



Threshold Cities in the Context of International Migration: Displacement Governance and Liminality

Uluslararası Göç Bağlamında Eşik Kentler: Yerinden Edilme Yönetişim ve Liminalite

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines spatial, administrative and existential practices of exclusion, uncertainty and displacement experienced by migrants in the cities. The research is focused on the subject of the duality of inclusion and exclusion experienced by displaced populations in urban environments, in the face of widespread migration, how it operates through the dynamics of the 'asylum paradox'. Urban areas are seen as places of contradiction that may be both sources of shelter and marginalization for migrants. Migrants living in cities have access to housing, job and social networks, but also endure hardships from physical isolation, legal vulnerability and structural exclusion. To explain the unequal distribution of migrants over cities, it is important to understand the circumstances contributing to this paradox. The research is conceptually informed by the concepts of spatiality, urban citizenship and liminality. Based on qualitative research grounded in secondary data analysis, the study finds that the MIPEX data provide insights indicating that migrant integration policies contribute to a decline in democratic satisfaction among people with attitudes and an increase in social polarization, according to the 2025 GRID and the 2026 World Migration Report, the vast majority of the 83 million people displaced by conflict and natural disasters have settled in urban areas. Against this background, metropolitan settings are viewed as dualistic spaces that offer emancipatory opportunities for migrants but also limiting, and perhaps discriminating, pressures. In this perspective, migrants are trying to survive by building networks of solidarity, developing geographic enclaves and reinterpreting their living circumstances.

Keywords: spatial segregation, urban vulnerability, threshold city, urban citizenship, migration governance

Öz

Bu makale, kentlerde yaşayan göçmenlerin maruz kaldığı dışlanma, belirsizlik ve yerinden edilme durumlarının mekânsal, idari ve varoluşsal boyutlarını incelemektedir. Araştırma, yaygın göç olgusu karşısında kentsel ortamlarda yerinden edilmiş nüfusların yaşadığı "dahil olma ve dışlanma" ikilemine odaklanmakta ve bu ikilemin "iltica paradoksu" dinamikleri aracılığıyla nasıl işlediğini ele almaktadır. Kentsel alanlar, göçmenler için hem barınma hem de marjinalleşmenin kaynağı olabilecek çelişkili mekanlar olarak görülmektedir. Şehirlerde yaşayan göçmenler barınma, iş ve sosyal ağlara erişime sahip olmakla birlikte, fiziksel izolasyon, hukuki savunmasızlık ve yapısal dışlanmadan kaynaklanan zorluklara da maruz kalmaktadır. Göçmenlerin şehirler arasında eşitsiz dağılımını açıklamak için, bu paradoksa katkıda bulunan koşulları anlamak önemlidir. Araştırma, mekânsallık, kentsel vatandaşlık ve liminalite kavramlarından kavramsal olarak beslenmektedir. İkincil veri analizine dayanan nitel araştırmaya dayanan bu çalışma, MIPEX verilerinin, göçmen entegrasyon politikalarının, belirli tutumlara sahip kişiler arasında demokratik memnuniyetin azalmasına ve sosyal kutuplaşmanın artmasına katkıda bulunduğuna dair içgörüler sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. 2025 GRID ve 2026 Dünya Göç Raporu'na göre, çatışmalar ve doğal afetler nedeniyle yerinden edilen 83 milyon kişinin büyük çoğunluğu kentsel alanlara yerleşmiştir. Bu bağlamda, metropol ortamları, göçmenler için özgürleştirici fırsatlar sunarken aynı zamanda kısıtlayıcı ve belki de ayrımcı baskılar da yaratan ikili yapıları mekanlar olarak görülmektedir. Bu bakış açısıyla, göçmenler dayanışma ağları kurarak, coğrafi yerleşim alanları geliştirerek ve yaşam koşullarını yeniden yorumlayarak hayatta kalmaya çalışmaktadırlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: mekânsal ayrışma, kentsel kırılganlık, eşik kent, kentsel yurttaşlık, göç yönetişimi

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the nineteenth century onwards, the clarification of territorial borders and the legal institutionalization of citizenship established a distinction between citizens and foreigners, transforming international migration from a form of human mobility into an issue of governance, regulation, and political authority (İçduygu et al., 2014:85). While internal migration primarily influences the demographic growth and spatial expansion of cities, international migration reshapes their social composition, cultural diversity, and governance structures. Consequently, cities increasingly become spaces where mobility is materialized, identities are renegotiated, legal statuses remain uncertain, and everyday life is often experienced under conditions of temporariness. Refugees, asylum seekers and people under temporary protection are not totally safe or integrated in cities. Also, they may be sites of marginalization, ambiguity, safety and possibility. While migrants often see urban areas as places of refuge, they may also experience legal restrictions, socio-economic disenfranchisement, and other types of spatial segregation (Sassen, 1999). These contradictory urban experiences imply that cities cannot be seen as mere sites of habitation or assimilation; rather, cities are complex spaces where inclusion and exclusion coexist. The idea of the threshold has been widely explored across fields such as architecture, and urban research in an effort to address spaces of transition, vagueness, and alteration. Threshold spaces are not considered to be static geographical sites, but as liminal spaces that are traversed, mediating identities and constantly re-defining social interactions (Janson & Tigges, 2014: 39). This notion has been widely used in architecture, public spaces and spatial transformations but its position in comprehending contemporary migrating experiences in cities has been relatively overlooked. If transition, uncertainty and negotiation are the characteristics of threshold sites, cities can be equally seen as urban thresholds where these dynamics occur on a larger social and spatial scale. The extension of the concept of thresholds from the personal to the realm offers a vital framework for fully understanding the intricacies of modern migration. There is an increasing body of literature on migration and urban governance but dominant notions of sanctuary, arrival and gateway cities have focused primarily on the inclusion or exclusion of migrants. So they do not sufficiently articulate how urban spaces are places of safety, unpredictability, marginalization and social unity. This conceptual limitation signals a major gap in the existing literature and is the main problem addressed in this research. The aim of this article is to bridge this gap by proposing the concept of threshold city as a framework to analyze the urban experience of global migration. This paper takes cities not as destinations, transit points or sites of assimilation but as lively urban spaces where migrants are continuously negotiating towards legal recognition, social acceptance and spatial integration. The main aim of this research is to present the concept of the threshold city as a theoretical framework in an effort to understand the complex processes of liminality, displacement and governance in contemporary urban settings. The article is less empirical and more theoretical in the sense that it explores the coming together of migration studies, urban governance and liminality. The threshold city provides a framework to understand the dual functions of urban areas as sites of inclusion and exclusion and protection and regulation, expanding the understanding beyond current urban migration theories and stimulating scholarly discourse.

The concept of the "city" refers to a geographical and administrative structure that emerged as a social and economic formation following humanity's transition to a settled way of life (Negiz & Yalçın, 2022:52). Migration, which has played a fundamental role in the emergence and transformation of cities throughout history, continues to shape their demographic, social, cultural, and political structures. Starting in the 19th century, the clarification of borders and the legal definition of citizenship as a category led to the division of individuals into "citizens" and "foreigners" (İçduygu et al., 2014:24). The establishment of the contemporary nation-state in the nineteenth century, through the institutionalization territorial boundaries and citizenship, changed the dynamics of mobility, political affiliation, and rights. Citizenship slowly changed from a simple legal status to the main way

of defining political affiliation, and people outside this construct were labeled as outsiders. As Balibar (2009: 55) states, it, "the distinction between citizen and foreigner is not self-evident, nor simply legal, but is a fundamental defining feature of modern political communities." The foreigner is seen not just as an individual of another nationality, but as a non-member whose particular legal and political status defines the limits of membership. Citizenship matters in relation to inclusion and exclusion. Arendt (1998: 214) enhances this viewpoint by asserting that citizenship transcends a legal designation, serving as the prerequisite for individuals to acquire and enact rights within a democratic society. From this viewpoint, migrants frequently find themselves in a transitional state where legal acknowledgment, political affiliation, and entitlement to rights do not completely align. This very state of being in-between renders modern cities ideal environments for conceiving the idea of the threshold city. Brubaker (1990: 380-381) defines citizenship mostly as affiliation with the nation-state instead than just a legal designation. From this viewpoint, discussions over immigration are essentially discussions about access to political membership, influenced by historically developed notions of nationhood. Bauman (2016: 71) transitions the dialogue from legal standing to societal viewpoint. For him, the "stranger" is not mainly characterized by citizenship or nationality, but rather by a sense of perceived otherness. Strangers are perceived as erratic and disruptive entities whose existence undermines the existing social hierarchy, frequently resulting in apprehension, ostracism, and political exploitation. Thus, the experiences of migrants in modern urban environments are influenced not alone by their legal status but also by how metropolitan communities define and react to differences. Bauman also observes (2012: 53) that modern cities no longer establish their borders mainly in opposition to foreign adversaries but are progressively generating new internal divisions inside urban environments. As a result, the differentiation between residents and outsiders is now conveyed not alone through geographical boundaries but also through daily acts of segregation, monitoring, and exclusion occurring inside the urban environment.

While this notion has often been utilized in relation to architecture, communal areas, and spatial shifts, its capacity to elucidate modern migration experiences in urban environments has garnered relatively less focus. If threshold places are defined by transition, uncertainty, and negotiation, modern cities may also be viewed as urban thresholds where these dynamics occur on a larger social and spatial dimension. The notion of thresholds can be extrapolated from the individual to the urban scale and offers a robust model to understand the complexity of contemporary migration. There is an emerging literature on migration and urban governance but mainstream notions of sanctuary cities, arrival cities and gateway cities have mostly been concerned with either inclusion or marginalisation of migrants. They are therefore not sufficient to explain how urban environments are at the same time places of security, uncertainty, exclusion and social cohesion. This theoretical limitation indicates a significant gap in the existing literature and is the core issue addressed by this study. This study attempts to fill this gap by introducing the concept of threshold city as a lens for understanding the urban experience of global migration. The study conceives of cities not as destinations, hubs or sites of incorporation but as urban spaces where migrants are constantly engaged in negotiations for legal recognition, social acceptance and spatial integration. This research attempts to develop the concept of the threshold city as a conceptual tool to understand the relationships between displacement, governance and liminality in contemporary cities.

This is not an empirical case study but a theoretical discussion at the intersection of migration studies, urban governance and liminality. It contributes to the academic discussion by proposing the threshold city as a means of comprehending the duality of urban spaces as places of inclusion and exclusion, and protection and control, with a more complex explanation than dominant urban migration theories.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Nation-State Borders and Citizenship

With the advent of modernity, the idea of nation state also emerged, particularly under the influence of the political impact of the French Revolution and the socio-economic changes due to the Industrial Revolution. This concept underwent major changes in the 19th century. These multiple layers of developments have led to the drawing of borders, the classification of people, and the legal making of citizenship status as a way of identifying who somebody is. The modern nation-state redefined the boundaries of membership and thereby the relationship between territory, citizenship and political belonging. Countries are not natural things, Anderson (1991: 125) argues, but imagined political communities. These communities are held together by shared stories, institutions and symbols, rather than face-to-face relationships. They think of themselves as belonging to a community of citizens, a nation, even if they have not met most of their fellow citizens. Governmental agencies and activities (e.g., censuses, cartography, and museums) help create this collective sense of belonging by drawing geographical boundaries, classifying inhabitants, and preserving shared national identities. In this context, citizenship is used as a device to distinguish members of the national community from outsiders, not just a legal status. In Foucault's view, the modern nation state was not simply a territorial entity, but a structure whose primary function was to regulate individuals. From this point of view boundaries are not only used to mark spaces but also to provide the political framework by which nations classify, control and supervise the people under their jurisdiction. Through the combined operations of law, discipline and security, the state constantly controls political association and movement (Foucault, 2007: 124). Scott's (2009) idea of bordering is more than the common idea of boundaries as fixed geographical demarcations. Bordering is seen as an active process through which political entities create identities, regulate movement and differentiate between inclusion and exclusion. This mechanism operates at the same time between physical borders, legal regimes such as visa policies and social narratives concerning national identity, migration and security. Hence, boundaries are constantly produced by political and social practices which define everyday understandings of identity and alienation, and which extend beyond the margins of nations.

Citizenship, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a legal status. It also represents a form of political inclusion through which states distinguish between those who belong to the national community and those whose presence remains subject to different forms of regulation. The concept of internal sovereignty, shaped around the principle of the state's absolute sovereignty over its territory (Gözler, 2011: 111), reinforced the state's absolute authority over a piece of land; at the same time, the spread of the nation-state dichotomy paved the way for the integration of identity and cultural elements into the social sciences of nation-states. As Bartram et al. (2019: 85) note, the key to understanding international migration at a conceptual level lies in focusing on the concept of the nation within an international context. International migration is recognized as a phenomenon whose outcomes stem from national differences or differences related to them. Therefore, the assumption of a foundational cultural role by one ethnicity relative to other ethnic groups living in the same country and its transformation into a dominant culture constitutes the fundamental mechanism of the nation-state paradigm. Giddens (1985: 111) defines the nation-state as a set of institutional forms of governance that hold a monopoly on administration over a demarcated territory, are governed by law, and exercise direct control over the instruments of force. Smith (2022: 145), building on this definition, notes that what distinguishes the nation-state from other forms of governance is the rise of fixed capitals, which enable stable governance over well-defined territories. The idea of "identity security," which is another way to say "social security," stresses the need to add threats to sociological factors like culture, identity, religious beliefs, traditions, and gender to the traditional security agenda. In this context, social security derives its strength from collective identities and is influenced by the

perception that belonging, shared identity, and the notion of "us" are at risk (Baysal & Lüleci, 2015). Marshall (2000) posits that citizenship has evolved through three distinct stages in history: civil, political, and social rights. He believes that the right to citizenship is a human rights requirement for everyone, no matter what language, religion, race, or gender they are (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992). Bottomore contends that these concepts necessitate global citizenship. This method shows how important human rights and citizenship are when people move. In democratic nations, the sole limitation imposed on foreigners (forcibly displaced people from the country of origin) is the exclusion from voting and electoral participation (Castles & Miller, 2008: 256). The nation-state paradigm, along with the securitization process at its core and the citizenship processes of migrants, are the things that shape, change, and control migration. Nevertheless, if you only talk about citizenship and belonging at the level of the nation-state, you are unlikely to fully comprehend how migration works today. This is because the cities where migrants live have a big impact on their rights, how well they fit in with society, and how they inhabit their daily lives. In this sense, the city's social, economic, and political dynamics are just as important as the nation's borders.

2.2. The Role of Cities in the Experience of Migration

Cities are regarded as living spaces that have been planned, implemented, and shaped by human experience (Awasthi, 2021; Hardyns & Pauwels, 2017). Global migration has progressively altered the role of urban areas in migration regulation. As states persist in establishing the legal parameters surrounding migration and integration, numerous practical obstacles related to migrant settlement are encountered and tackled at the municipal level. Therefore, cities are now important not only as magnets for new residents, but also as spaces in which access to housing, education, jobs, health care and public services are regularly negotiated. In numerous instances, local governments have formulated responses that diverge from national integration strategies, mirroring the unique requirements and traits of their respective communities (Rajca, 2020). The growing importance of cities is strongly associated with the possibilities they provide for participation and inclusion. Local authorities influence the assimilation of migrants through areas over which they have significant control such as housing, childcare, adult education and cultural services (Gebhardt, 2016). At the same time, local governments should encourage more participation by fostering immigrant associations, giving equal access to civic activities and providing channels for migrants to participate in community governance. Integration is not only created by national legislation but also by the habitual practices of urban governance in this place. The charm of city environments goes beyond just available public amenities. Major cities remain the magnet locations for migrants due to their agglomeration of economic opportunities, social networks and institutional resources that are lacking in many parts of the country. In this context, Portes (2000) argues that migrants not only react to existing labor markets but often create new economic opportunities through entrepreneurship and informal networks. Comparable findings have been observed in large cities worldwide, like London, Paris and Amsterdam, where powerful immigrant networks have fostered the rise of new service sectors and revitalized shrinking business activities (Sassen, 1996; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). These developments suggest that migrants are not merely adapting to urban environments but are also participating in their economic and social transformation. Overall, migrants do not merely increase a city's population; they transform its economic functions, neighborhood structure, service delivery, political relations, and global standing. By entering the labor market, immigrants ensure the survival of certain sectors, establish new businesses and social institutions, revitalize abandoned or declining neighborhoods, and bring new flows of capital, knowledge, and connections to the city through transnational networks. For this reason, immigrants are not passive groups added to the city later on, but rather "scale makers" who participate in the city's restructuring that is, actors who influence the city's regional, national, and global positioning (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011: 13). Lefebvre advocates that categorizing these spaces as safe or unsafe is a political choice. According to him, the perception of safety in cities emerges as a spatial reflection of power relations; consequently, which areas of the city are deemed "risky" is determined by the intervention of social and political structures (Lefebvre, 2014).

Thinkers from the Chicago School also emphasize that economic class differences are decisive in shaping the urban landscape. According to them, the “transition zones” of cities that is, areas where high levels of migration and the potential for crime coexist are defined as areas where economically disadvantaged groups settle (Burgess, 1967; McKay & Shaw, 2010:99). This situation illustrates that urban security cannot be tackled in isolation from socio-economic factors. Aguiar's (2018:40) research also strongly reinforces this link: it says that the main causes of security problems are youth unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Researchers assert that security policies neglecting these structural causes will be insufficient; they advocate for the formulation of strategies that engage local communities and correspond with socio-economic realities. All these theoretical and empirical studies demonstrate that the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts underlying perceptions of security and insecurity in cities must be included in the analysis (Yıldız & Baygeldi, 2025).

Varsanyi (2006) has introduced a concept of urban citizenship into the literature that prioritizes coexistence while referring to the pragmatic conditions of urban existence in the face of the transience and ambiguity of migration. Participatory democracy and the involvement of city residents in urban decision-making processes rank among the most important instrumental areas (Şahin, 2021). According to Dahl (2005:52), the political participation of the immigrant population in New Haven has been a key factor in the evolution of the local governance structure from an oligarchic system to a pluralistic social organization. He also points out that cities remain reliant on central government due to resource limitations, particularly in addressing structural challenges such as poverty and migration. The urban governance framework established by Saunders (1979: 47) and Pahl (1969:110) concentrates on disparities in the allocation of urban resources and services, highlighting that professional entities, including urban planners, social service experts, and housing developers, play a critical role in this distribution system as the “gatekeepers of the city.” Pahl (1969) asserts that decisions concerning the allocation of fundamental services, including housing and healthcare, significantly impact the daily lives of urban communities. These decisions are predominantly influenced by the value judgments and ideological orientations of local bureaucracies.

2.3. Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative approach comprising of conceptual analysis, literature review and assessment of secondary data. It is not based on fieldwork or a specific case study but aims to develop the notion of the threshold city by combining different academic perspectives on migration, urban studies and governance. The assessment is interpretative in approach, exploring the relationship between displacement, governance and liminality in contemporary urban settings. The theoretical framework is developed by reviewing literature on migratory governance, urban citizenship, bordering, liminality and urban transformation. Rather than analyzing each study separately, the article brings them together into a single analytical lens. The hypotheses proposed by Lefebvre, Sassen, Glick Schiller, Çağlar, Varsanyi, Bauman, and Foucault help to understand the capacity of urban spaces to be, at the same time, safe, excluding, uncertain, and socially cohesive environments. The study also uses secondary data from internationally recognized sources in support of the theoretical discussion. The patterns of displacement and migrant integration are evidenced by the Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID 2025) by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) and findings from the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). The statistics are not examined through statistical hypothesis testing; instead they are explored in relation to theoretical discussions to show how present migration patterns support the idea of the threshold city. Thus, qualitative, theory-generating study is maintained by using empirical evidence to support the theory.

3. THRESHOLD CITIES: CONTEXT AND FUNCTIONS

3.1. Development of the Concept of Threshold Cities

When cities are examined as threshold spaces that materialize uncertainties, they emerge as complex sociopolitical arenas where the quest for existential security intersects with legal and social exclusion. Blokland et al. (2015) claims that cities are not merely geographical and administrative structures but also socio-political environments that are layered at local and transnational scales. In these

environments, identities and relationships encounter, develop, and clash through daily spatial practices (Uitermark et al., 2005; Zacca Thomaz, 2022). Citizenship, meanwhile, is defined as the totality of relationships between individuals' lived experiences in the city, their political actions, and their sense of belonging (Chacko & Price, 2021; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016). However, the nation-state's definition of citizenship as the primary source of national legitimacy (Varsanyi, 2006) leads to urban spaces becoming a "threshold" for migrants; as citizenship status alone is insufficient to regulate daily interactions with the local population for these individuals; instead, legal uncertainties and conditions of temporariness have become fundamental characteristics of urban life (Cohen & Margalit, 2015; Sottini, 2024). As a threshold city, the city functions as a dual-sided space that holds the potential for both liberation and restriction for migrants. Cities offer opportunities for migrants to feel safe across various spatial scales, from architecture to the urban landscape; spaces such as neighborhoods, squares, workplaces, and places of worship emerge as potential threshold areas where interaction with host communities begins (Chacko & Price, 2021; Fainstein, 2011: 98; Harvey, 2009). However, while these interactions can strengthen a sense of belonging, they may also lead to experiences of exclusion and restriction due to a lack of social identity and being categorized as "foreigners" (Lobo, 2021; Tan, 2021; Lei, 2025). In these categorizations, cities have become important in their own classification such as sanctuary, arrival and gateway. Migration and the city have triggered a wide spectrum of conceptual approaches attempting to explain how urban spaces host, regulate and change migrant populations. Cities are increasingly recognized not simply as destinations but as active sites in which legal status, social participation, economic incorporation and spatial belonging are negotiated. Since then, migration and urban studies have produced a range of influential concepts urban refugee, transit city, sanctuary city, gateway city and arrival city each foregrounding a different dimension of the relationship between migration and urban life. Arrival city is the primary setting where migrants embark on the journey of social, economic, and cultural integration. Arrival cities are viewed as neighborhoods where new arrivals build social networks, find jobs, and gradually assimilate into urban society. The concept thus highlights the central trajectory of migration, focused on adaptation, mobility, and integration. It is based on the idea that arrival marks the start of a more or less linear path towards settlement and inclusion. However, this view is less convincing in situations where migrants are granted temporary legal statuses, insecure rights to residency, or are barred from full access to citizenship for long periods of time. Cities serve as primary ports of entry into national and international migration systems. Gateway cities are characterized by their economic importance, transportation infrastructure, labor markets, and strategic geographical location. The sanctuary city concept changes the focus from migration flows to local governance. Sanctuary cities are typically designated by city ordinances designed to restrict cooperation with federal immigration enforcement or protect illegal immigrants. From this perspective, city appear as political actors able to mitigate the exclusionary effects of restrictive national migration policies and to improve the accessibility of public services for migrants. Consequently, the sanctuary cities literature demonstrates the extent to which local governments can exercise considerable autonomy when determining migrant inclusion. The transition of Basmane in İzmir exemplifies the inadequacy of current notions like transit or arrival city in elucidating modern migrant experiences. Initially serving as a transit center for migrants seeking to enter Europe, Basmane progressively transformed into a site of extended ambiguity after the EU–Turkey Agreement. Refugees established social networks, local economies, and daily practices of inclusion while also facing legal uncertainty, informal employment, and geographical exclusion. Instead of serving as a transient transit area or a completely assimilated arriving metropolis, Basmane illustrates an urban state where uncertainty is perpetually generated by local administration, real estate markets, and daily urban experiences. This becomes Basmane a tangible example of the threshold city notion articulated in this research (Oner et al., 2020).

The uncertainty of legal status, as well as the threat of detention and deportation, makes it hard for migrants to know when they will be able to leave the city. This keeps the city in a constant "state of

transition." The work ban on people whose asylum applications have been denied, along with not enough financial help, forces these people into low-paying jobs with little protection, making them a "invisible" but "readily available" labor pool in the city (Crawley et al., 2011: 99; Griffiths, 2014; Karadağ, 2015:29). Migrants are coming up with ways to deal with this uncertainty by changing how they interpret the city. In this way, they organize themselves into parks, streets, and neighborhoods that encourage geographical clustering and a sense of familiarity. By putting up signs in their own languages for their businesses, they add markers of belonging to the places where they live (Melara et al., 2013; Thompson, 2016; Oner et al., 2020). Migrants do not experience urban space in the same way. Where they live is influenced not only by their migration status but also by their economic resources, legal position, employment opportunities, and access to housing. Refugees and asylum seekers frequently settle in more affordable neighbourhoods because of limited financial means, whereas highly skilled migrants and internationally mobile professionals often choose or are able to access more central and affluent areas. For this reason, it would be misleading to assume that migrants are uniformly concentrated in marginal urban spaces. Their spatial distribution instead reflects broader social and economic inequalities, producing diverse forms of settlement and belonging across the city. Consequently, the city should be perceived as a threshold for migrants one where safety is perpetually negotiated in accordance with legal regulations and physical conditions, and which fluctuates over time (Hennebry & Williams, 2015; Yeoh, 2006). Migration policies of nation-states are turning cities into "extended emergency" zones. Migrants are viewed as essential external components of the national order and are intended to be maintained under a particular discipline (Nyers, 1998, 2006: 52-98). The movement of Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey to a third country is not completely prohibited; however, in accordance with the Temporary Protection Regulation, temporary or permanent departure to a third country is subject to the permission of the Presidency of Migration Management. Furthermore, admission to, resettlement in, or departure for a third country may result in the individual termination of temporary protection. Therefore, temporary protection functions not as a regime that absolutely prevents Syrians' international mobility, but rather as one that conditions such mobility on the risk of losing administrative authorization, documentation, and status. This turns refugees into low-wage workers and makes social tensions rise because they are competing with locals for jobs (Baban et al., 2017: 46; Kirişçi, 2014:119). Likewise, practices such as temporary work visas and employers keeping migrants' passports make them seem like "disposable" tools for the city's economic growth, making it harder for them to get housing, education, and pension rights (Boese & Macdonald, 2017; Gardner et al., 2013). In this context, the city serves as a threshold space that highlights the mediating role of civil society organizations in accessing public services. However, migrants find themselves caught between "waiting" and "unable to stay" positions due to bureaucratic obstacles and inadequate infrastructure (Oner et al., 2020; Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). As a threshold city, it is a tense place between the citizenship systems of the nation-state and the everyday spatial practices of migrants. This space both offers opportunities for migrants to construct a sense of belonging and build solidarity networks, and simultaneously reproduces a constant state of "being in-between" through mechanisms of legal uncertainty, economic exploitation, and social exclusion.

3.2. Threshold Cities through the Perception of Migration

The concept of the threshold offers a broader way of understanding migration in urban space. Rather than referring to a fixed boundary, a threshold describes spaces where different identities, cultures, and everyday practices meet, interact, and are continuously negotiated. Stavrides (2010) argues that the modern city should not be understood in terms of fixed boundaries but rather in terms of pathways that enable interaction and dialog. In this respect, Balibar (2002) suggests that cities can be open to diversity by replacing borders with corridors but not force different groups to assume a unique identity. In this sense, urban thresholds are not intermediate zones or unoccupied spaces which separate communities. In contrast, they are spaces that unite and separate individuals at the same time, allowing for coexistence through regular contact (Simmel, 1997). The concept of liminality was first coined by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and further developed by Victor Turner (1967, 1969) within the

framework of the threshold phase between separation and reintegration in rites of passage . Liminality, according to Turner, is a temporary phase when people are taken out of their social identities and then take on a new social status. Turner's theory hasn't changed a lot, but modern migration challenges the idea that liminality is by definition temporary. In this new use, liminality is a sustained social and political condition, a definition adopted by contemporary migration scholars. Brun (2015) argues that displacement often creates a permanent state of impermanence where migrants are left in limbo with unknown legal status and an unknown future, rather than moving toward stable assimilation. Conversely, Malkki (1995) argues that displacement produces a number of social and symbolic thresholds, as belonging and identity are dismantled within a spatial context. This viewpoint further clarifies the contrast between the threshold city and Burgess's idea of the transition zone. The transition zone denotes a specific region inside the city's internal framework characterized by intense migration, demographic shifts, and socio-economic transformations (Burgess, 1967). A threshold city, however, is not a type of neighbourhood or a specific urban district. Rather, it describes an urban condition in which different populations continuously negotiate mobility, belonging, and coexistence across the city. In this respect, threshold cities may contain transition-zone-like spaces, but they cannot be reduced to them. This understanding is closely related to Lefebvre's idea of the right to the city, which emphasizes the collective right of people to participate in the production of urban life (Lefebvre, 1996: 42). Thresholds therefore gain meaning not because they divide urban space, but because they are crossed, experienced, and reproduced through everyday social interaction (Stavrides, 2010). From this perspective, the threshold city should be understood as a city that enables encounter, negotiation, and coexistence while preserving, rather than eliminating, difference.

Migration and the potential for diversity it brings are among the most significant issues facing cities. While political discourses may differ regarding the prevention of migration and how it can be prevented, migration flows toward developed countries lead to the encounter of different identities and the emergence of multi-identity structures (İçduygu & Biehl, 2012). Such encounters of identities can also be interpreted as trends brought about by urbanization. Urbanization is a process of population concentration that, parallel to industrialization and economic development, leads to an increase in both the number and size of cities; elevates the levels of organization, division of labor, and specialization within the social structure; and causes changes in human behavior specific to urban life. At the same time, urbanization refers to the increase in the urban population and the number of cities. Historically, this process, which began with the Industrial Revolution, emerged as a social consequence of modernization. Among the three fundamental social consequences of the Industrial Revolution are differentiation in social structure, innovation in production, and accelerated population mobility (urbanization) (Kaya et al., 2008:45).

Migrants' experience of cities as spatial living environments and their encounters with local populations in public spaces can lead to discriminatory practices that may give rise to identity issues such as "establishing a place" and "exclusion." Threshold cities may contain or reproduce transition-zone-like spaces (Burgess, 1967; McKay & Shaw, 2010:120). According to the Chicago School's fundamental view, these cities are the inevitable product of a natural order; they are shaped by population movements, competition, and successive settlement processes, much like self-organizing living organisms (Park, 1925: 144). From this perspective, it is possible to explain migration toward threshold cities using biological terms such as "invasion" and 'displacement' (Thorns, 2004: 65). The Chicago School is an important foundation for comprehending the ecological organization of cities and patterns of migrant settlement, but contemporary migration governance offers urban realities beyond ecological competition and demographic transition. More recent urban theory has emphasised the multiplicity of factors influencing migrant's urban experiences, including spatial distribution, differentiated citizenship regimes, local governance practices, unequal access to urban resources and struggles for the right to the city (Purcell, 2002; Marcuse, 2009). Purcell argues that urban citizenship should not be restricted to formal national citizenship, but rather should be based on participation in urban life, drawing on Lefebvre's concept of urban space. Purcell (2002) asserts that urban rights are for the people who inhabit, use and reproduce urban space regardless of their legal status. Similarly, Marcuse shows that modern cities reproduce many forms of exclusion through housing markets,

planning policies and differential access to urban resources, thereby making urban inequality a political process, rather than just a demographic one (Marcuse, 2009). In this sense, threshold cities should be understood as politically produced urban conditions rather than as ecological transition zones. These conditions are marked by the ongoing reproduction of legal ambiguity, spatial inequality, and everyday negotiations of belonging.

As Park points out, the city functions as a kind of “natural selection mechanism” that selects and filters out the individuals best suited to live within it. In threshold cities, this mechanism creates dynamic zones where migrants concentrate, cheap labor is traded, and there is constant population turnover and mobility (Giddens, 1997:49). These are the socio-economically marginalized settlements that stand out due to high population mobility and the associated risk of crime (Burgess, 1925: 41). The phenomenon of migration in threshold cities is, on the one hand, analyzed within the context of interdependence and symbiotic relationships; however, this balance is established through the inherent advantages individuals bring with them. Harris and Ullman’s Multicentric Development Theory (Goldfield, 2007), however, offers a different perspective: According to this theory, threshold cities can also be interpreted as new centers formed by the need for specialized services in certain activities and by those fleeing high rents (Keleş, 1972:74; Bal, 2008: 96). Hoyt’s (1939: 125) Sector Theory offers a different explanation for migration patterns in threshold cities: Different income groups cluster in different sectors; as income increases, migration shifts from the center outward within the same sector (Bal, 2008: 97). However, these models are also subject to criticism; after all, in real life, topography, unplanned development, and interventions by political actors disrupt these orderly patterns (Keleş, 1972: 85; Serter, 2013).

There are three main ways to look at the migrant experience in threshold cities: spatial, administrative, and existential. The spatial dimension examines the alteration of urban space in conjunction with the displacement processes of migrants. In this context, threshold cities serve as both temporary havens and venues for migrants to reconstruct their identities; however, this process frequently leads to spatial segregation and the exacerbation of urban poverty. On the other hand, the governance dimension looks at how local and national governments treat migrants, the unfair policies that are built into these policies, and the red tape that migrants have to deal with to get their rights. In gateway cities, governance is primarily shaped by a securitized discourse, which impedes the social integration of migrants. In the meantime, the “asylum paradox” represents the existential dimension and expresses the basic ambivalence of migrants between asylum-seeking and the tension of freedom and restriction. The paradox is that migrants are trying to satisfy their existential need for security, while being confronted by mechanisms of legal and social exclusion. Thus, threshold cities become a space for the experience of these three dimensions, a multi-layered space which creates both opportunities and constraints for migrants.

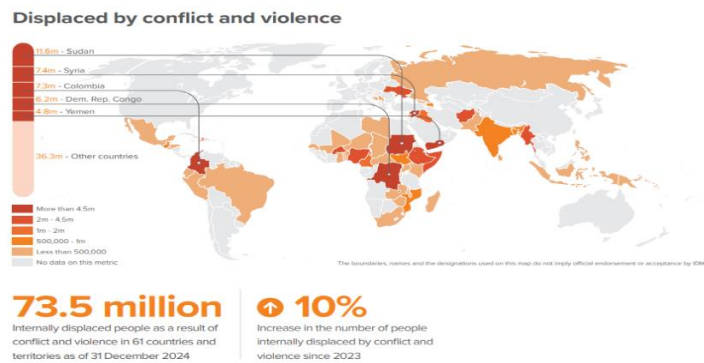
4. THE EXPERIENCE OF MIGRATION IN THRESHOLD CITIES

4.1. Spatial Dimension: Displacement and Transformation

Migration and urbanization are among the most powerful forces shaping the modern world. They are changing economies, reordering societies and producing effects which are often contradictory from cultural exchange and increased productivity to environmental pressures and unregulated growth. These two central dynamics are becoming increasingly interconnected: migration is a growing engine of urban growth and cities are magnets for this mobility. The magnitude of this movement is remarkable. Migration and socio-spatial transformation, as experienced, perceived, and designed within the framework of Lefebvre’s tri-dialectic relationship of space, can provide a foundation for understanding migration and spatial transformation through concrete spatial practices. Spatial practices, along with spatial reasoning, have been transferred from the country of origin to the destination. Through this spatial memory, space has been redesigned, giving rise to new ways of life. A society’s lived space creates its own new space. According to Lefebvre (2014: 75), lived space is the space of those who use it, mediated through the images and symbols that accompany it. These are the physical, material flows, transfers, and interactions that take place within and through space in a way that enables production and reproduction. Perceived space consists of meanings, codes, and signs that

allow for discourse on production relations and the material practices imposed by these relations. Designed space, on the other hand, consists of mental inventions that envision new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices. According to Scannell and Gifford's (2010) theory, which focuses on three main elements the individual, the environment, and the process in the formation of spatial belonging, the sense of belonging in the context of new migration is linked to the transformation of that sense through experience, memory, and communalization. As a sense of belonging emerges with a fluid structure during the process of new migration, space also moves away from fixity and gains meaning through experience. These spaces shaped by moments, memories, encounters, and possibilities may not always be limited, fenced off, delineated, or designed, but they offer us both a subjective and collective exploration of the boundlessness of space beyond what is visible to us. Understanding the spatial dimension of international migration flows and the transformations within this dimension cannot be reduced to a single level of analysis. Therefore, theories that take a multi-layered approach to the phenomenon of migration provide more comprehensive explanations. Migration systems theory can in this respect assess the macro-level economic, political and cultural relations between states, the meso-level collective actors such as migrant networks, civil society organisations and local institutions, and the micro-level decision-making processes, strategies and everyday experiences of individual migrants. The theory is important since it can account for the relationship between human agency and structural determinants. It is a helpful tool for analyzing the spatial dynamics of international migration (Yakar, 2021).

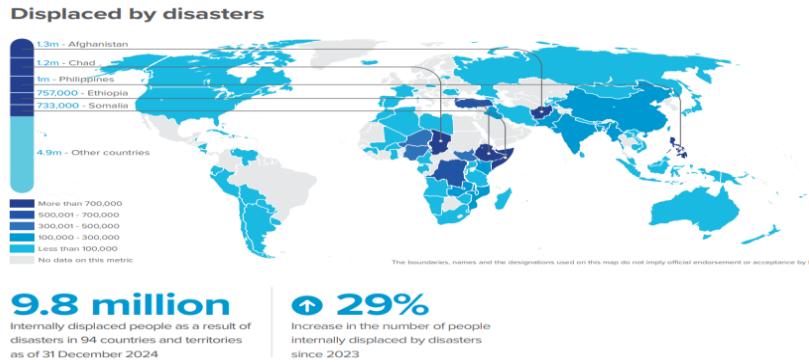
People may want to move to another country to feel safe, and make the right choices for their future (go to school, get a job and have a better life). This fluidity means that urban migration is not one set of circumstances or risks, but a wide range of individuals who move voluntarily looking for better opportunities, and those who move involuntarily because of environmental collapse, persecution or violence. Hence, this fluidity has been highly effective in facilitating mixed migration mobilities. Urban displacement is not only something that happens in big cities, but it's also something that happens in smaller cities and towns, including border towns. The host cities have bigger challenges due to the limited resources available. These pressures of urban migration, evident also in the rural hinterland, are further compounded by the fact that many displaced communities are pushed into peripheral settlements on the outskirts of the host city's official boundaries. Accordingly, the effects along the urban-rural continuum should be the main focus of policies about urban migration.



Map 1. Total number of displaced people by conflict and violence (GRID, 2025)

An estimated 73.5 million people across the world have been forced to flee their homes due to violence and conflict within their own countries (Map 1). This figure is 10% higher than in 2023, indicating that internal displacement has become a global structural crisis. This trend towards displacement is clearly regional in character. Sudan has the highest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world, at 11.6 million. Democratic Republic of the Congo has 6.2 million, Syria has 7.4 million, Colombia has 7.3 million, and Yemen has 4.8 million. These five countries host more than half of all displaced persons. The map 1's color coding shows that most of the countries in the "over 4.5 million" (dark red) group are in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The statement "People move when there is conflict" is a simple way of capturing the complex nature of human mobility. Displacement can occur due to conflict, though the extent of displacement cannot be attributed to conflict alone. The

situation is also affected by multidimensional dynamics such as the collapse of security institutions, economic vulnerabilities, damage to infrastructure, access to humanitarian assistance, prospects of return, border regimes and local housing markets.



Map. 2 Total number of Displaced people by disasters (GRID,2025)

In 2024 alone, 9.8 million people were driven from their homes by environmental shocks and natural disasters (GRID, 2025). This is in addition to the number of people who have been displaced from their homes due to conflict. These numbers show that humanitarian crises are becoming more common in cities. Most of the 83 million IDPs who were forced to leave their homes because of conflict. Additionally, armed conflict, climate change and unresolved crises have forced over 120 million people from their homes (World Migration Report, 2026).

305 million requiring humanitarian assistance globally. According to the push-pull theory, the conditions producing displacement which can be listed among the push factors is a concept that emphasizes traumatic and uncontrollable processes (Bisht, 2024). Forced migration and displacement lead to profound transformations in the shaping of family dynamics, the distribution of roles, and social support mechanisms.

4.2. The Administrative Dimension: Governance and Exclusion

The implications of mass migration on urban indicates not only demographic concentration but also a transformation of governance approaches and the production of exclusionary practices (İçduygu & Diker, 2017). Migrants' presence in the city reflects contradictions of cooperation between local government and central administration, fragmentation of service delivery and inequalities in access to public spaces (Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). In this framework, governance functions as a biopolitical tool (Foucault, 2009: 24) for classifying migrants as a "manageable population", simultaneously framing migrant identity as a "problematic" category and reinforcing the structural foundations of exclusion. International migration is more than just moving people. It is a complex phenomenon which involves the re-juvenating of places, the reshaping of borders and the transformation of identities. This event is best understood through the theoretical lens of Foucault's notion of governmentality. The migrant population is thus not only governed by legal structures and punitive measures, but also by guarantees of freedom, integration and participation. This principle of governance is clearly seen in urban areas where the spaces occupied by migrants, the economic activities they engage in and the extent of their indispensability to the city are defined by specific frameworks. Freedom, Foucault argues, is not the opposite of governance, but is in fact co-extensive with it. From this perspective, a migrant's perception of "home" in the urban context or the process of belonging is not just an individual experience, but a state in which liberty is operating as a governing principle. Foucault's claim that "alternative forms of biopolitics and governance are possible" enables us to acknowledge that space is not only governed hierarchically; it also acquires new meanings through the everyday acts, encounters and collective experiences of migrants.

5. CONCLUSION

Migration plays a decisive role in the formation and development of cities. This phenomenon affects not only the demographic structure of cities but also their sociological, psychological, and ideological transformations. Migration acquired a new character with the emergence of nation-states in the modern era; the clarification of borders and the legal definition of citizenship as a category beginning in the 19th century led to the division of individuals into "citizens" and "foreigners." Cities have emerged as the spatial arena where these policies are directly reflected and where access to rights for migrants is determined, even as the nation-state's securitization policies and regulations governing the transition to citizenship emerge as the fundamental elements shaping and constraining the phenomenon of migration. In this aspect, the nation-state's role in regulating and segregating migration has a significant impact on how cities are structured, determining the limits of migrants' integration, sense of belonging, and everyday routines. Therefore, it is evident that migration must be viewed as a social, legal, and ideological phenomenon rather than just a demographic element in order to adequately evaluate the processes of city construction and transition. The veracity of the observations provided in the introduction is once again validated in this situation. Using the "threshold city" framework, this study investigates the urban aspects of international migration, concentrating on the problems of exclusion, governance, and displacement that migrants encounter. According to research, cities provide migrants with both possibilities and challenges, acting as places where uncertainty increases and where a number of factors may cause migrants to remain in a state of uncertainty. Cities serve as contradictory institutions where socioeconomic marginalization, physical segregation, and legal uncertainty worsen, even if they provide migrants with social networks and economic opportunity. The theoretical framework, which ranges from Lefebvre's conceptualization of political space to the Chicago School's analysis of transition zones, shows that urban governance practices and local bureaucracies' decision-making processes influence the migrant experience in addition to citizenship status at the nation-state level. The presence of migrants in the urban sphere goes beyond a simple issue of demographic mobility, reopening the debate on fundamental social issues such as the right to the city, spatial justice, and democratic participation.

This article has argued that existing concepts in migration and urban studies remain insufficient to explain the contradictory character of contemporary cities. Whereas words like sanctuary cities, gateway cities and transition zones each identify specific facets of urban migration, none fully describes the concurrent existence and ongoing production of both protection and exclusion, and of belonging and uncertainty, in a single urban environment. The concept of the threshold city is an attempt to remedy this specific analytical deficiency. The threshold city implies a single urban condition, rather than prescribing a certain type of city. It is about metropolitan regions in which migrants are forced to constantly negotiate their legal status, their spatial ties and their everyday encounters in a lasting uncertainty. The threshold is not just a temporary transition state from leaving to settling, but an ongoing mode of being in the city, generated through the interaction of governance strategies, legal ambiguity and day-to-day spatial interactions. The study thus shifts the discourse from migration as a transnational phenomenon to migration as a permanent urban phenomenon. It shows that even when the migrants settle in the urban setting, displacement continues to persist. Instead, displacement is sustained by municipal governance, property markets, labor trends, and ongoing identity conflicts. From this perspective the division is repeatedly reaffirmed within the cityscape rather than disappearing upon entry. The designation of threshold cities has significant policy implications. If uncertainty is a constitutive part of urban governance, migration policies should not be limited to providing emergency assistance or regulating borders. Local governments would be a key partner in migration governance and would have increased responsibility for engagement, support, public services and ongoing integration. A crucial advance in dealing with the critical situation of today's urban migration is to see migrants as vital participants in the city, not as temporary individuals.

The proposed concept of the threshold city has three interrelated dimensions of the migrant experience: spatial dislocation, legal structures, and a state of existential liminality. These elements together make it clear that uncertainty is produced by everyday urban life and is not confined to national borders.

Ethical Standards and Author Declarations

1. Author Contributions (CRediT):

Çağrı Güçlüten: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, literature review, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

2. Ethics Committee Approval

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. The relevant wet-signed declaration form has been uploaded to the manuscript tracking system.

The author is solely responsible for the accuracy and appropriate attribution of all sources utilized in the study.

3. Authorship Contribution and Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, institutional, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could influence the planning, execution, evaluation, or publication stages of this study.

4. Financial Support

No financial support was received for this study.

5. Data Availability Statement

No new datasets were generated during the current study.

6. Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) Usage Declaration

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly and ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language editing, improvement of academic expression, and linguistic clarity. The conceptual framework, theoretical arguments, analysis, interpretation, and scientific content of the study were developed and verified by the author. Following the use of these tools, the author reviewed, edited, and made the necessary revisions to the content and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published article.

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