Predictions of the Remaining UEFA Affiliated Nations to Qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup Supported by Artificial Intelligence Techniques

**IN3062 Introduction to Artificial Intelligence**

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# Introduction

# Objective

The Objective of this project is to use data the SPI Ratings dataset by FiveThirtyEight together with match data of all international matches played since the 1st of January 2000, provided by Kaggle.com, to predict the remaining UEFA affiliated nations to qualify for the FIFA 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

# Model

The model used for this project is at the highest level a binary classification model, where the examples are the individual teams and the classes being whether they have qualified or not. However, to ultimately achieve these predictions a few lower-level predictions must be made, i.e., the scores of the individual matches. For example, should Wales be predicted to qualify, they must first win 2 matches, one with a defined opponent and one without. In the first match, Wales plays against Austria. Predicting the outcome of this match causes the model to become multi-label classification model due to two different labels (scores) being predicted with possible values being any non-negative integer.

The individual scores of the home and away team, however, are predicted separately in isolation from each other. This means that the model used for predicting the individual values is actually and multi-class classification model, where the classes are any non-negative integer.

Should Wales win against Austria they shall win and the winner of the parallel match in the same group, the same lower-level model will be applied to the new match. The result of this final match will determine the result for the highest-level model, meaning who qualifies.

# Dataset

To achieve the desired tasks, we were unable to find a singular ideal dataset and were hence required to merge multiple different ones together. The first step was to cut down Mart Jürisoo’s dataset containing all international match results ever played since 1972 to only include results recent enough to validly determine the strength of a nation’s team. The starting date chosen was the 1st of January 2000. This dataset strictly includes men’s full international teams and hence does not include e.g. Olympic teams and U-23 teams.

The next step was to merge this dataset with FiveThirtyEight’s SPI Global International Rankings dataset. This second dataset provided offensive and defensive values representing the number of expected goals scored or respectively conceded against an average of all teams and a “SPI-value” representing the strength of each team. The merging of these two datasets allows us to include the previously mentioned values of each team added to each of their matches and hence predict scores according to them.

The dataset containing the yet to be played UEFA qualifying playoff matches was created by us using FIFA.com as a source. The structure of this dataset is identical to that of the merged dataset used to train and test the algorithm.

# Processing Data

# Classifiers

# Results

## Chart, waterfall chart Description automatically generatedChart, waterfall chart Description automatically generatedChart, scatter chart Description automatically generatedGoal Scoring

Figure Confusion Matrices of Home Score Predictions

Chart, scatter chart, waterfall chart

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The plots above show the confusion matrices of the initial training of the classifiers (in a usual execution of the code) used to predict the home scores, whilst the ones below are of the classifiers used for away scores.

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Figure Confusion Matrices of Away Score Predictions

There are a few notable differences in the predictions of the home and away classifiers. The values predicted for the number of goals score by the home team have higher extremes (maximum and minimum values), e.g. the decision tree classifier predicting a maximum value of 8 for home goals whilst only predicting 6 for away goals. This discrepancy can be explained by the argument of home field advantage, meaning teams that play in front of a home crowd will have a louder cheering audience and this can affect their performance.

Whilst the discrepancy of goals scored home and away can be explained by external factors affecting the statistical performance of teams, the varying f1-scores of the classifiers cannot.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Classifier | F1-Score | | | |
| **Home** | | **Away** | |
| **Train** | **Test** | **Train** | **Test** |
| Logistic Regression | 0.3480 | 0.3700 | 0.4262 | 0.4100 |
| Support Vector Machine | 0.3455 | 0.3300 | 0.4306 | 0.4400 |
| Decision Tree | 0.6323 | 0.2500 | 0.6783 | 0.3700 |
| K-Means | 0.2947 | 0.2900 | 0.3676 | 0.2900 |

Figure Instance of F1-Scores for all Classifiers

(The data included in the table above are taken from a random execution of the code.)

The data in the table above shows a clear increase in the accuracy of the predictions of the individual classifiers when predicting the number of away goals over the number of home goals. Even though the table above only captures data from a singular instance of training and testing the classifiers, the pattern is consistent through all instances. The only value that does not increase is the testing f1-score when using K-Means, this is due to our K-Means being set to only use two clusters.

Whilst we are uncertain about the cause occurrence of this discrepancy, we speculate it may be due to the smaller difference of the extreme values of away goals scored.

## Text Description automatically generatedText Description automatically generatedText Description automatically generatedText Description automatically generatedMatch Results

Figure Instance of Match Results and Qualification

The above figure showes a randomly selected qualification prediction and its results. The decision tree classifier (DTC in Figure 4) will produce a variety of results that do not show a clear pattern. It will predict some believable results like a 2:0 win for the Czech Republic over Poland, whilst also predicting Turkey, the nation ranked 44th in the world, to win 7:1 against 6th ranked Portugal.

Using Logistic Regression (“LG” in Figure 4) will cause the predictions to have very high scoring games, e.g. a 22:22 draw between Wales and Austria, whilst using K-Means and Support Vector Machines (SVC in Figure 4) will predict very low scoring games, with scores rarely exceeding a total of 2 goals scored in the case of SVCs. Football is in general a low-scoring sport and hence such predictions are resonable as long as teams are of similar in skill level.

Our K-Means classifiers are set to only use two clusters. We decided to do this because we were less interested in how accurately it could predict the resulting score of a match, but rather how an unsupervised learning classifier would compare to supervised learning classifiers.

One problem with our approach that will lead to concern and misleading data is the handling of tiebreakers. In football, a draw between two teams after the maximum playable time is handled by a penalty shootout. In our approach the victory is handed to the away side. There is no specific reason as to why we do this, but there are reasons as two why we do not have an elaborate way of handling such situations.

First, we do not possess any data on the performances of international teams in penalty shootouts and are hence not able to reasonably predict the outcomes. Secondly, awarding the victory randomly was considered, however, it was also decided against as penalty shootouts are not random and do heavily depend on many different factors.

## Qualifying Teams

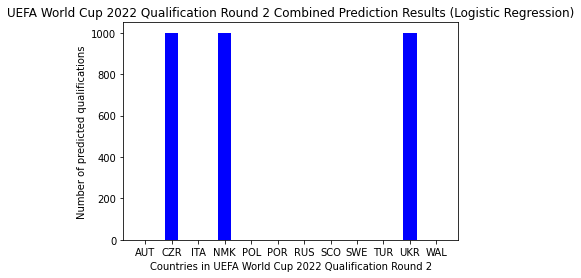
The objective of this project was to predict the remaining teams to qualify. We did this by using multiple classifiers and seeing how their predictions behave. Some classifiers gave predictions that were consistent, whilst others would give a different result with each prediction. To capture these inconsistencies we ran our code 1000 times, each time retraining all classifiers to avoid any repeated results.

Figure Results of 1000 Predictions Using Logistic Regression

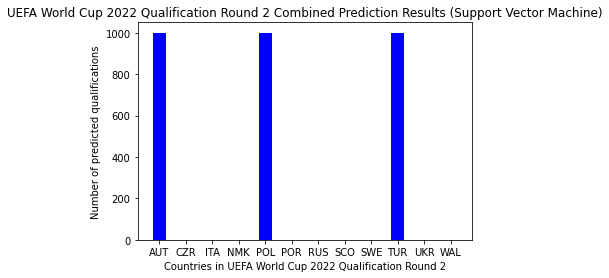
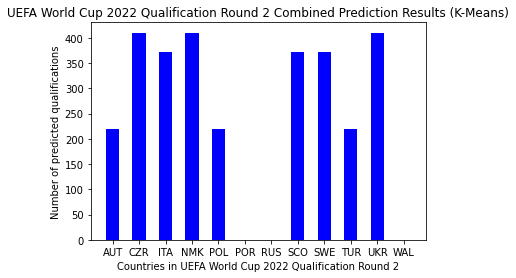
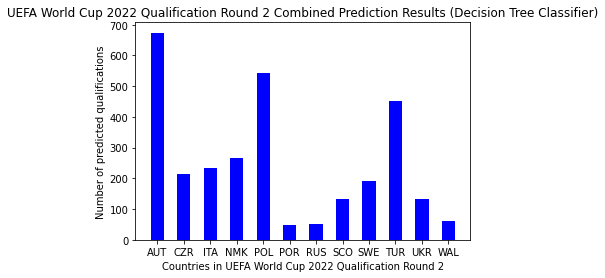
The two most consistent classifiers when predicting the teams that will qualify were Logistic Regression and Support Vector Machine. In the case of Logistic Regression it predicted the Czech Republic, North Macedonia, and Ukraine to qualify every single time. In comparison, the Support Vector Machine predicted Austria, Poland, and Turkey to qualify all 1000 times. This consistency in prediction is one could argue is not ideal. Even though it gives you a clear result, it does not account for any divergences. Predicting a sport where the result is ultimately only affected by the players on the field and weaker teams may perform better on the day even though statistically this makes no sense, e.g. Sheriff Tiraspol’s 2:1 victory of Spanish giants Real Madrid on the 28th of September 2021

Figure Results of 1000 Predictions Using Support Vector Machine

Figure Results of 1000 Predictions Using Decision Tree Classifier

Using both K-Means and decision trees as classifiers lead to better results. K-means has its preferred teams and gives a rather diverse result, however, according to it Portugal, Russia and Wales have absolutely no chance of qualifying.

Using decision trees leads to the most reasonable results, as all teams have qualified at least once. Its clear favorites are Austria (~67% chance of qualification), Poland (~55% chance of qualification), and Turkey (~45% chance of qualification).

It is also interesting to look at a summary of these results as this shows the overlaps between the different predictions. Overall, the most predicted teams are Austria, Czech Republic, North Macedonia, Poland, Turkey, and Ukraine.

Figure Results of 1000 Predictions Using Decision Tree Classifier

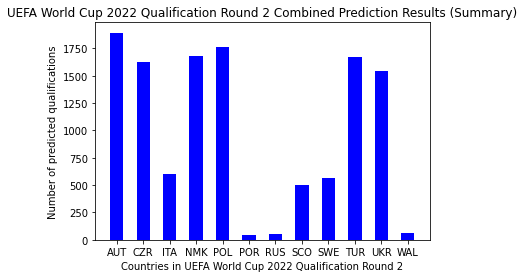


Figure Summary of 1000 Predictions