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POLITICS

Investigators Probed Jeff Sessions' Contacts With Russian Officials

During confirmation hearing, Sessions testified under oath he had no contact with Russia as a campaign surrogate

By **CAROL E. LEE, CHRISTOPHER S. STEWART, ROB BARRY** and **SHANE HARRIS**

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WASHINGTON—U.S. investigators have examined contacts Attorney General Jeff Sessions had with Russian officials during the time he was advising Donald Trump's presidential campaign, according to people familiar with the matter.

The outcome of the inquiry, and whether it is ongoing, wasn't clear, these people said. The contacts were being examined as part of a wide-ranging U.S. counterintelligence investigation into possible communications between members of Mr. Trump's campaign team and Russian operatives, they said.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, which has been leading the investigation, didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. The White House directed requests for comment to the Justice Department.

But disclosures about Mr. Sessions' contacts led quickly late Wednesday to demands that he step aside from any investigation involving the Trump administration, or that he resign for failing to tell the truth during his confirmation hearing.

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Jeff Sessions to Recuse Himself From Trump Campaign Probes

Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Thursday he will recuse himself from involvement in any probe related to the Trump campaign, after lawmakers called for him to recuse himself from an investigation into alleged Russian interference in the election.

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“If there is something there and it goes up the chain of investigation, it is clear to me that Jeff Sessions, who is my dear friend, cannot make this decision about Trump,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), adding that a special prosecutor might be needed.

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Mr. Sessions, in a statement placed on Twitter late Wednesday by his spokeswoman, said: “I never met with any Russian officials to discuss

issues of the campaign. I have no idea what this allegation is about. It is false.”

During his confirmation hearing for attorney general in January, Mr. Sessions, a Republican senator from Alabama, testified under oath that he had no contact with Russian officials as a campaign surrogate and never discussed the 2016 election with Russian officials.

But Mr. Sessions spoke with the Russian ambassador to the U.S., Sergei Kislyak, while the Republican National Convention was under way in Cleveland last summer, according to his spokeswoman, Sarah Flores. He also spoke with Mr. Kislyak on another occasion last year, in a meeting in his Senate office, she said, clarifying that the meeting was in person and not on the phone as she had initially said.

Ms. Flores said the contact last July occurred when Mr. Sessions spoke at a Heritage Foundation event attended by Mr. Kislyak in Cleveland, appearing in his capacity as a senator, not a campaign official. She said several ambassadors approached Mr. Sessions after his speech at the Heritage Foundation event, including Mr. Kislyak.

“It was short and informal,” she said.

She said the attorney general wasn’t aware that his communications have been under investigation.

During his confirmation hearing in January, Mr. Sessions was asked what he would do if any evidence emerged that someone affiliated with the Trump campaign communicated with the Russian government during the campaign and said: “I’m not aware of any of those activities.”

“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 said.

Ms. Flores said Mr. Sessions wasn’t required to disclose the contacts because they took place in his capacity as a senator, not a campaign official.

“The attorney general has been very clear that as a senator he had conversations with the Russian ambassador,” Ms. Flores said in a statement. “Last year, the senator had over 25 conversations with foreign ambassadors as a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, including the British, Korean, Japanese, Polish, Indian, Chinese, Canadian, Australian, German and Russian ambassadors.”

The focus of the U.S. counterintelligence investigation has been on communications between Trump campaign officials and Russia. The inquiry involving Mr. Sessions is examining his contacts while serving as Mr. Trump’s foreign-policy adviser in the spring and summer of 2016, one person familiar with the matter said.

The investigation is being pursued by the FBI, Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Treasury Department, officials have said. Counterintelligence probes seldom lead to public accusations or criminal charges.

However, the probe, if ongoing, could create a highly unusual and sensitive political dynamic given that the FBI is part of the Justice Department that Mr. Sessions, as

attorney general, now leads. Mr. Sessions has only been in office for under a month and the investigation began before he was nominated and approved by the Senate.



Jeff Sessions, then a senator for Alabama, arriving at Trump Tower on Nov. 15. He was sworn in as attorney general in February. PHOTO: DREW ANGERER/GETTY IMAGES

The FBI's role in the investigation into Mr. Sessions' conversations left the agency "wringing its hands" about how to proceed, said one person familiar with the matter.

Mr. Trump asked for the resignation of his national security adviser, Mike Flynn, after Mr. Flynn misled Vice President Mike Pence over the nature of a conversation he had in December with Russia's ambassador to the U.S.

The White House has denied any inappropriate interactions between associates of Mr. Trump and Russian officials. Asked during a news conference in February if anyone advising his campaign had contact with Russia during the campaign, Mr. Trump said "nobody that I know of."

Committees in the House of Representatives and the Senate are investigating Russia's alleged involvement in the election campaign and possible ties or communication between Russian officials and the Trump campaign.

Russia has denied interfering in the U.S. election, blaming accusations on American politicians who want to sabotage relations between the two countries.

Some Republicans contend that the Russia investigations are politically motivated and are being pushed by people who were furious that the FBI, led by its director, James Comey, continued to investigate Hillary Clinton's emails late into the 2016 election campaign. These Republicans say that the Russia investigations will prove to be without foundation.

Until this week, Mr. Sessions had resisted calls to remove himself from any role investigating possible ties between Trump associates and Russia. Democrats have said he should do so because of his place advising the Trump campaign.

On Monday, he suggested he would take himself off a case under certain circumstances, though he left out any specifics. Mr. Sessions told reporters he would "recuse myself on anything that I should recuse myself on, that's all I can tell you."

Late Wednesday, a number of Democrats, including House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D, Calif.) and Rep. Elijah Cummings (D, Md.), said Mr. Sessions should resign for failing to disclose his contacts with Russian officials.

As a senator, Mr. Sessions was a sharp critic of Russia. He supported kicking the country out of the Group of Eight summit and called for sanctions against Moscow for its 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

"I believe a systematic effort should be undertaken so that Russia feels pain for this," Mr. Sessions said at the time.

But his rhetoric softened after he endorsed Mr. Trump, and he advocated better relations with Russia.

Mr. Sessions joined the Trump campaign in February 2016 at a rally in the former senator's home state of Alabama. Within days, Mr. Trump named him chairman of his campaign's national-security advisory committee.

It is unclear whether anyone in Congress knew about the investigation into Mr. Sessions' Russian interactions before Mr. Sessions was confirmed.

The investigation into Mr. Sessions' communications comes amid calls from Democrats and some Republicans for an independent inquiry into the possible cooperation between the Trump campaign and the Russian government to influence the 2016 election, particularly through cyberattacks.

U.S. intelligence agencies already concluded that Russia hacked the Democratic National Committee and the personal email account of Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, John Podesta. Emails from both were released on the website WikiLeaks.

At first, Mr. Trump disputed that assessment, but later said: "I think it was Russia, but we also get hacked by other countries."

Justice Department regulations require the attorney general to remove himself from investigations that present a real or perceived conflict of interest. But ultimately, there is no practical mechanism, other than public pressure or an impeachment proceeding, to force the matter.

The law has changed since wide-ranging probes into the Clinton administration, when a three-judge panel could appoint an "independent counsel" or a "special prosecutor." Today, the attorney general retains far more control over the scope of a special investigation and its prosecutorial jurisdiction.

Mr. Sessions can also appoint a temporary "special counsel" from outside the Justice Department to conduct an investigation into a particularly sensitive matter and possibly prosecute related wrongdoing.

—*Lisa Schwartz contributed to this article.*

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Corrections & Amplifications

The last name of Jeff Sessions was incorrectly given as Session in an earlier version of this article. (March 2)

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