

South European Society and Politics

ISSN: 1360-8746 (Print) 1743-9612 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fses20

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To cite this article: Ezgi Elçi, Deniz Sert & Evren Balta (14 Oct 2026): Acceptance divided: an experimental study on the perceptions of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees in Turkey, South European Society and Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2026.2742925

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2026.2742925

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Published online: 14 Oct 2026.

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SOUTH EUROPEAN SOCIETY AND POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2026.2742925

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ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how economic and cultural factors shape public acceptance by comparing attitudes toward Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Turkey. Drawing on the Threat-Benefit Model, we embed a factorial survey experiment in a face-to-face national survey, independently varying each family's economic self-sufficiency and religiosity. The results show that economic concerns matter, but cultural and identity-based factors dominate. Acceptance depends more on respondents' own political identities than on refugee attributes. While religious citizens favor Syrians, secular citizens prefer Ukrainians, a divide that reflects deep polarization in Turkey. Kurdish respondents demonstrate strong solidarity with Syrians. The weight of economic credentials also depends on respondents' intergenerational mobility. These findings show that internal societal cleavages and the evaluator's social position shape refugee acceptance in polarized societies, where the respondent's own position can outweigh the refugee's attributes.

KEYWORDS

Cultural proximity; economic burden; anti-immigration; Syrian refugees; Ukrainian immigrants; survey experiment; religiosity; immigration to Turkey

Introduction

Large-scale refugee[1] movements increasingly involve populations that differ sharply in cultural background, religion, and perceived economic profiles. This raises important questions about how host societies evaluate different groups seeking protection: How do citizens assess refugees who vary in their cultural proximity and socioeconomic characteristics? Do material concerns outweigh cultural affinities, or are identity-based considerations more decisive? Focusing on public attitudes towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees within the same host society, this article examines how economic and cultural factors jointly shape patterns of refugee acceptance. By comparing responses across two distinct refugee populations within a single national context, the study isolates the conditions under which cultural distance, perceived economic costs, and symbolic boundaries influence public support for refugees.

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[1]We seek to reserve the term 'refugee' for Syrians residing in Turkey. Yet, when engaging with the broader literature, we often employ 'refugee', 'migrant', and 'immigrant' interchangeably (Carling 2023).

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2026.2742925

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Recent crises have profoundly shaped the global patterns of forced migration. Compelling host nations navigate complex questions of refugee integration and public acceptance. The humanitarian imperative to provide refuge is widely recognised, yet practical realities often conflict with it. By experimentally investigating these critical dimensions, we aim to uncover whether, and to what extent, economic and cultural factors explain differences in public acceptance of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Turkey. Our findings reveal a striking asymmetry. While economic credentials shape acceptance of culturally distant Ukrainian refugees, identity-based solidarity, which is rooted in Turkey's domestic religious and ethnic cleavages, dominates evaluations of culturally proximate Syrian refugees.

We draw on Tartakovsky and Dopelt Walsh's (2016a) *Threat-Benefit Model* (TBM) as a meta-theoretical approach, which claims that the credentials of newcomers affect anti-immigrant attitudes in the host society. This body of research argues that, rather than treating immigrants as a homogeneous group, we should examine whether individual differences in the native population's attitudes towards immigrants are relevant. For example, previous studies have suggested that the host population is more welcoming towards immigrants from strong economic backgrounds. However, the native population is less likely to accept immigrants when they perceive them as an economic burden (e.g. Turper et al. 2015; Valentino et al. 2019). Social assistance programs for immigrants provided by the host government may lead to welfare chauvinism and fear of losing welfare benefits. Such issues raise exclusionary attitudes towards immigrants (Gidron 2020; Rydgren & Tyrberg 2020).

A rapidly growing body of experimental research examines the factors that shape attitudes towards refugees and immigrants. The foundational studies in this tradition decompose acceptance into economic, humanitarian, and religious components. Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner (2016) show that Europeans favour asylum seekers who are employable, genuinely vulnerable, and not Muslim, while Alrababa'h et al. (2021) find that hosts in Jordan, a Muslim-majority and heavily impacted economy, likewise prefer refugees who are economically self-sufficient and culturally proximate. A recent meta-analysis documents that economic and cultural considerations both shape attitudes, but their relative weight varies across contexts (Weber et al. 2025).

Across existing studies, attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey are shaped by a mix of identity, contact, and perceived competition rather than a simple pro- versus anti-refugee divide. Refugees' ethnicity shapes acceptance even in Turkey's co-religious setting. Conjoint experiments show that Turkish respondents favour Turkoman refugees over Syrian Arab and Kurdish refugees (Getmansky, Matakos & Sinmazdemir 2024) and that Kurdish refugees are disfavoured relative to Arabs due to pre-existing intergroup relations rather than security concerns (Türkoğlu 2026). Identity cues on the respondent side also matter. Özen, Dal and Tokdemir (2023) show that national versus religious

identity cues different levels of perceived threat, with lower-income respondents less supportive of integration when refugees are seen as competitors for scarce resources. Özdemir, Kağan Malatyalı and Sakallı (2023) find that internalised cultural orientations, especially long-term orientation, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance, predict anti-refugee attitudes. The secular-religious cleavage cuts both ways. Religious motives soften hostility among conservative Sunni Muslims, though not enough to override personal economic concerns (Morgül & Savaşkan 2021), while secular Turks express above-average antipathy tied to the political and lifestyle threats they perceive under an increasingly Islamist government (Morgül & Savaşkan 2025). Causal evidence reinforces the economic channel. Using an instrumental-variables design, Kayaoğlu (2025) finds that refugee exposure heightens perceptions of economic burden, insecurity, and social distance, with negative attitudes driven mainly by relative deprivation, cultural alienation, and labour-market competition, while religiosity exerts only a mild welcoming effect. Özdamar, Giovanis and Hadi Akdede (2024) extend the picture by showing that cosmopolitanism and cultural proximity also condition acceptance. In summary, these studies indicate that support for refugee integration rises when shared identity, contact, or cosmopolitan orientations reduce threat, and falls when nationalist framing and economic or cultural competition heighten it. To our knowledge, however, no study compares attitudes towards Syrian and Ukrainian refugees within Turkey, which is a comparison that holds the host context fixed while varying religious and cultural distance directly.

The key contribution of this manuscript is twofold. First, by comparing attitudes towards Syrian (predominantly Muslim) versus Ukrainian (predominantly Christian) immigrants within the same national context, this research uniquely isolates the role of cultural and religious differences in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes. Previous literature suggests that natives generally prefer immigrants with legal status, high skills, employability, and humanitarian motives over those migrating for economic reasons. Religion and ethnicity, by contrast, matter less consistently (Dennison 2022).

Second, this study simultaneously tests the economic burden and cultural incompatibility explanations and further examines their interaction with mediating factors, including intergenerational mobility, marginality, and religiosity, which allows a direct comparison of the weight of economic credentials versus cultural traits in the acceptance of immigrants. Unlike many Western contexts where economic and cultural threats are often discussed in isolation, Turkey is a unique case in which these dimensions overlap and interact. The country's long-standing economic instability and high unemployment amplify concerns over welfare competition, while its religiously homogeneous yet ethnically diverse population creates distinct patterns of cultural proximity and distance.

Moreover, Turkey's deep secular-religious cleavage, what Kalaycıoğlu (2021); also see Kalaycıoğlu, Yeğen & Moral 2026; Toros, Zeybek Kabakçı & Toros 2025)

terms the Kulturkampf, may condition how different segments of the local population evaluate refugees from Muslim versus non-Muslim backgrounds. The simultaneous presence of both Muslim-majority (Syrian) and Christian-majority (Ukrainian) refugees provides a rare opportunity to disentangle how economic and cultural considerations operate in tandem rather than as competing explanations of exclusionary attitudes. Understanding this interaction is critical for capturing the nuances of refugee acceptance in hybrid political regimes such as Turkey's, where both identity-based and material anxieties coexist.

Using a face-to-face survey experiment, we find that economic burden reduces acceptance across both refugee groups, but the effect is stronger for Ukrainian families. More strikingly, Turkey's domestic cleavages powerfully shape acceptance. Devout respondents show a dramatically higher acceptance of Syrian refugees, while Kurdish respondents, drawing on shared experiences of marginalisation, show elevated acceptance of refugees from both backgrounds, especially Syrians. These identity-based effects are substantially larger than the economic burden penalty, which suggests that in Turkey's polarised political context, refugee attitudes are shaped as much by who is doing the evaluating as by what credentials the refugee brings.

Theoretical background

While there is general opposition to open immigration policies in the Global North, individuals are often willing to admit specific immigrants (Iyengar et al. 2013). Various factors influence public attitudes towards immigration, with economic and cultural considerations playing key roles. Cultural proximity and assimilation potential affect acceptance. White and culturally similar immigrants face less opposition (Ford 2011), whereas immigrants from Muslim-majority countries face more opposition (Valentino et al. 2019). Research consistently shows that people view highly skilled, educated immigrants in high-status jobs more favourably. While the country of origin and language skills influence attitudes, their impact is generally less significant than economic factors (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015; Turper et al. 2015; Aalberg, Iyengar & Messing 2012). Higher education and skills consistently correlate with more positive attitudes towards all types of immigrants, primarily driven by cultural values rather than labour market concerns (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2007). Across multiple countries, higher-skilled immigrants are preferred regardless of natives' socioeconomic status, which supports the sociotropic economic threat thesis (Valentino et al. 2019). These findings show that immigration attitudes reflect both economic and cultural considerations.

Tartakovsky and Dopelt Walsh's (2016a; also see: Tartakovsky & Dopelt Walsh 2016b; Tartakovsky & Dopelt Walsh 2020) TBM proposes that when people form opinions about immigrants, they generally consider two main

things. First, whether they see the immigrant group as a potential benefit or threat to their society, and second, their views on immigration policies, which might either support immigrants' rights or protect the host society from them. TBM suggests that how people initially appraise an immigrant group can directly shape their preferred immigration policies for that group. At its core, TBM posits that local people's perceptions of immigrants undergo a tiered cognitive process. Initially, the receiving society broadly perceives an immigrant group as either a general threat or a general benefit. This perception then refines to a middle level, where individuals distinguish between realistic and symbolic threats (e.g. job competition, cultural erosion) and realistic and symbolic benefits (e.g. filling labour gaps, cultural enrichment) (also see the Integrated Threat Theory of Stephan and White Stephan 1996).

Building on TBM, we test economic burden and cultural incompatibility as distinct forms of threat appraisal. The economic threat or burden thesis posits that the so-called 'losers of globalization' mostly carry anti-immigrant attitudes (Kriesi et al. 2008). The growing success of anti-immigrant parties worldwide following the 2008 financial crisis also supports this argument. More specifically, the economic burden thesis supports that low-income, unemployed, and economically deprived strata of society are more likely to have exclusionary attitudes because they perceive immigrants as their rivals in the job market and as drainers of the welfare state. Therefore, these groups exhibit welfare chauvinism, which holds that the right to receive benefits from national resources belongs only to the native population (Kunovich 2013; Careja & Harris 2022).

Furthermore, researchers have examined how individuals' perceptions of their own economic standing shape attitudes towards immigrants. A related strand emphasises economic trajectory, in which perceiving that one has risen or fallen relative to one's origins can shape economic anxiety and attitudes towards groups seen as competing for collective resources, even when one is not poor in absolute terms. We draw on this trajectory-based perspective and measure intergenerational mobility directly as respondents' current economic position relative to the family in which they grew up (Paskov, Präg & Richards 2021).

Others also claimed that immigration has a positive impact on the economy by supporting population and workforce growth, especially amid declining birth rates. For example, Münz et al. (2006) demonstrate only minimal negative effects of immigration on wages and employment, which are largely offset by job creation, productivity gains, and increased demand. While low-skilled migrants often take on difficult, low-paying, or seasonal jobs that the local population often avoids, high-skilled immigrants often fill specialised roles. However, the fiscal impact of immigration depends on migrants' access to the labour market. In countries where economic migrants integrate quickly, they tend to contribute to public funds. Conversely, in contexts where asylum

seekers face employment barriers or migrants struggle due to discrimination or lack of training, reliance on welfare can increase.

Furthermore, research on individual-level economic determinants of pro-immigrant attitudes reveals several key factors. Individual characteristics such as education, income, and skill level play a significant role. Highly skilled individuals tend to support immigration more strongly in countries where natives are, on average, more skilled than immigrants, and less so where immigrants have relatively higher skill levels (Mayda 2006). Self-assessed poverty also influences attitudes, independent of objective economic measures (Miller 2012). Individuals in growing sectors tend to be more supportive of immigration during economic booms (Dancygier & Donnelly 2013). Furthermore, García-Muñoz and Milgram-Baleix (2021) found that individual factors have a stronger influence on attitudes than macroeconomic variables.

Contrary to economic concerns, which stem from realistic threats, symbolic threats give rise to cultural anxieties. Symbolic threats involve perceived disparities between groups in morals, values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes that endanger the ingroup's worldview. In short, symbolic threats arise partly from the ingroup's conviction in the moral superiority of its own value system (Stephan & White Stephan 1996). The cultural incompatibility thesis posits that an increasing number of immigrants leads to intergroup cleavages within society (De Coninck 2020). The cultural tension between natives and newcomers intensifies the conflict between the native population and immigrants. Particularly when natives perceive that refugees' social characteristics are incompatible with established values and threaten the purity of existing social features, they are more likely to exclude the newcomers. For example, in Europe and the United States, Muslim immigrants are perceived as a threat to the native cultural values. Therefore, they should be excluded from society (Mudde 2019).

Although the literature on social cohesion expects that immigrants 'disturb long-held norms of social interaction within an area as residents are confronted with newcomers who may look different and bring dissimilar social and cultural practices' (Andrews 2011, p. 535), the very same native European population displayed mostly welcoming attitudes towards Ukrainian immigrants following the Russian invasion (Letki et al. 2024). Therefore, in this study, we used religion as a proxy of cultural proximity or distance since the far right in Europe establishes its exclusionary discourse based on religious differences. For example, Storm (2011) claims that identification with Christianity is associated with a higher likelihood of perceiving immigration as a threat to national identity since immigration towards Europe prominently comes from non-Christian countries. She points out that, in the context of cultural or ethnic Christianity, religion primarily is a marker of national tradition or ethnic heritage rather than a matter of religious belief. Still other scholars argue that co-religiosity eases the effect of populism on anti-immigrant attitudes (Çarkoğlu & Elçi 2021). Not only

individuals but also states adjust their settlement policies based on identity. Therefore, the preferences of the host country and the refugees may align. For example, Poland may favour hosting Ukrainians over Syrians, while Ukrainian refugees may themselves prefer seeking protection in Poland rather than in another safe state, such as Turkey (Efthymiou 2024).

Marginality theory argues that '*everything else being equal*, experiencing marginality or oppression oneself creates sympathy for other marginalised or oppressed groups, even if they do not belong to one's own group' (Fetzer 2000, p. 7). Thus, the underdogs of society may exhibit group solidarity through a shared experience of oppression. In a similar vein, Group Empathy Theory posits that members of historically disadvantaged minority groups are more likely to develop empathy towards other marginalised groups due to their own experiences with discrimination and exclusion. This empathy has cognitive and affective dimensions, where minorities are better able to understand the oppression others face due to their double consciousness and lived experiences. They are also more likely to experience emotional responses, such as compassion or anger, when witnessing discrimination. Shared histories of exclusion can foster solidarity and coalition-building, but intergroup competition over limited resources may sometimes hinder empathy (Şirin, Villalobos & Valentino 2016). Our personal values of conservation or benevolence relate to both marginality and group empathy theories. The former theory is based on the perception of newcomers as a threat, which leads to the defence of the status quo. In contrast, the latter theory facilitates self-transcendence, which helps to perceive refugees as a benefit and ultimately to the defence of immigrant rights (Walsh & Tartakovsky 2020). In the case of Turkey, Kurds, who have been the target of state-led oppression for decades, may show solidarity with migrants (Türkoğlu, Canavan & Icduygu 2023).

Refugees in Turkey

In this study, we focus on the drivers of immigration attitudes in Turkey, which hosts a significant number of predominantly Muslim immigrants who share similar religious and cultural practices with the host population (Çarkoğlu & Elçi 2021). Although Syrian refugees have the highest percentage (around 3 per cent of the local population), Turkey hosts various immigrants from different backgrounds, such as from Turkic countries (e.g. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia, neighbouring countries (e.g. Armenia and Iran), and several African countries (Üstübici, Kirişçioğlu & Elçi 2021; Köşer-Akçapar 2010; Yıldız & Sert 2023).

When Syria's civil war began in March 2011, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) government implemented an open-door policy for Syrian arrivals. Irregular Syrian

Table 1. Similarities and differences between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees.

	Syrians	Ukrainians
Official numbers (as of 2024)	2.9 million[2]	50 thousand[3]
Legal Status in Turkey	Under the Temporary Protection Regime	Primarily Short-Term Residence Permits; some International Protection (Secondary Protection) applicants
Primary Reason for Flight	Civil War and Conflict (since 2011)	Russia's full-scale invasion (since 2022)
Cultural Proximity to Turkey	Generally perceived as higher (shared religious and historical ties)	Generally perceived as lower (European, Orthodox Christian majority)
Historical Legacy/ Ties to Turkey	Deep Ottoman heritage: Syria was integral to the Ottoman Empire for centuries (1516–1918), leading to shared cultural, religious (Sunni Islam), and architectural elements, and historical migration patterns (Turkmens in Syria).	Complex historical interactions: Periods of conflict (Ottoman invasions of Ukrainian lands, Crimean Khanate raids), brief Ottoman suzerainty over parts of Ukraine (17th century), but no direct long-term integration into the Ottoman Empire. Some shared Black Sea history.

immigration continued even after this policy was terminated in 2016. However, after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the return rate increased considerably. In April 2025, around 200,000 Syrian refugees had voluntarily returned to Syria from Turkey following the change in the Syrian leadership (Dinçel 2025). The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (2025) also estimates that, since December 2024, around 400,000 Syrian refugees have returned from neighbouring countries, including Turkey.

Migration from Ukraine to Turkey, on the other hand, took place in three main waves. The first wave dates to the Ottoman Empire (1783–1922), which included Muslim Crimean Tatars. The second wave consists of many Ukrainians who arrived after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. The third wave began with the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian asylum seekers in Turkey following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Özgür & Deniz 2024). Table 1 summarises the similarities and differences between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Turkey.

These two groups differ sharply in religion and perceived cultural proximity while arriving in the same labour market, welfare system, and political context. This combination, two refugee populations that share a host setting but diverge on cultural and religious distance, is what makes a within-country comparison analytically useful, since it isolates the cultural dimension from the many host-level factors that confound cross-national studies.

[2]Source: Directorate of Migration Management: https://www.goc.gov.tr/ikamet-izinleri.
[3]Source: BBC News: https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cx2xnnzjr5po#:~:text=%C4%B0%C3%A7i%C5%9Fleri%20Bakanl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1'na%20 ba%C4%9Fl%C4%B1%20 G%C3%B6%C3%A7,Ukraynal%C4%B1lar%C4%B1n%20say%C4%B1s%C4%B1%2050%20binin%20alt%C4%B1nda.

Kulturkampf versus economic considerations on refugee acceptance

Another unique aspect of Turkey is the interaction between anti-immigration sentiment and domestic identity cleavages. Turkish society is internally divided along ethnic (Turkish vs. Kurdish), sectarian (Sunni vs. Alevi), and ideological (secularist vs. Islamist) lines (Hale 1994). These cleavages condition and moderate attitudes towards immigrants in ways that are not observed in more homogeneous nations.

Turkey's most significant crosscutting cleavage stems from the antagonism between secular elites and religious communities, a division that took shape during the nineteenth-century modernisation efforts in the waning Ottoman Empire. As the military (*askeriye*) and bureaucratic (*mülkiye*) classes consolidated power at the expense of the religious establishment (*ulema*), a societal duality emerged that Mardin (1973) characterised as a centre-periphery cleavage. The civilian and military bureaucracy championed secular nationalism, centralised governance, and a mixed economy, whereas religious populations gravitated towards Islamic values, conservatism, and economic liberalism (Kalaycıoğlu 1994). This bifurcation persisted for decades, structuring the Turkish left-right spectrum alongside other divisions such as Turkish-Kurdish nationalism and sectarian tensions (Çarkoğlu 2013).

The centre-periphery framework, however, has weakened as peripheral forces effectively displaced the old centre following the AKP's successive electoral victories. Instead, a *Kulturkampf* has emerged between two fundamentally incompatible visions of the good society, which reactivates and reconfigures longstanding fault lines. The secular vision emphasises scientific progress, rational inquiry, gender equality, and secularism as foundational principles, whereas the religious vision draws on tradition, Sunni Islam, family values, and nativism (Kalaycıoğlu 2021, 2012). These rival conceptions, inherited from the earlier centre-periphery divide, remain mutually delegitimising and largely incommunicable, continuing to drive contemporary Turkish politics.

The pro-Islamist populist AKP has been governing Turkey since 2002, maintaining its pro-immigrant stance by leveraging religious solidarity to temper anti-immigrant sentiment (Elçi, Şenol Sert & Balta 2025). Under the competitive authoritarian regime, the AKP effectively shapes public opinion through its dominant media presence and intellectual influence (Esen & Gumuscu 2016; Sert & Danış 2021). This advantage enables the party to craft a pro-immigrant narrative, a notable contrast with Western nations, where information flows are typically less biased, resulting in public opinion being heavily influenced by AKP-generated political discourse (Çarkoğlu & Yıldırım 2024). In such contexts, state-led narratives and partisan framing of refugees often blur the boundaries between perceived symbolic and realistic threats. For example, in Turkey, government discourse emphasising religious solidarity with Syrians may transform what would typically be a symbolic cultural threat into a perceived moral

responsibility, therefore moderating exclusionary attitudes (Elçi, Şenol Sert & Balta 2025). In summary, when the identities of refugees and immigrants overlap or clash with the existing identity cleavages in Turkey, they moderate the cognitive perceptions about the newcomers.

Since early 2022, most developing economies have tightened monetary policy amid rising fears of slower global growth and the risk of debt crises. Turkey, by contrast, has stood out by continuing the monetary easing begun in late 2021. Despite a fragile external position, Turkey pursued an explicitly heterodox, state-interventionist, credit-led growth strategy framed in nationalist rhetoric. Cycles of credit expansion have repeatedly produced currency instability and temporary returns to orthodoxy, but renewed rate cuts in 2021 pushed real interest rates into deeply negative territory, which accelerated depreciation and inflation. While this approach has supported short-term growth through extensive interventions in foreign exchange, credit, and banking markets, it has done so at the cost of falling real wages and a declining labour share of income (Orhangazi & Erinç Yeldan 2023). This era overlapped with the period when millions of refugees were hosted, which triggered economic nativism due to resource constraints (Demirkol 2024). Public discourse frequently emphasises job competition and welfare burdens, a discourse close to welfare chauvinism against refugees (Careja & Harris 2022). Therefore, economic concerns began to overshadow arguments based on cultural proximity and to challenge the ruling AKP's religious brotherhood discourse.

Hypotheses

Because the TBM distinguishes between realistic and symbolic appraisal, our hypotheses follow that distinction. H1 sets the realistic baseline, since refugees on social assistance impose the material cost that welfare chauvinism targets. Because that cost is assessed relative to the respondent's own economic position, we advance two competing, mutually exclusive expectations about intergenerational mobility. While scarcity sensitivity predicts that downward mobility heightens the penalty (H2a), marginality and group empathy theories predict that it fosters solidarity and reduces the penalty (H2b). H3 to H5 are related to symbolic appraisal, where Turkey's Kulturkampf and its Kurdish cleavage should explain which refugees count as culturally proximate, and to whom.

H1 (Main Effect): Refugee economic status (Independent Variable-IV) significantly impacts public acceptance, such that economically self-sufficient refugees are evaluated more positively than those relying on social assistance.

H2a (Scarcity Sensitivity): Respondents' intergenerational mobility (Moderating Variable-MV) moderates the effect of refugee economic status (IV) on acceptance. Downwardly mobile respondents will penalise economically burdensome refugees more heavily than upwardly mobile respondents.

H2b (Empathy): Respondents' intergenerational mobility (MV) moderates the effect of refugee economic status (IV) on acceptance. Downwardly mobile respondents will penalise economically burdensome refugees less heavily than upwardly mobile respondents.

H3 (Secular-Religious Cleavage): Respondent religiosity (MV) moderates the effect of refugee nationality (IV) on acceptance. Devout respondents will show greater acceptance of Syrian refugees over Ukrainian refugees, while less religious respondents will not show this differentiation.[4]

H4 (Three-Way Interaction): The effect of immigrant religiosity (IV) on acceptance is jointly moderated by respondent religiosity (MV1) and refugee nationality (MV2). Devout respondents will evaluate religious Syrian refugees more positively than secular ones, but will show no preference towards religious Ukrainian immigrants.

H5 (Marginality): Respondent ethnicity (MV) moderates the effect of refugee nationality (IV) on acceptance. Kurdish respondents will demonstrate higher acceptance of refugees compared to non-Kurdish respondents, with this effect being significantly stronger for Syrian refugees.

Data, sampling, and sample size

We conducted a face-to-face survey experiment in Turkey to test our hypotheses. Our exclusion criteria include individuals under 18 who are not eligible to vote in general elections.[5] Sample selection is carried out in three stages. In the

[4]Refugee nationality is a contrast that conditions the other effects. Its own main effect is not identified in this design, so no baseline hypothesis precedes H3. Economic burden and immigrant religiosity were randomised, so they are independent variables throughout. Intergenerational mobility, religiosity, and Kurdish identity were measured rather than assigned, so they are moderators. Nationality fits neither description, because every respondent saw the Ukrainian family first and the Syrian family second. Therefore, its main effect is collinear with presentation order. We make no baseline prediction about it. Whether we describe nationality as conditioned or conditioning depends on what a given hypothesis asks. H3 and H5 concern the Syrian–Ukrainian difference itself and how respondent characteristics affect it. In H4, the object is immigrant religiosity, and nationality indicates where that randomised attribute operates. See the Robustness section for the order confound.

[5]We received approval from Özyeğin University Ethics Committee 2024/05/06 before the fieldwork. We also conducted a pilot test with students of Özyeğin University between August 27 and October 3, 2024, to test our hypotheses and experimental modules before administering the actual survey. Research Istanbul Survey Company conducted the fieldwork between November 18 and December 9, 2024.

first step, the provinces are selected from the 12 NUTS-1 regions created by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) and stratified by their population shares within each region. Then, households from these regions with a block size of 100 are identified using the address list obtained from the TURKSTAT. Finally, 20 addresses are randomly selected from these blocks and visited. Respondents are randomly selected using the last-birthday method, interviewing the adult household member who most recently celebrated a birthday to ensure unbiased within-household selection. If the selected respondents cannot be found in the household or refuse to participate, the apartment with the highest number in the same building is visited. If this respondent also refuses, the highest-numbered apartment in the next odd or even-numbered building, depending on the previous selection, is visited. No other quotas (such as age, gender, or education) are applied as substitutes in participant selection. We interviewed 1,500 individuals from the voting-age population.[6]

Experimental design and dependent variable

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a factorial between-subjects vignette experiment. To this end, we presented information about two hypothetical families: Bondarenko (Ukrainian) and Alzuhur (Syrian). The qualifications of these families varied in terms of socioeconomic status (e.g. a high school graduate living on social assistance vs. a college graduate with their own company) and religiosity (religious vs. secular).

The comparison between Syrian and Ukrainian refugees is motivated by identification rather than representativeness. The inferential goal is the causal effect of economic and symbolic refugee attributes on acceptance, conditional on a fixed host-country environment. Turkey provides a constant institutional, political, and discursive context that holds macro-level confounders fixed, which typically complicate cross-national comparisons. Variation is introduced exclusively at the level of the refugee group. Syrian and Ukrainian refugees constitute a most-different contrast on theoretically central symbolic dimensions, particularly religion and perceived cultural proximity, while sharing forced-migration status and legal protection. This design combines a most-similar-systems logic at the host level with a most-different-cases logic at the group level to strengthen internal validity (Przeworski & Teune 1970).

This contrast provides direct leverage on the TBM's distinction between realistic and symbolic appraisals. In Turkey, Syrian refugees evoke strong, realistic economic threat perceptions (Alca 2026) alongside religious ties (Morgül & Savaşkan 2021). Despite representing a culturally distinct European group, Ukrainian refugees are largely insulated from welfare-dependency critiques due to their smaller numbers

[6]We a priori determined the sample size as 1,500, considering statistical power calculations. We expect a power of 0.92 with $\alpha = 0.05$, a small effect size (0.1), and a sample size of 1500 for a one-way ANOVA with four experimental groups (Faul et al. 2009; Tabachnick & Fidell 2013; Cohen 1992).

and perceived economic self-reliance (Elmas, Yılmaz & Gürbüz 2025). Embedding these groups in a factorial experimental design allows us to independently manipulate economic credentials and religious signals, which resemble key counterfactuals. How the same respondent evaluates refugees who differ in economic attributes while holding nationality constant, and how the same respondent evaluates refugees who differ in symbolic attributes while holding economic status constant. This structure permits identification of the relative contributions of economic versus identity-based considerations to acceptance, rather than relying on observational correlations that bundle these dimensions.

The case selection also defines explicit scope conditions for inference. Syrian and Ukrainian refugees are not treated as representative cases from a broader population of refugees. Instead, they function as analytically useful ideal types that generate sufficient variation on symbolic proximity to identify mechanisms (Sun 2024). The resulting inferences are therefore mechanism-specific rather than population-general, which clarifies the conditions under which economic signals meaningfully condition refugee acceptance and the conditions under which identity-based evaluations dominate in polarised political contexts.

Also, we chose to present hypothetical migrant families rather than single immigrants for both conceptual and methodological reasons. Conceptually, families constitute a more socially embedded and contextually grounded unit of migration, which enables respondents to evaluate immigrants within a familiar relational framework and to engage more realistically with questions of social integration and threat appraisal. For example, prior research shows that young male immigrants often elicit disproportionate perceptions of security and cultural threat (Ward 2019), which could bias evaluations towards exclusionary responses. Methodologically, family profiles offer a multidimensional structure that allows for variation across multiple attributes simultaneously, such as signalling religiosity through women's attire, while keeping the number of experimental conditions manageable and maintaining statistical power. Moreover, differentiating between single and family-based migration was beyond the theoretical scope of this study.

After warm-up questions, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental groups shown in Table 2. Following the stimuli, every respondent answered the same two items. These are our dependent variables, acceptance of the Ukrainian and Syrian families, each rated on a 7-point scale (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015).[7]

- How would you rate the Bondarenko family on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that Turkey should definitely not accept the migrant family and 7 indicates that Turkey should definitely accept the migrant family?
- Using the same scale, how would you rate the Alzuhur family?

[7]As an attention check, we asked for the surname of the Syrian family. 84 per cent of respondents correctly recalled the surname, indicating high response reliability.:

Table 2. Experimental vignettes.

Ukrainian religious – economic burden vs. Syrian not religious – not economic burden	Ukrainian religious – not economic burden vs. Syrian not religious – economic burden
The Bondarenko family came to Turkey from Ukraine in 2022. Since they are a religious family, family members visit their church weekly. The father, Maxim, had a high school diploma in Ukraine. However, they live on social assistance since he cannot work in Turkey.	The Bondarenko family came to Turkey from Ukraine in 2022. Since they are a religious family, family members visit their church weekly. Maxim, the father, studied engineering in Ukraine. He established his own business in Turkey and earned a living from his work.
The Alzuhur family came to Turkey from Syria in 2013. Since they are not a religious family, the women do not wear headscarves. Father Sayid had studied engineering in Syria. He established his own business in Turkey and earned a living from it.	The Alzuhur family came to Turkey from Syria in 2013. Since they are not a religious family, the women in the family do not wear headscarves. Sayid, the father, had a high school diploma in Syria. However, they live on social assistance since he cannot work in Turkey.
Ukrainian not religious – economic burden vs. Syrian religious – not economic burden	**Ukrainian not religious – not economic burden vs. Syrian religious – economic burden**
The Bondarenko family came to Turkey from Ukraine in 2022. Since they are not a religious family, family members do not perform religious ceremonies such as visiting churches. The father, Maxim, had a high school diploma in Ukraine. However, they live on social assistance since he cannot work in Turkey.	The Bondarenko family came to Turkey from Ukraine in 2022. Since they are not a religious family, family members do not perform religious ceremonies such as visiting churches. Maxim, the father, studied engineering in Ukraine. He established his own business in Turkey and earned a living from it.
The Alzuhur family came to Turkey from Syria in 2013. Since they are a religious family, the women wear headscarves. Father Sayid had studied engineering in Syria. He established his own business in Turkey and earned a living from it.	The Alzuhur family came to Turkey from Syria in 2013. Since they are a religious family, the women wear headscarves. Sayid, the father, had a high school diploma in Syria. However, they live on social assistance since he cannot work in Turkey.

Now, I will give you some information and ask questions about two migrant families in Turkey. Please listen carefully to the information about the families first.

Moderating variables

To test our moderation hypotheses (H2–H5), we measured three respondent-level characteristics that interact with the experimental treatments. First, to capture respondents' economic trajectories and test whether economic standing conditions reactions to refugee economic burdens (H2a/H2b), we used two ladder items that measured subjective social position on a scale from 0 (lowest economic level in society) to 10 (highest economic level in society). Respondents placed their own current position and the position of the family in which they grew up. We computed a mobility score by subtracting the family-of-origin position from the respondent's current position (own minus family). Positive values indicate upward mobility (the respondent now ranks above their childhood family), and negative values indicate downward mobility (Mean = −0.34, SD = 2.62).

Second, to test whether Turkey's domestic religious-secular cleavage conditions evaluations of refugee nationality (H3) and refugee religiosity (H4), we measured religiosity in two steps. First, we asked, 'Do you believe in any religion?' Next, we asked respondents who answered the first question as 'Muslim', 'If you think about the last year, how often do you pray?' Finally, we

generated a five-level religiosity variable,[8] where responses range from 'Non-believer' (1), 'Never' (2), 'Less than weekly' (3), 'Weekly' (4), and 'Daily' (5).[9] Finally, to test whether ethnic marginality moderates acceptance across refugee groups (H5), we asked respondents, 'Which of the following languages and dialects can you speak?' and coded those who answered 'Kurdish' as 1 and all others as 0.[10] Descriptive statistics of the moderating variables are available in the Online Appendix.[11]

Methodology

Our analytical approach proceeds in three stages: randomisation checks, hypothesis-specific models, and visualisation of predicted values. Because each respondent evaluated both the Ukrainian and Syrian families, we restructured the data from wide format (one row per respondent) to long format (two rows per respondent, one for each family evaluated). This yields 3,000 observations from 1,500 respondents.

From the experimental group assignment, we extracted two treatment indicators for each family: (1) economic burden, coded 1 if the family was described as relying on social assistance and 0 if self-sufficient; and (2) immigrant religiosity, coded 1 if the family was described as religious and 0 if secular. A nationality indicator distinguishes evaluations of Syrian families (coded 1) from Ukrainian families (coded 0).

We verified that individual characteristics (age, gender, education, income, religiosity, and Kurdish-speaking) were balanced across the four experimental conditions using F-tests and chi-square tests. Successful randomisation permits interpretation of treatment effects without demographic controls (See Online Appendix for details).

To isolate the effect of each theoretical mechanism, we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models on the pooled data, with standard errors clustered by respondent to account for the non-independence of the two evaluations per individual (Cameron & Miller 2015). This approach yields consistent standard errors without imposing distributional assumptions on respondent-level heterogeneity. We estimated a series of nested models. The baseline

[8]Percentage of categories: Daily = 21.8 per cent, Weekly = 32.6 per cent, Less than weekly = 35.7 per cent, Never = 8 per cent, Non-believer = 1.8 per cent.

[9]Muslims are obliged to pray five times a day. However, the frequency of praying varies individually. Therefore, we asked a range of alternatives to detect praying frequency. Recoded categories as follows: 5 = 'Daily prayers'; 4 = 'Praying multiple times in a week if not every day', 'Once in a week'; 3 = 'Monthly', 'During Ramadan and Blessed Nights (Kandil)', 'During Eids', 'Once or Twice in a year', 'Less than a year'; 2 = Never.

[10]Kurdish speakers are 20.7 per cent of the sample.

[11]We also conducted a pretreatment test to check whether there are significant differences between treatment groups regarding their attitudes towards immigrants. While we did not ask specific questions regarding Syrians and Ukrainians to avoid their impacts on the experimental manipulations, we asked generic questions about immigrants (i.e. 'Immigrants are generally harmful to the Turkish economy', 'Immigrants are generally harmful to Turkey's national culture'.). The results confirm that there is no significant difference between the treatment groups. A detailed analysis is available in the Online Appendix.

model includes the main effects of the treatments and nationality. Subsequent models add two-way interactions between treatments and nationality, the three-way Kulturkampf interaction (immigrant religiosity × nationality × respondent religiosity), and moderator interactions (Kurdish identity, intergenerational mobility).

Because presentation order was fixed (Ukrainian family first, Syrian family second), the main effect of nationality captures both true nationality differences and potential order effects. We therefore interpret interactions with nationality, testing whether treatment effects differ across refugee groups, rather than the main effect itself. These interaction effects are far less vulnerable to the presentation order, as we show below.

Finally, to facilitate interpretation of interaction effects, we computed predicted acceptance scores across combinations of treatment conditions and respondent characteristics using the *ggeffects* package in R (Lüdecke 2018). These predictions are displayed in marginal effects plots. All analyses were conducted in R using the *sandwich* package for clustered standard errors (Zeileis, Köll & Graham 2020) and *modelsummary* for regression tables (Arel-Bundock 2022).

Results

Overall, acceptance of both refugee groups was low, with mean scores below the midpoint of the 7-point scale (Ukrainian $M = 2.50$, SD = 1.66; Syrian $M = 2.51$, SD = 1.88). Descriptive patterns suggest that economic status matters more than immigrant religiosity. That is, self-sufficient families received higher ratings than those described as economic burdens, regardless of nationality (Figure 1). However, these aggregate patterns mask substantial heterogeneity across respondent subgroups, which we examine below.

We begin with a baseline model that includes all three treatment attributes as main effects, before introducing the moderators relevant to each hypothesis (Table 3). The economic burden significantly reduced acceptance. Immigrant religiosity, by contrast, had no significant average effect. Finally, the main effect of nationality was small and not significant. The treatment effects retain their sign and significance once moderators and interactions are added to the subsequent models. Differences in magnitude reflect the conditional nature of the interaction terms, as when the burden effect in H1 is estimated specifically for Ukrainian families. The near-zero average effect of immigrant religiosity should not be interpreted as evidence that religiosity is irrelevant. As we show below, religious signals increase acceptance among devout respondents and decrease it among secular respondents, so the two tendencies cancel out in the aggregate.

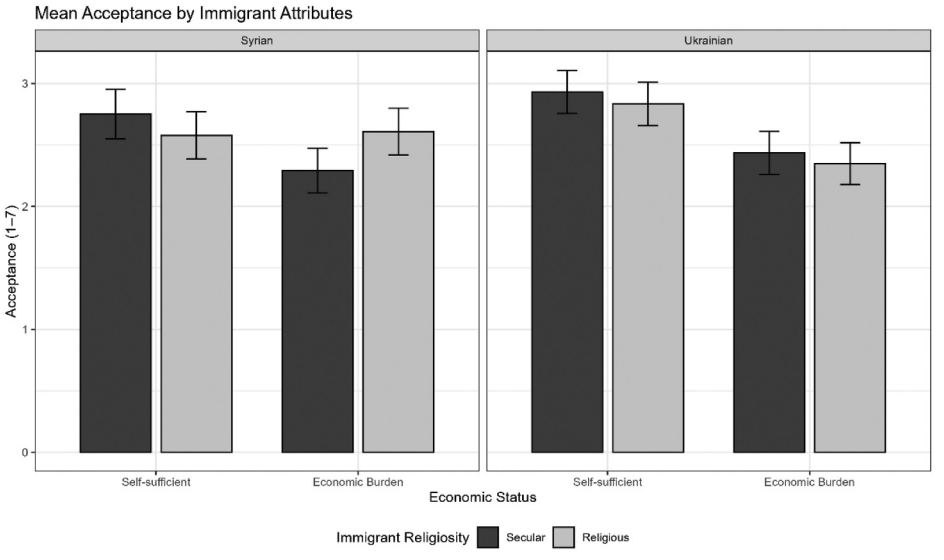


Figure 1. Descriptive acceptance.

Table 3. Regression results.

	Baseline	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5
Economic Burden	−0.353***	−0.491***	−0.374***			
	(0.059)	(0.090)	(0.061)			
Immigrant Religious	−0.010				−0.839*	
	(0.059)				(0.374)	
Syrian	−0.081	−0.218*		−2.660***	−3.429***	−0.194**
	(0.059)	(0.096)		(0.223)	(0.364)	(0.067)
Econ Burden × Syrian		0.275				
		(0.148)				
Intergenerational Mobility			0.090***			
			(0.021)			
Econ Burden × Mobility			−0.081*			
			(0.032)			
Religiosity (1–5)				−0.187***	−0.280***	
				(0.049)	(0.068)	
Syrian × Religiosity				0.724***	0.898***	
				(0.063)	(0.099)	
Imm Religious × Syrian					1.548**	
					(0.586)	
Imm Religious × Religiosity					0.196*	
					(0.097)	
Imm Relig × Syrian × Religiosity					−0.349*	
					(0.154)	
Kurdish						0.668***
						(0.129)
Syrian × Kurdish						0.554***
						(0.144)
Intercept	2.818***	2.882***	2.808***	3.208***	3.608***	2.498***
	(0.063)	(0.064)	(0.050)	(0.188)	(0.262)	(0.048)
N	2931	2931	2893	2761	2761	2919
R2	0.010	0.011	0.018	0.047	0.051	0.048
R2 Adj.	0.009	0.010	0.017	0.046	0.048	0.047

Note: Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

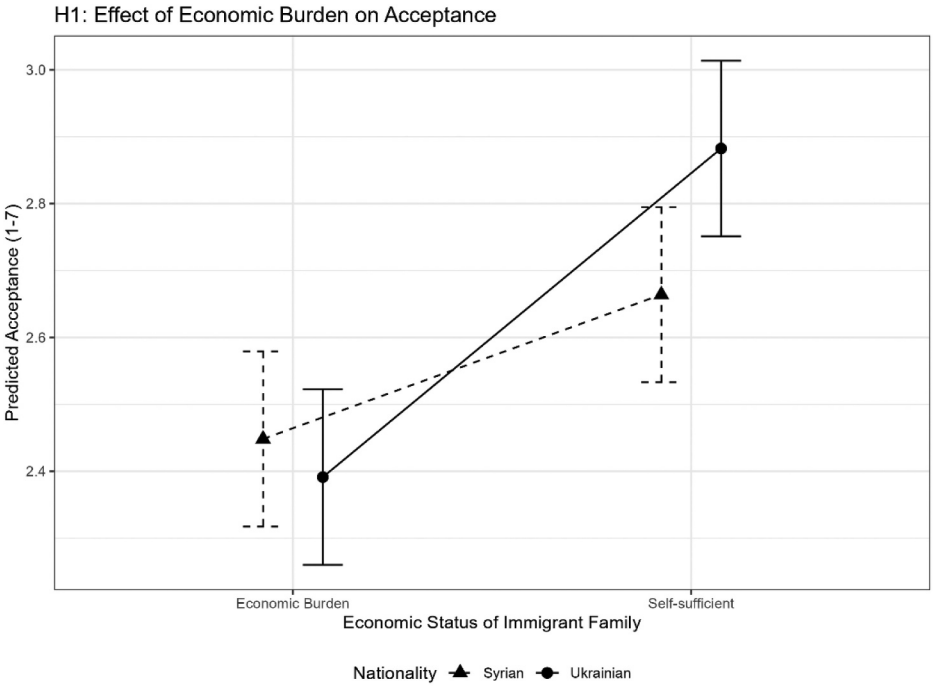


Figure 2. Predicted acceptance of refugee families by their economic statuses.

Table 3 also presents the results from five separate regression models, each testing one hypothesis. Hypothesis 1 predicted that refugees described as economically self-sufficient would be evaluated more positively than those described as relying on social assistance. The results support this hypothesis. The economic burden significantly reduced acceptance by nearly half a point on the 7-point scale.

The Economic Burden and Syrian interaction was positive but not statistically significant. Figure 2 illustrates this pattern, in which both Syrian and Ukrainian families show reduced acceptance when described as economic burdens, with similar slopes. Ukrainians show a slightly steeper decline compared to Syrians, but the difference is not statistically distinguishable.

Hypothesis 2 tested whether respondents' intergenerational mobility moderates the effect of economic burden. We posed competing predictions, scarcity sensitivity (H2a), under which downwardly mobile respondents penalise burdened refugees more heavily, and empathy (H2b), under which they penalise them less. The interaction is significant and negative, so the burden penalty is smaller among the downwardly mobile than among the upwardly mobile. This is the direction H2b predicts, though not for the reason it proposes. Panel A of Figure 3 shows that ratings of burdened refugees are flat across the mobility range. What changes is the reward for self-sufficiency, which the upwardly mobile grant and the downwardly mobile withhold.

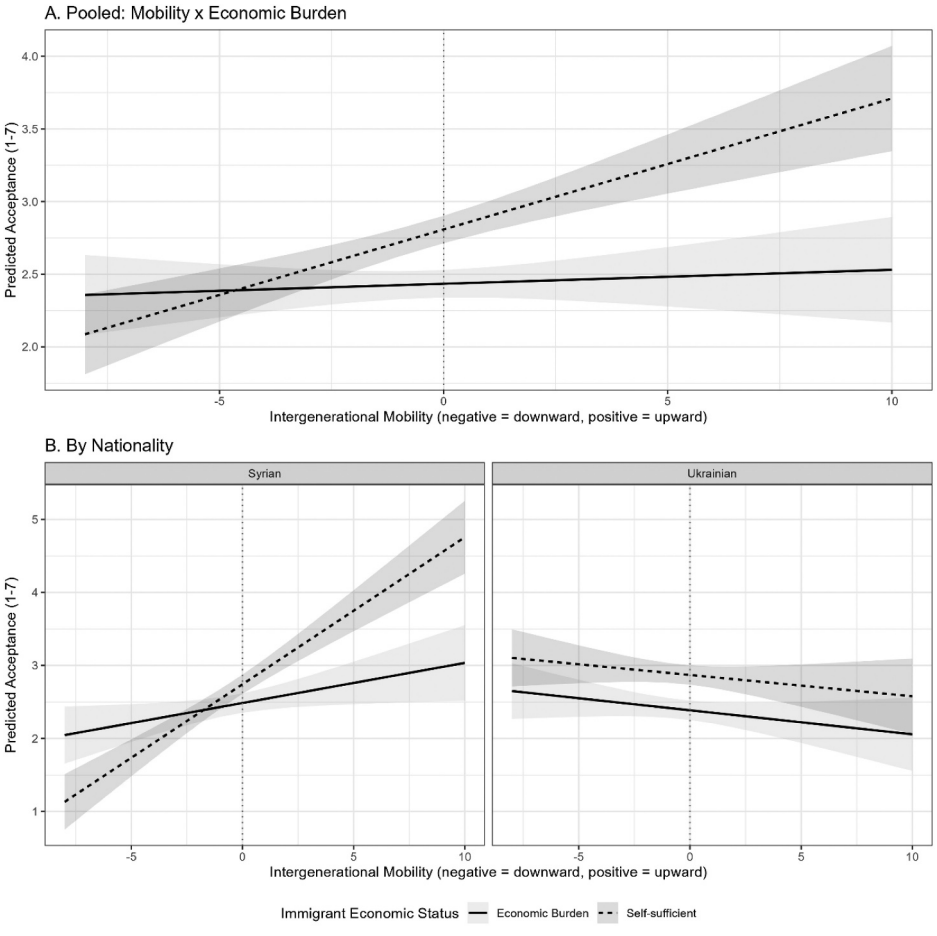


Figure 3. Predicted acceptance of refugee families by their economic statuses and respondents' intergenerational mobility.

Splitting the sample by nationality shows that the pooled interaction is driven almost entirely by the Syrian profile (Panel B and Appendix Table A11 for the model). For Syrian families, the distance between self-sufficient and burdened evaluations increases sharply across the mobility range, whereas for Ukrainian families, the two lines remain close together, and economic status does little work at any level of mobility. Economic credentials, in other words, shape the acceptance of Syrian refugees far more than that of Ukrainians.[12]

Hypothesis 3 tested whether Turkey's secular-religious cleavage shapes refugee attitudes, predicting that more religious respondents would show greater acceptance of Syrian refugees compared to Ukrainian refugees. The results strongly support this hypothesis. The Syrian-Religiosity interaction was large

[12]Unlike the religiosity and Kurdish interactions, the nationality-specific component of this interaction is not independently corroborated by the forced-choice measure, and we therefore read it as suggestive. The pattern is unchanged when all randomised attributes enter the model (Appendix Table A12).

and highly significant. For each one-unit increase in religiosity, the Syrian-Ukrainian acceptance gap increased by 0.7 points. Across the full range of the religiosity scale, this produces a nearly 3-point swing in relative preferences.

Figure 4 shows the crossover. The two lines meet near the weekly attendance mark. Among non-believers, the Ukrainian family leads by nearly two points, 3.0 against 1.1. Among daily practitioners, the Syrian family leads by roughly a point, 3.2 against 2.3. Religiosity has a negative main effect on Ukrainian acceptance, so more religious respondents rate Ukrainian families lower. For Syrian families, it runs the other way. Together, the main effect and interaction raise acceptance by about 0.5 points per unit. The Kulturkampf reverses which refugee group is preferred rather than shifting the overall level of acceptance.

Hypothesis 4 examined whether the effect of immigrant religiosity depended on both respondent religiosity and refugee nationality. We tested whether devout respondents would show stronger preferences for religious immigrants and whether this pattern would differ between Syrian and Ukrainian families. The three-way interaction was significant, but the pattern was more complex than anticipated. Figure 5 reveals the nature of this interaction. In the Syrian panel, both lines (religious and secular immigrants) rise steeply as respondent religiosity increases, reflecting the strong Kulturkampf effect. Critically, the two lines converge at the highest levels of religiosity. Among daily practitioners, religious and secular Syrian families receive virtually identical ratings. Among less religious respondents, there is a modest gap favouring religious Syrian immigrants, but this gap disappears among the most devout.

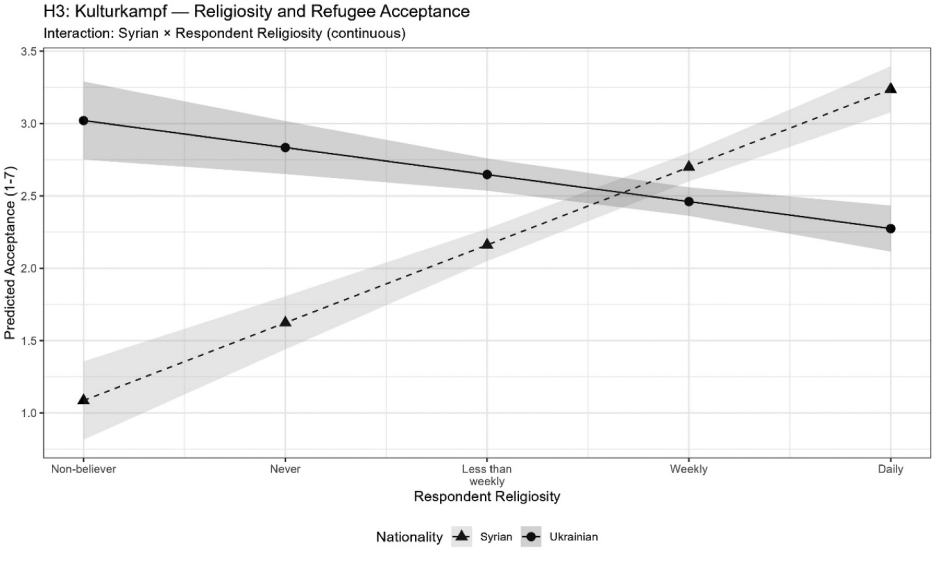


Figure 4. Predicted acceptance of refugee families by their nationality and respondents' religiosity levels.

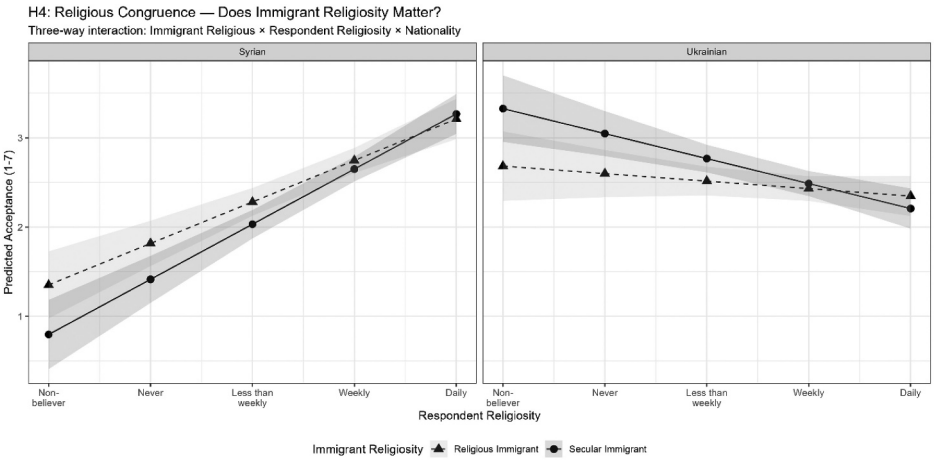


Figure 5. Predicted acceptance of refugee families by their religiosity and nationality and respondents' religiosity levels.

In the Ukrainian panel, the pattern is reversed. Non-believers showed a preference for secular Ukrainian families over religious ones. As respondent religiosity increases, this gap narrows, and the lines converge. The significant Immigrant Religiosity-Syrian interaction indicates that religious signals benefit Syrian families more than Ukrainian families overall. However, the negative three-way interaction shows that this benefit diminishes as respondent religiosity increases. The most devout Turkish respondents favour all Syrians equally, regardless of whether those families are described as religious or secular.

This pattern suggests that for highly religious Turks, the Kulturkampf operates at the categorical level of national origin rather than through individual-level religious signals. Devout respondents reward Syrians categorically rather than reward religious Syrians specifically. Shared membership in a Muslim-majority society appears to activate a group-based affinity that the additional religiosity cue does little to strengthen among the most devout. For daily-practicing respondents, religious and secular Syrian families are rated almost identically. The religiosity cue matters instead among less religious respondents, who prefer religious over secular Syrian families.

The two religiosity cues differ in form. The Syrian family's religiosity is conveyed through women's headscarf use, and the Ukrainian family's through church attendance, each serving as the most legible marker of devout identity for its group (Aytaç & Çarkoğlu 2019). Because the headscarf is a gendered signal, the warmth devout respondents show towards religious Syrian families plausibly reflects attitudes towards visible Islamic practice as much as religiosity as such.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 predicted that Kurdish respondents would show greater acceptance of refugees, particularly Syrian refugees. In line with the expectations, Kurdish respondents showed significantly higher overall acceptance, and this effect was stronger for Syrian families. Figure 6 displays this pattern clearly.

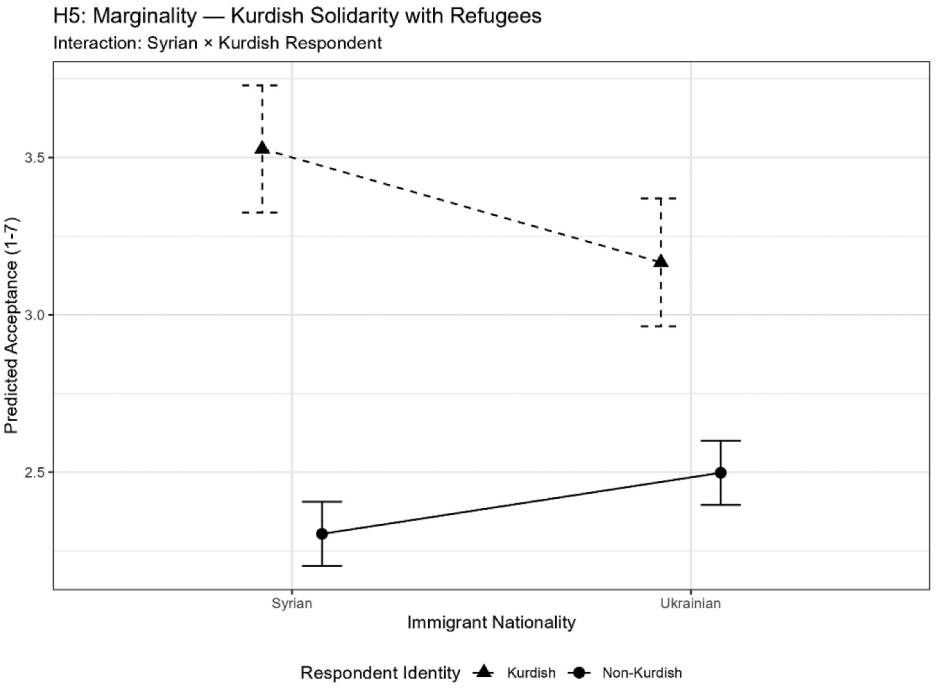


Figure 6. Predicted acceptance of refugee families by their nationality among Kurdish and non-Kurdish respondents.

Kurdish respondents rated Syrian families dramatically higher than non-Kurdish respondents did. For Ukrainian families, the gap was smaller but still substantial. The significant interaction confirms that Kurdish solidarity is particularly pronounced for Syrian refugees, likely reflecting shared experiences of marginalisation.

These findings reveal that economic and identity-based factors operate distinctly in shaping refugee acceptance. Economic credentials matter (H1), and their weight varies with respondents' economic trajectories. The distinction between self-sufficient and burdened refugees sharpens among the upwardly mobile and fades among the downwardly mobile (H2). This mobility pattern is concentrated in evaluations of Syrian families. Most strikingly, Turkey's domestic cleavages powerfully shape acceptance. The Kulturkampf between secular and religious Turks produces a dramatic crossover pattern (H3). This effect operates through national origin rather than individual religiosity signals, as the most devout respondents favour all Syrians equally, regardless of immigrant religiosity (H4). Kurdish marginality fosters strong solidarity with refugees, especially Syrians (H5). These identity-based effects are substantially larger than the economic burden penalty, suggesting that in Turkey's polarised

context, refugee attitudes are shaped more by who the respondent is than by what the refugee brings.

Robustness: order effects and convergent validity

Because the Syrian profile always appeared second, a natural concern is that the nationality contrast reflects presentation order rather than the refugee groups themselves. Evidence from split-sample experiments suggests that position effects of this kind are often modest (Düval & Hinz 2020; Gaines, Kuklinski & Quirk 2007). However, because nationality and order are fully collinear in our design, we do not rely on this alone. Put differently, we do not interpret the nationality main effect causally, since it cannot be separated from order. Our substantive claims concern how the Syrian–Ukrainian difference is moderated by respondent identity, and several features of the data indicate that these moderation patterns are robust rather than order artefacts.

Because presentation order is identical for every respondent, any additive order effect cancels from the within-respondent difference between the two ratings. Modelling that difference directly, Table 4 shows that religiosity predicts the Syrian–Ukrainian gap at the magnitude recovered in our main models, and Kurdish identity does so as well. Religiosity predicts the first-position Ukrainian rating negatively and the second-position Syrian rating positively. An additive position effect, or a general tendency to use the scale high or low, would move both ratings in the same direction and cannot produce coefficients of opposite sign.

The moderation also replicates in a separate forced-choice measure, in which respondents chose which family Turkey should prioritise rather than rating each separately. For Table 4, both religiosity and Kurdish identity predict choosing the Syrian family, and the religiosity effect survives controlling for AKP support. The forced-choice format presents both families together rather than in sequence, so it carries no position effect, and the same moderators appear in

Table 4. Robustness checks.

	Ukrainian rating	Syrian rating	Gap (Syr – Ukr)	Gap + AKP	Forced Choice	Forced Choice + AKP
Respondent Religiosity (1–5)	−0.199***	0.510***	0.707***	0.583***	0.145***	0.099***
	(0.050)	(0.052)	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Respondent Kurdish	0.433**	0.931***	0.470**		0.151***	
	(0.135)	(0.142)	(0.156)		(0.038)	
AKP Supporter				0.993***		0.342***
				(0.131)		(0.031)
Intercept	3.170***	0.470*	−2.680***	−2.451***	−0.079	0.010
	(0.189)	(0.183)	(0.222)	(0.216)	(0.053)	(0.051)
N	1373	1378	1369	1374	1142	1146
R2	0.021	0.112	0.098	0.129	0.099	0.176
R2 Adj.	0.020	0.111	0.097	0.128	0.097	0.175

Note: Clustered standard errors are in parentheses. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

both formats. Finally, the religiosity effect is not reducible to partisanship. Controlling for AKP support, religiosity remains a substantial predictor of the gap, with the two only modestly correlated ($r = 0.29$). Table 4 reports these models.

Further tests also show that estimates are substantively identical under a multilevel model with respondent random intercepts, with no coefficient changing sign or significance (Appendix Table A10). The focal interactions are also stable to demographic and partisan controls, and any shifts in significance reflect the smaller complete-case sample rather than covariate adjustment (Appendix Tables A6 and A7). If respondents anchored at their first rating or were tired by the second, the Syrian ratings would track the Ukrainian ones closely, cluster within a narrow range, and yield more non-responses. None of that appears. The Syrian ratings vary independently of the Ukrainian ones, their dispersion is slightly wider rather than narrower, and non-response is no higher on the second profile. Additional checks for anchoring and response fatigue, as well as an analysis of case loss (Appendix Table A9), appear in the Online Appendix and do not alter the patterns reported here.

Conclusion

This study examined how economic and cultural considerations jointly shape public acceptance of refugees in Turkey by comparing attitudes towards Syrian and Ukrainian families. Drawing on the TBM and Turkey's distinctive domestic cleavages, we show that refugee acceptance in a polarised, non-Western context is driven less by refugees' economic credentials than by identity-based evaluations rooted in the evaluator's identity. Economic considerations matter, but their impact is conditional and often overridden by symbolic appraisals tied to religion, ethnicity, and marginality.

Across both refugee groups, economic burden reduces acceptance, which confirms that realistic threat appraisals remain relevant in Turkey. However, this effect is modest compared to the influence of identity-based mechanisms. Economic criteria operate most clearly for Syrian families and among upwardly mobile respondents. As respondents experience greater upward mobility, they reward self-sufficient Syrians and penalise burdened ones more sharply, while evaluations of Ukrainian families remain largely insensitive to economic status across the mobility range. Economic information, in other words, does its strongest work where cultural distance is lowest, which suggests that material criteria are most salient when respondents are not already sorting refugees on identity grounds.

The most consequential finding concerns Turkey's domestic Kulturkampf. The secular-religious cleavage produces a pronounced crossover pattern in refugee preferences. As religiosity increases, acceptance shifts sharply away from Ukrainians and towards Syrians. This is not a marginal effect but

a dramatic reordering of preferences across the religiosity spectrum, with the magnitude of this shift substantially exceeding the economic burden penalty. Importantly, this mechanism operates primarily through national-origin categorisation rather than individual-level religious signals. Highly devout respondents do not selectively reward religious Syrians. They favour Syrians categorically, regardless of whether those families are described as religious or secular. This finding indicates that, in polarised contexts, symbolic boundaries based on national origin can dominate finer-grained cues about individual behaviour or beliefs.

Kurdish respondents exhibit another powerful identity-based mechanism. Their substantially higher acceptance of refugees, especially Syrians, is consistent with marginality and group empathy theories, which posit that shared experiences of exclusion can foster solidarity across group boundaries. The magnitude of this effect rivals that of the Kulturkampf. Historically marginalised groups can be unexpected sources of refugee support even in contexts marked by widespread anti-immigrant sentiment.

These results have several implications. First, they help explain why state-led religious framing has been effective in sustaining public acceptance of Syrian refugees despite prolonged economic strain. Such framing activates civilisational solidarity rather than economic calculation. At the same time, this strategy risks deepening polarisation by aligning refugee attitudes with existing Kulturkampf divides. Second, the strong solidarity expressed by Kurdish respondents points to the integrative potential of marginalised communities, which suggests that refugee policies may benefit from engaging local actors whose own histories foster empathy rather than competition. Third, the findings caution against policy approaches that rely exclusively on economic messaging. Economic self-sufficiency may increase acceptance for some refugee groups, but for others, identity-based evaluations dominate and can neutralise material considerations altogether.

More broadly, this study contributes to the comparative literature on immigration attitudes by demonstrating how domestic cleavages condition threat and benefit appraisals in hybrid regimes. Future research should examine whether similar civilisational logics operate in other Global South contexts characterised by strong religious or ethnic divisions, and whether elite cues and media framing can activate or dampen these mechanisms. Understanding how identity and the economy interact, rather than compete, in shaping refugee attitudes is essential to explaining variation in public acceptance across political and cultural settings.

Our findings are also related to the broader electoral competition in Turkey. Kalaycıoğlu, Yeğen and Moral (2026) find that the secular-religious divide fell just short of conventional significance in predicting AKP support in 2023 and mattered little among opposition voters. The authors raise the possibility that the Kulturkampf is fading or collapsing into a left-right ideological divide. For Toros,

Zeybek Kabakçı and Toros (2025), Kulturkampf has already fused with partisan identity into what they call Partykampf, in which citizens' views of democracy follow their camp more than their cultural commitments. Our findings challenge both articles. Religiosity changes, which refugees a respondent would accept rather than how many, when AKP support is held constant, and the two variables correlate at only 0.29. Whatever is happening to the cleavage at the ballot box, it still sorts citizens on a question Turkish parties have never fought over.

Several features of the design bound the scope of our conclusions. The nationality contrast is not an isolated treatment. Syrian and Ukrainian families differ in religion, region of origin, and length of settlement. We dated their arrival to 2013 and 2022 to match the actual onset of the displacement that brought each group to Turkey, which preserves the realism of the comparison but means that nationality and time-in-country covary, as they do for the real populations. We therefore read nationality as a bundle of correlated, ecologically grounded attributes rather than a single manipulation.

The Kurdish affinity for Syrian families admits a further ambiguity. Because the vignettes do not specify the Syrians' own ethnicity, the pattern is consistent with solidarity among marginalised groups but also with perceived co-ethnicity, as some Syrian refugees in Turkey are Kurdish. The two interpretations cannot be separated within this design. In addition, although both Ukrainian and Syrian refugee family profiles include a father figure, Syrian profiles explicitly mention women, whereas Ukrainian profiles do not. While religiosity cues are asymmetric for both religions, the mere mention of women may also influence respondents' attitudes.

Finally, the sample is broadly representative of the regions surveyed but over-represents middle-aged and high-school-educated respondents and under-represents the oldest and least-educated groups (Appendix Table A8). Because the experimental estimates rely on randomisation rather than sample composition, this affects the generalisation of the findings more than their internal validity. The effects we report are estimated among a somewhat younger and more educated population than the national adult population, and replication across the full age and education range would strengthen confidence in their reach.

To sum up, our findings challenge accounts that privilege economic insecurity as the primary driver of exclusionary attitudes. In Turkey's polarised political environment, economic concerns are refracted through identity cleavages that determine when, for whom, and how material criteria are applied. Refugee acceptance is shaped more by *who is doing the evaluating* than by *what the refugee brings*, particularly when refugees can be mapped onto salient domestic identity conflicts.

Acknowledgments

We thank Melek Aylin Özoflu, Gülsefa Kahraman, and Aliye Fettah for their assistance. We also thank two anonymous referees and our editor, Nicolo Conti, for their constructive comments. Previous versions of this article were presented at Concordia University, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, and the Midwest Political Science Association's 82nd Annual Conference. We appreciate the comments of participants in these events.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Ezgi Elçi:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft; **Deniz Sert:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Evren Balta:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This study is funded by The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) [122K882].

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on a reasonable request.

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