

Today's political leaders should be guided by more noble values

In the summer of 1942, Nazi Germany arrested four Swedish businessmen in Warsaw. After six months of interrogations at the Gestapo Berlin headquarters, they were sentenced to death for spying. One of the four arrested was my grandfather, Tore Widén.

The author, Staffan Thorsell, has revived the largely forgotten fate of the Warsaw Swedes in a book published in 2014. The Swedes led, before and during World War II, the Polish operations of the Swedish multinationals ASEA, L.M. Ericsson and the Swedish Match Company. They lived in almost unimaginable luxury even based on today's standards. My mother could tell about a life at home with chefs, servants and governesses until she was evacuated from Warsaw to the United Kingdom shortly before the outbreak of the war.

The Warsaw Swedes' "crime" was that they had helped the Polish resistance to smuggle out information about the Nazi horrors in occupied Poland. Even though they were putting their personal lives at risk, they could not remain passive when Poles, Jews and other minorities were persecuted and murdered.

Their actions in Poland are – to paraphrase Winston Churchill – one of the Swedish multinational industry's "finest hour". Commercial considerations and personal benefits had to give way to basic human values and an exceptional amount of courage. The personal intervention of the Swedish King Gustaf V and the late industrialist Marcus Wallenberg were the main reasons why the Warsaw Swedes had the death penalty converted into life in prison and why they were finally released in the winter of 1944.

The values governing parts of the Swedish business community and the political elite today seem far from those that characterized the Warsaw Swedes' actions during the war. Several publicly known industrial magnates have urged the right-wing political parties to form a government and rule with the support of the populist party 'Swedish Democrats' (SD). The Conservatives and the Christian Democrats appear ready to jump on any opportunity to form such a government. Short-term political and financial interests are prioritized at the expense of basic human values and democratic ideals.

So, what's the problem with forming a government with the participation or support of the SD? After all, the Swedish immigration/integration policies are a failure and the SD seems genuinely concerned with poor retired citizens and other neglected groups of the Swedish society. Many of the problems identified by the SD are readily apparent.

The core problem is elsewhere however. Cooperation with the SD will render nationalism's "we-against-them" approach and populism's scapegoat policies legitimate. The political signal from our political leaders would trickle down to our citizens and have devastating effects. It would affect our views on everything that on subjective grounds could be considered different.

It is already difficult to be an immigrant or belong to a minority in Sweden. The same is true for all people at the lower layers of the Swedish social ladder. The situation for these groups would deteriorate even further if politicians legitimize the right to blame injustices on the most fragile groups of our society. Sweden would overnight become a more unpleasant place to live in for many categories of our society.

The nationalist and populist winds blowing across Europe today bring memories to the political climate of the 1930s. We are threatened, both from within and outside, by authoritarian forces seeking to undermine the EU peace project and our democratic values. Any decision to form a government with SD support could produce ripple effects and accelerate corresponding developments in other European countries.

The Swedish political parties and their representatives should, on the basis of their own personal human values, consider whether the shortcut to a conservative government takeover is really worth the price. Nationalism, patriotism, populism all appeal to reflexes that are part of our basic biology, i.e., the fear and rejection of whatever we perceive as being different.

Once we have released these forces, both within ourselves and in the society at large, we will enter uncharted territory where no one anymore is able to predict the future. Last

time Europe fully released those forces, we ended up paying the bill with two world wars and a Holocaust.