

# The 2024 UEFA European Football Championship Preview



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After a gruelling group qualifying process and a few dramatic playoffs to round out the field, the EURO 2024 Championships are now set and ready to take on Germany. This is the country's first hosting assignment for a major tournament since they hosted the World Cup back in 2006, a tournament the Italians prevailed in as champions and a tournament this year that they enter as reigning champions. 24 nations will look to fight their way to the Olympiastadion Berlin on the 14th of July, but which countries *really* have the chance to lift the Henri Delauney Trophy? Here are your group breakdowns, your potential underdogs, your dark-horses, and your contenders:

J's Surprise Package = 🎁

J's Dark Horse pick = 🐎

J's Favorite to win = 🏆

## Group A 🇩🇪 🇸🇪 🇭🇺 🇨🇭

### Germany

FIFA Rank: 16

Manager: Julian Nagelsmann

Key Player: Joshua Kimmich

Formation: 4-2-3-1

International tournament football makes its return to Germany and *Die Mannschaft*, with their rich history of success on the biggest of stages. This time however, they are in desperate need of the home-support boost. Following their dominant addition of a 4th World Cup trophy in 2014, Germany swiftly fell off their perch and went through a very atypical rough patch. Following a decent semi-final showing in the 2016 EUROS, their next 6 years of international play included back-to-back eliminations in the World Cup group stages, as well as an ousting at the hands of England in 2021 at the Round of 16 stage.

This year's team will feature Julian Nagelsmann's counter-pressing 4-2-3-1 setup, using central overloads to attack through the centre of the pitch that create wide releases to try and break through defences in numerous ways. The key figures in this team such as Joshua Kimmich and Antonio Rudiger will be heavily relied upon to signal counter-pressing opportunities, and attacking talents such as Kai Havertz and Niclas Fullkrug will be crucial in execution and creation higher up the pitch. This year's EUROS will be a good litmus test for the German team to see whether they can turn a corner and get back to performing at the highest level of the game.

### Scotland

FIFA Rank: 39

Manager: Steve Clarke  
 Key Player: Scott McTominay / Andrew Robertson  
 Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 5-4-1

The Scots return to the European Championships for 2024, bringing with them a plucky, hard-working group of guys looking to make history for the United Kingdom nation. *The Tartan Army* have been to 4 iterations of the EURO's as well as a further 8 iterations of the World Cup in their history, but have yet to qualify past the group stages even once. A big issue for them in the past few years has been the over-reliance on a defensive structure and their inability to get at the stronger teams when it comes to scoring goals. In qualifying, their three biggest providers of goals and assists all occupied positions behind the forwards. If they're to make history at this tournament, they'll need to counter well, take advantage of set-pieces, and defend very well as a unit in a group filled with good-to-great teams.

Steve Clarke for the most part will employ some variation of a 3-back system, often dropping 2 from the midfield 4 to create a 5-back system for the big hitters. He uses his star players in much more advanced roles than they are used to at club level, as Robertson will play as a midfield wide player on the left and McGinn will play much higher to add some quality in with Dykes as the lone front-man. You will often see one of McGinn or McTominay make these marauding forward runs to aid Scotland's attack and add numbers, as is shown in the qualifying stats. The "McMiddle", despite not being used to playing as 10's or 9's, accounted for 63% of Scotland qualifying goals and will be a crucial part of what makes or breaks Scotland at this year's tournament. Personally, I quite like a lot of their individuals, but their group contenders and squad tactics suggest to me that they may have to wait another couple years.

### Hungary

FIFA Rank: 26  
 Manager: Marco Rossi  
 Key Player: Dominik Szoboszlai  
 Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 3-5-2

The *Magyarok* are back at the EUROS once again off the back of their resolute and impressive showing in the last European Championship. Although they finished bottom, they were taking part in a dreadful group of death and for large portions outplayed the likes of France and Germany, no easy feat. What surprised me most about them in 2021 was just how well this team played together as a unit, to me it seems like they continue to improve. Off the back of an impressive 4-0 drubbing of England in the Nations League and some greater consistency in Marco Rossi's 3-4-2-1 system, I think this is Hungary's best opportunity to reach a deep stage in the knockouts since their golden age of football in the 1950's.

In this 3-back system the Hungarian's employ 250 caps-worth of experience in the defence alone, including mainstay for the last decade Willi Orban. They are stout defensively and will drop that 2 in the midfield to aid in plugging gaps and countering the other way. Their main source of goals and creation is Liverpool's Dominic Szoboszlai, who captains this team at just 23 years old. If this team plays as good as I've seen them play since the last European Championship, I have no doubts that they'll get through this group, and may even cause a scare to the home nation in the process.

### Switzerland

FIFA Rank: 19  
 Manager: Murat Yakin  
 Key Player: Granit Xhaka  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 3-4-2-1

The Swiss have qualified for every major tournament since 2014, and in every single one, they've qualified from the group as well. You'd think in hearing that statistic that the *Rossocrociati* are a dominant tournament team, but in those 5 tournaments, they are 1-5 in the knockout round games, only reaching the quarter-finals once and consistently hitting a wall the minute they step into knockout football. In 2024, they bring in an aging squad with plenty of experience into a group filled with teams looking to either find a groove, or tread new ground. This is not a group that needs to "play to their potential" as I've said in years past, it's a team running out of time to push the boundary of what they can achieve.

The Swiss favour a 4-2-3-1 formation but also will go to a 3-back system when trying to get numbers behind the ball against tougher opponents. Bayer Leverkusen midfielder and Swiss captain Granit Xhaka is coming off his strongest individual year of his career and will offer a great backbone and a rocket of a left-foot with midfield partners Remo Freuler and Denis Zakaria. Their defence features a wealth of experience that will be tough for teams to break down, but they seem to sorely lack a killer instinct in the forward line, as Xherdan Shaqiri continues to age and the support behind him doesn't seem to be there in droves. This team's goal scorers are spread throughout the squad, and they'll need everyone to play well if they're to exercise their demons in the knockout stages as well as get out of the group unscathed.

## Spain

FIFA Rank: 8  
 Manager: Luis de la Fuente  
 Key Player: Rodri  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (a)

I always tend to hold a healthy amount of scepticism towards the Spanish national team. I am not blind or naive to their tiki-taka style and appreciate their constant excellence in maintaining their squad identity and bringing in youth talent ready for the big stage. However, I've seen far too many cases in past seasons where their possession-dominant setup, high-line, and lack of clinical finishing in key moments has gotten them in trouble. They are, without a doubt in my mind, the team who offers the biggest discrepancy between the highest ceiling and their lowest floor.

*La Furia Roja* set up in a 4-3-3 attacking formation, using the middle of that midfield 3 as a marauding attacking outlet who can join and provide for the front-3 at a moments notice. Their focus is tailored to quick passing, ball control, and high pressing the minute possession is lost. This team is littered with talent but seems to miss that one absolute star, which can certainly work for or against a team who share the ball so well together. For me, their success depends on two things. One, can they find a way to press well enough and not get beaten over the top by counter-attacking teams looking to prey on needless or inefficient possession, and two, will they be clinical in front of goal? Two very familiar points for the Spaniards.

## Croatia

FIFA Rank: 10  
 Manager: Zlatko Dalić  
 Key Player: Luka Modric / Josko Gvardiol  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (a) / 4-2-3-1

The *Vatreni* are near the end of an era. The Croatians have truly embraced their golden age of football in the former-Yugoslavian country, finishing as runners-up and 3rd place finishers in the last two World Cups, a truly magnificent achievement considering the country's population of just under four million people. However, during this unprecedented period, they've only managed to reach the Round of 16 stage, unable to replicate the magic of their World Cup runs in 2022 and 2018. With this being possibly the country's last run with their old guard, players like Luka Modric, Andrej Kramaric, Ivan Perisic, Marcelo Brozovic, and Domagoj Vida will look to end their international careers on a high.

Zlatko Dalić is no stranger to international tournaments with Croatia, and will stick to trying to out-possess and out-duel teams in the middle of the pitch, relying on his star players Modric and Kovacic. He employs a 4-3-3 attacking formation but will often change to a 4-2-3-1 to offer more control in the middle of the park and become more adaptable to what teams will throw at them in this group. The draw hasn't been kind to the Croatians, but they've flourished through tough terrain before. Spain, Italy and Albania will all offer different but equally as interesting tests, but they have the talent, they have the toughness, and they've been here before. There is no surprising Croatia, and no one is surprised by them anymore, either.

## Italy

FIFA Rank: 9  
 Manager: Luciano Spalletti  
 Key Player: Nicolò Barella / Gianluca Scamacca  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (a) / 4-2-3-1

The defending champions arrive back at the EUROs with a new look squad and a new manager. Luciano Spalletti takes over the defending champions with tactical flexibility and fluid football, aiming to guide his young side back to where they were just 3 years ago, but they'll have plenty of competition right from the off. This team has moved on from the days of Chiellini and Bonucci, their new look defensive line is young and will be tasked with the job of handling quite a bit on their plate as Spalletti's side wants to play fast and fluid attacking football, not a style the Italians have been used to for over a decade. If players like Barella and Jorginho do not control large portions of games, I would hope they don't allow their opponents too much space in-behind them. Although I am a big fan of what Spalletti accomplished at Napoli, I still have some reservations about them against the top dogs.

Spalletti will favour an attacking 4-3-3 or a 4-2-3-1, often dropping and advancing an attacking midfielder to switch between the two with the wingers adjusting accordingly. They will look to play fast, fluid, and direct football to try to capitalise on numerous areas where they believe they can hurt teams, often bombing the fullbacks forward and leaving the central defensive two alone with a dropping midfielder. I believe off the back of his glowing form at Atalanta, Scamacca will play a crucial goal for this team and will have to be clinical in order for this team to get by some real stern test in the group. Barella is their central star, but in all honesty, I hold some reservations about this



version of Italy and whether they're ready. Time will tell, but I wouldn't be shocked if we saw the defending champions struggling to get out of the early stages.

### Albania

FIFA Rank: 66  
 Manager: Sylvinho  
 Key Player: Nedim Bajrami  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1

Welcome back to *Kuqezinjtë*. This year's EUROs for the Albanians will be just their 2nd tournament on the big stage, and despite their achievement their group draw wasn't exactly favourable for their welcome back. Grouped against the defending champions, Spanish possessive-powerhouse, and their overachieving former-Yugoslav neighbours, they will have their work cut out for them and will have to seriously ride their luck and capitalise on key moments to sneak out of this group. One thing they do have is a technically gifted enough team to, if they work well as a unit, scare a team or two in this group, you really never know in these tournaments.

The Albanians are headed by former Brazilian player Sylvinho, who will employ a 4-2-3-1 formation the vast majority of the time, but considering their group we will probably see some variation of the formation that results in one or two more holding players, or the wingers in the 3 drop to create cover on the wings. Their goal contributions for the most part come from midfielder Nedim Bajrami or the more advanced Jasir Asani, look to these two to be their main source of chance creation and finishing. The Albanians are outmatched, but have had success in recent history with Sylvinho's adaptable 4-2-3-1 in the Nations League. Let's see if they can cause a shock or two.

## **Group C**

### Slovenia

FIFA Rank: 57  
 Manager: Matjaž Kek  
 Key Player: Benjamin Šeško / Jan Oblak  
 Formation: 4-4-2

Slovenia are back at the European Championships for the first time in a long 24 years, and are still yet to claim their first victory on Europe's biggest and brightest international stage. This time around for them, it'll be a nice mix of the old with the new, as this team is spearheaded by team captain and Atletico Madrid keeper Jan Oblak and features a young attacking prospect in Benjamin Šeško that has many high profile clubs circling for his signature. At just 20 years of age, he contributed the highest total of goals + assists for his country in qualifying and continues to lead this team in a way that makes you think if the service is there, this underdog could scare a couple teams.

Matjaz Kek employs the robust and traditional 4-4-2 which has the two controllers in the middle drop as two 6's to add defensive coverage whenever needed. Within the last 12 months, this formation and pragmatism has led to victories over Norway, USA, Northern Ireland and Portugal, with draws against two of their group contenders Serbia and Denmark. Would I put myself on the line and say we'll see them shock us? No, no I will not, but... Two of the most important things in international and knockout football tend to be whether or not you are rigid defensively with a good goalkeeper, and whether or not you have someone up top who can take their chances. They may be a couple years away from being the best version of themselves, but count them out at your own peril, this team intrigues me.

### Denmark

FIFA Rank: 21  
 Manager: Kasper Hjulmand  
 Key Player: Joachim Andersen / Rasmus Hojlund  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (a) / 3-4-3

The fairy-tale winners of EURO 1992 and semi-finalists of 3 years ago are back to attempt to make another run as the dark-horse darlings. Similar to last tournament, the Danes enter this year's competition with a well-organised, tight-knit group of players that aren't easily pushed to the side by the big hitters. This team is defined by a portion of its older guard and the younger generation it inspired to follow. Players like Kasper Schmeichel, Simon Kjær, and Christian Eriksen still play key roles in the squad coupled with the younger generation of Joakim Mæhle, Joachim Andersen, Andreas Christensen and Rasmus Hojlund ready to make their mark for their country. The Danes have proven they will be a tough customer for anyone.

*De Rød-Hvide* are led by Kasper Hjulmand, who employs a 4-3-3 attacking formation that will often be rotated to a 3-4-3 to utilise some of their wing-backs like Joakim Mæhle, a personal favourite of mine. They utilise the wings often to get in behind and send crosses into the box and will use players like Eriksen and Damsgaard to

occupy those advanced midfield positions whenever necessary. They are also one of those squads that are very comfortable sitting in and settling into a deep defensive shape when need be, something that can always prove to be very important if they can reach the knockout rounds. As per usual, they will be as immovable as a boulder and opponents will need to provide their most fluid and seamless attacks to take them down.

### Serbia

FIFA Rank: 33  
 Manager: Dragan Stojković  
 Key Player: Dušan Tadić / Aleksandar Mitrović  
 Formation: 3-4-2-1 / 3-4-1-2

Well, here we go again. Now it's time to talk about Serbia, joy is not in my body until I see something genuinely happen on the pitch to revive my faith. Piksi heads this team for his 2nd time in charge at an international tournament, following the disappointment in Qatar two years ago which saw this team claim a single point in their group. On paper, they're the most stacked for talent I think Serbia's ever been, and the ability to point out individual positives are there for all to see, but at the end of the day, the togetherness and the compatibility of the team just hasn't been there in years past when push has come to shove. Unfortunately, the lead up games to the tournament have given us an even clearer indication that something needs to change, and fast.

Piksi switches between a 3-4-2-1 and a 3-4-1-2 depending on the striking and aerial presence he wants to see up the pitch, opting for three at the back due to a real lack of pace defensively and an ability for talented wing-backs like Kostic to bomb up and down and adapt to the team at hand. Along with Kostic, other threats such as Milinkovic-Savic, Mitrovic, Vlahovic, and most importantly, Tadic, will be crucial to this team's chance creation and goals. It goes without saying that the talent is there and we've seen them work tremendously in the past to qualify for these tournaments, but the reliance on a 35-year old Tadic, who is fantastic but shouldn't be looked to to carry the brunt of the load, is alarming. Serbia can play up to the level of the top dogs, but can just as easily play down to the lowest common denominator. I wouldn't even be shocked if they got something from England and then lost the remaining two matches. My question is, which version will we see? I have a fear it may be the floor rather than the ceiling, but you never know.

### England

FIFA Rank: 4  
 Manager: Gareth Southgate  
 Key Player: Harry Kane / Jude Bellingham  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3 (a)

The never-ending saga that is the Three Lions are back. Following their heartbreaking loss to Italy in the final 3 years ago, they reloaded this squad with a new platoon of youth and in-form players, additions that make this squad the strongest I think they've ever had for England since the turn of the century. It'd be mind-numbing going through the team at every position, they are loaded in attack, strong and technical in the middle, and have added new additions in defence that I think improve upon previous years' setups. It is no longer a matter of judging potential or "if" for England, they are strong enough to win right now, and they may even be the favourites.

Gareth Southgate over the years had adapted this setup and it has evolved into changing between a 4-2-3-1 and an attacking 4-3-3, with many options for both formations. Kane spearheads the attack, and the chance creation beside and behind him is loaded. Palmer, Foden, Saka, Bellingham, Alexander-Arnold, Watkins, Eze and more... They have more than enough to expect to break down any team, at any time, anywhere. Three big questions for me:

- Whether they have enough controllers in midfield to control the tempo of matches and play teams out of games through technicality and ball-movement
- Whether or not the new additions defensively will come together as a cohesive defensive unit
- Can Southgate field lineups that work the most cohesively to win four knockout games in a row

Without question though, the time is now for England.

## **Group D**

### Poland

FIFA Rank: 28  
 Manager: Michał Probierz  
 Key Player: Robert Lewandowski  
 Formation: 3-5-2 / 3-4-2-1

One big positive to this Polish side under Michal Probiez's management is that they are yet to lose a match with him at the helm. With that being said, he has coached the team for under a year, taking over a national team that had been plagued by underachievement with an expectation of improvement on the big stage. The team does not lack togetherness and has little turnover of players from previous years, boasting one of the highest average ages of players at the tournament with 28.2. If they're to get out of a complicated group, they'll need to use that togetherness and new manager verve to ride their luck.

The *Bialo-Czerwoni* use a 3-back system, and will often use a 3-5-2 for most matches, dropping the outside 2 of the midfield 5 back for opponents such as France and Netherlands. Their talisman is unquestionably the ageing Robert Lewandowski, Barcelona forward and focal point to everything Poland look to accomplish. Most attacks move through the wings and often, they look to provide good service for Lewandowski as well as other secondary options such as Piotr Zielinski and Arkadiusz Milik. Personally, I'd be very impressed if Poland got out of this group, but I'd lean towards a group stage exit as most neutrals expect.

### Netherlands

FIFA Rank: 7  
 Manager: Ronald Koeman  
 Key Player: Virgil van Dijk / Cody Gakpo  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (d) / 3-4-3

18 months on from their nail-biting World Cup quarter-final exit at the hands of the eventual Champions, the *Oranje* are back at the EUROs with a bone to pick. With Frenkie de Jong set to miss out and a fully healthy captain Virgil van Dijk (as opposed to the last European Championship) this team will have to adjust to another big star not being available to them this time around as well. With Ronald Koeman at the helm for his second stint with the Dutch, I have fears about this team as a whole. Koeman in the past decade, despite a glowing playing career, has failed to really impress me at any of the clubs under his tutelage, including his first stint at Holland prior to leaving for Barcelona in 2018. However, a big positive for this squad is one of the most talented defenders the country has ever produced being paired alongside a rising next-generation defender in de Ligt, that will be a force to break down for anybody.

Koeman's team, to their credit, plays to its strengths. They often rotate between a 4-3-3 with two defensive midfielders and a 3-back system built around a limiting of space in behind and providing service for their attackers down the wings. Their defence is their strong suit, but with the struggling form of some of their key midfielders and a heavy reliance on the clinicality of their strikers, the question for them will revolve around whether the unit can produce enough chances to really challenge the best teams at this tournament. As with many great defences at international tournaments, they always have a puncher's chance to ride their rigidity and luck through games, but personally I don't see a team that is consistent enough for me to put my faith in unless strikers like Cody Gakpo and Memphis Depay can make the most of the chances provided. If history is anything to go by, based on the World Cup and EURO qualifying eye-test, they really lack in key attacking areas and that makes me hesitant.

### Austria 🎁

FIFA Rank: 25  
 Manager: Ralf Rangnick  
 Key Player: Marcel Sabitzer / Konrad Laimer  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3 (a)

Ralf Rangnick's Austria looks as stern a test as I've ever seen them since the turn of the century. They're a very well-drilled squad who have a good mix of youth and experience, containing a team full of players who play in the top 5 leagues and more importantly, work very well together. In the last couple of years they've breezed through EURO qualification, beat teams such as Germany, Italy, Sweden, Serbia and Turkey courtesy of a 5-goal drubbing, and have done so while implementing 9 different formations. Something about this Austria team wreaks of a squad no big team wants to play, and they'll need to go through 2 giants.

Rangnick employs... well, everything. Recently he has found success in a 4-2-3-1 which many squads in this year's EURO's utilise to be adaptable in real time, but it's hard to say what he'll use come tournament time. The strength of this team lies in the middle of the park, as even their highest contributors of both goals and assists come from the midfield. I favour Sabitzer and Laimer to be huge contributors to this team's chances, and many other pieces such as Alaba, Seiwald, Baumgartner, and Gregoritsch could play a huge part in Rangnick's system. Similar to Japan in the last iteration of the World Cup, Austria is up against two huge footballing nations in their group, along with a stern test in waiting in their third match. I believe they have the flexibility, rigidity, creativity, and team makeup to shock people as Japan did 18 months ago. They're my surprise package.

### France 🏆

FIFA Rank: 2  
 Manager: Didier Deschamps  
 Key Player: Kylian Mbappé

Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3 (a)

*Allez Les Bleus.* The French teams of the past decade have carried a massive fear factor for the rest of whatever field they've been a part of. A 10-year period of interchange between two massive footballing generations, of which both are spoiled for depth and star-talent. Following the World Cup drama of their penalty-shootout loss to Argentina, a similar fate that plagued fellow group members Netherlands, they come to this tournament with a wealth of youth talent impatient to prove they can be as feared as the one before, with fragments of the old-guard littered throughout the squad. Deschamps, a World Cup winner, finalist, and EURO finalist of 2016, will look to add that coveted EURO title to the trophy cabinet and cement this team as the most dominant international squad of recent memory.

Deschamps pivots between a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-3-3 attacking formation, and has all the attacking pieces necessary to make this team a genuinely terrifying prospect to defend against. Coupled with phenomenal creative pieces, they also welcome back the engine of N'golo Kante, as well as many up and coming youngsters already making their mark such as the Real Madrid duo of Tchouameni and Camavinga. Their defence also features a wealth of talented defenders in Saliba, Konate, Upamecano, Kounde, and Hernandez; as I had mentioned before, absolutely spoiled. The experience is there, the youthful exuberance is there, every position is accounted for, they've been to the very top before, and they have an identifiable talisman who is, debatably, the best player in the world right now in Kylian Mbappe. I just can't convince myself to pick anyone else, I think Deschamps knows exactly how to make this team tick. Despite an intriguing group, I have them to take the whole thing.

## Group E

### Belgium

FIFA Rank: 3  
 Manager: Domenico Tedesco  
 Key Player: Kevin de Bruyne  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (d) / 4-2-3-1

The erosion of expectation for the Belgians is what I find the most intriguing about this squad. After a 6 year stay at the helm, Roberto Martinez moved on from coaching what was largely considered, the golden age of the Belgian national team. With so much talent from front to back it was hardly a shock to hear this narrative constantly, the peak coming at the 2018 World Cup in Russia as they defeated Brazil in the quarter-finals and went on to finish 3rd, marking the best finish they had ever had at the prestigious tournament. The expectation from there continued to grow larger, and with it the performances continued to come up shorter, blowing up in their faces 2 years ago as player feuds and unenthusiastic performances saw them out by the group stages, Martinez left his post. In spite of this, I believe a reset and a real pulling back of expectation could be just what this team needs.

*De Rode Duivels* fresh new manager Domenico Tedesco employs a 4-3-3 defensive formation, but will often change that to a 4-2-3-1 when he wants to bombard his opponents with extra runners from midfield. Although narratively this team is near or at the end of their golden era, I think they have a great mix of youth and experience. Kevin de Bruyne will lead the line, a master of chance creation and someone who can score a goal with either foot from anywhere; players like Trossard, Doku, Lukaku, and Openda will only get better with him around if he can stay healthy. Another big help to their main man will be the cover of the defensive midfielders with him, players like Onana and Mangala are only going to help unlock their star man further and it's the best balance I've seen their midfield have in some time. I believe the group they drew is quite friendly to them, and they have the chance to really grow into this tournament. Where many can see the end of the golden generation, I see the opportunity for one last shot with new ideas and a newer generation capable enough to fill in the pieces. I'd keep an eye on the Belgians.

### Slovakia

FIFA Rank: 48  
 Manager: Francesco Calzona  
 Key Player: Dávid Hancko / Ondrej Duda  
 Formation: 4-3-3 (a)

The *Sokoli* return for their 3rd European Championship in a row. Under Francesco Calzona's direct approach to attacking football, the Slovak's have established themselves as a team capable of scoring goals and combining young and old defenders to have a knowledgeable, sturdy, rigid base to build from. This generation of players are no strangers to tournament football and that will help in a group where that 2nd spot seems up for grabs to any of the three not including Belgium. Their fate will undoubtedly rely on what they can scalp Belgium for and how they take advantage of the rest of the group.

Calzona uses a 4-3-3 attacking formation, and for all 16 games under his management they have never wavered. They often like to use their height on set-pieces to create good chances and their direct approach is used to



take advantage of their quality up the pitch. This team is not all that deep, but it has an exciting group of about 10 or 11 players who are used to high-level football and may be able to raise their level to somewhere much higher than the general public expects. Watch out for David Hancko, a talented young centre back who played the most minutes, logged the most starts, and provided the most goal contributions for Slovakia in qualifying. A talented diagonal-ball and 1v1 defender who will be paired nicely with team captain Milan Škriniar.

### Romania

FIFA Rank: 46  
 Manager: Edward Iordanescu  
 Key Player: Radu Dragusin / Ianis Hagi  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-1-4-1

Coming off of an unbeaten qualifying campaign, the Romanian's return to Europe's premier competition with some real hope of recapturing the magic of the 2000 EUROS which saw them reach the quarter-final. As I mentioned about Slovakia and I'm sure will mention about Ukraine, this group's 2nd and possible 3rd spot is up for grabs. The Romanian's bring a rigid defensive structure and the ability to ride waves of pressure out with talented defensive pieces and attacking outlets that share the wealth in front of goal, with 4 players racking up multiple goals in their 10 qualifying matches. If this team has any hope of getting to the knockouts, it's the foundations of their rigid defensive structure that will play a big part.

Edward Iordanescu likes to toggle between a 4-2-3-1 and a 4-1-4-1, often keeping large numbers behind the ball defensively. Despite their average age sitting at around 27, most of their starting eleven and key role players are quite young. Centre back Radu Dragusin remains the highest profile player in the squad, starting all 10 qualifying matches and being the key defender in a backline that limited opponents to only 5 goals conceded in those 10 matches. Their biggest attacking inspiration going forward is the son of famous Romanian legend Gheorghe Hagi, Ianis. Along with him, the lesser known Olimpiu Morutan will be a source of creativity as he led the team in assists in qualifying. However, if the *Tricolorii* are to make any noise this summer, it will have to be through the foundations of their defensive backbone.

### Ukraine

FIFA Rank: 22  
 Manager: Sergiy Rebrov  
 Key Player: Oleksandr Zinchenko / Mykhailo Mudryk  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1 / 4-3-3 (a)

The Yellow and Blue qualify for their 4th successive European Championship on the heels of the playoffs, defeating both Bosnia & Herzegovina and Iceland. They enter the tournament with the lowest average age of any squad at 26.1, defined by their next generation of talent and looking to capture some of the magic they had 3 years ago which saw them reach the quarter-finals, their best ever performance. Many neutrals and analysts consider them a favourite to survive this group behind Belgium, however many will take the narrative around this team away from football due to the recent invasion of Ukraine by neighbouring Russia. It is a sobering point but one that allows us to see how sports can make us forget about the horrors of war and politics, even if just for a moment.

Sergiy Rebrov sets this team up in a 4-2-3-1 formation and will often throw caution to the wind with a 4-3-3 attacking formation that takes the game to their opponents. They have some very talented, noteworthy pieces that allow a free-flowing, attacking style to reign supreme within this squad. Players such as Oleksandr Zinchenko, Mykhailo Mudryk, and Artem Dovbyk will be the ones to look at to push the attacking style and get at backlines, and the emergence of Real Madrid keeper Andriy Lunin will be a welcomed addition to maintain stability in front of their own goal. The youth of their backline and tendency to bomb forward down the wings may be a way in which teams like Slovakia and Romania hope to counter-attack, but there's no doubt the attacking pieces, when working in unison, will be tough to keep out. A lot to live up to from 3 years ago for the Ukrainians, but the talent is there to see. Will their lack of experience keep them from rising to the occasion?

## **Group F**

### Türkiye

FIFA Rank: 40  
 Manager: Vincenzo Montella  
 Key Player: Hakan Çalhanoğlu  
 Formation: 4-2-3-1

Anyone remember 3 years ago when I said Türkiye would be a darkhorse and then lost all 3 matches, looking flat and void of energy? Sure hope not. *Ay Yıldızlılar* are back at the EUROS, however the past 12 months have not been free of inter-squad issues. Stefan Kuntz, former Turkish national team manager was sacked off the back of his team's bad form, but also in-part due to some scathing remarks about his squad's lack of fight, disinclination to listen, and a number of dressing room spats. Since Montella has taken over, it's been a mixed bag for results. The



qualification was secured, a number of good performances in beating nations like Croatia and Germany close to appointment, but some recent dips as well that have seen them lose by 5 goals to Austria and scrape over the qualification line to the Welsh. I'm not quite sure what to make of the noise, but I am reluctant to praise them towards massive success.

In his 7 games in charge, Montella has used a 4-2-3-1. There seems to be no real set lineup and that for me is a concern, but also could be helpful as there hasn't been main sources of goals, but rather a group effort of many contributors. Players such as Çalhanoglu, Kokcu, Ozcan, and Demiral have played important roles in the qualification process and for them it may be as simple as can they catch a string of good performances at the right time. The two games they circle on the calendar are Georgia, a newcomer to the big stage, and Czech Republic, another team plagued by off-field issues. All I know for sure is that I certainly don't feel anywhere close to as confident about this team as I did 3 years ago.

### Georgia

FIFA Rank: 75  
 Manager: Willy Sagnol  
 Key Player: Khvicha Kvaratskhelia  
 Formation: 3-4-3 / 3-5-2

A warm welcome to the *Jvarosnebi*, newcomers to the European Championships and debutants to their first ever major international tournament. Qualifying through the third path of the playoffs, the Georgians look to make their mark and show that their growth in the game is more than just a one-time appearance. They will have their work cut out for them, as the vast majority of the squad are not used to the level of competition as the EUROS will bring, but with some possibly shaky confidence levels and narratives following group members, the ultimate Cinderella story is not to be dismissed out of hand.

Willy Sagnol often turns to a 3-back system of some sort, whether that be with a 4 or 5 man midfield depending on the numbers needed to clog up the crucial central areas. Their talisman is unquestionably Napoli's 22 year old star Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, a mazy, slaloming winger with an uncanny ability to keep the ball on a string while being extremely agile, he'll be the player most teams target to man-mark out of danger areas. Other crucial players to this setup are FC Metz striker Georges Mikautadze and Valencia goalkeeper Giorgi Mamardashvili, both falling under the age of 24. Whether they get anything from their 3 group games or not, one thing is clear. Whatever they're doing to develop the next generation of talent in their country, it's clearly bearing fruit.

### Portugal

FIFA Rank: 6  
 Manager: Roberto Martinez  
 Key Player: Bruno Fernandes / Cristiano Ronaldo  
 Formation: 3-4-3 / 4-1-3-2

Portugal, champions of EURO 2016 and a current hot-bed for the growth of elite talent, has as good a chance as anyone to win this year's tournament. *A Seleção das Quinas* are absolutely red-hot under Roberto Martinez's management, breezing through qualification with a 100% record and occupied by multiple generations of talent. Every year you feel as if there is a handful of teams who have a real, legitimate chance at the trophy, and Portugal is undoubtedly one of them. Front to back, it is a team that is stacked with talent. If you're going to nitpick for weaknesses, you have to think the defensive individual abilities are a touch too attacking minded. They will have to rely on players such as the elder statesman Pepe, Ruben Dias and Goncalo Inacio to reign the squad in to committing to that defensive solidity Martinez's teams often prides themselves on.

Martinez has experimented with different 4-back systems over the previous month and it has resulted in the team losing their first two matches under his reign in friendlies. When they are their most effective, it has often been with some variation of a 3-back system like the 3-4-3. This is partly due to the fullbacks often bombing up the wings and not being as naturally inclined to defending 1v1, so if I were Roberto, I'd stick to having that extra centre back. Cristiano Ronaldo at the tender age of 38 remains the team's main source of goals, and you have to think with father time rearing his head that this may be his last chance to lead the line at the European Championships. He'll certainly have the help in attack, so it's as good a chance as ever for the Portuguese to take home the trophy.

### Czech Republic

FIFA Rank: 36  
 Manager: Ivan Hašek  
 Key Player: Tomáš Souček / Patrik Schick  
 Formation: 3-4-1-2 / 4-2-3-1

The Czech's return to Europe's biggest stage, looking to repeat their quarter-final achievement of 3 years prior. This team still contains a lot of the players that made 2021 so successful for them, but with a major caveat.

Their now ex-manager, Jaroslav Silhavy, stepped down following their qualification for this summer's tournament, citing harsh criticism from the Czech media for the team's performances and a particular tip of the iceberg event involving the suspension of 3 Czech players for partying. The main reason for his departure was certainly the overzealous media criticism, as he stated himself, "the decision was growing in me and this certainly didn't help it" referring to the suspensions of the players. Nevertheless, the team continues on and certainly has the pieces in place to make another deep run, but a new manager with only 4 games at the helm certainly won't help coupled with the recent drama.

Silhavy's replacement, Hasek, has employed a 3-4-1-2, a 3-1-4-2, and a 4-2-3-1 in their 4 games, and I'm not necessarily sure he's certain of which one to stick with come tournament time. This team in the past few years has been defined as a hard-working and high-pressing outfit who have a sturdy, industrial midfield with a rigid defensive solidity, and you'd hope that it remains that way if they're to have any success this summer. Key players for them will be their industrial defensive midfielder Tomas Soucek, who loves to get up the pitch and contribute heavily with goals for this team, and Patrick Schick, the 5-time goalscorer of the 2021 European Championships. I remember I was quite high on my opinion of this outfit in 2021, I loved their togetherness and tenacity, but with some uncertainties in place it feels much more unclear on what version of them we'll see this summer. At full-flow, they're certainly a team to be reckoned with.

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