ECIPE | EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

NEWS – ECIPE PRESS RELEASE – NEW OCCASIONAL PAPER

The 6G Wake-up Call for Europe: Reforms Urgently Needed to Sustain Europe's Telecommunications Leadership

By **Fredrik Erixon**, **Oscar Guinea**, **Dyuti Pandya** *and* **Vanika Sharma**, *Director, Director, Analyst, and Economist at ECIPE, respectively.*

Brussels, 1 October 2026 - Europe enters the 6G transition with a strategic asset: a globally competitive telecommunications sector that gives the EU real leverage in an era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry. A new ECIPE Occasional Paper finds that this strength can help Europe capture a larger share of the global digital economy.

6G will be fundamental to European industrial competitiveness. More than faster connectivity, it will combine communications, computing and artificial intelligence to enable physical AI: machines that sense, analyse and act in the real world. Industrial robots, autonomous vehicles and drones will need predictable low latency and computing capacity close to where they operate, and 6G will deliver this critical infrastructure. The transition will shape whether the European industrial sector can deploy advanced automation, develop new goods and services, and maintain Europe's competitive edge against global rivals like China in tech-driven manufacturing.

Europe brings a material advantage to this contest. Its firms remain strong in telecommunications R&D, patents, network equipment and engineering. Telecoms is one of the few ICT fields in which Europe is comparatively less dependent on foreign innovation, and in which other economies depend on European technology to build and operate advanced networks.

"6G is a major opportunity for Europe. Telecommunications is one of the few digital technologies in which European firms retain world-class engineering expertise and a decisive competitive edge. With the right conditions, they can turn network expertise into greater value in the emerging computing and AI economy", said Fredrik Erixon, Director at ECIPE and co-author of the study.

Europe must turn this asset into commercial success. EU telecommunication equipment makers invest 18 per cent of net sales in R&D but earn operating margins of only 3 per cent. 6G offers better returns: rather than supplying commoditised equipment and connectivity alone, European firms could offer tailored, higher-value services. Building a market for these services requires operational experience, which 5G deployment should already be generating. However, no EU country has achieved double-digit 5G standalone availability, compared with 32 per cent in the United States and 81 per cent in China. Of the EU's 747 recorded private-5G deployments, 500 are in Germany. Restrictive rules on business services and mounting compliance costs widen these gaps, eroding the business case for investing in 6G infrastructure.

"Europe must not make the same regulatory mistake twice. The EU is trying to simplify a digital rulebook that became too complex, yet a new wave of telecoms obligations is coming. EU policymakers should rethink these new regulations before they undermine one of Europe's leading technology sectors", said Oscar Guinea, Director at ECIPE and co-author of the study.

Europe has a clear route to make 6G a new industrial success story: scale 5G standalone and private networks, enable advanced network-service business models, reduce regulatory overlap, and focus public support on the R&D that allows European firms to make credible contributions to 3GPP and other standard-setting bodies. With 6G standardisation under way and commercial deployment expected from around 2030, acting now can translate telecommunications leadership into a lasting advantage for European companies, workers and industries.

Publication details: The 6G Wake-up Call for Europe: Reforms Urgently Needed to Sustain Europe's Telecommunications Leadership, ECIPE Occasional Paper No. 07/2026.

Contact the corresponding author: Fredrik Erixon, fredrik.erixon@ecipe.org

Media inquiries: info@ecipe.org or +32 (0) 499 053 110