

Project 1: Was Rodri the best defensive midfielder of the Euro 2024?

Introduction

For this project I selected **Rodrigo Hernández Cascante (Rodri)**, Spain's defensive midfielder (DM) and the official *Player of the Tournament* at UEFA EURO 2024.

Rodri is widely regarded as one of the best midfielders in the world because of his ability to control tempo, dominate possession and organise both Manchester City and Spain from the base of midfield. However, my motivation was slightly different: I was not convinced that he was either the best DM of the tournament, and hence, the best player of the 2024 Euro. By analysing his actions in detail, I aim to understand what he actually contributed on the pitch, where his influence came from, and whether the data supports the narrative that he dominated the tournament.

Given his role, I focus primarily on his **passing behaviour**, which is the core of his game and the main source of his perceived influence. As a DM, Rodri's most important actions are: ball circulation, tempo control and progression through the middle third. Rodri is responsible for moving Spain from the first to the second and third thirds of the pitch. Efficient progression from deep areas into more advanced zones is crucial to breaking defensive blocks. When he chooses to play forward, his passes can break lines and connect midfielders and forwards.

Rodri's pass-flow structure appears in Figure 1, which shows a 30×30 transition matrix representing how frequently he moved the ball from one zone to another.

- The y-axis represents the zone where a pass **starts**.
- The x-axis represents the zone where the pass **ends**.
- Colour intensity represents the **probability** of a pass going from one zone to another.
- The legend below the matrix shows the **average number of passes per game** in each zone of the pitch.

Rodri pass-flow analysis

Rodri plays most of his passes from zones 18, 19, 17 and 13, all located in the central middle third.

This highlights his role as the main connector in Spain's build-up, receiving and distributing the ball in stable central areas rather than moving wide or advancing into the box.

The transition matrix shows a strong diagonal pattern, meaning that most of his passes go to nearby zones. This reflects short, low-risk circulation rather than vertical progression.

Passes into the final third are relatively rare, indicating that Rodri's influence lies in stabilising and connecting possession rather than directly creating chances.

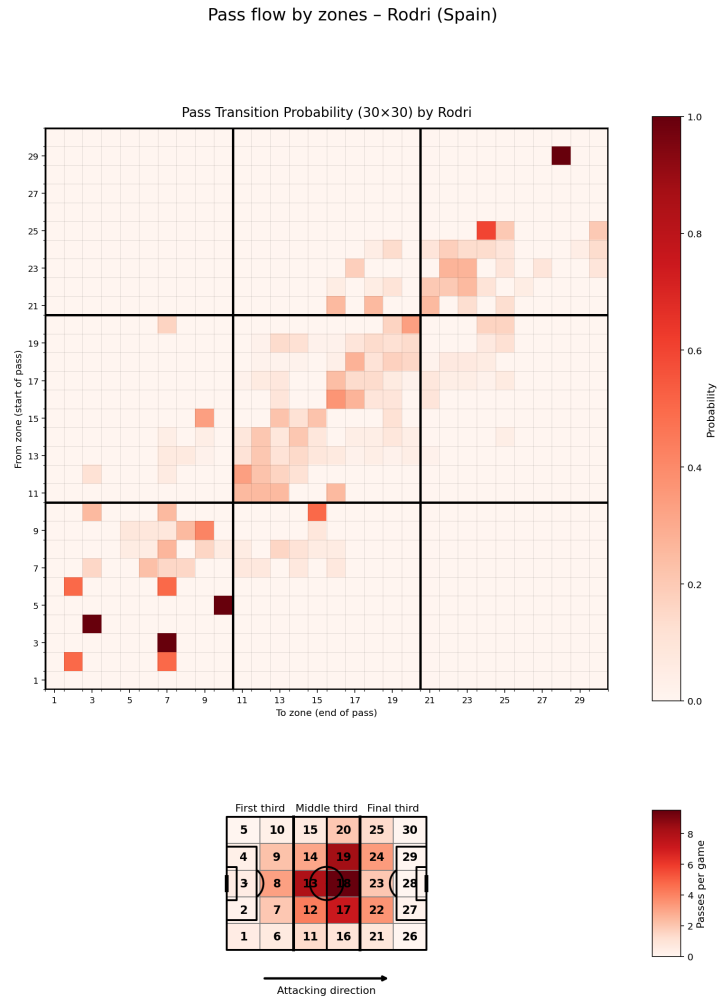


Figure 1: Pass-flow matrix for Rodri at EURO 2024.

Comparing Rodri with other defensive midfielders

To compare Rodri with other defensive midfielders, I constructed two performance metrics (defensive and offensive) for every DM who played at least 270 minutes. This threshold ensures reliable comparisons and avoids distortions from very small samples. I counted all defensive actions (pressures, interceptions, ball recoveries, blocks and duels) and normalised by minutes played. Regarding the offensive one, I counted passes that led to a shot within 15 seconds in the same possession and again normalised by minutes played.

These serve as a direct measure of how much a DM contributes to chance creation and attacking progression. I converted both into z-scores so they could be plotted together on equal terms. I performed one-sample t-tests for both dangerous passes per 90 minutes and defensive actions per 90 minutes. Rodri tested significantly above the mean at the 5% significance level in both metrics, indicating that his performance was statistically higher than that of the average defensive midfielder

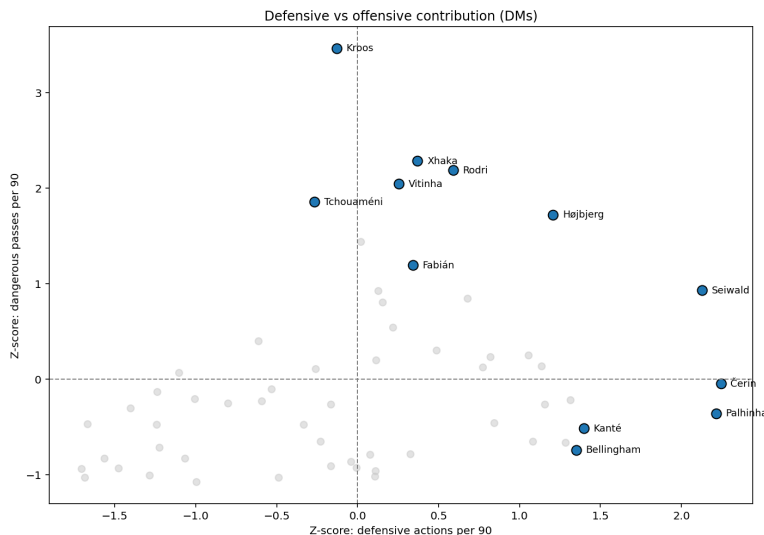


Figure 2: Defensive vs offensive contribution

Conclusion

The data shows that Rodri was not the most dominant defensive midfielder in pure ball-winning terms—players like Palhinha and Čerín contributed more defensively. He was also not the top creative DM—Kroos and Xhaka produced more dangerous passes. However, Rodri is one of the very few midfielders who rank above average in both defence and attack. His balanced profile places him firmly in the elite top-right quadrant, alongside the most complete midfielders of the tournament. It is also worth noting that Højbjerg performed strongly across

both metrics, showing above-average defensive work combined with meaningful involvement in dangerous passes.

This combined influence helps explain why Rodri was perceived as central to Spain's success. Whether he deserved to be Player of the Tournament depends on the criteria, but the data supports the idea that he was among the most impactful all-round midfielders when considering both phases of play together.