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Austria’s Science Diplomacy: A Conversation with Ambassador Weiss

Ambassador Martin Weiss leads the Embassy of Austria to the United States since November 2019. He started his career in the Austrian Foreign Service in 1990. Before his appointment as Austrian Ambassador to the U.S., Ambassador Weiss served as Ambassador to Israel, as Director of the Press and Information Department of the Foreign Ministry, and as Ambassador to Cyprus.

Ambassador Weiss spoke with Kim Montgomery, Director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy and Executive Editor of *Science & Diplomacy*, on Austria’s science diplomacy as part of the Ambassador Interview Series.

Kim Montgomery (Interviewer): *Thank you, Ambassador, for agreeing to share your thoughts on science diplomacy as part of the Ambassador Interview Series initiative. Throughout your impressive diplomatic career, you have served in the United States on multiple occasions, starting with your first post at the Austrian mission to the United Nations in New York and now as Ambassador since November 2019. In your opinion, how have Austria’s priorities in the bilateral relationship shifted over the decades?*

Ambassador Martin Weiss: My first job in the U.S. was at the U.N., but that was part of my diplomatic education. It was seven months of training where you get a taste of how diplomacy works. My first real posting was at the Embassy in Washington, D.C. as science attaché in 1992. That was really the beginning, and it was really something. At the time, our Ambassador was quite forward-looking because he wanted to have a science attaché and also created a special post for a diplomat to cover only Capitol Hill.

As to our priorities: joining the European Union has made a huge impact for Austria because, when I was here in 1992, Austria was not yet a member of the E.U. Becoming an E.U. member was a huge shift, but the things that were important at the time still are important today. For example, the situation in the Balkans was very important in the 1990s. At the time it was a very bloody affair because the breakup of former Yugoslavia did not go easy. We were reaching out to the Americans and conveying our position: Austria was a trusted partner because we had some history and saw how things were unfolding before our eyes. So, at the time it was the Balkans and today is still the Balkans, but now much less bloody. In our view, this is still a situation that is unresolved because we have this “soft European underbelly.” How does it make sense for the E.U. that you have this ‘geographic gap’ between the E.U. member states, Croatia and Greece? This is part of the reason for uncertainty and instability – and that is never good.

Montgomery: *What can you tell us about Austria's goal to be one of the most innovative countries in Europe?*

Ambassador Weiss: When it comes to the most innovative countries in Europe, this is not a novel competition. Everyone wants to be among this group, and Austria has made great strides in it. When you look at our investments in research & development (R&D), the numbers have been significantly up in the last decade. We have seen years where Austria's R&D expenditure has been among the highest among the OECD countries, exceeded only by South Korea. The only time this upward trend came to a pause was during COVID-19, but we are fully expecting that things will continue as they had started. In the end, we know full well that this is an investment in our future, but money is unfortunately always scarce. It speaks of the foresight of the Austrian government, that we are really putting the money where our mouth is.

In Austria, we have a very particular kind of economic landscape as small and medium-sized companies are the drivers of the economy instead of multinational companies, so it can take a little more convincing that they should be leaders in their fields. This is also true when it comes to R&D. But they have taken up that challenge, and we are seeing medium-sized companies who are competing at the

highest levels. Just to give you one example: Frequentis, an Austrian air traffic control systems company, can be found pretty much in every airport in the world. It is a company that hardly anyone in the general public will know, except if you are working in that field. Among the experts, everybody will know that name. And there is a long list of Austrian companies like that. We do not have 'Nestles' or 'Philips' but we have a lot of companies that are world leaders in their particular fields.

Montgomery: *Two aspects of science diplomacy are, first, scientific knowledge and expertise helping to inform diplomatic objectives; and second, diplomatic initiatives helping to foster international scientific collaboration. Can you share some examples from Austria on those aspects of science diplomacy?*

Ambassador Weiss: In terms of the role of science in our diplomatic agenda, just look at the Iran talks currently taking place again in Austria. After former president Donald Trump pulled out of the Iran deal, we now see discussions about how to come back to the deal. These are of course negotiations very much driven by science: you can never come to such an agreement if you do not fully understand the underlying scientific data.

There are stories from the original negotiations, that the reply on proposals from the Americans would sometimes take a long time. Later, it was found out that this was because U.S. scientists were calculating all the different variants to understand exactly what the different proposals meant. This is not a negotiation that a diplomat can decide on the spot at the negotiation table, as one must know from a scientific perspective exactly what one is agreeing to. The same is true with other negotiations, for example, when it comes to climate change. These examples show how closely diplomacy is often connected with science.

Montgomery: *A third aspect of science diplomacy is international scientific engagement helping to advance diplomatic objectives, including utilizing science to improve relations between countries. As you already mentioned, Austria is an E.U. Member State, but also has strong ties to neighboring countries who are not part of the E.U. So I'm wondering if you could share some examples of how Austria is uniquely poised to use international scientific collaborations with E.U. and non-E.U. members?*

Ambassador Weiss: It is hard to separate what you do as a member of the E.U. and what you do not as a member. IIASA, where you used to work, is a wonderful example of this. The idea of IIASA surged during a 1967 meeting of then-U.S. President Johnson and the USSR Premier Kosygin. At the time, the effort was made to have some confidence-building measures, which was followed by the creation of the institute with six members from the West and six from the East, including

both the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) – countries that did not have diplomatic relations (with each other). IIASA to this date, fulfills that kind of mandate. Iran and Israel are both cooperating in IIASA even though they do not see eye-to-eye in the international arena. This is a beautiful example of how you can combine different worlds through scientific cooperation.

Another example is the Institute of Science and Technology (IST) Austria. The idea of IST Austria was initiated by Professor Anton Zeilinger, the President of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and then outlined by Professor Haim Harari, a physicist who was the President of the Weizmann Institute in Israel from 1988 to 2001. If you look at the scientists who are affiliated with IST Austria and the papers written every year, you will find names from all over the world, cooperating and working across different scientific disciplines. This is an excellent example of an idea that had been implemented in Israel and was a wonderful inspiration for Austria.

Montgomery: *The [Office of Science and Technology Austria \(OSTA\)](#) at the Embassy is the hub for Austrian science, technology, and innovation initiatives not only in the United States, but also in Canada and Mexico. I was hoping you could talk about the tools that the Austrian Embassy uses, including the [Research and Innovation Network Austria \(RINA\)](#) to engage with its scientific diaspora across North America?*

Ambassador Weiss: What is the added value that we can have in OSTA at the Austrian Embassy? If we observe what is going on in the scientific landscape in the U.S., we can focus on certain areas that are important for Austria and create a network there. There are thousands of Austrian scientists working in the U.S. at any point in time. Often, they are connected to their alma mater, but the Embassy would not necessarily know what they are doing.

It is complicated to keep a network like this up to date: scientists by definition move around, as they might stay at a university only three or four years. Having a database is not enough: you have to be an added value. These scientists have often spent years abroad and they may not know about the latest instrument that Austria has developed to support a certain kind of research. Therefore, you are an information provider, and hopefully you will get information in return. It has really worked quite well so far: we have over 3,000 scientists in the network, with information flowing back and forth.

We have a high-level delegation from our Ministry of Education, Science and Research coming physically to the U.S. this fall to our annual conference, [ARIT 2021, the Austrian Research and Innovation Talk](#), which gives Austrian scientists the opportunity to meet with Austrian science leadership. At the same time, it can inspire our policymakers because when they come to the U.S., they also want to learn more about the latest scientific developments.



*Ambassador Weiss visiting the Goddard Space Flight Center in early February 2020. He is pictured here with Austrian researcher and former deputy head of the Hubble mission, Dr. Helmut Jenkner.
Credit: OSTA Washington.*

Montgomery: *Using different skills, diplomats and scientists try to find solutions to fundamental problems in their countries, regions, and the world. Given your experience as diplomat and on public diplomacy, what advice would you give to someone who is interested in pursuing a career in science diplomacy?*

Ambassador Weiss: The Austrian Foreign Service is a system of generalists. Previously, only those with a law or economics background could join but now we are open to all kinds of backgrounds. Still, as an Austrian diplomat, you are supposed to be a generalist: you are a diplomat who at times may work more with science, and other times less so. Larger diplomatic services could have different answers, and perhaps more specialization. The Austrian Foreign Ministry has a strong department for international scientific and cultural affairs, and they have published a [white paper on science diplomacy](#) and what it means for our service.

My advice to those interested in careers in science diplomacy is that you always have to keep an eye on the future. Or, as we started this conversation: how can one be a diplomat leading negotiations on climate change if you do not have sound scientific data? This is a large part of what we are doing. For a diplomat, science diplomacy is something that may have sounded exotic 20 years ago, but now it comes more naturally.

Montgomery: *You are active on Twitter, which has become an important tool for diplomats and policymakers to communicate with their constituency and with the world. What is your opinion about the use of social media like Twitter in diplomacy?*

Ambassador Weiss: It is similar to the use of the term “science diplomacy.” I remember in my early years, old-school Ambassadors were very wary of the traditional media: never talk to them, leave this to the politicians. But times have changed. As a diplomat today, you must be able to explain to an often-critical public what you are doing. How do you tell your story? You could give a lecture to a hundred students here and there, but if you are on Twitter and have 6,000 followers and someone with, say, 40,000 followers gives you a retweet, you have a much larger megaphone.

If you want to be an effective diplomat, you cannot avoid using social media. Nothing comes without a risk: I know diplomats who have lost their job because of a tweet. But overall, I think it is a great tool to inform and spread the word about what you do. It is, by the way, also a great tool to connect with people.

Montgomery: *I had the amazing opportunity to live and work in Austria for four years, but I would be remiss if I had this opportunity to speak with you and did not ask you about your destination highlights that people should see in Austria when travel is more feasible.*

Ambassador Weiss: I am from Salzburg, so I always have to say you should visit Salzburg – it's simply a stunningly beautiful city. And for all Mozart lovers an absolute must-see. But as this is a science-oriented conversation, the Ars Electronica Center in Linz and the Technical Museum in Vienna are also quite amazing.

Vienna has changed a lot since I first visited it when I was about 15 years old. Then you felt the Iron Curtain just one step away. With Austria joining the E.U. and the opening of our borders, things have changed dramatically. In Vienna, the culture and music are very developed, not just at the classical level, but in an underground music scene as well. If you look at the names of the artists, you will see plenty of names stemming from the Czech Republic, the Balkans, and other neighboring regions. For many years now, Austria is experiencing a sort of 'fusion' with its neighbors on many levels, and that's quite a fascinating development.

If you just want landscapes, you could go to many parts of Austria, for example the Tirol, Styria, or Carinthia. But Vienna is of course the large metropole - where you will always find something for everyone. **SD**

Disclaimer

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.