

EU says US data deal 'close' despite missed deadline

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EU Commissioner for Justice Vera Jourova, seen in Amsterdam on January 26, 2016, says talks aimed at a deal that would replace a 16-year-old "safe harbour" agreement "have not been easy"

The EU's top justice official on Monday said a deal towards sealing a new transatlantic data-sharing pact was close, despite a missed deadline that could mean a crippling blow to American online giants including Facebook and Google.

European Justice Commissioner Vera Jourova said months of talks were nearing a deal that would replace the 16-year-old "safe harbour" agreement that was struck down by Europe's top court for insufficiently protecting Internet users from US spying.

"We are close, but an additional effort is needed," Jourova told a European Parliamentary committee hearing in the eastern French city of Strasbourg, a day after a January 31 deadline to reach the deal.

"I will not hide that these talks have not been easy," she added.

The European Court of Justice in October ruled that the EU-US arrangement allowing firms to transfer European citizens' personal information to the US was "invalid" because of US snooping practices exposed by Edward Snowden, the former intelligence contractor who leaked a hoard of National Security Agency documents.

The case stemmed from a legal challenge brought by Austrian Internet activist and law student Max Schrems against Facebook in Ireland.

Schrems in a tweet said Jourova's remarks to MEPs were "100 percent laughable" and signalled he would head back to the EU's top court.

EU officials had set a January 31 deadline for a new pact, in time for a meeting Tuesday bringing together the heads of the bloc's 28 data privacy watchdogs, many of whom are quite sympathetic to the Schrems case.

But Jourova said she would hold further talks with her US counterparts, including later on Monday, as she defended the extension in negotiations to sceptical MEPs.

"I believe that the close partnership between Europe and the United

States deserves these special efforts on their side and on our side as well," she said.

Since the [court](#) decision, major Internet firms in Europe technically no longer have the legal protection for transferring data of EU citizens to the US.

Top European and US trade groups in mid-January warned of enormous fallout for businesses and customers if the two sides fail to strike a deal.

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