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Deals with Russia could lead to break-up of Ukraine, warns Tymoshenko

Tony Halpin, Kiev

Five years ago she was a driving force behind the Orange Revolution that ousted Ukraine's pro-Russian Government and swept a new nationalist coalition to power. Now Yuliya Tymoshenko has given warning that the country could break up, as its new President embraces the Kremlin once more.

In an exclusive interview with *The Times*, Mrs Tymoshenko said that Ukraine's independence and stability were being put at risk by Russia's dash to strike energy and security deals with President Yanukovich. She accused the President of conspiring with Moscow before his election in February to sign away control of key industries. "For the first time in 19 years of independence, the question is the preservation of the country itself, its political sovereignty."

She said that there were rising tensions over the Crimea region after Mr Yanukovich approved a controversial deal to allow Russia's Black Sea fleet to remain in Sevastopol for up to 30 years after its present lease expires in 2017. In exchange, Russia agreed to reduce gas prices for Ukraine by 30 per cent. Mrs Tymoshenko, 49, who lost narrowly to Mr Yanukovich in the presidential election, said that the new treaty was opposed by half of Ukraine's people. "There is a serious threat of instability if such a substantial group is dissatisfied," she said. "I think Yanukovich is intentionally destabilising the situation in the country but I don't know why. The situation in Crimea is quite seriously destabilised now. People have begun to collect signatures in favour of unity between Crimea and Russia. An activation of anti-Ukrainian movements is taking place in Crimea."

Much of Crimea's population is pro-Russian and senior figures in the Kremlin have suggested that Moscow should reclaim the territory, which was transferred to Ukraine as recently as 1956 by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

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Mrs Tymoshenko said that President Medvedev had ordered Russia's Defence Ministry to prepare investment plans for Crimea. "Now Crimea will be developed under the auspices of the Russian Federation, which is difficult for society to understand. It creates the risk of a crisis. I am in favour of mutually beneficial co-operation. However, I do not

allow the thought of a loss of part of our territory or of a loss of sovereignty."


She urged the United States and Europe to pay greater attention to Ukraine's survival, rather than viewing the country as "a bargaining chip" in international relations with Russia.

"When Ukraine surrendered its nuclear weapons [after the collapse of the Soviet Union] it received guarantees that its territorial integrity would be protected. I would like to believe that these guarantees are still in force."

On a two-day visit to Kiev this week Mr Medvedev signed several new agreements with Mr Yanukovich at the seventh meeting since the latter succeeded Viktor Yushchenko, Mrs Tymoshenko's co-leader of the Orange Revolution. Mr Medvedev, who had denounced Mr Yushchenko as anti-Russian, told journalists: "Finally, there is a worthy Ukrainian partner."

Mrs Tymoshenko said that the speed of Kremlin proposals for joint ventures in nuclear energy, shipbuilding, aviation and the possible merger of Ukraine's gas company with the Russian energy giant Gazprom had taken everyone by surprise. While

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