



National Summary Report

Case study: Sweden



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Exploration and analysis of further public and civic alternatives to RR: case studies at multiple levels

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Disclaimer

This document provides a concise summary of the key findings of the WP7 national report in Sweden. For detailed analysis, evidence, and comprehensive insights, please refer to the full report. The information in this summary should not be considered complete or fully representative of the entire study.

Mapping alternatives to expulsions takes place against a backdrop of a political environment with expressed anti-migrant rhetoric. Most implementing agents and civil society representatives reflected on the current political discourse in Sweden which focuses entirely on increasing effectiveness of return policy, by raising the return rate and discourages any discussion of alternatives to return and readmission policies. Given the current political climate, three possible scenarios were discussed: “returning and trusting the process,” lowering the asylum threshold and taking into consideration the length of stay in Sweden when issuing return decisions. The conclusion reached after investigating each scenario is that, in practice, these do not offer viable alternatives to return. Albeit not without deficiencies, the “Amnesty/Regularization of 2005” and the Upper Secondary School Act were successful in regularizing a large number of migrants at risk of return.

This report focuses on an in-depth study of the track-changes option as a functional, transferable and well-designed alternative to return. The practice of “track changes,” so far unique to Sweden, was regulated in the Aliens’ Act Chapter 5, Sections 15a and 18. These provisions stipulated how a rejected asylum seeker, after applying to get a residence permit as a refugee “changes tracks” to apply for a residence permit based on employment. To be considered for track-changes, the applicant had to fulfill the following requirements:

- Have had their asylum application rejected by a final decision
- Have been employed in Sweden for at least four months, with employment meeting the requirement for a work permit (including salary, insurance, and other terms not worse than those in collective agreements or customary for the profession)
- Have submitted the application for track changes within two weeks of the asylum rejection becoming final
- Not have established themselves in Sweden before applying for asylum; the employment must have occurred during the asylum process.

The “track changes” option was selected for in-depth analysis due to the length of time it was actively used in Sweden (2008-2025) and its intention for full labor market integration. Analyzing the “track changes” option as an alternative to return illuminates the shifts in Swedish return policies by looking at its introduction in 2008, implementation, and final abolishment in 2025. Although not used in Sweden anymore, much can be learnt from how this alternative worked in practice, with significant potential for transferability to other national contexts.

Swedish authorities published two main documents prior to terminating track changes as an alternative to return. The Swedish National Audit Office (NAO) produced a report auditing the track changes option in 2022. In February 2024, the Swedish Government published the results of the public inquiry New rules for labor migration (SOU 2024:15), with a section (Section 8) devoted to abolishing the track-changes option. Instead of eliminating track-changes as an alternative to return, the Swedish authorities could have followed the recommendations of the National Audit Office (NAO). Recommendations of the NAO were designed to minimize alleged abuses of the system caused by track changes, such as using the asylum system with the sole purpose of accessing the labor market.

According to estimates of the Swedish Migration Agency, when track-changes were abolished on April 1, 2025, there were approximately 4,700 people at risk of return, since they could not extend their residence permits obtained using track-changes without leaving Sweden. Initially, these 4,700 people were left in limbo, as they could not extend their residence permits without going back to their country of origin, a route that was impossible for many of them. Belatedly realizing this problem, on March 6, 2026, representatives of the ruling Swedish coalition government made a statement allowing people who have received their residence permits through the track changes option to extend those existing permits by applying for an extension from within Sweden. To extend their residence permits, the applicants would still need to satisfy the new (from June 2026) income requirement, which is 90% of gross monthly median income, set to SEK 33,390 (approximately EURO 3,090).

References / Further Reading

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