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## Attorney general recuses himself from Russia probe after prior contact revealed

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Under intensifying pressure, Attorney General Jeff Sessions abruptly agreed Thursday to recuse himself from any investigation into Russian meddling in America's 2016 presidential election. He acted after revelations he twice spoke with the Russian ambassador during the campaign and failed to say so when pressed by Congress.

Sessions rejected any suggestion that he had tried to mislead anyone about his contacts with the Russian, saying, "That is not my intent. That is not correct."

But he did allow that he should have been more careful in his testimony during his confirmation hearing, saying, "I should have slowed down and said, 'But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times.'"

The White House has stood by Sessions in the latest controversy to dog President Donald Trump's young administration, though officials say they first learned about his contacts with the ambassador from a reporter Wednesday night. Trump himself said Thursday he had "total" confidence in Sessions and didn't think he needed to recuse himself — not long before he did.

## Reaction from Hawaii's Congressional delegation

Sen. Brian Schatz:

// "These new reports make it clear: Attorney General Jeff Sessions cannot and should not be the person to investigate the Trump campaign's ties to Russia which now include the Attorney General himself. The reports also make clear that this administration struggles with telling the truth. We need an independent prosecutor, and we must empower all relevant committees in the Congress to conduct an exhaustive, bipartisan, and transparent investigation."

Sen. Mazie Hirono:

/ "The Attorney General made the correct decision to recuse himself, but it is not sufficient. We need an independent investigation into the Trump administration's ties to the Russian government."

Rep. Tulsi Gabbard:

/ "In order to reduce the divisiveness in our country and increase the people's faith in our Justice Department, it would be best if Senator Sessions resigned. The sooner the better."

Rep. Colleen Hanabusa:

“Attorney General Sessions’ credibility is at stake. How can our nation’s top law enforcement officer perform his duties when he himself regrets testimony he gave under oath? Not recalling specific political discussion with the Russian ambassador during the campaign season is not the same as “I did not have communications with the Russians.” Attorney General Sessions should resign and restore credibility to the office of the Attorney General.”

One of Sessions’ conversations with Ambassador Sergey Kislyak occurred at a July event on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. At that same event, the ambassador also spoke with Carter Page, who briefly advised Trump’s campaign on foreign policy, according to a person with knowledge of the discussion.

Separately, a White House official said Thursday that Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and ousted national security adviser Michael Flynn met with Kislyak at Trump Tower in New York in December. The official described that sit-down as a brief courtesy meeting.

Flynn was fired last month for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with Kislyak.

The Trump team’s account of Flynn’s contacts with the ambassador has changed several times. The White House did not disclose the in-person meeting, or Kushner’s involvement, until Thursday.

Both the White House official and the person with knowledge of Page’s discussion insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly disclose the meetings.

Trump has been trailed for months by questions about potential ties to Russia, and allegations of Russian efforts to interfere in the U.S. election to help him defeat Hillary Clinton. The new president and his campaign officials have blamed such contentions on Democratic sore losers and have heatedly denied any contact with Russians concerning the election.

While there is nothing necessarily nefarious or even unusual about a member of Congress meeting with a foreign ambassador, typically members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meet with foreign ambassadors, not Armed Services Committee lawmakers, such as Sessions, whose responsibility is oversight of the military and the Pentagon.

The latest development comes on the heels of what had been the high point of Trump's young presidency: a well-received address to Congress Tuesday night that energized Republicans and appeared to wipe away some lawmakers' concerns about the administration's tumultuous start.

But Sessions faced a rising chorus of demands that he resolve the seeming contradiction between his two conversations in the summer and fall with Kislyak and his sworn statements to Congress in January, when he said he had not had communications with Russians during the campaign.

The Justice Department said he met with Kislyak in his role as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, not in his role as a Trump adviser with the campaign, and that led to his answers.

The attorney general, an early backer and key adviser for Trump's campaign, said he decided to recuse himself for investigations that are underway and others to come after his staff recommended he do so. Acting Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente will handle such matters for now.

Sessions added that his announcement "should not be interpreted as confirmation of the existence of any investigation."

Some Democrats called for Sessions not only to recuse himself but to resign.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who had accused Sessions of "lying under oath," repeated her call for his resignation after he recused himself. Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said a special prosecutor should be appointed to examine whether the federal investigation into Kremlin meddling — and into possible contacts between Trump associates and Russians — had been compromised by Sessions. Democrats also sought a criminal perjury investigation.

More than a half dozen Republican lawmakers, including some who consider themselves personally close to Sessions, had urged him to recuse himself from the probe. Sen. Tom Cole of Oklahoma said he didn't believe Sessions could have colluded with Russia, but "If there is an investigation, he probably shouldn't be the person leading it."

The Justice Department acknowledged two separate Sessions interactions with Kislyak, both coming after cybersecurity firms had concluded that Russian intelligence agencies were behind cyber-hacking of the Democratic National Committee.

The first occurred after a Heritage Foundation event during the Republican National Convention in July, when the department says a group of envoys — including the Russian ambassador — approached Sessions. The second was a September conversation, which the department likened to the more than 25 discussions Sessions had with foreign ambassadors last year as a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But Sessions did not disclose his discussions with Kislyak at his Senate confirmation hearing in January when asked what he would do if “anyone affiliated” with the campaign had been in contact with officials of the Russian government.

Sessions said he knew of no such contacts. He added, “I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I didn’t have, did not have communications with the Russians, and I’m unable to comment on it.”

He answered “no” in a written questionnaire when asked about contacts regarding the election.

Dmitry Peskov, the spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin, said it was normal for Russian diplomats to meet with U.S. lawmakers. A spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, told AP that meetings with American political figures were part of the embassy’s “everyday business.”

Revelations of the contacts, first reported by The Washington Post, came amid a disclosure by three administration officials that White House lawyers have instructed aides to Trump to preserve materials that could be connected to Russian meddling in the American political process.

Sessions is not the first attorney general to disengage, or take a reduced role, in a high-profile matter. Attorney General Loretta Lynch last summer agreed to do so at the recommendation of the FBI in the Hillary Clinton email matter after an impromptu meeting with Bill Clinton on her airplane.

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