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Communist Firebrand Nikolai Bondarenko Arrested in Saratov

August 21, 2026

Nikolai Bondarenko. **@bondarenko_blog / Telegram**

Law enforcement authorities in the southern Saratov region arrested Communist Party firebrand Nikolai Bondarenko on Friday, a move the politician slammed as an attempt to bar him from running in parliamentary elections next month.

Bondarenko, a former Saratov regional lawmaker who is now running for a seat in the lower-house State Duma, confirmed his arrest on his blog.

"Ten police officers detained me at my home," Bondarenko later told news outlet Ostorozhno Novosti. "This is connected to my political activity, and it's an attempt to pressure both the Communist Party and me, and to 'adjust,' so to speak, the results of the upcoming elections."

Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov said he was aware of Bondarenko's arrest and that party lawyers are "getting things sorted."

Party officials said he faces charges of "extremism" over an old social media post featuring a

photo of the late opposition activist Alexei Navalny. However, they said that the account that made the post does not belong to Bondarenko.

Other political candidates seeking to run in the September elections have faced similar legal challenges. Pro-peace politician Boris Nadezhdin, who fled Russia earlier this month, was barred from the ballot under the same charges of displaying "extremist" symbols after sharing a link to a video that contained an image of Navalny.

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Bondarenko rose to national fame through his fiery, unfiltered attacks against Russia's deeply unpopular 2018 pension reforms.

During his tenure in the Saratov regional assembly from 2017 to 2021, he built a large social media following through theatrical political stunts, including a viral experiment where he tried to survive on a monthly pension of 3,500 rubles ($52).

His populist rhetoric, savvy use of social media and diatribes against the ruling United Russia party earned him high praise from Navalny, who once dubbed Bondarenko his "favorite" regional lawmaker.

Bondarenko was stripped of his seat in the Saratov regional assembly in 2022 after state prosecutors claimed he failed to declare ad revenues and user donations generated through his popular YouTube channel.

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