Premium

News

Family dynasties battle over role of 'Her Tremendousness' princess in Italian principality of Seborga

share
Save

The flag of Seborga flies in front of a church in the village

Follow

By Nick Squires, ROME
9 NOVEMBER 2019 • 1:33PM

They may not quite be the Habsburgs or the Romanovs, but two dynasties will go head-to-head on Sunday to elect the new ruler of a tiny self-declared principality in Italy.

The village of Seborga, which overlooks the Italian Riviera in the north of the country, has insisted for nearly 60 years that it was never legally incorporated into Italy, citing documents that date back to the 18th century.

Over the years it has concocted all the trappings of an independent country, albeit a miniscule one laced with references to the Knights Templar, the Cathars and Cistercian monks , along with a healthy dollop of eccentricity.

Now, for the first time in the principality's history, the inhabitants of the village are poised to elect a princess, who will revel in the title of La Sua Tremendita - Her Tremendousness.

There are two candidates running in the election and both are women with close ties to past rulers of the hilltop village in the region of Liguria.

Seborga lies at 1,500ft and overlooks the Italian Riviera CREDIT: ALAMY

Laura Di Bisceglie, 45, is the daughter of the founder of the principality, a local flower grower who gave himself the title Prince Giorgio I.

Nina Döbler Menegatto, 41, the rival candidate, is the ex-wife of the current ruler of Seborga, former speedboat champion Marcello Menegatto, or to give him his full title, His Tremendousness Prince Marcello I.

He resigned in April after a nine-year reign, citing "personal and family reasons", but remains prince until the election on Sunday.

Ms Döbler Menegatto's plans for the tiny territory include forging better relations with countries around the world – notwithstanding the fact that no state recognises Seborga as independent, not least Italy.

Undeterred, she wants to establish a mint in order to revive the principality's ancient currency, known as the Luigino, with the exchange rate to be set at one Luigino to US$6.

The two candidates vying to become princess of Seborga - Nina Döbler Menegatto (L) and Laura Di Bisceglie

And she has vowed to continue pushing Seborga's claims to sovereignty, which are based on the fact that when the village was sold to the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1729, the deeds were not registered properly and the payment was never made. The acquisition was therefore not valid, it is argued.

The anomaly was not remedied when Italy was unified in 1861, leaving Seborga in a legal twilight zone.

The claim to independence is no gimmick or joke, insists Ms Döbler Menegatto, who wants Seborga to be granted observer status at the United Nations.

"We all believe in our case. More than 200 people in the village vote in the elections and they can't all be crazy. Nothing is impossible. Who would have thought the British would vote for Brexit? Never say never. Miracles happen."

If elected and crowned princess by Seborga's 250 voters, she will juggle her new role with looking after her three-month-old daughter.

"I have a big vision for Seborga. I think it has huge potential. People want fairy-tale stories, especially right now when there are so many bad things going on in the world. I want to organise events to make Seborga known around the world, so we can attract more tourists," said Ms Döbler Menegatto, who is originally from Germany.

A piazza in the heart of Seborga

Seborga has done well from tourism over the years, with visitors coming to see its distinctive blue and white striped flags, guard of honour in blue berets and shops selling themed T-shirts, mugs and bottles of wine.

While Ms Döbler Menegatto has lived in the village for many years, Ms Di Bisceglie's roots go back further, as the daughter of the man who first declared the village's independence back in 1963.

She wants to create a museum in the house in which her father was born and, like her rival candidate, would also pursue the apparently vain efforts to have Seborga's independence recognised.

"It's almost exactly 10 years since the death of my father, Prince Giorgio I, so this election feels like destiny. Seborga has declined over the last few years and we need to start afresh, to make it known throughout the world. Prince Marcelo was absent half the time, off in Dubai and places like that," she said.

Mark Dezzani is a British DJ and documentary producer who has lived in Seborga for decades CREDIT: ANDREW HASSON

Her campaign is supported by Mark Dezzani, a British DJ and documentary maker who has also lived in the village for decades.

He is vying to become Seborga's next prime minister, having failed to be elected prince at the last election in 2017.

"Laura understands the unique history and values of Seborga. Her father took the whole thing seriously, but not too seriously," said Mr Dezzani, 58.

Originally from Crawley in West Sussex, he says he too is keen to revive what he calls "that rather English sense of self-irony."

The pageantry and pomp of Seborga has been clouded in the last couple of years by the arrival of miscellaneous crackpots and cultists, including a group calling themselves The Whites.

Seborga sits on top of a hill in the northern region of Liguria, with views of the sea

They were led by a Frenchman who until his recent death saw himself as a Christ-like figure and used his generous inheritance to buy up property in the village.

Another Frenchman, named Nicolas Mutte, claims without foundation to be the true prince of Seborga and has moved into the village, exacerbating the tensions.

"Seborga attracts dark people who project their own fantasies onto the place," said Mr Dezzani.

"There are about five different groups of 'knights', some of whom claim to be the true heirs of the Templars."

Mr Dezzani, if elected, hopes to restore an abandoned restaurant in which there is a vaulted room painted with scenes from Seborga's past.

"It would make a perfect museum or throne room, a focal point for tourists. It's a no-brainer," he said.

Whether that plan comes to fruition will only be known on Sunday evening, after votes are counted – a process that, given Seborga's diminutive size, should not take very long.

Related Topics
Europe History West Sussex Italy

share
Show comments

MORE STORIES
1 There's nothing like a good old-fashioned office romance - and I should know
2 Former Oxford professor Tariq Ramadan accused of 'destroying' alleged rape victim's life
3 Queen of 'mumfluencers' Clemmie Hooper unmasks herself as Instagram troll who attacked other...
4 This should be the Tories' best argument against Jeremy Corbyn... but they've thrown it away
5 Woman killed in floods has been named as former Derbyshire High Sheriff Annie Hall

FOLLOW THE TELEGRAPH
Follow on Facebook Follow on Twitter
Follow on Instagram Follow on LinkedIn

© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2019