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Carnival in Crimea

By Pepe Escobar

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Time waits for no one, but apparently will wait for Crimea. The speaker of the Crimean parliament, Vladimir Konstantinov, has confirmed there will be a referendum on greater autonomy from Ukraine on May 25.

Until then, Crimea will be as hot and steamy as carnival in Rio - because Crimea is all about Sevastopol, the port of call for the Russian Black Sea fleet.

If the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a bull, this is the red flag to end all red flags. Even if you're deep in alcohol nirvana dancin' your troubles away at carnival in Rio - or New Orleans, or Venice, or Trinidad and Tobago - your brain will have registered that NATO's ultimate wet dream is to command a Western puppet Ukrainian government to kick the Russian navy out of its base in Sevastopol. The negotiated lease applies until 2042. Threats and rumors of reneging it have already emerged.

The absolute majority of the Crimean peninsula is populated by Russian speakers. Very few Ukrainians live there. In 1954, it took only 15 minutes for Ukrainian Nikita Krushchev - he of the banging shoe at the UN floor - to give Crimea as a free gift to Ukraine (then part of the USSR). In Russia, Crimea is perceived as Russian. Nothing will change that fact.

We're not facing a new Crimean War - yet. Only up to a point. NATO's wet dream is one thing;

it is quite another to pull it off - as in ending the Russian fleet routinely leaving Sevastopol across the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and then reaching Tartus, Syria's Mediterranean port. So yes, this is as much about Syria as about Crimea.

The new Ukrainian Orange, Tangerine, Campari, Aperol Spritz or Tequila Sunrise revolution seems so far to have answered NATO's prayers. But it's a long and winding road for NATO to reenact the 1850s and remix the original Crimean War.

For the foreseeable future, we will be drowning in a white sea of platitudes. As in Pentagon supremo Chuck Hagel "warning" Russia to stay out of the turmoil, while NATO's defense ministers issue the requisite pile of statements that no one reads "showing support" for the new leadership, and corporate shills reassure the populace this is not a new Cold War. [1]

Dance to my strategy, suckers

Where's H L Mencken when we need him? No one ever lost money underestimating the mendacity of the Pentagon/NATO/CIA/State Department system. Especially now, when Ukrainian policy seems to have been subcontracted by the Obama administration to the likes of neo-con Victoria "F**k the EU" Nuland, married to Dubya darling neo-con Robert Kagan.

As Immanuel Wallerstein has already observed, [2] Nuland, Kagan and the neo-con gang are as much terrified of Russia "dominating" Ukraine as of a slowly emerging, and eventually quite possible, geopolitical alliance between Germany (with France as a junior partner) and Russia. That would mean the heart of the European Union forging a counter-power to the dwindling, increasingly wobbly American power.

And as the current embodiment of wobbly American power, the Obama administration is really in a class by itself. They are now lost in their own, self-concocted "pivot" maze. Which pivot comes first? That one to China? But then we need to pivot to Iran first - to end that Middle East distraction. Or maybe not.

Take this latest sound bite by US Secretary of State John Kerry, on Iran: "We took the initiative and led the effort to try to figure out if before we go to war there actually might be a peaceful solution."

So suddenly it's not about a nuclear deal to be possibly attained in 2014 anymore; it's about "if before we go to war". It's about bombing a possible deal so the Empire may bomb a country - again. Or maybe that's just a wet dream supplied by the Likudnik puppet masters.

The great Michael Hudson has speculated that "multi-dimensional chess" might be "guiding US moves in the Ukraine". Not really. It's more like if we can't pivot to China - yet - and if the pivot to Iran is going to fail anyway (because we want it to), we might as well pivot somewhere else. Oh yes, that pesky place that prevented us from bombing Syria; it's called Russia. And all that under the profound guidance of Victoria "F**k the EU" Nuland. Where's a neo-Aristophanes to chronicle these marvels?

And never forget US corporate media. That CNN hack has been Amanpouring lately about the Budapest Agreement - stressing Russia should stay out of Ukraine. Well, visibly a horde of producers at ratings-falling-to-the-floor CNN have not even read the Budapest Agreement which, as University of Illinois professor Francis Boyle has noted, "also states that the US, Russia, Ukraine, and UK need to immediately jointly 'consult' - meaning meet at least at the foreign minister level".

So who pays the bills?

The new prime minister of Ukraine, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, is - what else - a "technocratic reformer", code for Western puppet. [3] Ukraine is a (torn) basket case. The currency has fallen 20% since the start of 2014. Millions of unemployed Europeans know the European Union does not have the dough to bail out the country (perhaps Ukrainians could ask former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi for some tips).

In Pipelineistan terms, Ukraine is an appendix to Russia; it's Russian gas that transits through Ukraine to European markets. And Ukrainian industry depends on the Russian market.

Let's take a closer look at the new Aperol Spritz "revolutionary" wallet. Every month, the natural gas import bill from Russia is roughly US\$1 billion. In January, the country also had to spend \$1.1 billion in debt repayment. Foreign currency reserves plunged to \$17.8 billion from \$20.4 billion. Ukraine has a minimum debt repayment of no less than \$17 billion in 2014. They even had to cancel a \$2 billion eurobond issue late last week.

Frankly, Russian President Vladimir Putin - aka Vlad the Hammer - must be grinning like the Cheshire cat. He could simply erase the significant 33% discount on natural gas imports he gave Kiev late last year. Rumor after rumor already state - ominously - that the Aperol Spritz revolutionaries won't have the cash to pay pensions and public servants' salaries. In June comes a monster payment to a bunch of creditors (\$1 billion in debt will mature). Afterwards, it's bleaker than north Siberia in winter.

The US offer of \$1 billion is risible. And all this after the ""F**k the EU" "strategy" of Victoria Nuland torpedoed an Ukrainian transitional government - by the way, negotiated by the EU - which might have kept the Russians on board, money-wise.

Without Russia, Ukraine will totally depend on the West to pay all its bills, not to mention avoid being bankrupt. That amounts to a whopping \$30 billion until the end of 2014. Unlike Egypt, they cannot dial the House of Saud's number and ask for some juicy petrodollars. That \$15 billion loan from Russia promised recently could come in handy - but Moscow must get something in return.

The notion that Putin will order a military attack on the Ukraine should be billed to US corporate media's sub-zoological intellectual quotient. Vlad the Hammer just needs to watch the circus - as in the West squabbling about where to get those billions to be squandered in a (torn) basket case.

Or the International Monetary Fund churning out yet another dreadful "structural adjustment" to send Ukraine's population back to the Paleolithic.

Crimea could even stage its own delayed carnival, voting not only for more autonomy but to leave the (torn) basket case altogether. In this case, Putin will even get Crimea for free - Krushchev-style. Not a bad deal. Thanks to that oh so strategic "F**k the EU" Russian "pivot".

Notes:

1. US and Britain say Ukraine is not a battleground between East and West, Daily Telegraph, February 26, 2014.
2. See here.
3. Biden: U.S. Supports Ukraine's New Government, Voice of America, February 27, 2014.