

Opposition Leader Attack Spurs Biggest Rally of 2014 in Kiev

By [Anna Dolgov](#)

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A massive pro-EU rally in Kiev gathered thousands of people. **Ivan Bandura**

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian anti-government demonstrators rallied in Kiev on Sunday, as the protests heated up after a holiday lull, fueled by the beating of an opposition leader during clashes with riot police on a day earlier.

At least 50,000 people gathered on Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square, in Kiev, Reuters reported. The numbers marked the biggest protest turnout so far this year, following a waning over the New Year holidays.

Vitaly Klitschko, a former heavyweight boxing champion who has become an opposition leader, told the crowd that the opposition will continue to "protest peacefully," despite what he described as the government's attempt to use the police to silence protests.

He also reiterated the opposition's call for early presidential elections, which are not

scheduled until 2015.

"We know that we can only change the country when we change the current authorities," he told the Sunday rally.

The protesters seemed galvanized by the beating of Yuri Lutsenko, ex-interior-minister-turned-opposition leader, and several other opposition activists in a clash with the police on Saturday.

Lutsenko received "about 10 blows to the head," his spokeswoman said, AFP reported. He was transferred out of intensive care later that day, the report said.

Ukraine's top human rights official said 11 people were hospitalized after the clashes, The Associated Press reported.

Opposition leader Arseny Yatsenyuk on Sunday called on the West to impose sanctions against senior state officials accused of violating Ukraine's constitution by using force against the protesters.

Last week, the U.S. Senate passed a non-binding resolution calling for asset freezes and visa bans against Ukrainian officials who ordered or carried out violence against protesters.

Another heading on Ukraine is scheduled to be held at the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Jan. 15.

Pro-government activists tried to disrupt another protest rally in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv on Sunday, by throwing smoke grenades at the demonstrators, Interfax reported. Two of the attackers were detained — one by police, and another by protesters.

The massive protests broke out in November after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's government decided to pull out of a planned association deal with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia.

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