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Supporters of Valerenga are seen during the Toppserien League football game between Valerenga and Kolbotn at Intility Arena in on March 23 Oslo, Norway.

Inside Scandinavia's VAR Revolt – Featuring Walkouts, Silences and Fishcakes

BY DANIEL TAYLOR / THE ATHLETIC
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Kristian, a bearded Valerenga fan, stood defiantly outside Intility Arena in Oslo, Norway. “We won’t give up,” he said. “We want to be the first country to remove this disease. Then other countries will realize VAR can be defeated.”

It was the first weekend of Norway’s soccer season, and inside the stadium of Oslo’s biggest club, the stand where Valerenga’s most boisterous supporters congregate was completely empty as the game kicked off.

Thousands remained outside, refusing to enter until the 15-minute mark as part of a series of coordinated protests involving fans from every club in Norway’s top flight, the Eliteserien, as well as others from the division below.

It was a different scene in the away end, where the supporters of Viking were employing another tactic to signal their hostility toward the video assistant referee system, which uses an official watching television replays away from the stadium to review significant on-field decisions. Viking fans took their seats but remained silent for the first 15 minutes.

All that could be heard were the shouts of the players, an occasional blow of the referee’s whistle or the thud of boot against ball. “Nei Til VAR!” read the banner in Valerenga’s deserted Ostblokka stand. Translation: “No To VAR!”

The previous day, with the snowy peaks of Drammen visible in the distance, Stromsgodset’s match against Rosenborg got the new season underway with a silent protest of its own. Both sets of fans took part. No songs, no cheering -- just near silence until the signal arrived after 15 minutes.

Rosenborg’s fans gathered behind a banner -- “NFF Mafia” -- that made it clear what they thought about the Norwegian Football Federation. Lampposts

outside the stadium were decorated with stickers reading “Hater VAR” (“hate VAR”).

“Our supporters who are against VAR have the right to express their feelings,” said Alfred Johansson, Rosenborg’s manager. “It’s much better this way -- a quiet 15 minutes -- than other forms of action. Because we also know what it’s like when a game has to be stopped, or even canceled, because of protests.”

Last July, Rosenborg’s game against Lillestrom was abandoned when fans threw smoke bombs, tennis balls and fishcakes on the field. Other games in Norway’s 16-team Eliteserien have been targeted in similar ways.

This season, the fan groups have decided they will not actively disrupt games, but the anger is real in a country where members run the soccer clubs and many think that VAR was brought in without a proper consultation process.

Critics accuse the review system of being unreliable and prone to human error, causing unnecessary delays; disrupting the flow of matches; and, perhaps worst of all, ruining the spontaneous joy that soccer’s most beautiful moment -- a goal -- is supposed to bring.

In January, the 32 clubs in Norway’s top two divisions voted by 19-13 in favor of a motion for “the discontinuation of VAR as soon as possible.”

What seemed like a landmark victory, however, has not led to any changes. Instead, the NFF held a national assembly March 1 for its 450 member clubs, all the way down to grassroots level, and they voted by 321-129 against abolishing the technology. Anger has peaked since.

“We were hopeful we could get rid of VAR,” said Sebastian Hytten, the leader of Valerenga’s Klanen fan group. “But it wasn’t a surprise the NFF worked so hard to keep it because, for them, it was a matter of honor. If they had lost the battle, they would have lost honor. They would have faced

accusations that the supporters had taken over.”

The backlash against the VAR system can be felt in many ways in this part of Scandinavia. One reminder for Lise Klaveness, the president of the NFF, came outside her house in Nordstrand, a suburb south of Oslo.

“Maybe I had parked my car a little too far out,” she said. “Someone put a note on my windshield to joke about how my car was parked and ‘it needs to go to VAR’ to decide what to do about it. Really funny.”

Klaveness, a lawyer and a former soccer player for Norway, has changed her opinion on VAR over the years.

“I didn’t like VAR when it came in,” she said. “I was a pundit in Russia at the 2018 World Cup, and it was the first time VAR was used in an international championship. It was disturbing. We didn’t understand it, why we had to wait such a long time for decisions. It felt like disruption. People said it worked well, but that was not the feeling the footballers and pundits had.”

Critics of the NFF have accused the federation of being rocked by the initial vote against VAR and engineering a way around it by involving teams further down the pyramid that would never play in a match using the system. Those clubs, it is widely believed, were encouraged to vote in line with the NFF’s preference to keep the technology.

The nationwide protests, according to their organizers, were to “raise awareness that member democracy is under attack by anti-democratic forces who want to take control of Norwegian football.”

Klaveness has built her reputation as a progressive leader who was willing to ask difficult questions of FIFA and UEFA, regardless of the consequences for herself, when it came to the Qatar World Cup and the bidding process for the 2030 and 2034 tournaments. Now, though, some of Norway’s leading anti-VAR groups and cam-

paigners are wondering whether UEFA influenced the decision to continue with the technology. The accusation is that European soccer’s governing body might have leaned on Klaveness at a time that she is being added to UEFA’s executive committee.

Klaveness is stung by the suggestion. “Rumors will get roots,” she said. “But it has no roots in truth. We went to UEFA to ask them what arguments they had for or against VAR, and they were clear they didn’t want to affect us.”

A working group led by Raymond Johansen, a former Oslo mayor and ex-Valerenga board member, carried out a four-month review of VAR’s good and bad points. According to the NFF, many coaches and players confided that they wanted to keep the technology but had not dared say it publicly. Many fans articulated the same.

“We talked to so many people,” Klaveness said. “I’ve heard this accusation that ‘we simply didn’t want to lose the argument.’ It’s not even close to the truth. It’s about democracy, and in the end, it was clear the silent majority wanted to keep VAR.”

That is not going to hold water with some of the protesters, who are planning further coordinated actions and unveiled protest banners when Norway’s national team played a World Cup 2026 qualifier in Moldova.

Yet Klaveness, unlike many soccer administrators, is a passionate advocate for freedom of speech. She also believes in the right to protest. “We cannot turn against our supporters; we cannot hate the fact they are yelling,” she said. “They have a very relevant argument.”

She is also determined to meet the protesters head-on. Two days before the national assembly, Klaveness was at Carls, a pub in Oslo, to meet 200 anti-VAR campaigners from across the country. Did she win over everyone? No, but she maintains it was important to “show respect and demand respect back.” It was, she said,

“very intense.”

Yet there is also a backlash against the backlash, and in the land of Erling Haaland and Martin Odegaard, the pro-VAR campaigners are becoming increasingly voluble, too.

In November, Fredrikstad chair Jostein Lunde asked for feedback from the club’s members, who voted by 70-65 in favor of the VAR system.

“I have been quite clear that VAR must continue,” Lunde said. “I have tried to be a strong pro-VAR voice because the people who want change tend to speak the loudest, whereas the people who don’t want change are often silent. I got a lot of criticism from different supporters. But the silent majority were too silent for too long.”

And what about the players? Do they want VAR abolished?

“Opinion is very mixed,” said Ole Selnaes, a Rosenborg player with 32 Norway caps. “Some do, but some don’t. I can see both sides. Yes, it hasn’t worked perfectly, but we have to remember these are still early days. To me, it would be strange for us to remove VAR if almost everyone else in Europe has it.”

The challenge for Klaveness is to navigate a way through all of this when, by her own admission, it is almost impossible to align everyone’s views. It has not been, she said, a “happy case.”

Ultimately, though, she said it had been “the most transparent process in the world.” She believes the VAR system has drastically improved since its inception and that the good will outweigh the bad if people give it time.

“People all across the world are dissatisfied with VAR,” Klaveness said. “Nobody is saying it’s perfect. But it has improved a lot.”

It has been 25 years since Norway played in a men’s World Cup or European Championship, but last year, the national team was promoted to League A, the top level, in the Nations League.

Klaveness said she was delighted by the country’s upward trajectory. And she has not forgotten one key detail.

“Erling Haaland scored a late goal that was very important,” she said of Norway’s 2-1 win against Austria in September. “At first, it was annulled. Then VAR came along, and the goal was allowed. We ended up winning our group. And, oh, what a feeling. Euphoria!”