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Justice Dept: Sessions spoke with Russian ambassador in 2016

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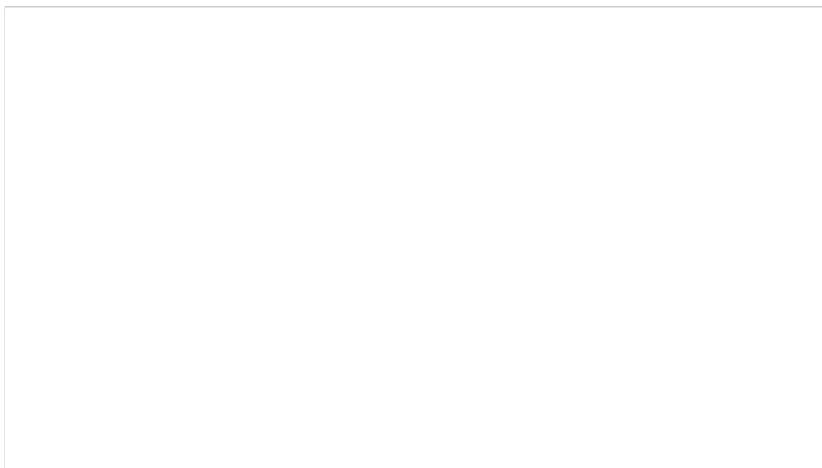
Attorney General Jeff Sessions pauses while speaking at the National Association of Attorneys General annual winter meeting Tuesday in Washington.

WASHINGTON >> Attorney General Jeff Sessions had two conversations with the Russian ambassador to the United States during the presidential campaign season last year, contact likely to fuel calls for him to recuse himself from a Justice Department investigation into Russian interference in the election.

Sessions, an early supporter of President Donald Trump and a policy adviser to the Republican candidate, did not disclose those communications at his confirmation hearing in January when asked whether “anyone affiliated” with the campaign had contact with the Russians.

Justice Department spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores said tonight that “there was absolutely nothing misleading about his answer.”

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That answer did not satisfy Democrats demanding his recusal from an ongoing federal investigation. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, accused Sessions of “lying under oath” and demanded that he resign.

Sessions had more than 25 conversations with foreign ambassadors in his role as a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and had two separate interactions with the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kislyak, the department said.

One was a visit in the fall, Flores said, and the other occurred in a group setting following a Heritage Foundation speech that Sessions gave during the summer, when several ambassadors — including the Russian ambassador — approached Sessions after the talk.

Revelations of the contact, first reported by The Washington Post, triggered calls from members of Congress for Sessions to back out of any involvement in the FBI’s probe.

“If reports are accurate that Attorney General Sessions — a prominent surrogate for Donald Trump — met with Ambassador Kislyak during the campaign, and failed to disclose this fact during his confirmation, it is essential that he recuse himself from any role in the investigation of Trump campaign ties to the Russians,” said Rep. Adam Schiff of California, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

"This is not even a close call; it is a must," he said.

At the confirmation hearing in January, Sen. Al Franken of Minnesota alerted Sessions to allegations of contact between Russia and Trump aides during the 2016 election. He asked Sessions what he would do if there was evidence that anyone from the Trump campaign had been in touch with the Russian government during the campaign.

Sessions replied he was "unaware of those activities."

Then 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."

Flores, the Justice Department spokeswoman, said that response was not misleading.

"He was asked during the hearing about communications between Russia and the Trump campaign — not about meetings he took as a senator and a member of the Armed Services Committee," she said in a statement.

The White House did not immediately comment.

Franken, in a statement tonight, said he was troubled that the new attorney general's response to his question was "at best, misleading." He said he planned to press Sessions on his contact with Russia.

"It's clearer than ever now that the attorney general cannot, in good faith, oversee an investigation at the Department of Justice and the FBI of the Trump-Russia connection, and he must recuse himself immediately," Franken said.

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