

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Belarus / Belarusia > **"Am I ashamed? Honestly, no. I just took it and did it. We learnt how (...)**

## **"Am I ashamed? Honestly, no. I just took it and did it. We learnt how Sergei Dylewski, the most famous worker in Belarus, is doing**

Friday 8 September 2023, by [DYLEVSKY Sergei](#), [Zerkalo](#) (Date first published: 16 August 2023).

**Otvock is a town of forty thousand inhabitants thirty kilometres from Warsaw. Sergei Dylewski's family settled here not so long ago. In the summer of 2020, the man, who at that time was a thermist at MTZ, became one of the most famous workers in Belarus. For his civic position, he [was left without a job](#) at the plant and without a country. For the third year the activist has been living in Poland. There he organised the Belarusian Workers' Association, with the help of which he tried to encourage people to go on strike. It didn't work. In November 2022, the man opened a small service station and went into business. He told The Mirror about what was in his life, what he has now, his dream to return home and a million-dollar offer.**

On 1 September, Sergei Dylevsky will be 34 years old. After the 2020 elections, he [headed](#) the strike committee of MTZ and joined the presidium of the Coordination Council. [He served](#) 25 days in Akrestsin and Zhodzina. Later in Belarus he was charged under several articles of the Criminal Code. On four of them he was already tried in absentia and [given](#) 12 years of colony under general regime. After moving to Poland, Siarhei organised the Belarusian Workers' Association (BOR). On 1 November 2021, the association [called](#) Belarusians to a nationwide strike.

"I was so tired that I didn't have the strength to think how bad everything was".

Sergei modestly calls his small service station in Otvock a garage. There are only two employees here - the founder and his wife Irina. In their workshop, cars are repaired, painted, and prepared for technical inspections. If necessary, Sergei goes to see and repair the car at the customer's address. This morning there was just such a call.

If I returned to the garage without a tow truck, it means that the repair was not difficult," smiles the man, describing how the first half of the day went. - There was an electronic problem, which required diagnostics.

Sergei's mood is excellent. Work is a pleasure for him. He spends five days a week in the garage. And weekends are "holy time" with his family. The activity of the Belarusian Workers' Association, which he [founded](#) in 2021, has been frozen for about a year.

It was a difficult decision," he explains. - In fact, we started our work as a trade union human rights organisation. Now, unfortunately, it is physically impossible to fulfil these functions on the territory of Belarus. And the activists, who are in the country and could somehow influence the processes, are actually not left: someone is in prison, most of them are abroad. And the small part of those who are left is lying low, and it's not worth exposing them to danger. As a result, we cannot do anything

effectively and fight the regime as planned.

**In August 2021, you [said](#) that if you couldn't return to Belarus soon, you would open a business in Poland. When did this idea become a reality?**

By the beginning of the war in Ukraine, I had my own car. I am an adherent of a sect that does not service cars in a car service centre. I do everything myself. I rented a small garage. After February 2022, together with BOR activists and other concerned Belarusians, we started buying and handing over cars to Ukraine. We serviced them and prepared them for delivery. People started asking me through word of mouth and acquaintances: "Will you change the oil for me too? Maybe you can do this? Maybe do this?" Slowly it became clear: people needed my services. My wife and I consulted and decided to try our hand at auto repair. We started looking for premises for a service station. We found a cheaper option in Otwock, where we later moved from Warsaw.

At that time we had already been in Poland for a year and a half. I did not sit idle, I was always working. We collected some money - that was our initial capital. Plus some help from my relatives. And on the advice of a Polish client, we turned to the Polish government for help: we applied to the Uząd (local executive committee. - Editor's note) and asked for a subsidy - the amount we lacked according to our business plan. The application was approved and 10 thousand zlotys (7700 roubles - Editor's note) were allocated. The money raised was enough to rent the premises, install a lift and buy basic tools. And over time, it went on and on.

**Is there already a profit?**

It's too early to talk about it, because 90 per cent of what we earn is spent on buying new equipment and tools. We have to grow. Now we are reaching the break-even point, that is, we earn enough to rent premises, pay taxes and salaries. And our salaries are enough for housing, food and bread and butter. All in all, I'm satisfied. And not only from the point of view of some romance, that a hobby has turned into a job, but even purely out of mercantile interest, let's say. Here, in Poland, there are much more opportunities to open and develop something of your own and not to depend entirely on the state. For 15 years in Belarus, I tried to deal with cars - I repaired them, tried to put it on the stream. Now I joke that I have achieved more in a year and a half in Poland than I did in our country.

**Who are your clients?**

Mostly Poles, and thank them very much, because only thanks to that I started to speak Polish normally (*laughs*). In general, right away I was afraid that people wouldn't come, but advertising is the engine of progress. We started targeting on Facebook, which is a social network popular with Poles. We spared no expense and put up several signs around Otwock. Before we set up the service station, there was a car wash in this building. Poles from the old memory used to come by "for a wash", disappointed that there was no car wash anymore, and we told them: "Don't get upset, we will do maintenance for you". And somewhere we gave them a business card, somewhere a flyer. That's how, by and large, we got Polish clients.

And then, when people began to see that we were doing quality work, they started to come themselves. Although, of course, at first we made the price lower, gave discounts and promotions. Belarusians also come to us, guys come from Warsaw. Ukrainians have been coming a lot lately.

**Did it happen that Belarusians came to you for repairs because you are Sergei Dylevsky? Let's say, as a sign of solidarity.**

When they started to advertise, sometimes a person would call: "Is it really you?" I'd say, "I am." He

says, "Can I come over?" He comes, it seems that everything is fine with the car, just for diagnostics or to change a light bulb and have a coffee, to find out how things are going.

**Was there a moment when your hands were down and it seemed that nothing would work out?**

Probably in January. That's when I learnt that this is the dead season for any business. When we started, we had no emergency capital. At first we worked like this: at the beginning of the month our account was round zero. By the end we had to make money to survive. In January, after the holidays, the first two weeks after the holidays, there were very few clients. At the same time, I realised that at the end of each week I had to pay, say, four thousand zlotys for the garage rent, but I only had three. In seven days I had to solve this issue somehow. How? I took a car, registered on Bolt-delivery and delivered orders. During the day I worked in the garage, and in the evening, in order to have some financial cushion, I worked in the delivery. That's how we managed.

**At that time, probably, almost no sleep.**

Let's just say I slept (*laughs*). Tired that I had no strength to think how bad things were.

"There wasn't a man on the spot who would throw his helmet on the ground and say: 'I've had enough'."

**Do you keep in touch with the workers in Belarus now? What are the moods there?**

Yes, with the guys who were active in 2020, 2021, 2022. Their mood, to be honest, I don't even know how to describe it... The mood at the enterprises is decadent. If in 2020 they realised that things were very bad at the plants, but they tried to fight it somehow and believed that the situation would improve, now everything has become even worse, and there is no one to fight it.

**You seem to be exaggerating: the factories are working, people are getting paid.**

Let's take MAZ as an example. Everything is good in the picture, they are working - great. They produce some products and sell them to Russia. But now St. Petersburg is refusing from Belarusian MAZ buses (137 MAZ buses have been suspended in St. Petersburg due to malfunctions that [can lead to fire](#). - Editor's note). Why is this happening? There are no normal components. They seem to do some work, but it is action for action's sake, and the quality of products is poor. The quality is shitty, that is why there are no orders. No orders, no profits. No profits, no wages.

**Do you still communicate with anyone who works at MTZ?**

Let's be honest, we have almost no one left there. Everyone who expressed their position in any way was dismissed from the enterprise. At the moment, in my opinion, if we take the most rough estimates, this figure is in the region of six thousand people.

The information we receive from the tractor plant is superficial. And this situation is approximately everywhere now: people are afraid to speak.

**There have been three attempts of strikes in Belarus since 2020. In August and [October 2020](#) and in [November 2021](#). Why do you think nothing came out of it?**

The only strike, which more or less worked out, was in August 2020. Then, indeed, even for a day or two, but the factories stopped. Why? Because there were people to follow. There were leaders on the ground. And the second and third waves - I now realise perfectly well - were just conscription for

conscription's sake. For the simple reason that there was no one who would throw his helmet on the ground and say: "I've had enough."

### **Why do you think they didn't finish in August 2020?**

By and large, people did not believe that the security forces would start destroying us to such an extent, and were not ready to give their lives for, let's say, the righteous cause of the revolution. The authorities managed to intimidate the Belarusians in a moment through plantings, harsh detentions, murders. A week after the beginning of the protests, people began to realise that they themselves could physically disappear from the face of the earth. Everyone began to be afraid for themselves. It was the most frightening thing.

### **After two unsuccessful strikes you announced the third one. Why?**

We called it more for epidemiological reasons: people were dying of covid. When I left the factory, there were ten people left in my brigade, and then one more was taken on. Of those, four of them died from COVID-19. That's really scary. We tried to get people up on it somehow (talking about the pandemic. - Editor's note): "What the f\*\*k? What's going on?" The virus is not going anywhere, why not declare a quarantine to wait out the incubation period? The idea behind the strike was to isolate. To stop work to save people, not to stop production. We urged to stay at home by any available means: to take sick leave, holidays, not to march in the street.

There is probably not a single family left in Belarus, which would have been spared by the coronavirus. I sincerely hoped that this would somehow shake people up, because it personally affects everyone, but, unfortunately, it didn't work. Judging by the feedback, over the 21 days of the strike, a total of 1,000 to 6,000 people took part.

### **Were there any arrests because of that?**

Fortunately, no, but there were dismissals. Mostly for absenteeism.

### **On the second day of the strike, on the air of "Real Time" you said that 10-30 per cent of all workers in the country [were involved](#). Where did you get those figures?**

We were collecting approximate statistics on assets at the time. We made enquiries to the strike committees of enterprises, received information from them, summed it all up - and a really large number of people came out. Then, when we started to analyse these figures, it turned out that they were overstated.

### **Why did the activists overestimate them?**

Probably because people wanted to see it that way. For example, we had reports: "There's an assembly shop at such and such an enterprise. We started checking. It turns out that just one team, six people, decided not to go out. The information was just sent by an employee of this brigade. In his eyes, everyone in the workshop did so.

### **Did your colleagues and workers fly at you afterwards for the fact that it didn't work out?**

I got a lot of blows. On the one hand, on the one hand, it was frustrating, but on the other hand, at least we were trying to do something, trying to stir people up somehow. Am I ashamed of it? Honestly, no. I just took it and did it. I'm not a political scientist, I'm not an economist, I didn't graduate from any institute of revolution or war. We acted on instinct. Exactly as we saw and felt it, so I do not consider myself wrong in that particular situation.

## **When you realise that everything ended in failure, how do you live with it?**

We live and just live. You know, ever since my wife and I opened a garage and started to develop, I am constantly faced with the question: "Do I want to go home to Belarus?". It seems that I have already started some business here, and it is possible to settle down. But I reassure myself that nothing will prevent me from relocating this business to Belarus. I live with the feeling that I have done and am doing everything for the future. I feel the same way about the situation with the strike.

## **Do you think you'll come back?**

I'm sure of it. The big question is when. When I'm in my prime, like I am today, or when I'm in my old age.

We have a company of active guys, with whom we are preparing physically, mentally and emotionally, how to put it correctly, that the hour X will come and it will be necessary to return to Belarus. What is the hour of X? I don't know. It can be any important trigger. And if it happens that I need to defend my country with a shield and a sword, I must be ready for it.

## **You met Lech Walesa in Poland and he said to you: "You won't be able to demand Lukashenko's departure even by strikes. Demand negotiations. Do you think this advice is still relevant? What, in your opinion, should be demanded from Lukashenko and what could you offer him in return?"**

The advice is working. I am sure that the revolution in Belarus will end at the negotiating table. But we should negotiate not with Lukashenko (he is already a downed pilot, he has nothing to lose, and he will not compromise), but with his entourage. There are high-ranking people among them, who still have room for manoeuvre. We will have to decide with them on what terms they will be ready to put Lukashenko in jail.

"I set myself the bar not to piss, not to be afraid."

## **Do you belong to any organisations now?**

I decided that organisations, foundations and other things are not for me. If I want to help, I support a person. One should understand that a lot of people continue to leave Belarus just like we did once, just in vain. We try to help them find housing and jobs. And Ukraine, again, is a primary task. I sincerely believe that when it wins, there will be neither Putin nor Lukashenko. We have a group of guys - someone has a coffee shop, someone has a bar, someone has a service station. Every month we put aside some of the money we earn, and then we use it to buy something for volunteers, hospitals, hospices. Last month we closed three drones for Kalinowski's regiment.

## **Remember some touching case when someone from Belarus was helped.**

The most touching thing is when a person does well. Once, when my wife was volunteering at a humanitarian warehouse in Warsaw, a guy - Vladimir - came there. He lived in a refugee camp and while he was waiting for the Polish government to decide on his fate, he came to the warehouse to help: to carry boxes, unload something, in general, with everything he could. That's where I met him. He said: "I can't do nothing, I have to do something". And in Belarus he worked as an electrician. We heard him, understood him, accepted him. He talked to a Pole. While Vladimir's documents were being prepared, he agreed to hire a Belarusian for a part-time job. We brought them together, and the man disappeared for three months, and then comes to the warehouse in his own car with a huge cake, coffee, tea - to treat the girls and thank them. They got on well with the Pole and started co-operating. Now Vladimir is in charge of a team of electricians, he constantly

comes to my car to service it. The man is doing well.

**You said that every month you give some amount (I understand, not a small amount) to help Ukraine. I am asking an indelicate question, but I think it is important to discuss this. Your business is just growing and still not glamour, is it a shame to donate part of your salary?**

In the first months of the war, when there was a need for ambulance drivers in Ukraine, I started travelling with the head of a Polish foundation and other volunteers to evacuate the wounded. We picked them up, took them to hospitals, took them to Poland, and transferred them to planes to Norway. Now, when I sit at home in the evening or lie under a warm blanket, I realise that at this moment, somewhere in a Ukrainian basement, someone is in hunger and cold. And what is there to feel sorry for?

**Do you also go to transport the wounded now?**

No, I travelled from April to December 2022. Now, unfortunately, I don't have that option. I have refugee status and a Geneva passport. To get to Ukraine, I need a visa. When the one I had expired, the SBU was not allowed to issue a new one.

**What areas did you work in?**

Kharkiv, Chernigov, Odessa, Sumy - basically, all over Ukraine. I left Poland on Monday and returned on Friday. I would spend the weekend with my family and then go there again. The guys from the Foundation still travel like that.

**Was it scary?**

It was. On the other hand, the guys "in the front line" (on the front line. - Editor's note) are more scared. But I set myself a goal not to piss, not to be afraid.

**Did it happen that you didn't manage to bring a man back in time?**

Once. A woman of age, a civilian. Her leg was torn off, she was stabilised, I think. We left the Lviv hospital and took her to Poland to catch a plane. We didn't get ten kilometres to the plane. Her heart stopped.

**What was it like at that moment?**

Words can't describe it. Painful, hard, hurt. When you get home, you don't want to talk, eat or drink. Well, not to eat. You're very thirsty. And to drink very strong alcohol.

"The head of the guard comes in and says: "They called, they said to throw you out of the country.""

**Let me bring you back from Ukraine to Belarus. How did it happen that you became interested in politics? You worked at MTZ, in the evenings you could spend hours fixing machines in the garage....**

I have not always been interested in politics, but this regime has always displeased me. I also took part in Ploshchy 2010. It is well said that I had a garage and a job. By and large, the garage was my livelihood too. In the black, but I also earned there. Because of this, I always wondered: "Why do I have to work at the factory and in the garage? Is it not possible to make it so that a person is

engaged in his profession, and not constantly looking for opportunities to earn money?" That's always triggered me.

**In 2020 you became the face of the labour movement in Belarus. Has fame changed your life in any way?**

Only in the fact that people on the street started to recognise me, came to shake my hand. Sometimes I would go for a walk with my wife and they would say: "Sergei, Sergei, can I take a picture?" My wife, like a little ulcer, joked: "A photo with a monkey costs a ruble.

**How did you leave Belarus? You said that at some point you had three "criminal charges" against you.**

I think it was the 18<sup>th</sup> of October. We organised a protest in Zaslavl, where I lived in 2020. When I went to it, I left my phone at home. When I came back, I had fifty missed calls from different people. And most of all from Pal Palych [Latushko]. I called him back, and he said to me: "Sergei, from reliable sources: you are wanted after midnight. Some acquaintances threw me into a car and drove me to Brest. At random I took a ticket to Warsaw. At the border, they took me off the bus and locked me in an office for two or three hours. I asked: "What status am I in?" "They said: "Detained, they are coming from Minsk to pick you up". I realised: that was it, I wasn't going anywhere. Some more time passed, the head of the guard came in, said: "They called and said to throw you out of the country", and I was simply put on the next passing bus.

**And what happened to the family?**

Irina and her son left earlier. While I was in the detention centre, the KGB came to see my wife. There were unpleasant conversations, up to the point that "here he is sitting, and something may happen to you". When I was released and she told me about it, I sent her out of the country, because I realised that the family was a lever of pressure.

**When you moved to Poland, did the security services follow you?**

For the first three or four months I felt the surveillance in my subcortex and saw a couple of people following me. Then either they disappeared or I stopped paying attention to them. And there was also that someone wrote to me in Telegram on behalf of a large Belarusian businessman, who was obviously not profitable, and offered me a million dollars. I laughed at it. From the point of view that these are infotsygane.

**And what did they ask for in return?**

The messages started coming in when we started talking about a strike in 2021. They asked me to call it off and keep it quiet.

**You don't regret not making a million now?**

No. In fact, at the time, it made us even more determined to act. It was a clear signal that they (the authorities) are very afraid of the strike. I replied to the first message: "No". And they continued to write to me for three more days, persuading me.

**Forced emigration and living in another country at first somehow affected your relationship with your wife? As practice shows, not all families withstand such a test.**

Yes, and very strongly, but in the direction that we became more united. Until 2020, we just lived

quietly as average Belarusians, that is, we tried to survive. And then what happened happened: elections, isolation, forced relocation. And here, in Poland, we came to the realisation that we have nobody here but ourselves. Yes, there are relatives, parents, but they are all in Belarus and out of reach. We can only call and talk to each other. Again, parents are at the age, so they do not worry unnecessarily, you will not tell them that in the first months after the move we had a situation from the category of nothing to eat at home in the evening. On the contrary, you reassure them: "Everything is fine. In the end, all the problems fell on our shoulders, and it brought us together. As a family we became friendlier and stronger.

And again, after we got out of our comfort zone, it became easier for us to get involved in some, roughly speaking, adventures. In the situation with the same service station, any qualified economist would have said: "You're crazy." After all, without a financial cushion and special capital, we just plunged into the business with our heads and started to develop somehow. Now we understand: we have each other, we have a son growing up (Danila is six years old - Editor's note), so we can cope with everything.

You know, back in Belarus I had a dream about my own house on wheels. Here I made it a reality. I bought the worst trailer, restored it within a year, and now every weekend we drive together in Poland. This is a sacred time for me.

### **What was the hardest moment when your wife supported you?**

When I was in the detention centre, there was a period when they started to actively crack down on everyone. If a man went to jail, they could take his wife and give the child to an orphanage. Then my mother-in-law casually suggested to my wife: "Maybe let's apply for a divorce, so that"de jure"you are no one to each other". In response, Ira threw a scandal: "How can this be?! He's my husband. I'm with him, I'm after him."

### **How did you find out about this situation?**

About six months later, my wife told me.

### **What did you say to her?**

I don't remember what I told her then (laughs). I think, a lot of good things.

### **You said that the first months after the move the situation was such that you had nothing to eat. Tell us about that period.**

All the money I left to Warsaw with was enough for two months to rent a house and I had maybe a hundred dollars left. Until I found a job, I rode a bicycle and delivered food. You don't know the language. You see, God forbid you get lost, you can't even ask anything. You're afraid of the city. You don't understand where to buy the same products cheaper.

Then an acquaintance recommended a place in a printing house. They did advertising. I used to sticker cars. Then I was retrained as a driver. When the war started, I immediately volunteered as a driver for a Polish foundation. In order to be allowed to use special lights and to drive people in ambulances, I had to take a paramedic-driver course. I mastered it, and I was hired by the foundation on a permanent basis. And while I had a visa, I drove wounded people from Ukraine.

### **Not so long ago you [were sentenced](#) to 12 years in absentia. How did you react to the verdict?**



More with a smile.

**How has everything you have experienced since 2020 changed you?**

What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. Stronger, I guess. When you see the full scale of what happened in Belarus and with me, what is happening now in Ukraine, you begin to treat some everyday problems as insignificant trifles. Although I would have been worried before, so I began to look at the world more soberly.

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**Sergei Dylevsky**

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