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How (not) to overcome language barriers



During my time of service in the Netherlands, I also witnessed the unspeakable "sanctions" against Austria – triggered in February 2000 by the decision of the then Chancellor Schüssel to form a coalition with the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Jörg Haider. Between February 2000 and June 2000, in the distinctly hostile mood of the Dutch public and the negative attitude of the Social Democratic Prime Minister in those days towards Austria, to criticise our country was the order of the day. Dozens of media interviews, articles in leading magazines and lectures by the Ambassador led to a gradual change in public opinion towards our country – but unfortunately not in the Dutch government.

One day, one of the TV stations in Hilversum, the country's media center, contacted me with a request to participate in a live morning show in Dutch language about everyday and family problems. I had given my interviews mostly in English, partly also in French and German, however due to the political explosiveness at that time, not in the national language of the Netherlands.

Since I had been expressly assured by the TV station that I would only be presenting so-called "human interest stories" and not political issues, I agreed, after some initial hesitation, to speak Dutch. On the drive from The Hague to Hilversum, under the guidance of my Dutch chauffeur, we practiced diligently and went through the answers to all kinds of questions about everyday life.

The program began and proceeded unspectacularly at first – I was able to talk relatively effortlessly about my family's life in The Hague and other trivia. Suddenly, however, contrary to the agreement, questions about Haider and Austria's unfortunate past in the Netherlands during National Socialism came up. I had to make a strategic decision in the twinkling of an eye, whether to continue in the national language or to answer in English.

Out of false pride, in retrospect, I made the wrong choice and stuck with Dutch in the discussion of highly political issues.

On the way back from Hilversum to The Hague, my dear driver said: "You know, Mr. Ambassador, it was not bad how you did it, but may I still suggest not to speak in Dutch in further appearances on TV." I hardly dared to ask what in particular he had to criticize – but it was immediately clear to me that I had not had my best moment...

I took the well-meant advice of my esteemed colleague to heart for all further public appearances and – hopefully – did well with it.

Have you experienced something comparable? Please let us know! We are looking forward to receiving your comments!

About the author



Former Ambassador Dr Alexander Christiani is the Vice-President of the Austro-British Society and leads the ABS Expert Group which releases high-quality Policy Papers with first-hand background information on current political developments. Dr Christiani is a member of the board of the Austrian Society for Foreign Politics and the United Nations. His professional career led him to the hotspots of political developments all over the world (e.g. to the Middle East, South Africa, New York and many others) where he contributed reasonably to Austria's excellent diplomatic reputation in the world.

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