

# The Fighter

**A MESSAGE AND ITS STORY** Why a former Miss Ukraine in Los Angeles makes politics

How unjust the world is. In 2018 Veronika Didusenko was 23 years old. She had been elected Miss Ukraine, but shortly afterwards her title was revoked – because she was a divorced mother.

Four years later, Didusenko sits at a large conference table on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, in the office of attorney Gloria Allred, a well-known civil rights activist. For decades, she has championed women's rights, the right to abortion, protection against the termination of pregnant women, and same-sex marriage in California. In the abuse trial against comedian Bill Cosby, she represented 33 plaintiffs. Since last year, she has also been fighting for the rights of women in beauty competitions. Didusenko almost sinks into a deep armchair.

Veronika Didusenko explains how she came from Ukraine to Los Angeles. Which way she has gone. She speaks concentrated, in fluent English. She filed a lawsuit against the organizers in London after the 2018 Miss Ukraine election and launched the campaign #RightToBe Mother, she

says. Her case had outraged many, she wanted to use the attention.

In December 2021, Allred invited her to a press conference in Los Angeles on To International Women's Day in March. But before that, the war broke out in the Ukraine. Didusenko lives in Kiev; Allred says she had any more Expected that Didusenko would come.

But Veronika Didusenko came. Most of the time she has her iPad with her, it is her only connection to the family in Kiev. She had just spoken to her mother on the phone. Her parents stayed in Kiev, her grandmother was ill and could not leave the city. As a teenager, Didusenko had dreamed of leaving Ukraine. Then she was discovered by a scout, traveled as a model to London, Paris and Milan, returned to Kiev, obtained a bachelor's degree in mathematics and found that Ukraine is a good country to live in.

It was democratic and free, but on the other hand there was still a lot to do, for example for the equality of

women; on playgrounds you only ever saw mothers with their children, never the fathers, says Didusenko. She founded a support program for children, »Young Einstein«, which had been one of the reasons why she had applied for the Miss Ukraine election: it offered the opportunity to advertise for donations.

When Allred invited her, Veronika Didusenko immediately agreed. Her lawsuit had been unsuccessful until then, and there would soon be an anniversary celebration for Miss World's 70th anniversary; she wanted to see the rules change, she says. The two women arranged to meet in Los Angeles in March.

On 24. February, the day of the Russian raid, the sirens howled in the morning. Didusenko says she has never heard this sound before. Her son Alex, now seven years old, was still asleep when she read on Facebook that there was war.

She took her bags, which she had already packed five days earlier, called her ex

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husband, woke up her child, and together they set off.

In front of the city, military vehicles approached them, helicopters circled. They drove west, reached the border to Moldova, from Romania they flew via Vienna to Switzerland, where friends live. Of course, Didusenko could have cancelled the appointment in Los Angeles, there were now more important things than the rights of women in beauty contests. But she thought: now all the more so. It was about the rights of all women, about their survival. Didusenko got a visa for the USA, still from the airport in Los Angeles she called Gloria Allred.

At the press conference, Allred spoke first – about discrimination. She quoted from the list of questions that the applicants for beauty competitions have to answer: Have you ever had a child? Are you pregnant right now? Then Didusenko talked – about her country. About Yulia Sdanowska, math teacher who competed for Ukraine in the 2017 European Girls' Mathematics Olympiad and won silver. Sdanowska was her friend,

she died in the first days of the war, 21 years old. Didusenko asked for a minute of silence: for Sdanowska – and for all those who had already died in this war.

It was very quiet in the room, you could only hear the clicking of the cameras. Allred looked to the ground. She said nothing about the war during this press conference. Maybe she thought you had to keep things separate to get the best result.

Allred had spoken about the war the day before, together with Didusenko. She recalled the many parents and grandparents who had once come to America as refugees from Ukraine, she asked President Joe Biden to take in people from Ukraine even without a visa in the United States. The two women had held up the Ukrainian flag to the sounds of the Ukrainian national anthem.

Two weeks later, Veronika Didusenko is back in Geneva. Her parents and grandmother are still in Kiev. You make phone calls. When the news of a massacre in

Butsha goes around the world at the beginning of April, she posts photos of the victims. In an e-mail, she writes, the model who became a civil rights activist: "We are strong, united and freedom-loving people. We will fight for our freedom, and we will win."

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