

EU parliament backs copyright bill targeting US tech giants

26 March 2019, by Raf Casert



People gather at the front of the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France, Tuesday March 26, 2019, to show their support for the copyright bill. The European Parliament is furiously debating the pros and cons of a landmark copyright bill one last time before the legislature will vote on it later. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

European Union lawmakers approved a copyright directive Tuesday to give writers and artists more protection of their creative rights and incomes, an intensely contentious measure that could have major trans-Atlantic implications for American technology companies.

The European Parliament voted 348-274 to pass the online copyright bill, with 36 abstentions. Opponents argued the legislation, which had been in the works for three years, would stifle freedom and creativity online. The EU's member countries gave the measure preliminary approval in February and have final reviews set for next month.

If the directive is enacted, companies such as Apple, Facebook and Google parent company Alphabet likely would have to pay European artists more and do more to keep work that appears

online from being used without permission.

The most controversial section would make companies responsible for copyrighted material that is uploaded to their online platforms.

"Web giants have been able to benefit from content created in Europe by paying derisory taxes, transferring huge profits to the U.S. or China," European Parliament President Antonio Tajani said. "Parliament has chosen to put an end to the existing digital Wild West."

Lobbying against the bill by internet giants was said to be so intense even after EU members gave their provisional support that passage wasn't viewed as a sure thing Tuesday.



Axel Voss, Member of the European Parliament and rapporteur of the copyright bill, poses for the media at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, Tuesday March 26, 2019. The European Parliament is furiously debating the pros and cons of a landmark copyright bill one last time before the legislature will vote on it later. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

German EU lawmaker Axel Voss, who was the bill's

lead backer, let out a massive sigh when the vote tally flashed up on a screen inside the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France.

"We have agreed a new set of rules which will do exactly the opposite of killing the internet," Voss said.

After the vote, Google said in a statement that the bill "will still lead to legal uncertainty and will hurt Europe's creative and digital economies. The details matter, and we look forward to working with policy makers, publishers, creators and rights holders as EU member states move to implement these new rules."

EDiMa, an association of European tech companies, said in a statement that the version approved Tuesday improved on earlier drafts, but "we still fundamentally disagree with it, as it undermines other EU law, tries to force a licensing business model on open platforms, and weakens the fundamental privacy and freedom of speech rights of EU citizens."



European Parliament Brexit chief Guy Verhofstadt speaks during a press conference at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, Tuesday March 26, 2019. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

Tens of thousands of people marched in cities across Germany over the weekend to protest what the EU sees as reforms and what critics see as restrictions that could lead to online censorship.

Outside parliament, a French band performed music to push the point that artists need higher payments and better copyright protection.

"There is nothing like free lunch, and I don't know why the giant techs should carry on, you know, having a free lunch on our expense," French music producer Wally Badarou said.

In France, ever the guardian of European culture, the government greeted the bill's passage with relief.



Axel Voss, Member of the European Parliament and rapporteur of the copyright bill, stands at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, Tuesday March 26, 2019. The European Parliament is furiously debating the pros and cons of a landmark copyright bill one last time before the legislature will vote on it later. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)

"The EU message is clear," French Culture Minister Franck Riester said. "Everyone intervening on the European market must respect our common preferences, whether it is copyright or fiscal rules" that require America's tech companies to pay more taxes in Europe.

The leader of the EU parliament's liberal ALDE group, Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium, countered the bill's critics by saying the cards had been stacked so much in favor of "monopolistic American companies" that it was ridiculous to talk about a free internet.

"The only freedom you have is to send your data mainly to U.S. companies who are using it for their profit. That is all," Verhofstadt said during Tuesday's session.



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An EU flag flies at the front of the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France, Tuesday March 26, 2019. The European Parliament is furiously debating the pros and cons of a landmark copyright bill one last time before the legislature will vote on it later. (AP Photo/Jean-Francois Badias)



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