



Member Interview



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Q: Our guest today is the new Ambassador to Abu Dhabi, Mr. Etienne Berchtold. Etienne, welcome to this interview.

Etienne Berchtold:

Good afternoon, Werner, it is a pleasure to be here to answer your questions for the Austrian Business Council.

Q: Etienne, the very first question, please tell us a little bit about you personally. Where are you from? What did you do before you came to Abu Dhabi?

Etienne Berchtold:

I am 36 years old, and I am a quite young ambassador. I am from Tyrol, the Alpine region between Germany and Italy and I grew up in the city of Innsbruck where I went to school. There, after some time, I also learned to ski, but I always wanted to live somewhere where it is flat and I don't have to ski every weekend. By now I learned how to do it properly and to not bring shame on my fellow Tyrolians when they see me on the slopes. So, skiing is a thing I do now and hiking as well; I fulfill the proper cliché of a

Tyrolian, which is hiking and skiing. I have been living in Vienna since 2004 where I did my compulsory military service as well as studying law. I also studied international relations at a distance learning university in the UK, at the Open University, which I did parallel to my law studies. I finished my first degree of Magister in 2008 and then I continued with a doctorate (PhD), which I finished in 2017. That was quite an achievement, considering the fact that I did it next to work. I am also interested, as you can see from my studies, in International Relations, Law, Economics, travelling and some sportive activities. I would say that the place where I am right now is a perfect mixture of all of that.

Q: Something was not mentioned and I am a little bit curious about that: are you married?

Etienne Berchtold:

No, but I have a girlfriend. She will come to visit me from time to time and hopefully, at some point, decide to stay here for longer.

Q: As you mentioned, you became the Ambassador at a very young age. I also understand that this is the first post for you. How did you become the Ambassador of the Republic of Austria to Abu Dhabi.

Etienne Berchtold:

That's a very good question and certainly is in the mind of many of your members as well. I applied, as it is foreseen, for the so-called Reader for Embassies, which become vacant. This process happens every year. You have to apply and to argue why you think that you are best qualified to serve as an ambassador in a certain country. To me it was very clear why to choose Abu Dhabi because I was accompanying Sebastian Kurz as chancellor for whom I was a spokesperson for many years: as foreign minister since 2013 and then as chancellor since September 2017. I was working continuously with him as a diplomat in his office, in the capacity of the spokesperson of the foreign minister and the spokesperson of the chancellor. I travelled here with him a quite few times and I saw that the relationship became stronger every year. I also saw the business perspective; that many Austrian companies are engaged here, and I saw how many prospects there are. I also saw that it is, politically speaking, a very interesting country, which is very much interested in fostering a strong relationship with us. Also, many Austrians do live here, 2500 registered Austrians and many more who come here on a regular basis and doing business or for tourism. Overall, it was quite clear to me to apply for Abu Dhabi and as I mentioned beforehand, I was working in the field of foreign policy for more than ten years: nine years as spokesperson for Sebastian Kurz and then his successor Schallenberg and Nehammer, as well as in Brussels at our permanent representation to the European Union. There I was serving in different council working groups and in the political insecurity committee, as well as taking notes for the foreign affairs councils (this is where our foreign ministers convene). I did that for two years and before that I was

working for Shell in Austria as a spokesperson and assistant to the country chairman. The whole oil and gas business is something that is not entirely new to me, and which also worked in my favor in the application process. As I said, I understand a thing or two about barrels and production capacities and gas and LNG. This is one of the main reasons why we have such a key interest in further developing strong relationship with the UAE.

Q: LNG is a very important topic right now for Austria, for Germany and for Europe in fact. That is a very good transition to my next question. You have a term of four years, and you are just starting off right now, what is the new Austrian Ambassador, Mr. Etienne Berchtold, planning to do in the next four years? What will be the focus of your work? What is your day-to-day work?

Etienne Berchtold:

This is a very good question. I will set myself some KPIs and it is my pleasure to show one of the few goals that I have already set for myself at our next meeting with your members. I will continuously set myself further goals. First and foremost: business. Fostering our business relationships, helping entrepreneurs wherever possible, further increase trade wherever I meet interlocutors from the UAE where I see great potential to do so. That will be one of the main things. In-flow of direct investments, not only here, but also attracting UAE foreign direct investments to Austria. That will make this relationship a bit more balanced with respect to FDIs. That is quite important to me. Then of course servicing all the Austrian businessmen, together with the commercial counsellor Johannes Brunner, who need or want some advice or require help with authorities or wherever else I can be of support. I will be more than willing and always reachable to help and assist wherever possible. That is the commercial side, which is certainly a very important one to me.

The other one is of course consular affairs where I want to help to assist Austrians as much as possible who live here or who are staying as tourists and who need our help and assistance in any way possible. That is something which comes naturally but it is easier said than done. It has to be continuously assured that there is this good level of service for all the Austrians.

Apart from that I want to further increase the political relationship, with more high-level visits, continuous working groups, inter-ministerial working groups, meetings of all of sorts for different delegations. That will be a very important part of it and will give a good balance of Emirati visits to Austria and different kinds of Austrian official visits to the Emirates to show mutual interest in further fostering this relationship.

And then of course, last but not least, the whole cultural aspect. I think we have a lot to offer as Austria with respect to classical music, oriental carpets, paintings - you name it we have it. Wherever I can be of help to establish relationships, to bring Austrian musicians to Abu Dhabi or Dubai to Opera Houses or for concerts or art exhibitions, I will also be more than happy to assist.

These will be my initial four targets of working here and can be enlarged as we go.

Q: You mentioned you will be very accessible to the Austrian business community. My last questions to you is: What can the member of the Austrian Business Council particularly expect from you?

Etienne Berchtold:

First and foremost, they can expect to have an open ear for all their concerns. There is no hesitancy to contact me whenever; I am reachable 24/7. I will share my phone number with ABC members and WhatsApp, so please contact me if you need anything: be it advice, introductions or even accompanying people to authorities if required. I will then of course have a closer look. And when the Ambassador comes along it shows that the 'official Austria' is also interested in getting something solved or done. Of course, I will be acting in a very close cooperation with the Commercial Counselor.

Another point is issuing passports quickly or helping staff members of your company who are third-country citizens, for example from Pakistan, India or Bangladesh with the visa process if they need to go to Austria for a business trip in case that the Visa application takes too long. We will always have a closer look on how we can accelerate this process to make it possible for the person to travel to Austria in time. Within the letter of the law, we will show utmost flexibility. I see myself serving Austrians, Austrian businesses, and Austrian interests here. You have my open ear, you have my phone number, please contact me if I can help you.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, thank you for your time and for this interview.