

## ***Herceg Novi's Heart Beats for Serbia***

**06 04 2006** An influx of Serb refugees and pensioners has made this ancient resort town a bastion of pro-union feeling.

*By Nikola Doncic in Herceg Novi (Balkan Insight, 6 Apr 06)*

The Mimosa Festival in Herceg Novi, a picturesque seaside town in south-west Montenegro, is a combination of a flower show and a masked ball.

Taking place amid high spirits in anticipation of the arrival of spring and a new tourist season, it features uniformed majorettes clad in red and white, dancing in the streets and squares, and the sounds of the town's well-known brass bands.

But this year the festival is unfolding in a very different atmosphere of suspense and tense expectation.

In May, four years after Montenegro's prime minister, Milo Djukanovic, signed the Belgrade Agreement, committing Montenegro to join a loose "state union" with Serbia, an independence referendum threatens to cast that state union into history.

A narrow majority in Montenegro as a whole may favour that outcome. But not in the so-called Mimosa town, where supporters of the union with Serbia far outnumber those who back independence.

In the town hall, a unionist coalition consisting of the Socialist People's Party, SNP, the Serbian People's Party, SNS, the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, and People's Party, NS, holds power. These parties, together with the Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, make up the opposition bloc in Montenegro whose primary objective is the state union's survival.

The pro-independence coalition, led by Djukanovic's Democratic Socialist Party, DPS, and the Social Democrat Party, SDP, headed by Ranko Krivokapic, is their great rival.

Local analysts say around 60 per cent of the population in Herceg Novi will vote for the continued joint state with Serbia.

Milos, a pensioner, is one. He fears separation from Serbia may cost Montenegrins dearly. Secession "will be of no use to either the Montenegrin or Serbian peoples", he maintains. "The borders will surely not be as lax and flexible as the politicians like to say."

Such views are music to the ears of Dejan Corovic, the town's pro-union NS deputy mayor. "Our choice is Serbia and Montenegro," he says. The local people, he goes on, have always counted on living together in union with Serbia.

They speak the same language and share the same Serbian Orthodox faith, he adds, which has forged strong bonds and a common identity.

"Given that the economic strength of Montenegro as an independent state is uncertain, it would be better to remain a partner of an economically stronger Serbia," Corovic continues.

Economic ties are certainly a factor in Herceg Novi. About 80 per cent of tourists come to the resort from Serbia or from the Republika Srpska, RS, the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "This clearly highlights the fact that Herceg Novi finds the joint state more suitable," says Corovic.

By and large, the economy of Herceg Novi has long depended on tourism.

Numerous hotels, oriented mostly to a domestic clientele since the imposition of United Nations sanctions on Yugoslavia in the Nineties, offer a variety of cheap holiday options to Serb customers.

But Westerners are increasingly coming, too, these days, drawn by the mild climate and upmarket spas and health clinics.

While the people of Herceg Novi lean heavily towards the pro-Serbian option, Corovic makes it clear that victory by the governing parties will not lead to violence.

The NS, he says, will respect the will of the voters and will continue to lobby for the preservation of good relations with Serbia.

In the meantime, not wishing to leave matters to chance, local activists are busily working on their pro-union campaign, preparing billboards and brochures and visiting locals in their homes to explain both the voting procedures and the advantages of staying with Serbia.

Herceg Novi was not always the bastion of Serb feeling that it has become today.

Generations back, the town, which lies only a few miles south of Dubrovnik, had a largely Catholic population and culture, symbolised by its Catholic patron saint, St Anthony, or St Antun.

But after the town was attached to Montenegro following the Second World War, the old Catholic and Croat population mostly died away or moved out, ceding their places to Montenegrin and Serb incomers.

More recently still, the number of Serbs has grown rapidly at the expense of Montenegrins, largely as a result of immigration from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unofficial reports suggest about 15,000 Serbs from Bosnia and Croatia moved into the town - which has a total population of around 35,000 - during the war years of the Nineties.

According to the 2003 census, the number of Serbs has jumped by 22 per cent since 1999 to 52 per cent, making them an absolute majority. At the same time, the number of Montenegrins has dropped from 40 to 28 per cent.

The Serbian newcomers show little sympathy for the town's older traditions and have tried to get the authorities to agree to have St Antun replaced by the Orthodox St Stefan as Herceg Novi's patron saint.

Along with their inherently pro-Serbian feelings, many locals feel independence would merely enrich the powerful elite surrounding Djukanovic's government.

Nebojsa Vujovic, head of the NS in Herceg Novi, says sovereignty will only help these people to "further amass their wealth".

Gojko Pejovic, leader of the local pro-independence SDP, agrees that the wave of Serb refugees and incomers has certainly made the town a pro-Serbian redoubt.

The refugees "still have strong ties with Serbia," he says. Many ex-military pensioners from Serbia have also come to live by the sea, he adds, and they are equally keen to preserve ties with Belgrade.

Some activists in the sovereignty camp remain optimistic that Herceg Novi voters may yet swing over to their side.

One is Stanko Zlokovic, director of the Jadran shipyard in Bijela, near Herceg Novi, an official of the pro-independence DPS.

"Montenegro opened its doors to many people in need", Zlokovic says. "It would be absurd if they don't now lend their support to Montenegro".

Zlokovic insists that all those who have suffered from the nationalist excesses of the Yugoslav wars will vote for independence. "A great number of Serbs will be supporting their state - Montenegro," he claims.

Djordje, a 40-year-old television producer, is one pro-independence local. An ethnic Montenegrin himself, he says it is high time for the republic to go it alone.

"I would like to have the opportunity to present my creations to the world representing my own country," he says. "Until now, in the existing state union, we have remained stuck at the same place".

But many voters in Herceg Novi do not appear to care much either way. Sandra, aged 32, a local businesswoman, is tired of the referendum already.

"I am not interested in the referendum result," she says. "All I am interested in is whether we have a good tourist season."

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