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Foreigners want to be able to "Swissify" names

A family name ending in "ic" can be a burden in Switzerland. "What if Petrusic were called Glarner?" asks a campaign launched for people in Switzerland with a migration background.

Second@s Plus Aargau, part of a national group that fights for citizenship and equal opportunities, wants to submit a bill that would enable naturalised Swiss to change their name without any problem.

Around a fifth of Switzerland's 7.7 million inhabitants are foreigners, with an estimated 500,000 of them being second or third generation.

So-called secondos are born in Switzerland to immigrant parents, grow up in Switzerland and speak the local language. Almost half have a Swiss passport.

Studies show it's harder finding somewhere to live in Switzerland if you have a foreign name – especially one from the Balkans. The same is often the case when applying for a job.

With a view to equal opportunities, Second@s Plus Aargau is therefore demanding that foreign names can be changed in Swiss passports automatically as part of the naturalisation process.

New names for foreigners could even be discussed at a national level; a politician from the centre-left Social Democratic Party is considering putting forward a parliamentary motion.

But would it be enough for Suntharalingam, Ismajlovic or Petkovic to become Müller, Meier or Küenzli? Shouldn't fighting xenophobic prejudices be first on the list?

"The proposed motion will certainly not solve every integration issue," admits Ivica Petrusic, a youth worker and president of Second@s Plus Aargau, adding that the idea is certainly not accepted everywhere.

Petrusic says the idea is pragmatic. Migrants who have found their identity in Switzerland see to some extent a contradiction in their original name, according to the organisation's website.

Petrusic, who lived in Bosnia until he was 14, has Swiss-Croatian double citizenship. His name is spelt differently in his two passports: In his Swiss one the diacritic which should be written on the suffix -ic – important for correct pronunciation – is missing.

"The residency office said their computers didn't have the symbol," he told swissinfo. "If my name's going to be changed by the computer system, I'd prefer to change it myself." For Petrusic, changing one's name doesn't mean losing one's identity. It's not an issue for women who take their husband's name, he points out. "The name belongs to me – it's part of who I am. But it's a hassle having to constantly repeat it or spell it." He says he's been on the residency office council for four years but the people there still can't pronounce his name properly. When looking for an apartment, he's switched to using his girlfriend's Swiss surname.

In the United States officially changing one's name is simple; in Switzerland it is anything but. First of all there must be "important reasons", according to the civil code (article 30). What counts as important is decided by the relevant cantonal government.

The Federal Court adds that you can't change your name to cover your tracks, but "ridiculous, ugly or offensive names" or those "which are always being mangled" have a good chance. The fear of not being able to make any progress because of your name is not considered a satisfactory reason.

An online project by the Swiss commercial employees' association shows that foreigners looking for apprenticeships have a hard time. Their chances of getting an interview are measurably better if they can remain anonymous on the application form.

Foreign residents must wait at least 12 years before being eligible to apply for citizenship. Foreigners married to Swiss nationals can take advantage of a simplified or "facilitated" procedure, reducing the number of years they have to wait.

Successful applicants must show that they are integrated into Swiss society, comply with Swiss law and pose no threat to internal or external security. The cantonal and local authorities are responsible for naturalisation procedures. *from swissinfo*

Parents in hot water over missed swimming lessons

Several Muslim families have been fined for keeping their children out of mandatory school swimming lessons, the first time such a punishment has been handed down.

Education authorities in canton Basel-Stadt said that seven children from five families had missed the lessons. Five of the children were removed on religious grounds. All of the students were girls under the age of ten.

A revision of cantonal school policies made the lessons obligatory one year ago and each parent can be fined as much as SFr1,000 for not sending his or her child to the classes.

Basel-Stadt schools offer swimming lessons that separate boys and girls past puberty, while younger children take the classes together.

Christoph Eymann, director of the canton's education department, said it was important for schools to avoid creating parallel societies. There are a total of 1,033 Muslim boys and girls registered in the canton's primary schools. *from swissinfo*