

Norway's ties to Kiev run long and deep

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NEWS ANALYSIS: In the midst of the Norwegian media's heavy coverage of the Olympic action in Sochi, substantial coverage is also being given to the ongoing crisis in Kiev. It reflects both current and strong historical ties between Kiev and Oslo that extend back to Viking times.



Harald Hardråde married a Russian prince's daughter while living in Kiev, and gained full control over Norway just two years after leaving the Ukrainian capital. There was close contact between Scandinavia and the Kiev area both in the Viking times and in the Middle Ages. PHOTO: Wikipedia

Ukrainians living in Norway continued to place candles and flowers outside the Ukrainian Embassy in Oslo on Thursday, to commemorate the dead and injured in recent violent clashes between Ukrainian authorities and demonstrators back home. Locally based Ukrainians are following the crisis in Kiev closely, as are many Norwegians, and say they feel helpless and shocked by the escalating violence that some fear will descend into civil war.

They say it's not just a conflict over whether Ukraine must choose to have closer ties either to the EU or Russia, but rather over the injustice that they say pervades the country. Pointing to corrupt politicians and a lack of democracy, they say they understand why people from all walks of life in Ukraine have risen up against the current government led by President Viktor Yanukovich.

Division over democracy

"It's so hard to be in Norway and see what's happening in our homeland," Yuliya Haugland told newspaper *Dagsavisen* earlier this week, even before snipers started shooting at demonstrators on Thursday. Adds Svitlana Kobyletska: "This isn't first and foremost about the EU. It's about ending injustice." She said her own parents in eastern Ukraine are taking part in demonstrations against the government every day.

She and others who gathered outside the embassy contend there's "only one important division in Ukraine," and it's between "those who want a free democracy and those who don't." They told *Dagsavisen* that several Ukrainian diplomats have signed an appeal in which they support the demonstrators. Ukraine's ambassador to Norway, Jurij Onisjenko, agreed that a majority of Ukrainians condemn the violence and demand a peaceful solution. "I support that fully," Onisjenko said, adding that "dialogue" is the only way to find a solution to the crisis.

Viking kings in Kiev

As Norway announced plans Thursday night to support and join new EU sanctions against Ukrainian authorities, history shows long and deep ties between Norway and Ukraine. No less than four Viking kings lived in Kiev, and it was the most famous among them, *Harald Hardråde*, who founded the city named Oslo.

Newspaper *Aftenposten* reported recently on how a Norwegian soldier of hire named Harald Sigurdsson left Kiev in 1045, after having married the daughter of a Russian prince and gathering great wealth during battles in the Mediterranean. He was the half-brother of *Olav den hellige*, and he became known as Harald Hardråde for his hard ways of gaining power over all of Norway. He ultimately died at Stamford Bridge, after an ill-fated attempt to also gain control over England.

Three other Viking kings had spent long periods of their lives in Kiev, where many residents were of Scandinavian ancestry and where Vikings settled while traveling in their longboats south along the rivers to the Black Sea and Mediterranean. Olav den hellige, was among them, and his son, *Magnus den gode*, grew up in the home of Prince Jaroslav in Kiev, the same prince who became Harald Hardråde's father-in-law.

Christian influence

Olav Trygvason, Norway's king from 995-1000 and credited with founding the city of Trondheim in 997, also spent much of his childhood in Novgorod and Kiev, after he and his mother Astrid are believed to have fled persecution in Norway. They traveled over the Baltic on their way to Astrid's brother who worked for Prince Vladimir in Novgorod. Olav Trygvason returned to Norway as a young man, influenced by Vladimir's introduction of Christianity in his own area around Kiev.

Ties today between Oslo and Kiev are of a different nature, but still strong. Foreign Minister Børge Brende nonetheless felt compelled to call in the Ukrainian ambassador this week, and **called again on all parties to return to the negotiating table**. On Thursday night, Ukraine's national assembly reportedly agreed to withdraw police and soldiers from Kiev's Independence Square, but the measure was pending approval from Yanukovich.

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