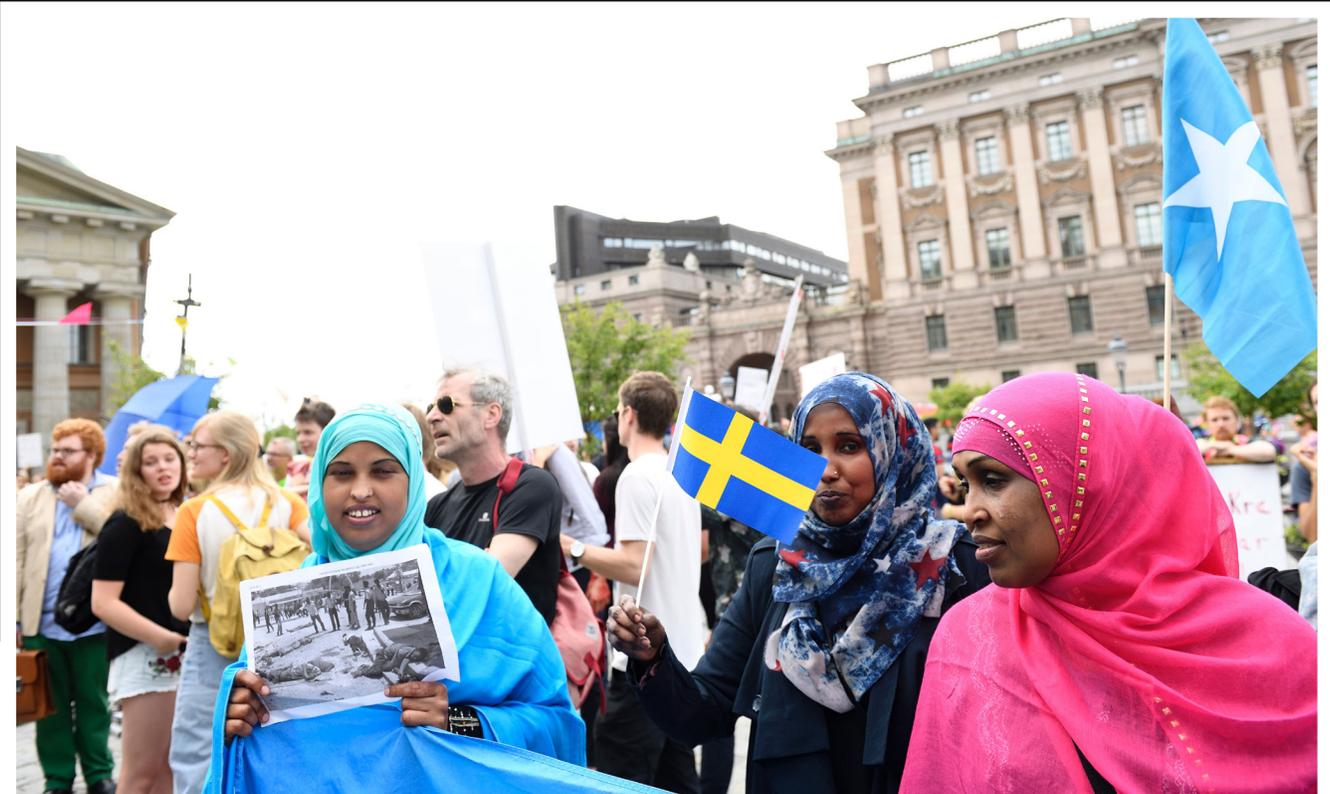


CASE STUDY

Sweden



Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that explicitly recognize, in their national security framework and through criminal law, the threat posed by repressive foreign governments to residents who engage in political activism. Despite demonstrating a high level of awareness of transnational repression, however, Sweden's government has not established clear methods for ensuring accountability through foreign policy or diplomatic practice. Although Sweden has welcomed hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and lifted the requirement to demonstrate individual persecution for some groups, the increased use of temporary forms of protection obliges other vulnerable people to maintain contact with repressive governments. Sweden could improve its response to transnational repression by prioritizing human rights in foreign policy and building resilience against sources of harassment and intimidation in the migration system.

Best practices in Sweden's response to transnational repression:

- The national security framework expressly **recognizes the threat posed by foreign states to individuals**, including members of specific diasporas, and that this threat **interferes with the exercise of fundamental rights**.
- The documentation of "refugee espionage" cases in the security service's annual reports increases **public awareness of transnational repression** as a distinct threat.

Demonstrators gather in front of Sweden's parliament on June 21, 2016 to protest legislation that tightened regulations for asylum and family reunification. Photo credit: AFP/Stringer via Getty Images.

- The **criminalization of gathering information about individuals**, especially members of diasporas, for the intended benefit of a foreign state provides law enforcement agencies with tools to address the problem of transnational repression directly.
- Official recognition that one of the groups most targeted by transnational repression, Uyghurs from China, face

collective persecution allows authorities to **remove the burden of demonstrating individual persecution** during the asylum-seeking process. The issuance of guidance to asylum case officers on other groups that are commonly targeted by transnational repression similarly streamlines the process.

Introduction

Tumso Abdurakhmanov, a critic of the repressive regime in Russia's Chechen Republic, moved to a small town in Sweden in early 2020, seeking safety from Chechen authorities who were threatening his life. A few months later, a man with a hammer showed up at his apartment while he slept. In a grainy video shot on his phone, Abdurakhmanov recorded his attacker, disarmed and bleeding from the head, as he explained how he was sent to Sweden to silence the activist by men from Grozny, the Chechen capital.¹ In 2021, the attacker and a female accomplice were convicted of attempted murder by a district court in Gävle.² They repeated their claims about who had hired them, placing responsibility for the attack on Chechen authorities.

Despite Sweden's reputation as a safe haven, many political exiles and foreign dissidents have come under attack after relocating to the country. In the early 1990s, several ethnic Kurdish dissidents from Iran were assassinated in Sweden, most likely by agents of the Iranian state, which was conducting a campaign of assassinations across Europe at the time.³ In 1985,

a defector from Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's government was murdered in a hotel while living in exile in Sweden.⁴ More recently, members of the Iranian, Uyghur, Turkish, Eritrean, Rwandan, and Tibetan diasporas in Sweden have been surveilled and targeted by agents of foreign governments.⁵

Sweden is unique among democratic states in its level of official awareness regarding the threat of transnational repression. The government views malign acts by foreign states against dissidents as a serious danger to the democratic fabric of the country, and such acts are addressed through criminal prosecution under a special espionage law. Yet broader foreign policy efforts to ensure accountability for foreign states remain largely absent. In the field of migration, although the country is known for both protection and inclusiveness, since 2016 it has sought to discourage asylum seeking and increased the use of temporary protection. The migration service's reliance on unvetted translators has introduced opportunities for intimidation and coercion within the migration and asylum processes.

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Security

Domestic and foreign threats to Sweden’s national security are the remit of the Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen, or SÄPO). In addition to traditional threats such as espionage, terrorism, violent extremism, and cyberattacks, the Swedish government has explicitly identified the threat posed by foreign states to individuals in Sweden—both citizens and foreign nationals—as a national security concern. Though the Swedish government demonstrates a uniquely high level of awareness of transnational repression among its democratic peers, there are gaps in its ability and willingness to hold state perpetrators accountable on a systematic basis.

Government awareness

SÄPO has identified the purpose of transnational repression, finding that autocrats target dissidents and critics abroad to preserve their hold on power at home and ensure their political survival. The service’s 2020 Yearbook notes: “One reason that authoritarian regimes monitor, threaten, or even go so far as attempting to assassinate individuals who are exercising their democratic rights in Sweden is a need for regime stability. The perceived threat to the stability of a totalitarian regime knows no boundaries.”⁶ Spurred by this recognition of what drives the use of extraterritorial violence, the Swedish government has adopted a broad definition of transnational repression: “Refugee espionage [is] ... political persecution, not only affecting individuals who have been given refuge in Sweden but also targeting journalists and representatives of human rights organizations.”⁷ This definition goes further than those adopted by most other entities working on the issue of transnational repression—including Freedom House—by considering all people working to promote democratic values as potential victims, whether they are native Swedes or foreign-born, rather than limiting the scope to individuals who originate in the perpetrator state.

Importantly, Swedish authorities have moved beyond a narrow focus on the experience of exiled dissidents to frame transnational repression as a threat to the exercise of fundamental freedoms, and therefore as a threat to Swedish democracy: “Intelligence activities and political persecution aimed at political exiles ... leads to the undermining of the democratic process. People who have received asylum in Sweden do not dare to exercise their constitutionally protected freedoms and rights.”⁸ The explicit link between

transnational repression and the inability to exercise basic rights in a democracy highlights the true effects of this authoritarian tool.

Espionage against individuals

Given the Swedish authorities’ recognition of the motivations, potential targets, and effects of extraterritorial attacks, it is not surprising that Swedish law prohibits not only activities typically thought of as crimes, such as assault or intimidation, but also other, more common tactics of transnational repression, including surveillance. The gathering of information on targeted individuals is often a precursor to violence against them or their families.

Sweden’s prohibition on intelligence gathering, or espionage, against individuals is significant because it departs from traditional definitions of espionage, which tend to focus on the collection of secret government or military information on behalf of a foreign state. Sweden’s criminal code prohibits obtaining information secretly, fraudulently, or via “improper means” about a *person* for the benefit of a foreign power.⁹ This has come to be colloquially known as “refugee espionage” (*flyktingspionage*), though the victims are not always refugees. To be considered a criminal act, the collection of information need not be followed by a transfer of that information to a foreign power. The intent to hand it over is enough. In addition, collecting information through “improper” and “fraudulent” means encompasses acts that simply mislead the individual, in addition to more coercive or intimidating methods. Conviction can lead to a prison sentence of between six months and four years.

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According to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, the governments of Russia, China, and Iran actively conduct both traditional and refugee espionage in Sweden. For example, in 2018, a Tibetan man who had arrived in Sweden from Nepal as a refugee in 2002 was convicted of refugee espionage and sentenced to one year and 10 months in prison. An investigation by SÄPO showed that the man had collected information about the family relationships, housing, protest participation, and travel plans of members of the Tibetan community in Sweden and neighboring countries for China's Ministry of State Security between 2015 and 2017.¹⁰ Almost a decade earlier, a different man was convicted of refugee espionage against the Uyghur community in Sweden, also on behalf of Beijing. In that case, the court ruled that the crime was aggravated by the defendant's attempts to infiltrate the World Uyghur Congress—a well-known international organization of exiled Uyghurs—and collect contact information as well information on the immigration status and political participation of its members.¹¹ In 2019 an Iraqi man was convicted of unlawful intelligence activities in Sweden against Ahvazi Arab refugees from Iran. The man had claimed to be an Arab journalist in order to, over a period of four years, participate in and film gatherings of the diaspora community in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe. The court assessed that his activities “may have caused a large number of opposition Ahvazis or their relatives to be persecuted, seriously injured or killed.”¹²

Sweden's criminal code prohibits obtaining information secretly, fraudulently, or via “improper means” about a *person* for the benefit of a foreign power.

Gaps in prevention

Despite official awareness of the threat that authoritarian states pose to individuals and communities in Sweden, gaps in protection and accountability remain. For example, while SÄPO emphasizes its role in preventing and monitoring threats to national security, its level of cooperation or communication with vulnerable groups and the Swedish Police Authority—the ordinary national police force—appears to be low.

There are few established channels of communication between diasporas and the police. Members of diasporas are most likely to encounter law enforcement authorities through the “dialogue police,” officers who work with organizers of major public events such as demonstrations in order to foster mutual respect.¹³ There is a dearth of research on the nature of contacts between diaspora communities and the Swedish Police Authority beyond the dialogue police, but existing accounts suggest a reluctance to investigate threats that are not taking place on Swedish soil, such as threatening calls from abroad.¹⁴ This is worrying because coercion by proxy—threats against family members in the origin country—and harassment are two key tactics of transnational repression. A member of the Iranian diaspora interviewed for this report confirmed that SÄPO and the Police Authority did not undertake general outreach activities to vulnerable diasporas, though they did occasionally warn prominent activists of possible threats emanating from foreign states. Reflecting on his own experience of being harassed via email and phone calls and reporting this to the Police Authority, the activist noted that the police appeared to take no action beyond recording his complaints.

Gaps in accountability

Sweden's mechanisms for punishing acts of extraterritorial violence tend to be aimed at individual perpetrators, foregoing the opportunity to create systematic accountability for transnational repression. In Tumso Abdurakhmanov's case, for example, the Swedish court acknowledged the extent of the criminal planning that had taken place abroad and with the help of foreign authorities. However, beyond submitting a formal request for legal assistance to Russia, which went unanswered, no punitive actions against the Russian government were taken.

Foreign diplomats in Sweden, as elsewhere, are immune from criminal prosecution but can be labeled *persona non grata* and expelled from the country. According to media reports, at least 10 foreign diplomats were expelled between 1995 and 2009 for engaging in transnational repression by surveilling diaspora communities in Sweden.¹⁵ Seventy-five percent of all *persona non grata* designations in Sweden stem from cases of refugee espionage.¹⁶ The Swedish government does not, however, name and shame diplomats for participating in transnational repression, preferring instead to avoid public statements on the reasons behind its decisions to expel them—a practice that has been criticized by some observers as a form of ineffective “silent diplomacy” vis-à-vis authoritarian states.¹⁷

Because the Swedish government only issues sanctions that have already been adopted by the United Nations or the European Union (EU), its foreign policy does not include unilateral tools of accountability other than diplomatic expulsion to punish acts of transnational repression. Moreover, Swedish authorities sometimes prioritize bilateral relations with trading partners over human rights concerns. For example, Angela Gui—the daughter of Gui Minhai, a Chinese-born Swedish citizen and Hong Kong book publisher who was abducted from Thailand by Chinese authorities in 2015 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for “providing intelligence overseas”¹⁸—was pressured by Chinese agents to stop her activism at a 2019 meeting organized by the then Swedish ambassador to China, Anna Lindstedt.¹⁹ In agreeing to the meeting, Angela Gui had thought that it was officially

Seventy-five percent of all *persona non grata* designations in Sweden stem from cases of refugee espionage.¹⁶

sanctioned by Sweden’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This turned out not to be the case, and Lindstedt was later charged with “arbitrariness during negotiations with a foreign power.”²⁰ The Swedish government said it decided not to expel the Chinese ambassador to Sweden over this incident in order to keep channels of dialogue open.²¹

Migration

Foreign-born residents in Sweden account for 14.4 percent of the total population,²² and the country has a record of welcoming newcomers. In 2015, Sweden experienced an unprecedented influx of asylum seekers as nearly 163,000 people—triple the annual average—arrived in search of safety from instability and war in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The Swedish state then came under political pressure to shift the focus of its migration policies from facilitating permanent settlement to deterring would-be asylum seekers. While Sweden maintains a rights-sensitive approach to evaluating claims for asylum and considers privacy rights in its handling of information, the government’s prioritization of efficiency has created opportunities for authoritarian states to target vulnerable people through transnational repression.

By imposing temporary status on almost all asylum seekers, the Swedish government ensures that vulnerable people will have to interact with institutions tasked with surveilling and harassing them.

A reformed system

Immigration, asylum, and naturalization are managed by the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket), which is governed by both national laws and EU directives, including the Dublin II Regulations. In 2016, Sweden introduced important legal changes that made the asylum process more restrictive for the express purpose of reducing the number of people seeking asylum in the country.²³ These changes included reducing the number of grounds for protection, making temporary protection the norm, and limiting opportunities for family reunification. Sweden also limited access to its welfare system for different types of migrants, in what amounted to a stark departure from previous policies of open access for all residents of the country.²⁴

Previously, once someone was recognized as a refugee in Sweden, meaning they were found to have a “well-founded fear

of persecution on the grounds of race, nationality, religious or political belief, or on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation or other membership in a particular social group,”²⁵ they would be issued a permanent residence permit, which allowed them to remain in the country indefinitely. Now, asylum seekers who receive refugee status are given a residency permit for three years. In order to convert the temporary residence permit into a permanent residence permit, refugees must meet a number of conditions, including language and employment requirements. Those who do not meet the asylum standard can be granted “subsidiary protection.”²⁶ Such individuals receive temporary residence that must be renewed every 13 months. People with subsidiary protection do not have the right to family reunification or Swedish travel documents. Although these changes were first introduced in 2016 as a temporary measure to deal with an unprecedented situation, they were codified into law in July 2021.

Extending periods of “temporariness” for refugees and limiting opportunities for family reunification can open the door to certain methods of transnational repression. Temporary legal status in receiving states forces people to remain in contact with repressive regimes in their countries of origin in order to renew their travel and identification documents. As research has shown, many political exiles and refugees express well-founded anxiety at the prospect of interacting with diplomatic representatives of their home countries.²⁷

Syrians, who are among the largest groups of both historic and recent asylum seekers in Sweden, have reported harassment, intimidation, and surveillance undertaken by the Syrian embassy in Stockholm since 2001. Members of the diaspora have been photographed by diplomatic staff at protests and public events, questioned using information that was collected surreptitiously in Sweden, and subjected to intimidating phone calls from embassy personnel.²⁸ In 2010, a Syrian intelligence officer was expelled from Sweden for actions against the diaspora.²⁹ By imposing temporary status on almost all asylum seekers, the Swedish government ensures that vulnerable people will have to interact with institutions tasked with surveilling and harassing them.

Restricting family reunification leaves refugees’ loved ones stranded in origin states and facilitates coercion by proxy, a common tool of transnational repression. Threatening, intimidating, or punishing people who remain within the

territory of the origin state in order to influence or control the actions of individuals who are now abroad is a low-cost but effective tactic for silencing dissent.³⁰ It seldom provokes a public outcry but substantially affects people who have found a measure of physical safety in democratic states. Even in cases where family reunification is possible, the Swedish Migration Agency requires that the family members have a passport, which necessitates contact with the origin state embassy. For some, such as Eritreans living in Sweden, obtaining a passport from the embassy entails signing an apology letter to the regime and paying a tax.³¹

Vulnerabilities within the Swedish Migration Agency

The day-to-day functioning of the Swedish Migration Agency tends to prioritize efficiency in case management and therefore remains vulnerable to the influence of authoritarian states. Swedish officials use Country of Origin Information (COI) to verify the credibility of individual asylum claims. Information is gathered from open sources, according to the European Asylum Support Office's methodology. Agency employees who compile these reports are fluent in Arabic, Russian, Spanish, French, German, and Kurdish. However, for other languages, the Swedish Migration Agency enlists contract translators who are uncertified and, with rare exceptions, unvetted. Media reports have documented 49 complaints against interpreters working in asylum cases.³² In 2016, Eritrean interpreters were found to be threatening and attempting to intimidate asylum seekers on behalf of the Eritrean regime.³³ Similar complaints have been made about Turkish interpreters.

Interviews conducted as part of this research also indicated low levels of concern or awareness among Swedish Migration Agency staff regarding the ongoing threat that home states posed to asylum seekers *inside* Sweden. For cases in which targeting or harassment was suspected, there were no clear or established methods to elevate these concerns within the agency. While those suspected of committing refugee espionage were referred to SÄPO, victims were not offered any special form of help or protection.

In 2019 Swedish authorities designated them as a persecuted group, meaning Uyghur asylum seekers would no longer have to demonstrate persecution on an individual basis.

Approach to sensitive groups

Despite the new, generally more restrictive approach to asylum claims, the Swedish Migration Agency recognizes the dangers posed by regimes that are notorious perpetrators of transnational repression, namely those in Eritrea, China, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. In light of the severe danger Uyghurs could face if repatriated to China, in 2019 Swedish authorities designated them as a persecuted group, meaning Uyghur asylum seekers would no longer have to demonstrate persecution on an individual basis.

In a legal position paper written by the head of legal affairs at the Swedish Migration Agency, case officers examining individual asylum claims were urged to treat Turkish applications with care. Groups highlighted as potentially vulnerable to state persecution and therefore in need of international protection included human rights activists, accused supporters or members of Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement, and accused supporters or members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a banned Kurdish militant group.³⁴ This is in line with research that has identified the Turkish government as one of the world's most prolific perpetrators of transnational repression, responsible for kidnapping, rendering, and extraditing hundreds of suspected Gülen supporters.³⁵

In a different position paper on Uzbekistan, the agency's head of legal affairs warned that opposition activists and critical journalists may be at risk of persecution.³⁶ The paper also stated that all Uzbekistan nationals who have applied for asylum abroad may be endangered if returned to Uzbekistan—a clear recognition of the fact that perpetrators of transnational repression regard the act of seeking safety in another country as a sign of disloyalty and cause for punishment.

Recommendations for the Swedish government:

- **Consider revising diplomatic practices** to publicly identify transnational repression as the reason for expulsions of foreign diplomats who have been caught surveilling or harassing refugees or other residents in the country.
- **Reduce reliance on temporary forms of protection for asylum seekers** and return to a norm of granting full refugee status.
- **Screen for vulnerability to transnational repression** as part of the immigration and asylum process. Institute mechanisms to vet interpreters and others working with asylum seekers to ensure that they are not intimidating or collecting information on behalf of a foreign state.
- **Establish methods for law enforcement and security services to engage in outreach** to communities that may be targeted for transnational repression.

About the Project

Defending Democracy in Exile: Policy Responses to Transnational Repression examines what is being done to protect exiles and diaspora members who are being intimidated and threatened by the governments from which they fled. This report assesses the responses put forward by the governments of countries where exiles and diasporas reside, by international organizations, and by technology companies.

It represents the culmination of the second phase of our research into transnational repression. It combines an analysis of the policies of nine host countries, interviews with members of diasporas targeted by transnational repression who reside in the United States, interviews with staff at technology companies, and data on 735 physical, direct transnational repression incidents that occurred between 2014 and 2021. With this report, we aim to advance the ongoing conversation among members of the general public, civil society, media, and policymakers on countering this practice.

Over a 16-month period, we developed an original methodology for evaluating policy responses to transnational repression, trained and collaborated with 16 in-country analysts to gather data, and held two roundtables to review and refine our findings and recommendations. Collaboration with academics and civil society researchers around the world was integral to the success of this project.

Yana Gorokhovskaia and Isabel Linzer led the project and cowrote the final report and eight of the nine country reports. Research Associate Bochen Han provided research support and wrote one country report. Intern Paulina Song helped to catalog and vet incidents for the transnational repression database. The project was made possible through the generous support of the National Endowment for Democracy.

Our data collection and coding methods can be viewed at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/about-acknowledgements>. Data is available on request through the research@freedomhouse.org email account. Please use the subject line “Transnational Repression Data Request.”

This report builds on the findings of *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression*—the first global study of this dangerous practice—which Freedom House released in February 2021. The first phase of our research sprang from our engagement with academic researchers dedicated to examining transnational repression.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without exiles from Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, Egypt, Rwanda, Russia, China, Turkey, Vietnam, Equatorial Guinea, and Ethiopia who agreed to speak with us about their experiences of transnational repression. Their courage and resilience are an inspiration.

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