

Pressure on Italy as play-off hopefuls **eye** 2026 World Cup

Sixteen teams compete for four remaining European places in first 48-team tournament

● Italy face Northern Ireland in Path A semi-final

● Italy have not qualified since 2014

● Ukraine, Kosovo seek first World Cup appearance

AFP | Paris

The final line-up for the 2026 World Cup will be decided over the next week, with 16 teams competing for the last four places allocated to European countries.

Twelve runners-up from the qualifying groups and four teams that earned spots through their UEFA Nations League results have a second chance to punch their ticket to football's global showpiece.

These are the four play-off routes that will determine the remaining qualifiers for the first 48-team World Cup:

Path A

Four-time World Cup winners Italy face immense pressure as they attempt to qualify for a first appearance at the tournament since 2014.

After lifting the trophy in 2006, Italy's record at the World Cup has been dire. They suffered two successive group-stage exits before missing out entirely on the 2018 and 2022 editions.

In order to avoid another qualifying failure Italy must overcome Northern Ireland in Bergamo on Thursday, before a potential final against Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina on March 31.

"It's only normal that there's pressure - only if you had no blood in your veins would you



A FIFA World Cup trophy is displayed at the Akron Stadium, where it arrived as the second part of its tour in Zapopan, Mexico

not feel it," said Italy coach Gennaro Gattuso, who played in the 2006 final which the Azzurri won on penalties against France.

Northern Ireland are big underdogs against Italy but hope to end a 40-year absence from the World Cup.

Wales host Bosnia in Cardiff in the other semi-final.

Manager Craig Bellamy said earlier this month that he "feels a responsibility" to lead Wales to a second straight finals. Their appearance in Qatar was the country's first at the World Cup in 64 years.

Path B

Ukraine's footballers will hope to lift the morale of a war-torn country by competing at a first World Cup in 20 years. To get there, they need to beat Sweden on neutral ground in Valencia and then Poland or Albania.

Sweden picked up just two points in a dismal qualifying campaign but a team now coached by former Chelsea and Brighton boss Graham Potter will get another shot on the strength of their Nations League performances.

However, Sweden will be

without key man Alexander Isak as the Liverpool forward is not yet ready to return from a broken leg suffered in December.

Poland can count on Robert Lewandowski who is eyeing a third World Cup, but Albania -- led by former Arsenal and Barcelona defender Sylvinho -- believe they have what it takes to qualify for the first time.

Path C

Kosovo stand two wins away from a first major tournament a decade on from their admission to UEFA and FIFA. They came second in their qualifying group after two wins over Sweden and a victory in Slovenia.

"It's a massive opportunity for us. The whole country is buzzing with excitement. Everyone's over the moon," Kosovo captain Vedat Muriqi told FIFA.com.

Mallorca striker Muriqi sits second only to Kylian Mbappe in La Liga this season with 18 goals. The 31-year-old is also Kosovo's

all-time record scorer.

Slovakia, who last featured at the World Cup in 2010, host Kosovo in Bratislava while Turkey and Romania square off in Istanbul.

Turkey have not played at the World Cup since a surprise third-place finish in 2002. Ro-

18

goals in La Liga this season put Kosovo's record scorer Vedat Muriqi second only to Kylian Mbappé heading into the crucial play-off fixtures

mania's most recent appearance was in 1998.

Path D

Troy Parrott's heroics snatched the Republic of Ireland a play-off berth, but there is much still to be done if the Irish are to return to the World Cup stage.

Ireland, who haven't featured at the tournament since 2002, head to Prague to take on the Czech Republic in the semi-finals. The winner of that tie will host the final against Denmark or North Macedonia.

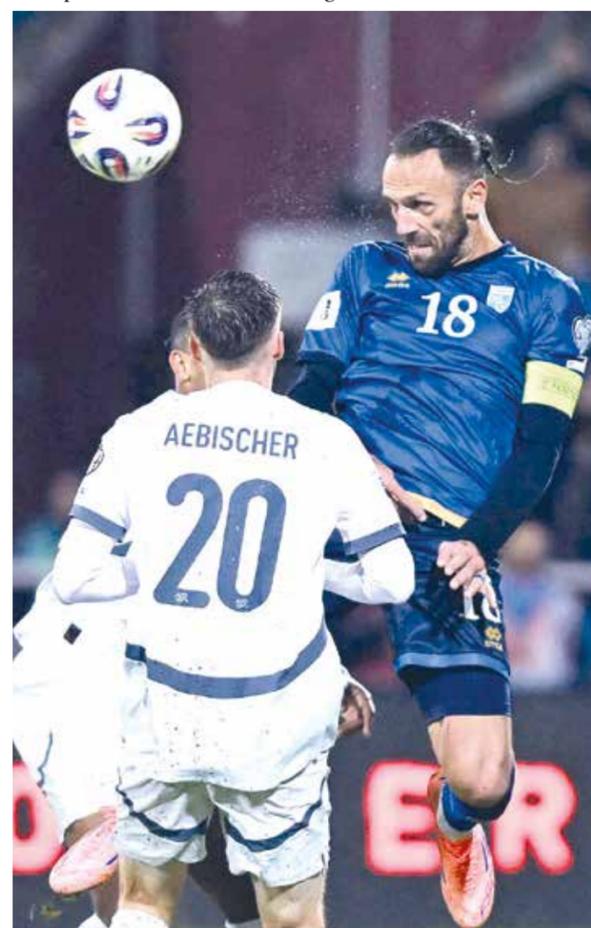
"There's a quiet confidence in the group growing together, it's great to see but we know there's a lot of hard work to come," said Ireland assistant John O'Shea.

Denmark missed out on automatic qualification after a dramatic defeat in Scotland but will be expected to see off North Macedonia, whose lone tournament appearance came at Euro 2020.

Kasper Schmeichel is absent for Denmark after revealing last week that he may have played his final game, with two surgeries required to repair his damaged shoulder.



Italy's Gennaro Gattuso looks dejected after being defeated during the FIFA World Cup 2026 European qualification football match between Italy and Norway (file photo)



Kosovo's forward #18 Vedat Muriqi heads the ball



Four-time winners Italy are under immense pressure to avoid a third consecutive qualifying failure, having not appeared at a World Cup tournament since their group-stage exit in 2014