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Fresh questions for Sessions _ and he'll answer in public

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) - Attorney General Jeff Sessions, facing fresh questions about his Russian contacts during the election campaign and his role in the firing of James Comey, will be interrogated in a public hearing by former Senate colleagues on Tuesday.

The appearance before the Senate intelligence committee comes one week after former FBI Director Comey cryptically told lawmakers the bureau had expected Sessions to recuse himself weeks before he did from an investigation into contacts between Trump campaign associates and Russia during the 2016 election.

Sessions, a close campaign adviser to Donald Trump and the first senator to endorse him, stepped aside from the investigation in early March after acknowledging he had spoken twice in the months before the election with the Russian ambassador to the United States. He said under oath at his January confirmation hearing that he had not met with Russians during the campaign.

Since then, lawmakers have raised questions about a possible third meeting at a Washington hotel, though the Justice Department has said that did not happen.

Sessions on Saturday said he would appear before the intelligence committee, which has been doing its own investigation into Russian contacts with the Trump campaign. There had been some question as to whether the hearing would be open to the public, but the Justice Department said Monday he requested it be so because he "believes it is important for the American people to hear the truth directly from him." The committee shortly after said the hearing would be open.

The hearing will bring sharp questioning for Sessions and likely some uncomfortable moments from the Trump administration.

Sessions is likely to be asked about his conversations with Ambassador Sergey Kislyak and whether there were more encounters that should have been made public. And he can expect questions about his involvement in Comey's May 9 firing, the circumstances surrounding his decision to recuse himself from the FBI's investigation, and whether any of his actions - such as interviewing candidates for the FBI director position or meeting with Trump about Comey - violated his recusal pledge.

Asked Monday if the White House thought Sessions should invoke executive privilege to avoid answering questions about his conversations with Trump, presidential spokesman Sean Spicer replied, "It depends on the scope of the questions. To get into a hypothetical at this point would be premature."

He did not explicitly endorse Sessions' appearance, saying in response to a question, "We're aware of it, and we'll go from there."

Comey himself had a riveting appearance before the same Senate panel last week, with some key moments centered on Sessions.

Comey said Trump told Sessions and other administration officials to leave the room before Trump asked him in February to drop a probe into former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn's contacts with Russia.

In addition, Comey has said Sessions did not respond when he complained that he did not want to be left alone with Trump again. The Justice Department has denied that, saying Sessions stressed to Comey the need to be careful about following appropriate policies.

The former FBI director also testified that he and the agency had believed Sessions was "inevitably going to recuse" for reasons he said he could not elaborate on.

"We also were aware of facts that I can't discuss in an open setting that would make his continued engagement in a Russia-related investigation problematic," Comey said.

Sessions' appearance before the intelligence committee is an indication of just how much the Russia investigation has shaded his tenure. White House frustrations with the FBI's investigation, and whether any of his actions - such as interviewing candidates for the FBI director position or meeting with Trump about Comey - violated his recusal pledge, spilled into public view last week, when Trump on Twitter criticized the legal strategy in defending his proposed travel ban.

Spokesman Spicer declined to say then that Sessions enjoyed Trump's confidence, though spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said later in the week that the president had confidence "in all of his Cabinet."

Though the Justice Department maintains that it has fully disclosed the extent of Sessions' foreign contacts last year, lawmakers have continued to press him for answers about an April 2016 event at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, where both Sessions and Kislyak attended a foreign policy speech by Trump.

Senate Democrats have raised the possibility that Sessions and Kislyak could have met there, though Justice Department officials say there were no private encounters or side meetings.

Lawmakers, including Al Franken of Minnesota and Patrick Leahy of Vermont, have asked the FBI to investigate and to determine if Sessions committed perjury when he denied having had meetings with Russians.

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