally in increasing their political influence as they gain popularity and legitimacy for moving the country towards the desired goal of membership. Hence, the process of enlargement enables Islamic groups to engage in a two-level strategic game – they strive for and use accomplishments at the EU level to improve their domestic standing.

Construction of new identities: Muslims’ learning of the EU norms

The alternative explanation behind Muslims’ support for European integration and democracy pivots around the malleability of religious ideas and identities they compose. Accordingly, the human ability to interpret the contingencies that Muslims confront in their daily life promotes the construction of new ideas and worldviews, including pro-democratic interpretations, which can then be utilized as a frame of reference by religious entrepreneurs. In this alternative, ideological “taming” is a process which develops parallel to, if not precedes, interest-based strategic shifts of behaviour. Proponents of this approach argue that democratic incentives which are not accompanied by ideological change risk the so-called paradox of democracy by empowering non-democratic religious actors to strategically use and perhaps reverse those rules.

The ideational change in question can occur in different settings – crises and dramatic change in the political environment, political experiences as well as exposure to different ideas – which facilitate learning processes. Ideas that are thus acquired gain currency and motivate political behaviour. Yet, few scholars are willing to empower ideas with a role independent from that of interests. Indeed, ideas are often considered as formative and/or a by-product of interests, while the literature is full of cases of tactical use of ideas in pursuit of
organizational and/or personal interests. The strategic use of ideas, however, does not exclude the option that, in time, they could also gain an independent function from that of interests, especially when they resonate with the local corpus of Islamic doctrine. This can be extended to argue that the EU, as a normative structure, provides a depository of new ideas, which can be learned and internalized but also used strategically in the domestic environment. Hence, Islamists’ political programme could genuinely change as a result of observation and exposure to new ideas dominant in the EU environment. At the same time, Islamists may come to “use” EU norms as a valuable resource for their strategic arguments to liberalize the political system and put pressure on restrictive secular actors and institutional arrangements.

The role of meso-level factors: secular arrangements, organizational capacities, and theological interpretations

Both streams of research dealing with sources of Islamic change and moderation tend to emphasize macro-level factors, such as democratic regime incentives and/or regional contexts to explain differences of behaviour among Islamic groups. Such explanations, however, fail to explain why Muslims respond differently to largely similar regime- or regional-level incentives and norms. We argue that it is meso-level contextual factors that mediate the role of macro-factors and trigger Islamists’ various political choices. Drawing on the comparative studies on religion and democracy, we distinguish three such factors that are found to have a significant impact across various religious denominations, waves of democratization, and democratic experiments in the Muslim world: (1) the model of secularism, (2) organizational sources, and (3) liberal theology. Yet, on the basis of our cases, we expect that organizational capacities, as defined in the secular context, are the primary explanatory factor; while liberal ideas are a necessary but insufficient condition of Muslims’ support for EU integration.

Secularism is understood as the separation of secular spheres (state, law, economy, science) from religious institutions and norms. The form of separation reflects different state policies, ranging between assertive and passive. In the assertive model, the state claims religious neutrality and plays an active role to exclude religion from the public sphere. In the passive version, the state is more permissive towards religious public involvement. The particular secular arrangements confine the institutional set-up within which religious groups can communicate their views and compete for power in the political sphere; thus, influencing their political fortunes and the strategies available to them in a given country.

Organizational capacities, on the other hand, enable religious groups to gain advantage from, but also negotiate, and if necessary stretch out the opportunities and constraints embedded in the secular model. From an organizational standpoint, Islamic actors can be any individual or group that represents Islamic beliefs. Collective actors can be organized as civil society organizations, which aggregate believers around a set of Islamic values, but have limited claims and access to
political power. They can also take the form of political parties, which have a more direct claim to power and fuse religious beliefs with political authority. Besides their political functions, the attributes of religious organizations vary based on the number of believers they are able to mobilize and their degree of centralization. Such capacities, combined with the form of secularism under which they operate, determine the domestic opportunity structure within which religious actors calculate their options and strategize their choices on various issues, including EU integration. When faced with limited organizational sources and restrictive secular arrangements, allying with the EU can open new windows of opportunity for Islamic actors to strengthen their position in the domestic arena.

Political theology, which translates the basic beliefs that an Islamic group holds on political regime and authority into political ideals and programmes, may also influence Muslims’ choices. Theology may develop and evolve in line with Islamic actors’ strategic interests within a given opportunity structure, and/or learning experiences in a certain socio-political context. Yet, the adoption of liberal interpretations of Islamic doctrine, or some degree of it, is a necessary factor for Islamic actors to subscribe to and engage with EU-required and democratic rules in the first place. Whether emerging as a result of perceived interests in playing by democratic rules or genuine adoption of democratic ideals, liberal theology enables and enforces Islamic actors’ support for the parallel battle of democratization and EU integration.

Our conceptual framework echoes the consensual findings of EU enlargement research that accession empowers those domestic groups that commit to the goal of EU integration. In line with the findings of EU enlargement research, we suggest that power-based calculations are the primary driver of Muslims’ support for EU integration, while religious ideas complement interest-based motivations and explain “instances of rule adoption in the absence of EU conditionality”. Our analysis, however, advances the EU enlargement literature by investigating how and when strategic interests and religious doctrines gain priority and combine to shape Muslims’ support for EU integration.

Comparing the AMC and the AKP: secularist arrangements, organizational capacities, and theological interpretations

Secular arrangements

Secularism is firmly established as the fundamental characteristic of the political system in both Turkey and Albania. In Albania, concerns about national unity and the modernizing policies of the post-Ottoman state have moulded a historical consensus on the separation of religion from the state. After almost four decades since the abrogation of religion under communist rule (1944–1991), post-communist Albania has returned to the pre-communist consensus on secularism – the state recognizes no official religion, but, instead, promotes equality of all religious denominations and their institutional independence. The legal
and political system in Turkey is similarly secular. Since the foundation of the modern republic in 1923, Turkey has embarked on a process of secularization seen as the *sine qua non* of state-led westernization/modernization reforms. First recognized in 1937, secularism is the regime’s founding principle whose revision “cannot be proposed”.\(^{39}\) Furthermore, the Political Parties Law of 1983 outlaws exploitation of religion for political purposes.\(^{40}\) Accordingly, parties that engage in anti-secular activities can be dissolved by the Constitutional Court, as has been the case with several Islamist parties.

In addition, both Turkey’s and Albania’s models of secularism are inspired by the French-style “assertive” model of secularism, which implies active state supervision of religious institutions and activity. The post-communist Albanian state, much like the pre-communist one, has opted to closely oversee religious institutions.\(^{41}\) The Committee of Cults, a state organ created in 1999, facilitates cooperation between the state and the main four religious denominations – Sunni, Bektashi, Christian-Catholic, and Christian-Orthodox – while also checking and documenting their activity. In Turkey, state control over religion is similarly exercised through the Directorate General of Religious Affairs (DRA), an institution under the Office of the Prime Minister, which coordinates and supervises religious services. In line with the assertive model of secularism, both countries show a clear tendency to confine the role of religion to the private sphere and prohibit religious activity, including the use of religious symbols, in public institutions.

Finally, both organizations under analysis have conformed to the principle of secularism enshrined in the legal framework and strongly embedded in the historical, social and political context. The AMC shares the view that secularism is not only a social necessity but also a divinely sanctioned principle with a foundation in authentic national values.\(^{42}\) The AKP has been far more active in negotiating the assertive model of secularism, which is actively enacted by the Kemalist establishment (the military, high judiciary, and the opposition Republican People’s Party, CHP). Despite its more passive stance on secularism at the level of individual religious freedoms, the AKP has committed to the secular state model.\(^{43}\) The party’s programme condemns “the interpretation and distortion of secularism as enmity against religion” and also rejects the use of religion “for political, economic and other interests”.\(^{44}\)

**Organizational capacities**

Islamic actors in Turkey and Albania have organized in different forms and capacities. In Albania, religious groups operate within the realm of civil society and are regulated by the Law on Non-profit Organizations of 2001. The central organizations that represent the main four religious denominations, including the AMC, have additional bilateral agreements with the state. Accordingly, they are granted additional advantages such as representation in the Committee of Cults, supplementary tax exemptions, and financial support from the state budget.
Efforts to create an Islamic party or any other form of political representation of Islam, however, have all failed because of Muslims’ lack of support for the politicization of their religion.\textsuperscript{45}

In contrast to Albania, Turkey’s political spectrum is marked by strong Islamic political activism, initially organized within right-wing parties (during the 1950s and 1960s), and subsequently channeled into separate Islamic parties. The first openly Islamic party, the National Order Party (MNP), was established in 1970, but was subsequently banned from politics by the Constitutional Court based on anti-secular charges, as were also its successors the National Salvation Party (MSP), Welfare Party (RP), and Virtue Party (FP). The AKP, founded in 2001, is an offshoot of the RP and its successor the FP. Since its creation, the AKP has emerged as the most successful Islamic-inspired party and has attracted remarkable shares of the national vote in the 2002 (34.29\%), 2007 (46.58\%), and 2011 (49.8\%) elections.

The AKP arguably owes its unprecedented electoral success to its effective mobilization strategies and centralized organizational structure. The party’s mobilization strategy targets a broad coalition combining former centre-right voters, moderate Islamists, moderate nationalists, and even a certain segment of the former centre left.\textsuperscript{46} With more than three million members nationwide, the AKP approximates a unique mass party in the Turkish political scene. In addition, the AKP’s local organization structures seem “more active, more highly motivated and more elaborately organized than those of other Turkish political parties”.\textsuperscript{47}

Finally, the AKP, like most other Turkish parties, consists of a highly centralized and hierarchical organization. Its leader and current prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, controls all party policies and functions in association with a close group of collaborators.

The AMC, when compared to the AKP, possesses relatively weak organizational capacities. Created immediately after the lifting of the communist ban on religion in 1991, the AMC enjoys the status of a nationwide organization responsible for managing and interpreting all Islamic-related issues in the country.\textsuperscript{48} The permission of religious rights and pouring of assistance mainly through Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs) after the fall of communism has allowed the AMC to rebuild its basic infrastructure – reconstruction of places of worship, training of new clergy, creation of new outlets of communication, and proliferation of social activities. Yet, the regeneration of its organizational capacities after decades of atheist policies has proven very slow and challenging.\textsuperscript{49} The substantial mass of agnostics, who grew up amidst anti-religious communist propaganda, has further undermined the level and scope of religious mobilization.\textsuperscript{50} The AMC’s capacity to manage autonomously Muslims’ affairs is also challenged by the lack of an independent budget, which is instead pooled together by different sources as they arise.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{Theological interpretations}

In both Albania and Turkey the interpretation of Islamic doctrine is embedded in a historically liberal tradition of Islam. In Albania, the creation of a localized liberal
tradition goes back to the pre-communist period when modernizing state policies guided Islamic authorities to adapt to the principles of “present European life”. The development of a liberal tradition of Islam in Turkey can also be traced back to state-led reforms conducted during the early years of the modern Turkish republic, which sought to modernize society and remove religion from the political sphere. In both our cases, the tradition of liberal Islam has worked to marginalize radical interpretations of Islamic law and claims for the adoption of Islamic principles in public life. Dominant Islamic groups in both cases have generally incorporated moderation, tolerance and pluralism into their interpretations of Islamic scripture.

In post-communist Albania, Islam emerged from the communist era completely destroyed, and in need of redefining its social and political doctrine. The AMC’s choice was clearly for a moderate brand of Islam that builds on the historical tradition and borrows selectively from imported ideas diffused via foreign organizations. Gradually, moderate Turkish influences have gained favour against more radicalized Arab and Middle Eastern influences, which penetrated the open market of ideas at the beginning of the transition. Only one person among the current staff of the AMC headquarters has studied in Arab countries, a reverse of the situation 10 years ago. The AMC has also embraced Hanefi Medhab – a moderate Islamic school of law, which stresses interpretation of Islamic scripture – as the official line of the community. In the bilateral agreement signed between the state and the AMC, the former has pledged to defend the community’s moderate line against any “deformations, extremist tendencies, or other aggressive manifestations in the spaces occupied by [Islamic] believers”. In general, Islam in Albania tends to be non-ritualistic, disassociated from theological problems, tolerant, and pro-Western.

In the Turkish case, the AKP has clearly distanced itself from the ideology of political Islam shared by its predecessor Islamist parties as well as the relatively marginal Felicity Party (SP) and the Islamist National Outlook Movement (Milli Görüş), which advocated the Islamic state model. Officially, the AKP subscribes to the ideal of “conservative democracy” that approximates the programme of mainstream Turkish right and Europe’s Christian Democrats. As explained by the party’s ideologue, Yalçın Akdoğan, conservative democracy stresses “common sense, prudence, and gradual change”. In the words of President Abdullah Gül, a former AKP politician: “We wanted to prove that a Muslim society is capable of . . . attaining contemporary standards [of democracy], while preserving its values, traditions and identity”.

The AKP’s self-definition in conservative democracy terms, however, includes expressed sympathy for Islamic values. Some AKP-led policy initiatives, such as efforts to criminalize adultery, have arguably revealed the party’s “deep convictions about Islamic . . . values”. Policy initiatives have been paralleled by AKP leaders’ expression of sympathy for Islamic ideas. Still, the party’s ideology promotes religious values at the level of individual freedoms, without seeking Islamic transformation of the state or society. On the whole, the AKP aspires to
a reform-oriented, moderate conception of Islam, while not completely abandoning the promotion of Islamic values at the individual and social level.

Organizational capacities and support for democracy and EU integration

The AMC’s weak organizational capacities and consistent support for EU integration

Since the very beginning of the democratic transition in the early 1990s, the slowly regenerated AMC structures have been reliable supporters of democracy, as a system that best guarantees religious freedoms. Muslim leaders and their followers, who volunteered to create the AMC in 1990, were close allies of the anti-communist movements, which struggled for a democratic future and extension of fundamental human rights negated by the communist dictatorship. AMC authorities and lay Muslims in general became active supporters of the democratic cause when anti-communists clashed with communist forces over the future of the regime change in the period 1990–1992: imams made use of sermons and Friday prayers to laud democratic freedoms in front of thousands of believers who flocked to newly open mosques; AMC authorities protested shoulder to shoulder with anti-communist opposition leaders; and Muslim believers crowded the anti-regime rallies that finally forced the capitulation of the communist establishment. Although the AMC’s initial backing of democracy was primarily motivated by its interest in sanctioning religious liberties, which would guarantee its organizational survival, its support for democracy has persisted after the legalization of substantial religious freedoms.

The AMC has similarly supported the process of European integration, which, since the fall of communism, has emerged as a goal analogous to democratization and a major national objective commanding the consensus of the entire social and political spectrum. Both the EU integration and democratization project promised to enhance the newly established religious freedoms, but also render legitimacy to the contested role of Islam in the country. Support for EU integration was probably the AMC’s only strategy available to thrive in a socio-political context suspicious of the role of Islam in the realization of the desired European integration and generally hostile to Islamic faith. Ismail Kadare, the celebrated Albanian novelist, himself from a Muslim background, speaks on behalf of many intellectuals when asserting that “the Albanian path to Europe should be taken without the baggage of Islam, which is not worth it and only delays the arrival”. Much too often, official debates have echoed the offensive of intellectuals towards Islam. Anti-Muslim rhetoric became almost an official policy line during the Socialist Party’s rule (1997–2005), the successor of the former Communist Party which drew its electoral support mainly from the Christian-Orthodox strongholds in southern Albania. That socialist rule coincided with the post-9/11 purge against Islamic extremist networks elsewhere in the Balkans contributed to augment non-discriminatory political attacks against Muslims. The director of
the State Committee of Cults, Ilir Kulla, has spoken openly against the Muslim majority in the country while proposing that “the state should take control over Islam”.66 Alfred Moisiu, then President of Albania, offended many Muslims when “explaining” in front of academic audiences that: “Albanians are often cited as . . . a country of Muslim majority. [But] this is a very superficial reading of the reality. Islam in Albania is neither a residential religion, nor a faith spread originally . . . As a rule, it is a shallow religion”.67

The fierce contestation of Islam in the Albanian public sphere has thus weakened it as a system of beliefs and the faith of the majority. As noted by a renowned scholar of Albanian religions, “post-communist politics have signified the end of the pre-communist monopoly of Islamic institutions and [its] inversion . . . into a ‘surviving majority’”.68 If one adds the AMC’s organizational and ideational weakness to the constellation of forces allying against Islam, democratic and European “protection” emerges as a window of opportunity for Muslim organizations to protect themselves and thrive against their many opponents in politics and society. The AMC, as the nationwide organization of the targeted Sunnis, has taken a strong stance to construct a “European version of Islam”. Its official statutes emphasize the “liberal and tolerant tradition” of Albanian Islam as the guiding doctrine.69 The tradition is moreover “packaged” to show the compatibility between Islam and European values. AMC leaders have been especially active in reinterpreting Islamic values in the context of requirements that the EU imposes on countries waiting in line for membership like Albania. In the words of an AMC official, EU accession reforms consist of similar principles propagated by Islam such as “the fight against corruption, trafficking, prostitution, feuds and drugs”.70

Other groups organized around younger Islamic scholars, who have returned to Albania after studying theology in foreign universities mostly in the Middle East and Turkey, have mobilized to improve what they believe to be an ideologically and economically “bankrupt” situation of Islam vis-à-vis other forces in politics and society. Some of the new religious scholars would have preferred a more strict reading of Islamic sources.71 Others aim to disclose a certain Islamophobia72 and state bias against Islam in the country.73 Yet, most Muslim groups, even the so-called Albanian “radicals”, have followed their forefathers at the AMC in supporting democracy and European integration, as “the only game in town”. They pledge “[to] remain loyal and devoted citizens to the principles of democracy and human rights in which the United Europe believes today” while also adding that “Muslims of Albania have a great need for the democracy and the human rights that European continent has constructed in years”.74 Weak organizational capacities in an environment of assertive secular state policies and strong socio-political opposition to Islam have determined Muslims’ univocal support for Europe and democracy as a system ensuring much needed religious liberties. Meanwhile, the historical experience of liberal Islam has provided a usable pool of ideas to draw from and reduced the scope of clash among competing ideas and strategies, thereby facilitating Muslims’ consensual and consistent support for European integration.
The AKP’s fragile position in the period 2002–2007: strong but selective support for the EU

Upon assuming power in 2002, the AKP quickly capitalized on the goal of EU membership and made it its top foreign policy objective. Similarly to the AMC, the AKP had strong incentives for embracing a pro-EU platform as a means of consolidating its initially fragile position in the Turkish social and political arena. When the party first came to power in 2002, its leader, Erdoğan, was banned from politics. At the same time, the secular establishment consistently doubted the party’s secular credentials and targeted it for harbouring an “Islamist agenda”. As a relatively new Islamic-rooted party facing the threat of getting banned, the AKP found a strategic ally in the EU. Some EU-required reforms promised to transform the rigid Kemalist model of secularism into a “less repressive” one and neutralize the secular establishment. The EU anchor would additionally lend credibility to the party’s disputed “conservative democracy” ideology and demonstrate its compatibility with European democratic values.

Driven by the imperative to consolidate its domestic position with the help of the EU, the AKP has enacted a broad range of initiatives to comply with EU requirements. The EU’s 1999 Helsinki Summit, which had first declared Turkey an EU candidate, had encouraged a comprehensive package of EU-oriented reforms already in 2001. The AKP upheld this “wind of change” and adopted six additional reform packages in line with the EU’s political criteria. These reforms speeded up Turkey’s pre-accession process and led to the opening of membership negotiations with the EU in October 2005.

At the same time, however, most EU-friendly legislation adopted by the AKP helped to alter the domestic political equilibrium in favour of the party and weaken the secular establishment. Changes in the structure of the National Security Council, a prominent institution enabling the military’s involvement in politics, marginalized the military as a political actor and fierce defender of the assertive secular model. This was a necessary step for the consolidation of democracy to the extent that it reduced the likelihood of much debated military interventions in the political process. Yet, it also endowed the AKP with greater independence in day-to-day policy-making. Additional legislation on the banning of political parties based upon anti-secular charges also worked to strengthen AKP’s position vis-à-vis the Constitutional Court which had previously banned Islamist parties. Other constitutional amendments, adopted in December 2002, and enacted into relevant legislative changes in January 2003, limited the ban on party membership to persons “convicted for terrorist acts” and allowed the indicted Erdoğan to run for elections and assume the position of prime minister in March 2003. Altogether, the reforms targeting “civilization of politics” and “liberalization of political freedoms” contributed to the liberalization of the political environment but they also enhanced the AKP’s political power and bargaining position against long-standing secular “rivals” which for years had monitored and scrutinized religion-based parties.
The AKP’s interest-based strategic motivations were particularly evident in the selective nature of EU-oriented reforms. Throughout its first term in office, the party was fast to translate some EU conditions into legislative bills, but overlooked or delayed other EU demands that threatened to weaken its position as a ruling power. EU requirements targeting the improvement of political accountability, such as judicial independence and removal of MPs’ immunity from jurisdiction, for example, were systematically ignored despite the EU’s insistence on these topics. Regarding the former, the European Commission had asked that the autonomy of the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors – the institution which decides on the appointment and career promotion of judges and prosecutors – should be enhanced. With respect to the latter, it had suggested that parliamentarians’ immunity from jurisdiction should be lifted. The AKP’s failure to act on these issues was criticized by the EU as a critical setback in the fight against high-level corruption.

The AKP’s strengthened position in the post-2007 period and EU integration fatigue

After its ample victory in the 2007 elections, the AKP rose as a stronger and almost unrivalled force in the Turkish political scene. Given its expanded power base and consolidated position vis-à-vis the secular establishment, the post-2007 AKP enjoyed higher political leverage to negotiate, and even impose, its preferences upon its opponents. The AKP had, thus, considerably less incentives to resort to the EU as a window of opportunity to consolidate its domestic position. Despite its shrinking incentives to ally with the EU, the AKP has generally followed the path of EU integration. The fact that the party’s conservative democracy programme accommodates the EU’s democratic norms, and that the party seeks recognition for this, has helped sustain its general commitment to EU accession even in the face of reduced incentives for staying the course of EU reforms. As Turkey’s Minister for European Union Affairs and Chief EU Negotiator Egemen Bağış announced after the June 2011 elections: “... Turkey is set to accelerate, with a new dynamism, its focus on the reform process and further alignment with the EU”.82

The AKP’s support for EU integration, however, has been less reliable and consistent when it came to act upon the reforms required in the context of EU accession. In line with the party’s shifting needs in the domestic system and the costly nature of EU demands that were left to deal with, the AKP has been reluctant to engage with the remaining issues, in particular those concerning freedoms of expression and the press. As of 2012, 95 journalists remained imprisoned, up from 57 in 2011.83 The number of prosecutions under the Anti-Terror Law has simultaneously risen, reaching 150 in 2010, six times as many as in 2009.84 Defamation suits launched by AKP leaders against journalists have also increased substantially in the past years.85 Consequently, Freedom House lowered Turkey’s press score to 54 in 2011 from 47 in 2007, while both the OSCE and...
the European Commission have warned that rising pressures on the media may amount to self-censorship. Criticism over the state of political freedoms was also raised in the context of the politically charged cases of Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, which led to the imprisonment of members of the military, the media, and academia based upon allegations of plotting to overthrow the government and/or engaging in terrorist activity. The European Parliament has called the government’s attention to problems of due process in these judicial proceedings, especially related to “excessively long periods of pre-trial detention, which can . . . become de facto punishment without a trial”. In this context, the European Court of Human Rights’ (ECHR) decisions on the admissibility of the cases brought by two plaintiffs, journalist Tuncay Özkân and former general Çetin Doğan, with respect to their ongoing trials in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases, respectively, are also significant. In December 2011, the ECHR rejected all legal complaints raised by Özkân concerning the lawfulness of his trial in Turkish courts, except one: that the duration of his detention is not reasonable when considering Article 5(3) of the European Convention on Human Rights (Özkân has remained in prison since September 2008) and that he has not had the right to contest his detention in the Turkish legal system. A slightly parallel decision was reached on the Doğan case in April 2012 when the ECHR ruled that Doğan’s detention was justified at the time of his arrest while accepting the admissibility of his complaint concerning his right to contest the legality of his detention in Turkish courts. The ECHR has so far upheld the legality of both cases. However, it is also important to note that these rulings are only preliminary since the court can only rule on the lawfulness of the trials after they are fully completed in the Turkish domestic legal system. In addition, the fact that the ECHR has accepted Özkân’s complaint regarding his long detention period while his trial is ongoing is also significant.

In response to these problems, in July 2012 the AKP government passed the “third judicial reform package” in order to bring relevant legislation in line with the European Convention on Human Rights. The legislative package removed the “special authority courts” much criticized for allowing the long detention periods in the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. Yet, related amendments of the Anti-Terror Law, Turkish Penal Code and the Code on Criminal Procedures that the European Commission has mentioned in its reports are still pending.

One should take into account that changing factors on the EU’s side may also have influenced the AKP’s fatigue in complying with crucial EU demands in the post-2007 period. Since 2005, when the Union launched membership negotiations with Turkey, the list of membership criteria has expanded to include additional issues that have little to do with democracy, such as the EU’s capacity to absorb Turkey and Cyprus-related issues, all jeopardizing the process of accession negotiations. At the same time, the EU has added new question marks to Turkey’s future in the Union by calling for privileged partnership instead of full membership for Turkey, while key European leaders have openly advanced anti-Turkey arguments. Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, noted on different occasions that: “Turkey
is not a European country, and as such it does not have a place inside the European Union”. Such issues have seemingly added to the AKP’s “Eurofatigue,” which has been increasingly criticized by the liberal intelligentsia, among them many AKP sympathizers, eager to see the EU integration and democratization reforms fulfilled by the AKP at all costs.

Yet, weakening incentives on the EU’s side can explain neither the timing nor the selective nature of the reforms enacted under the AKP. First, one can argue that the credibility of the membership perspective was already shaken in 2004 when the European Council qualified membership negotiations with Turkey as “open-ended”. Still, the AKP’s EU enthusiasm endured for most of the period 2002–2007. Second, the diminishing credibility of EU membership cannot explain why the AKP has held on to certain EU reforms, such as civilization of politics, which were beneficial for further consolidating its position in the political system even after 2007. Finally, the AKP’s shifting commitment towards EU integration stands in sharp contrast to the AMC’s continuing support despite the Commission rejecting Albania’s membership application twice since 2009, which casted doubts on the country’s accession process. Hence, our analysis demonstrates that domestic factors — primarily interest-based, strategic concerns; and secondarily liberal ideas — trump EU-related explanations of the AKP’s shifting support for EU integration.

Extending our findings to other cases

These findings are also supported by the EU positions of other Muslim organizations in Turkey. For example, the Gülen movement (a religious network named after Fethullah Gülen, a charismatic religious cleric who preaches moderate Islam, which has existed since the late 1960s) has consistently advocated a pro-globalization and pro-EU view. In contrast to the AKP, Gülen’s Islamist group is not a formal political party. Although its sympathizers have successfully infiltrated the security (mostly the police force as opposed to the military) and judicial institutions as well as the general bureaucratic administration, the movement lacks the direct decision-making power that the AKP has. In addition, although Gülenists have supported the AKP government against the secular establishment since 2002, they have increasingly diverged from the AKP over a range of policy issues in the past years. Now that the common rival — the military — is politically marginalized and poses less of a threat to religious organizations, a power struggle has emerged between the Gülen group and the AKP. There is evidence to suggest that the AKP government is viewing its Gülenist allies as a liability as much as an asset and has already taken steps to curtail Gülen’s influence within the bureaucracy and the judiciary. As a result, although a powerful religious group, the Gülen movement is still vulnerable vis-à-vis the AKP. Hence, its persistent support for EU integration and democratic reforms is consistent with the argument proposed here.

As an alternative example, the Haydar Baş religious movement has consistently opposed the EU and democratic norms despite the fact that it is a weak
organization. While this seems to contradict our argument at first glance, closer analysis still proves the relevance of our two variables, organizational capacities and ideas. In contrast to the AKP and the Gülen movement, the weak Baş community has chosen the option of cooptation by the Turkish state instead of engaging with the EU as a strategy of survival in the secular context. In addition and perhaps more importantly, the movement does not subscribe to liberal Islamic ideas as the AKP and Gülenists do. It has instead developed an “intolerant normative framework” based on “an unfriendly view of other religions” and rejection of globalization. Consequently, the Baş group’s anti-EU integration stance especially proves the role of liberal Islamic ideas as a necessary condition for supporting the EU, and is compatible with our findings on the facilitating role of liberal Islamic doctrine in the AKP and AMC cases.

Conclusions
This article aimed to explain why Muslim-inspired organizations in EU applicant countries show different attitudes towards European integration processes and related democratic reforms. We argued that Muslim groups define their stance towards the EU based on their varying organizational capacities in strictly secular environments. In both Turkey and Albania, our chosen organizations, the AKP and the AMC, have operated under similarly stringent secular constraints and subscribed to liberal Islamic ideas in favour of EU integration and democratization. Yet, they have shown differential support for the twin processes of EU membership and democratic reforms. While the AMC has consistently endorsed the EU and democratization process, the AKP’s stance has varied over the years, shifting from high to falling support since 2002.

We attribute these observed variations to these groups’ different and changing needs for political power measured by their organizational capacities. As a relatively weak civil society organization in the Albanian secular context alien to political Islam, the AMC has shown unwavering support for EU integration as a means to solidify its domestic position and guarantee its organizational survival. In contrast, as Turkey’s ruling party since 2002, the much stronger AKP could afford to shift such support strategically over the years. During its first term in power (2002–2007), the AKP held on to the EU reform agenda, though selectively, to guarantee its political position vis-à-vis the secular military-judicial establishment, which doubted its official, democratic secularist programme. Its post-2007 rule, however, has been characterized by EU fatigue and stalling democratic reforms, consistent with its consolidated position with respect to rival secular forces. In this period, having improved its power position, the AKP no longer needed the EU’s protection and, hence, strategically shifted its focus away from the EU integration and democratization agenda.

Our analysis also shows that Muslim organizations’ liberal political ideas complement purely power-based, organizational motivations that determine support for the EU. We found liberal ideas to be operating as necessary and
facilitating factors in this process: the embrace of liberal theology was necessary for enabling the AMC and AKP to develop an interest in, and stay committed to, the goal of democratization and EU integration as opposed to the competing ideology of political Islam. This was especially evident in the AKP’s case. The party’s conservative democracy ideology has allowed it to stay on course for EU integration even in the face of reduced political incentives for doing so in the post-2007 period.

At a more general abstract level, this article delves into the factors that explain Muslims’ political preferences and relevant choices on various issues. Our explanatory framework bridges the interest-idea dichotomy, while providing a contextualized account of Muslims’ options based on their respective secular constraints, organizational capacities, and ideas about politics and authority. Our findings on the primary role of organizational sources in a fierce secular environment, and the facilitating role of ideas, can thus be extended to explain why Muslim organizations opt for certain choices and not others depending on the issue at stake and also country and regional contexts.

Notes
1. Özel, “A Passionate Story,” 57.
2. Nasr, “The Rise,” 25.
3. Tezcür, “The Moderation,” 80–1.
4. Ragih-Aghsan, “Turkey’s EU Quest,” 45.
5. Yavuz, “Is There a Turkish Islam?”
6. Albania is currently a “potential” candidate country and applied for EU membership in 2009. Turkey has been a candidate country since 1999.
7. Elbasani, “Religion and Democratization.”
8. See Bellin, “Faith in Politics.”
9. For a summary of literature see Kunkler and Leininger, “Religious Actors.”
10. George and Bennett, Case Studies, 151.
11. Ibid., 166.
12. Ibid., 205.
13. Stephan, “Religion, Democracy,” 47–52.
14. Bellin, “Faith in Politics,” 319–26.
15. Kalyvas, “Commitment Problems,” 385.
16. Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates?” 352.
17. Tezcür, “The Moderation.”
18. The rewards offered by the EU range from closer economic cooperation and strengthened institutional ties to the ultimate “carrot” of membership.
19. Adopted in 1993, the official EU membership criteria require candidate countries to demonstrate, among others, “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities” (European Council, Presidency Conclusions, 13). Over the years, the political criteria have been expanded to include more specific areas of reform on a case-by-case basis.
20. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, “Introduction,” 11.
21. Yavuz, Islamic Political Identity, 215.
22. Schwedler, “A Paradox of Democracy?” 25.
23. Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates?,” 363.
24. Bellin, “Faith in Politics,” 345–6.
25. See Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, “Introduction,” 1–28.
26. Kunkler and Leininger, “The Multi-Faceted Role.”
27. Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God’s Century*, 9–10.
28. Kunkler and Leininger, “Religious Actors.”
29. Casanova, *Public Religions*, 211–15.
30. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies*, 31–2.
31. Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God’s Century*, 39.
32. Kunkler and Leininger, “The Multi-Faceted Role,” 1063.
33. Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God’s Century*, 45.
34. Tezçü, “The Moderation.”
35. Vachudova, *Europe Undivided*, 2005.
36. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, “Conclusions,” 211.
37. Della Rocca, *Kombi dhe Feja*.
38. Article 10, Albanian Constitution.
39. Article 4, Turkish Constitution.
40. Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism*, 17.
41. Lakshman-Lepain, “Albanian Islam,” 41.
42. Endersen, “Is the Albanian’s Religion Really ‘Albanianism’?” 205.
43. Kuru, “Reinterpretation of Secularism,” 147–52.
44. Quoted in Ibid., 142.
45. Interview with Besnik Sinani, 20 December 2010, Berlin.
46. Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism*, 37.
47. Ibid., 49.
48. Lakshman-Lepain, “Albanian Islam,” 4.
49. Pano, “Religion in Albania,” 152.
50. Clayer, “God in the ‘Land of the Mercedes.’”
51. Raxhimi, “Turkish Brand of Islam.”
52. Clayer, *Ne Fillimet e Nacionalizmit Shqiptar*, 406–23.
53. Elbasani, “Religion and Democratization.”
54. Raxhimi, “Turkish Brand of Islam,” 4.
55. See Government of Albania, *Agreement between the Council of Ministers*, article 3.
56. Lakshman-Lepain, “Albanian Islam,” 49.
57. Kuru, “Globalization and Diversification,” 268–73.
58. Quoted in Kuru, “Reinterpretation of Secularism,” 141–2.
59. Quoted in Duran, “JDP and Foreign Policy,” 288.
60. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy*, 168.
61. Elbasani, “Religion and Democratization.”
62. Endersen, *Is the Albanian’s Religion Really ‘Albanianism’?*.
63. Elbasani, *European Integration*, 207.
64. Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja*, 265.
65. Quoted in Sulstarova, “Europa e Ngurte e Kadares,” 39.
66. Quoted in Muslim Forum of Albania, “The Muslim Forum of Albania,” 2.
67. Moisiz, “Inter-Religious Tolerance.”
68. Clayer, “God in the ‘Land of the Mercedes,’” 13.
69. Vickers, *Islam in Albania*.
70. Quoted in Endersen, *Is the Albanian’s Religion Really ‘Albanianism’?*, 179.
71. Vickers, *Islam in Albania*.
72. Muslim Forum of Albania, “Miranda Vickers.”
73. Muslim Forum of Albania, “A Call for Albanian Government.”
74. Muslim Forum of Albania, “Miranda Vickers,” 5.
75. Erdoğan served a four-month prison sentence in 1999 for “inciting public hatred based on religion” (Article 312, Turkish Penal Code) and was subsequently banned from participating in parliamentary elections for five years.
76. Kuru, “Globalization and Diversification,” 272.
77. Duran, “JDP and Foreign Policy,” 284.
78. For a detailed discussion, see Hale and Özbudun, Islamism, Democracy and Liberalism, 55–67.
79. See for example European Commission, Turkey 2007 Progress Report, 10.
80. Ibid., 11.
81. Ibid., 11.
82. Quoted in Celęp, “Turkey’s Long EU Accession Process.”
83. OSCE, Main Findings.
84. Freedom House, Turkey Freedom of the Press 2011.
85. Champion, “Call the Prime Minister a Turkey.”
86. OSCE, “OSCE Media Freedom”; European Commission, Turkey 2011 Progress Report, 26.
87. European Parliament, European Parliament Resolution of 29 March 2012 on the 2011 Progress Report on Turkey, para. 15.
88. ECHR, Décision requête no. 15869/09, 7.
89. ECHR, Décision, Requête no. 28484/10, 11–12.
90. Türmen, “AIHM’nin Tuncay Özkan Kararı.”
91. European Commission, Turkey 2011 Progress Report, 25.
92. Saatçioğlu, “Revisiting the Role.”
93. Quoted in Yılmaz, “Turkish Identity on the Road to the EU,” 297.
94. See, inter alia, Alpay, “Why the Turkish Paradox?”; Babahan, “Those Who Pull the Trigger.”
95. Saatçioğlu, “Revisiting the Role.”
96. Kuru, “Globalization and Diversification,” 261–5.
97. See, inter alia, Stratfor, “Turkey: An Emerging AKP-Gulenist Split?”
98. Çakır, “İslami kesim içinde.”
99. Kuru, “Globalization and Diversification,” 266–8.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid., 266.

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