

The Case of Karin Kneissl

Personal Encounters with a Talented Woman

by Alexander Christiani



When I returned to the "headquarters" of the Foreign Office in 1990 after four fascinating years in South Africa and became Head of the Department for the Middle East and Africa, a young member of staff introduced herself to the department – it was Karin Kneissl. For the next three years we were to work together to provide analysis and input to Austrian foreign policy in this area. Karin was a very self-confident but extraordinarily capable colleague with dazzling language skills, not least in Arabic.

At first, however, I had reason to be annoyed with her. As is customary in the diplomatic service, I had written and presented a long – and, in my opinion, very well-founded – political report on four difficult years of apartheid, the political change with the release of Mandela. Such reports and analysis are usually not only presented to the Minister, but also circulated among all embassies worldwide. Before my return, Karin, in an overconfident manner had simply filed the report and thus my "South African Testament" had not received the desired attention.

Over the next few years, I came to appreciate her analytical skills, her knowledge of the Middle East and her ability to work independently.

After a few years in the cabinet of the Foreign Minister, Karin Kneissl left the Foreign Ministry before the turn of the millennium – she felt that the bureaucratic top-down system of the ministry was not (any longer) appropriate for her. She became self-employed and started writing books and giving lectures. She was a sought-after expert and discussion partner in many media and her expertise was generally appreciated. This was also the case for me and a friendly relationship developed.

Many years passed and Karin Kneissl became Foreign Minister in the Kurz/Strache cabinet. She often complained to me that the public perception constantly "labelled" her as a member of the FPÖ (which she was not). I strongly criticized her appearance at Strache's resignation at his side – but she made me understand that she had had "no choice".

In the ministry itself, her work was sometimes viewed critically, not least in deciding on top positions. Her "menagerie" of many different animals in her house in a small town in Lower Austria, her marriage, Putin's invitation and appearance at her wedding, her imminent divorce and her departure from the government were events that received much negative comment in the media, which led to her decision to turn her back on the country as a "refugee".

In 2020, she published her last book: "Diplomacy Makes History - The Art of Dialogue in Uncertain Times". As a gesture of friendship, my wife and I attended the presentation of the book. It contains many valuable suggestions for "rethinking diplomacy" – but her criticism of the way the Foreign Ministry and some of its representatives work is unmistakable.

She moved with her animals to a small farm in the south of France and tried to build a new life there. We spoke on the phone from time to time and I tried to give her advice. Above all, she complained about her precarious financial situation – she had been "cut off from everything" and would be "mercilessly persecuted" in Austria. As it was no longer possible for her to stay in France for various reasons, she moved – naturally again with her animals – to Lebanon, where she had once studied and obviously felt at home.

Then her closeness to Russia, to Putin anyway, became public, first as a commentator for the propaganda channel RT, her financial dependence on and also her ideological closeness to the country. This despite the military aggression against a neighbouring country and the transformation of Russia into a flawless dictatorship. Several trips by Karin Kneissl to Russia – even after 24 February 2022 – went largely unnoticed by the public and her relationship with the regime became ever closer. Now she is even considering moving her centre of life to Russia.

I am at a loss as to what must be going on in a once respected expert in international relations, a member of the government of the Republic of Austria and a thoroughly pleasant and likeable woman to place herself so uncritically at the disposal of a dictatorship. All this was too much for future "friendship" and I also let her know how disappointed I was in her and that I rejected her attitude. A relationship that had existed for over thirty years was probably irrevocably broken.

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and 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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