

The Germans are coming!



This cartoon illustrated a German immigration article recently published in the *Zürcher Unterländer* newspaper

“How many Germans can Switzerland take?” “Are the Germans taking our jobs away?” These are just some of the headlines recently splashed across Swiss media, in reaction to the large influx of German immigrants. *Swiss News* takes a closer look at the media’s reporting style.

By Julia Hancock | February, two years ago: There is a commercial break in Swiss-German programming on SF1, state television, before the popular evening news magazine *10 vor 10*. The screen fills with an image of the Swiss flag sandwiched between the black, red and gold stripes of the German flag. Slowly, the German colours overwhelm the distinctive cross, until it disappears.

This was how daily newspaper *Blick* publicised the launch of series called “How many Germans can Switzerland take?” The articles ranged from serious

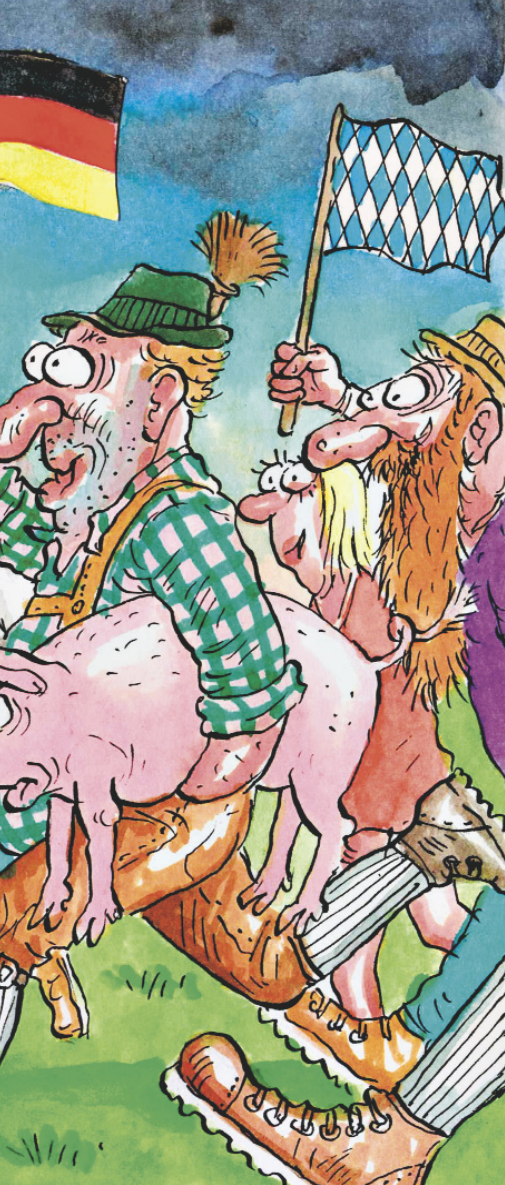
assessments such as the reasons behind increased German immigration, to a set of Swiss-German lessons for their High-German speaking neighbours.

Historical destination

Switzerland is not unaccustomed to immigration. Since the end of World War II, thanks in part to its economic success, Switzerland has been a desirable destination. In the 1970s, thousands of Italians and Spanish came in search of employment or simply higher pay than they could have earned at home.

Switzerland has typically maintained a strict immigration policy that included the issue of temporary and seasonal immigration permits. However, since 2002, Switzerland – despite not being a member of the European Union – agreed to a bilateral labour accord with the EU for an initial seven-year period. Under the agreement Switzerland and the EU grant each other access to their respective labour markets. The agreement has since been extended, and now includes the newest EU members Bulgaria and Romania.

For the German-speaking regions of



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Switzerland, this bilateral agreement has led to a considerable influx of German nationals – happy to seize the opportunity for higher pay in a country they generally find offers an attractive lifestyle.

Since 2002 the number of German residents has grown to such an extent that by the end of last year, in Canton Zurich, they accounted for the largest foreign national group – clocking in at 5.1 per cent of the population. Italians are the second largest at 3.8 per cent. At the national level the largest foreigner group is still comprised of Italians (with 290,000 at the end of last year), but the Germans are close behind (233,352 at the end of 2008).

Crossing the line?

This new group of immigrants, however, is different than many of its predecessors. German nationals already speak the official language – though not the dialect – and many are not taking the lower-paid

jobs often happily accepted by more traditional immigrant groups who've left poor countries. Rather, German nationals are scooping up top managerial posts, and filling hospitals and universities with qualified doctors and professors.

Though it is normal the world over for local nationals to comment on some national characteristics of immigrant populations, to foreign eyes it may seem strange that the media gets away with such public baiting and teasing of this new group of immigrants.

Many of the articles are humorous, like *Blick's* "Swiss German for beginners", which offered pick-up phrases like "Hi, I have never seen you here before." (*Sali, diich ha-n-I doo ja noo nie gsee* versus *Hallo, dich habe ich hier ja noch nie gesehen* in High German.) Another was *Blick's* compilation of reasons the Swiss should like the Germans, which included the fact that they invented Gummi Bears.

But other articles have levelled serious criticism. One, for example, questioned the high number of German professors at the University of Zurich, which was deemed – among other things – a potential disadvantage for young Swiss academics.

"Number of German professors at university triggers scorn – Why do the Germans come?" was one of headlines published by the highbrow *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) at the start of last year.

"I subscribe to the *Tages-Anzeiger* and at times I have been so fed up with the articles that I just have to stop reading them," said a German mother of two who has lived in Switzerland for the past eight years.

"What have we done wrong?" she asked.

All in good fun

Germany's ambassador to Switzerland downplayed the media's angle by defining it as a "natural" reaction.

"Considering that there has been an increase of nearly 20 per cent of Germans in 2008 from 2007, it is natural that the media will make comments," German Ambassador Axel Berg told *Swiss News*.

"Germany and Switzerland have close relations, and this makes it possible for the Swiss to tease us Germans in a friendly family-like way," he added.

Torsten, a 34-year-old German immigrant who moved here five years ago to complete a PhD and then decided to stay, said he thought the reporting was quite balanced.

"The articles report on both the advantages of hiring qualified employees but also report on some of the problems," he said.

"In any case, I find the reporting on Germans in Switzerland less offensive than what I read in the British press when I lived there," Torsten told *Swiss News*.

Managing expectations

Unsurprisingly, the tabloid-like *Blick* has taken some of the most original angles to the story, including: "A German stole my girlfriend". Editors at *Blick*, despite repeated requests from *Swiss News*, did not provide a comment on their reporting angle of German immigration.

A *Blick* journalist, however, did agree to speak on the basis of anonymity. The journalist tried to explain why the Swiss appear so sensitive with regard to the Germans.

"Switzerland is a small country and is therefore suspicious of its big neighbour," the journalist said.

It may also be a bit insecure. "On top of that, our dialect is not as precise as High German which means they can speak and argue better than we can," the journalist said.

The Zurich correspondent for the German broadsheet *Frankfurter Allgemeine* said that in his personal view, the Swiss reporting has been entertaining so far:

"It's good reading when the reporting is on things that the two countries do not have in common ... in the end the issues are never very serious – we are not talking about issues like crime and security," Jürgen Dünsch said.

The picture could change and become nasty though, he said.

"The crunch will really come when unemployment increases in Switzerland," he added. "Then the tone could change."

Revealed by ink

Whatever the economic climate brings, some Swiss are calling for a change in the media's reporting style on all immigration, not just German.

Professor Kurt Imhof, from the Sociology Department at the University of Zurich, described the current reporting style as indicative of an underlying fear of foreigners.

He called for a change in coverage. "The current globalisation that is underway requires a news coverage based on reflection, and not reproducing stereotypes."