



SCHRANNER NEGOTIATION INSTITUTE

A PROMISED LAND – BARACK OBAMA

An analysis of the negotiation with Putin, by Matthias Schranner

I have been eagerly awaiting the new book "A PROMISED LAND" by Barack Obama. Now I have read it and learned a lot about Obama's conduct of the negotiations. In the chapter "THE WORLD AS IT IS" the former US president describes how he sees the world and gives insight into his negotiations with the Russian President Vladimir Putin. I would like to analyze this negotiation in this article.

Important: As always, my articles do not deal with political statements, I remain in the area of negotiation.

At the beginning of the chapter on Russia, he describes Putin: „Vladimir Putin, who had come to power in 1999, claimed no interest in a return to Marxism-Leninism. And he had successfully stabilized the nation's economy, in large part thanks to a huge increase in revenues brought about by rising oil prices.”

And he continues with a personal assessment: „With the fastidiousness of a teenager on Instagram, he curated a constant stream of photo ops, projecting an almost satirical image of masculine vigor (Putin riding a horse with his shirt off, Putin played hockey), all the while practicing a casual chauvinism and homophobia, and insisting that Russian values were being infected by foreign elements.”

This is followed by what I consider to be the most dangerous sentence „ There was just one problem for Putin: Russia wasn't a superpower anymore.” (A PROMISED LAND, page 459)

The inner attitude toward a negotiating partner influences the way we conduct negotiations. Obama describes Putin as a "teenager" and does not see him at eye level, his eye level. Personal assessment should have no influence in such important negotiations. A professional negotiator with this responsibility can be expected to leave personal assessments out of it and enter the negotiation professionally and thus respectfully.

However, I find the statement about Putin's position of power more serious than the personal assessment: „not a superpower anymore“. Obama sees himself as a "superpower" and denies Putin the same status. Now, one can certainly be divided on this, but I think that Russia is a powerful player in international politics and, with its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, can significantly influence world politics.

Obama's attitude toward Putin is therefore not one that makes a respectful negotiation possible. This is evident in the first meeting between the two presidents in Moscow”

“In July, I flew to Moscow for my first official visit to Russia as president.”

"I met Vladimir Putin for the first time the following morning when I traveled to his dacha, located in a suburb outside Moscow. Our Russia experts, Mike McFaul, Bill Burns and Jim Jones, joined me for the ride."

Mike McFaul was U.S. ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014, and he has always emphasized his critical stance toward Putin in public. That is, of course, his right, but his participation in this negotiation has a signal effect.

Bill Burns advised Obama before the meeting: „You might want to open the meeting by asking him his opinion about the state of U.S.-Russian relations and let him get a few things off his chest."

Obama took the hint and writes: „I thanked Putin for his hospitality, noted the progress our countries had made with the previous day's agreements, and asked for his assessment of the U.S.-Russia relationship during his time in office."

Putin complains in a monologue about the disturbed relationship and accuses the U.S. of being "arrogant, dismissive, unwilling to treat Russia as an equal partner." From his personal point of view, Putin has helped the U.S. after 9/11 and this help has not been appreciated.

During Putin's monologue, Obama's escort "started sneaking glances at their watches." Obama did not interrupt and let Putin finish.

After this monologue of 45 minutes, Obama commented on each point and brought his point of view: „I rejected, I reminded him, I disputed, I explained..."

Obama describes in his book that the goal of the negotiation is not "to eliminate all differences" Rather, after the Cold War, the goal was to build a realistic and joint relationship that could manage differences. Putin confirmed this idea after this "two-hour marathon" and expressed openness to a "reset" of relations. He handed over the details, "you will have to work with Dmitry."

On page 466, Obama describes his view of Putin "For Putin, life is a zero-sum game...in the end, you couldn't trust them."

Analysis:

A negotiation consists of two elements: there is conflict and there is interdependence. Is there conflict between the U.S. and Russia? YES. Is there interdependence? YES.

Anyone who starts a negotiation must acknowledge the rules of the negotiation - or not start the negotiation and allow, for example, diplomats to sit at the table.

The question follows, what exactly was the goal of this described negotiation? Obama describes the "reset," the new beginning of the relationship in order to have a resilient partnership for the future.

Partners meet at eye level and try - in an often lengthy process - to build trust. It is first and foremost about the will to want this partnership. Obama never describes Putin as a partner at eye level, but as someone who can't be trusted.

I think you have to make a decision. Either you want a partnership, then you go to the negotiating table openly and respectfully. Or you don't want a partnership, in which case you can't hold out the prospect of one. Above all, you must not write about it, because this book will of course have an impact on further relations. It is not about whether Putin is a good or a bad person. It's about whether I treat my negotiating partner with respect. There is a very interesting podcast by former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder - "The Agenda." He

describes in the episode "Russia" his relationship with Putin and clearly distinguishes relationship and cronyism.

As already written: The inner attitude to my counterpart influences the conduct of negotiations. You cannot conduct a partnership-oriented negotiation with the attitude described by Obama.

I also find the composition of the team inappropriate. Obama should have brought someone with him who has a positive relationship with Russia. This is about signals of partnership. Someone who knows the culture, the great poets and thinkers, the painters, the composers of Russia. How different the entry into this negotiation would have been if they had talked about the great culture of Russia.

Obama's entry was certainly very helpful in allowing the host to speak and emphasizing the common ground. Less helpful is setting every point Putin makes straight with "I rejected, I reminded him, I disputed, I explained..."

Summary

Has this negotiation now resulted in a "reset" of relations? Has the U.S.-Russia relationship improved as a result? Was this a successful negotiation?

Putin will certainly read the important passages of "A PROMISED LAND." He will read how he and Russia are seen by an American president. He, the teenager who does not embody a superpower.

The new U.S. President Joe Biden will surely meet Putin soon. Biden was vice president under Obama and now has the task of pushing the "reset" button. Biden talks about respect and values. Let's hope that these will not remain empty words and that he will enter the negotiations with Putin respectfully.

It won't be easy, Obama didn't do him any favors with this book.

Negotiation Tip:

- Of course, there are evil and unsympathetic counterparts with whom you want nothing to do. These people have a different value system and act unfairly and against all rules from your point of view.

- If you have to find a solution with someone because of mutual dependence, then you just have to come to an agreement with this person.

- Working as a hostage negotiator I learned an important principle: "We negotiate with a human being, not with a criminal". Respectful interaction is the basis for reaching an agreement.

- First, the relationship with the counterpart is stabilized, common ground is discussed and the negotiating partner is praised. Only then are the contents negotiated.

- A principle at our institute: "We negotiate for something, not against someone". We always have the target in mind and do not act against the negotiating partner. An arrogant approach will cause any negotiation to fail.

Zurich, January 21st 2021, Matthias Schraner

Source: BARACK OBAMA - A PROMISED LAND, Crown, New York, 2020, First Edition