

EURO 2024 : WHY THE THREE NATIONS LEAGUE QUALIFIERS DESERVE THEIR PLACE AMONG THE 24 TEAMS

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A much-anticipated, month-long football tournament of thrills, spills and entertaining upsets, Euro 2024 features an opening match between Scotland and the host country Germany. A total of 24 teams will battle it out on the pitch in front of huge audiences all over the world.

Teams will compete in six groups of four. The top two teams from each group and the four best third-placed teams across all groups will advance to the Round of 16, ensuring a competitive knock-out phase.

To determine 20 of the [23 national teams](#) joining Germany, qualifying matches took place from March 2023 to March 2024. As with Euro 2020, the remaining three national teams' qualification relied on their performance in the [Uefa Nations League](#).

This means the Nations League offers teams that fail to qualify through the traditional route an alternative path to the final stages. But doubts have been raised regarding the fairness of granting national teams an additional opportunity to qualify and participate in 2024 via this league.

The [Nations League](#), which was established in 2018, involves all men's national teams of the Uefa member associations and [largely replaces](#) international friendly games by offering more competitive games.

Teams are organised into leagues and groups based on rankings derived from their recent results, allowing more frequent matches between national teams of comparable

level.

Winners of each group advance to the final round to determine the Nations League champion, and a system of promotions and relegations ensures regular team reshuffling between leagues. A key feature of the Nations League is its connection to the Euros, providing teams with an additional opportunity for qualifying.

Some academics, including [László Csató](#) and [Kjetil Haugen and Alex Krumer](#) have suggested that the coexistence of the Nations League and Euro qualifying raises fairness concerns. They believe this could lead to a situation where a team that qualifies for the Euros through the Nations League might not deserve it as much as a team that failed to qualify through the traditional route.

In our recent analysis of [the Nations League's impact on fairness](#), we found evidence that the integrity of national men's football team competitions and games in Europe remained intact when comparing the period before the Nations League (2014-2016) with the period since its inception (2018-2021). However, while we observed no decrease in fairness, we acknowledge that legitimate concerns that have been raised.

Working hard to qualify

For the 2024 Euros, three teams secured their spots through the Nations League: Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia. Poland finished third in Euro qualifying Group E behind a (surprisingly) strong Albania and the regularly solid Czech Republic.

Poland serves as a notable example of how the Nations League can help mitigate potential unfairness stemming from the seeding of traditional Euro qualifying group draws, where teams may face opponents with considerably varying levels of difficulty. In other words, Poland may have faced stronger teams in Group E than it would have had if seeded in another group.

Ukraine presents an even clearer case, finishing third in Euro qualifying Group C, behind England and Italy, despite ending with an equal number of points as Italy. Given these circumstances, both Poland and Ukraine appear deserving their qualification to Euro 2024.

Georgia's path to qualification for the Euros for the first time in its history also merits attention. Despite finishing fourth in Euro qualifying Group A, Georgia secured the top spot in Group 4 of the Nations League C and earned their place in the Euros this year through the Nations League play-off system.

While some may argue that Norway had a stronger case, having placed third in Euro qualifying Group A, Georgia's journey through the Nations League, facing opponents such as North Macedonia (a participant in Euro 2020), highlights the potential for relatively weaker national teams to aspire to participating.

Notably, North Macedonia held traditionally strong football nations such as England and Italy to draws in their respective Euro 2024 qualifying matches, and even managed to defeat Italy away. In addition, Georgia's qualification came at the expense of Greece, a former Euro champion.

So in light of Uefa's commitment to provide [real competition and qualification opportunities](#) for all members, Georgia's presence at this year's Euros should not be dismissed as unfair. Despite potential dissent from Norwegian fans, Georgia's journey to Euro 2024 suggests they could be competitive, further bolstering the case for an alternative route to Euro qualification through the Nations League.

We believe the three teams that qualified via the Nations League have done so fairly. This suggests that all 24 teams participating in the competition this summer will be there on merit and should be competitive - with the reasonable assumption that Germany would have qualified even without being host team.

Underdogs often rise to the occasion and make things unexpectedly interesting at the Euros. Denmark was not supposed to participate in 1992 (the Scandinavian country replaced Yugoslavia at short notice), but it went on to win the tournament.

The qualification of 16 out of the 24 teams participating in the group stage and uncertainty about who will end up playing who, will generate much excitement and anticipation, not to mention entertainment. All the elements are in place for a top-notch tournament of thrilling football, so let the games begin.

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