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Dear friends,

On this day, it is more important than ever for me to be among people whose support I could not even hope to enlist, and who *did* become a reliable support in my struggle. People like Gloria Allred and Andrea Quiroga, from whom I learned a lot and who I really want to be like.

It is important for me because I still remember the shock when 4 years ago I was crowned Miss Ukraine. And then another shock, even bigger, when this crown was taken away from me. Back to that day my son and I were turned into the object of public humiliation, and I was told, “She gave birth to a child at the age of 19 and she got divorced. I think it’s wrong to make someone like her an example.”

My first desire then was just to run away from this shame. To hide, forget, start life from scratch. Not my personal offense, but my son, my main achievement and my pride, was the reason that I did not run away then. It became the starting point of my four-year struggle.

And then, when I set off on this journey, I saw support of tens of thousands of women from all over the world. Their pain. Not only of young mothers like me. But also rape victims. Victims of the vicious practice of forced early marriages in many countries. Who, due to the discriminatory rules adopted once 70 years ago, were deprived, first of all, of their pride, and then of the opportunity to make a career in the beauty pageant industry.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to assemble a professional team. I have visited many countries with my advocacy campaign. The single-person pickets that I held in front of the Miss World office in London. I have repeatedly addressed publicly and non-publicly the leaders of the Miss World, Miss Universe, Miss Earth, and Miss International pageants. I asked opinion leaders for support, from Brigitte Macron to Michelle Obama. During this time, I gave hundreds of interviews to leading TV channels, online and printed publications from around

the world, I spoke at universities and at public events. I collected tens of thousands of signatures in more than 130 countries around the world under my petition in defense of the rights of young mothers.

And finally, I created an NGO #RightToBeAMother. Oh, and of course, how could I forget it, 3 lawsuits in three countries — the UK, the US, and in Ukraine.

I should probably stop here. I think you already understand that it was a non-stop campaign, and in order to list everything here, to recall everything, we don't have an extra four years for that.

I want to thank my team and everyone who was with me on this journey. During these 4 years, during the moments of despair my team did not let me give up. No matter how hard it was. Gene, Rosie, Andrew, Igor, Nadia, Yana, Nona, Vova, Ravi Naik, Asters team, APCO worldwide and, of course, Gloria, Andrea, Olivia and Diane, you are just the best and you have been working so hard on this being by my side every second I needed you.

Well, together we wrote our page in history. Just think, for 70 years, the rule depriving young mothers of the opportunity to take part in the four main beauty pageants seemed like the rule that could never be changed.

And yet, on this day, when this huge victory has happened, and the main goal of the four years of my life has been achieved, I confess, if such an opportunity presented itself, I would not hesitate to exchange this moment for the victory of my country, of my people in our War for Freedom. For our children and their mothers to stop dying every day from bombing and terroristic attacks by Russia.

Well, we have seen today that any goal is achievable. You just have to start walking towards it.

Personally, of course, I want to see the Miss World contest to be the first to end the discrimination against motherhood. The one that took my crown. But from the point of view of the rights of women, it does not matter who is first. I applaud the Miss Universe pageant for leading the way and being the first of the four industry giants to enter the 21st century. This is a historic decision, and we expect the same rules to be adopted by Julia Morley of the Miss World, as well as by Miss Earth, and Miss International, and other pageants throughout the world.

The first step has already been taken. Now history cannot be stopped.

Statement of Veronika Didusenko

August 11, 2022