

Size Matters More Than Wealth: New Research Reveals What Predicts World Cup Qualification in Europe

A new academic study using statistical modelling shows that a nation's population size — not its income — is the dominant factor determining which European countries qualify for the FIFA World Cup, while identifying remarkable overachievers like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia who defied the structural odds.

ATHENS, Greece — A new study to be published in the *Athens Journal of Sports* finds that population size is the single most powerful structural predictor of World Cup qualification among European nations, while GDP per capita — despite being positive — plays a far more limited and statistically weaker role than previously assumed. The research, authored by Gregory T. Papanikos of the Athens Institute, analyses all 52 UEFA member associations competing in the 2026 FIFA World Cup European qualifying rounds using an econometric probit model.

The study asks a deceptively simple question: setting aside tactics, coaching, and individual talent, which countries are structurally expected to qualify for the World Cup — and which ones beat or fall short of those expectations?

KEY FINDINGS

- Population is king. Larger nations with bigger talent pools are significantly more likely to qualify, regardless of income level. This effect is statistically robust across every model estimated.
- Money helps, but less than expected. GDP per capita is positive but only borderline statistically significant in the preferred probit model — suggesting that within Europe's relatively prosperous context, additional wealth generates diminishing returns in terms of footballing success.
- The model correctly predicts most outcomes. Germany (88%), France (83%), England (80%), and Spain (74%) were all correctly predicted as highly likely qualifiers and all duly qualified.
- Italy is the biggest shock. With a predicted qualification probability of nearly 80% — the fourth highest in Europe — Italy's failure to qualify is the most structurally surprising result in the entire dataset, pointing to deep institutional problems in Italian football that no amount of population or wealth could overcome.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina is the greatest overachiever. With a predicted probability of just 4.1% — the lowest of any qualifying nation — Bosnia's qualification is the single largest positive deviation between structural prediction and actual outcome in the sample.
- Croatia punches far above its weight. With only 3.8 million people, Croatia's predicted probability was just 17.8%, yet it qualified — a testament to an extraordinary concentration of elite talent in a single generation.

"The results tell a clear story: if you want to predict which European nations will qualify for the World Cup, the first thing to look at is how many people live there. But the model also reveals something

more interesting — a handful of nations consistently beat the structural odds, and that tells us something important about the role of footballing culture, player development systems, and yes, individual star players, that no econometric model can fully capture."

— **Gregory T. Papanikos, Author**

THE STAR PLAYER EFFECT: WHEN ONE PLAYER CHANGES EVERYTHING

The study goes beyond the numbers to examine why some nations consistently outperform their structural profile. The answer, the paper argues, often comes down to the transformative impact of individual world-class players:

- Croatia built its 2026 qualifying campaign around Luka Modrić — a Ballon d'Or winner and five-time Champions League champion with Real Madrid — alongside Mateo Kovačić, Joško Gvardiol, and other elite club players. No statistical model based on population and income can capture this concentration of talent.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina's qualification defied all structural logic. The presence of Edin Džeko — one of the most prolific strikers of his generation with over 70 international goals and spells at Manchester City, Roma, and Inter Milan — was decisive for a nation of just 3.4 million people.
- Scotland's overachievement (predicted probability: 30%) was driven in part by Andrew Robertson, a Champions League winner with Liverpool and one of the finest left-backs of his era.
- Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo — arguably the most prolific international goalscorer in football history — represents perhaps the most extreme example of a single individual transforming a nation's structural footballing prospects.

A ROADMAP FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The paper calls for a new programme of case study research examining each overachieving nation individually, investigating their football development policies, youth academy infrastructure, coaching systems, and diaspora talent pipelines. Croatia's acclaimed youth development model and Bosnia's capacity to mobilise diaspora talent across Western Europe are highlighted as particularly promising subjects for future investigation.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Title: ["Population, GDP per Capita, and Qualification for the 2026 FIFA World Cup: Evidence from UEFA Men's National Teams"](#)

Author: Gregory T. Papanikos, President, Athens Institute; Professor (Adjunct), University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

Journal: *Athens Journal of Sports (forthcoming)*

Data: 52 UEFA member associations; population and GDP per capita from the IMF World Economic Outlook (2025)

Method: Probit binary choice model; logit and OLS estimates reported for robustness

Conference: To be presented at the 26th Annual International Conference on Sports, organised by the Sports Unit of the Athens Institute, 11–12 May 2026 and sponsored by the *Athens Journal of Sports*.

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