A review of the book:
**Patryk Wawrzyński, Prezydent Lech Kaczyński. Narracje niedokończone**
[President Lech Kaczynski. The unfinished narratives],
Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2012

by Michał Zabdyr-Jamróz

With these words of Mark Antony – as a motto – Patrick Wawrzyński could start his book. Published in 2012, the work is titled *President Lech Kaczyński. The unfinished narratives* (Prezydent Lech Kaczyński. Narracje niedokończone), and it is just such an attempt of doing justice to the tragically deceased president of the Republic of Poland. The author has undertaken the task of presenting the views of Lech Kaczyński as they actually were – separating them from incorrect interpretations and opinions attributed by other actors of the Polish political scene: his opponents as well as allies.

The book presents what the president actually said and wrote, and not his image created in the minds of contemporaries. This also means that it is concerned not with the president’s actions, but his own narratives. The author points out, however – in accordance with the approach of social constructivism – that these narratives affect political reality. Wawrzyński suggests considering Kaczyński’s own words as part of a transmission belt “between national culture and international community.” This allows the author to illustrate “how cultural narratives, unique to given countries, are transferred – through political behaviour of its leaders – to the international level and universalized in order to be understood independently from the particular heritage.”

The book presents various areas of the president’s narratives; systematize them according to their logical correlations. In the subsequent chapters, Wawrzyński shows clearly as Kaczynski’s historiosophical beliefs – determined by Poles’ historical experience – shaped his vision of the national interest, thus resulting in specific political behaviour:
especially on the international level. The author takes us on a tour of a clearly arranged intellectual structure. It starts from the chapters devoted to traumas of the lost independence and heroic struggles to protect or regain it. These experiences determined the president’s view of the circular history of Poland, and his profoundly romantic patriotism (“the essence of Polishness is a recurring trial of heroism”, p. 24).

This historical circularity, however, is supplemented by the constant strive towards the linear development of Polish statehood. Repeating international threats interrupt this strive, forcing Poles to struggle again and again for freedom (theirs and others) – to put their nation-state back on track of progressive development. Particular geopolitical position of Poland makes these risks easy to reoccur, and it requires significant efforts to prevent history from repeating itself. These measures should be devised for all relevant areas of international politics: Central-European (Idea Jagiellońska, the “Jagiellonian Vision” of strong regional cooperation), European (solidarity of the members within the European Union), and international (NATO). From this perspective, Wawrzyński’s book is a fine example of a monograph that is not merely idiographic (merely collecting and cataloguing information), but also clearly nomothetic – the author formulates certain important generalizations, that allows for deducing its application in particular cases.

As proof of this, Wawrzyński leads a reader – through the chapters relating to those areas of international politics – into the capillaries of Kaczynski’s political narrative. Understanding the premises, we see the various gestures and statements as part of a grater and far-sighted vision – not as ad hoc responses to changing circumstances. Wawrzyński identifies four complementary narratives of this vision (p. 153): (1) European solidarity, (2) the central-European cooperation, (3) containment of Russian imperialism, and (4) alliance and the U.S. The author does not shy away from pointing out the contradictions of this vision. He also reveals a certain narrative presbyopia – too strong concentration on this far-sighted vision that makes it difficult to notice details and to respond flexibly to the constantly changing situation. This is evident especially in European politics where the president – clearly against his own aspirations – positioned himself on a eurosceptic stance (after accession, the concept of the Europe of Nations was embraced by those who opposed integration entirely). The author also shows numerous historiographical anachronisms in Kaczynski’s narratives, such as: the idealization of Poland in the interwar period (as supposedly ethnically harmonious, p. 234); the
abuse of moral judgments (a frequently occurring category of “absolute evil”, used even in reference to the EU bureaucracy); the naive idealization of the goals of Polish aspirations (European Union before accession, NATO and the U.S.), which led eventually to the president’s strong disappointments (p. 109). These disadvantages, however, should not overshadow the fact that Kaczynski’s narratives represented a feature extremely rare within today’s political class – a historical perspective.

Wawrzyński diligently presents its complexities. He also clearly indicates what was wrongly attributed to presidential narratives. This vision is contrasted with programs of both leading parties: political opponents – Platforma Obywatelska (pp. 104, 106) – and supporters – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość led by his brother, Jarosław (p. 69, 87).

From time to time, the author does not avoid the occasional judgments, clearly marked as his own opinions. The reader will quickly notice that the style of the book itself seems to be influenced by the narratives it describes. This gives the impression of being done on purpose in order to achieve two complementary objectives. On the one hand, it definitely makes reading easier and more fluent (an attempt of expressing “an objective distance” would require composing sentences much harder in reception). On the other hand, this approach is a fine example of flowing the, so-called, principle of charity. It states, that in order to properly describe and interpret one’s position, a scholar should try to present it in the most favourable, acquiescent way – choosing, in case of doubt, the interpretation most resistant to criticism, never presuming irrationality, logical fallacies, etc. The principle is intended to prevent the use of straw man argumentation technique (unjustly establishing his opponents position in a way that makes them vulnerable to criticism). Only with such an approach can constructive polemics occur, and The unfinished narratives is a good ground for such discussion.

The book of Patryk Wawrzyński is an excellent example of modern scientific writing: free from unnecessary mannerism, comprehensible even for non-scholars, though not abandoning the scientific rigor and nomothetic character. Written with fluent style and systematically, this book will be an invaluable source for the study of Polish political narratives of the first two decades of the Third Polish Republic.