



HEALTH TOURISM. A NEW DRIVER FOR THE BULGARIAN ECONOMY

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Abstract: *This paper builds on knowledge about health tourism and the importance of this specific tourist product for the economy of Bulgarian tourism industry and for the economy of the regions, upgrading their tourism mix with a sustainable, green and year-round form of tourism, in between two industries tourism and healthcare. Firstly, the author aims to bring out the important role of health tourism for the tourism sector in Bulgaria, with its components: medical spa tourism (balneological tourism), SPA tourism, wellness tourism and medical tourism. Secondly, to support and encourage the Bulgarian destinations with natural resources, historical traditions, educational potential and modern infrastructure to push further their development as a competitive 365 days health tourism destination. The author's suggestions will allow upgrading the existing understanding of the role and the positive impact of health tourism for the economy of Bulgaria, furthermore, to motivate the governmental support to invest in the infrastructure for these regions.*

Keywords: *health tourism, spa medicine, destination management, economy of tourism, sustainability.*

1. Introduction

Health tourism is an emerging, global, complex and rapidly changing segment that needs to be managed with modern management tools in the present era. Health tourism comprises around 5% of general tourism in the EU28 and contributes approximately 0.3% to the EU economy [9]. Health tourism has a much higher domestic share than general tourism does. Increasing the share of health tourism may reduce tourism seasonality, improve sustainability and labor quality, and may help to reduce health costs through prevention measures and decreased pharmaceutical consumption. The last more than ten years have seen an increasingly sustainable development of health tourism. Established and emerging destinations are increasingly exploiting the potential of this tourism segment, seeking to diversify to increase revenues and cope with seasonality [2]. Health tourism is increasing its role as a significant contributor to the development not only of regional but also national economies. Despite certain tendencies in preference for individual (personalized) tourism, it is expected that health tourism and health tourism destination will continue to increase its influence and take bigger part in the tourism- mix in the future [7]. There are in Europe over 2000 medical spas and health resort destinations, meaning areas of confirmed therapeutic properties of the climate that may be a remedy to limit the negative influence of harmful phenomena on society.

Based on the results of the international research studies and on our professional experience we can state that health tourism and especially medical spa and spa tourism can limit both the negative effects of pollution by engaging in tourism in natural areas and at the same time meet the demanding needs of the aging society to maintain good health for as long as possible. European health tourism is developing.

This includes the classical medical spa as well as the medical spa sector and the countless wellness offers. According to estimates from the European Spas Association the approximately 18,000 health and wellness tourism facilities in Europe generate a turnover of more than 45 billion euros. This means that European facilities are not only an essential part of the health service in their national markets and in Europe, but also important economic contributors and employees. In addition, many of these jobs are in structurally weak regions - as is untouched nature and the distance to industrialized regions an essential feature of many spas and health resorts (European Spa Association, Tourism Manifesto, 2019 [4, 6]). Health tourism is the generic term for the sub-types: medical-SPA, SPA, wellness tourism and medical tourism [1,8, 9, 11].

2. HEALTH TOURISM IN BULGARIA

Last 15 years health tourism is a dynamic and essential part of Bulgarian tourism industry, offering travelers not only relaxation but also scientifically grounded therapeutic benefits. Within this context, Bulgaria stands out as a truly exceptional destination, blending rich cultural heritage with natural healing assets and high quality infrastructure (modern private medical spa, spa and wellness centers& hotels were build during the last 15 years as well as modern dental clinics, clinics for aet).

Bulgaria has a number of key advantages that can establish it as a preferred destination for medical tourism in Central and Eastern Europe. The country has highly qualified and experienced medical specialists, many of whom have international qualifications and practice in foreign medical institutions. Healthcare services are affordable, and the quality of treatment in a number of clinics and hospitals is not inferior to that in Western Europe. The country is also rich in natural resources, which allow for easy combination of treatment with rehabilitation. An additional plus is the rich cultural heritage, the diverse and authentic cuisine, the relaxed pace of life and the good transport connections with the rest of Europe. Bulgaria is also a full member of the Schengen Area, which further facilitates free movement between member states, and is expected to be a full member of the Eurozone from January 1, 2026.

Bulgaria is a popular tourist destination with its summer sea holiday tourist product and ski tourism. The international markets like Bulgaria due to the very good balance between price and quality, friendly climate, rich culture, modern hotel`s infrastructure, good quality of the food and the good quality of the service in most Bulgarian hospitality industry. The destination is safe to travel and the hospitality in the tourism sector is among the advantages of the country.

In an extensive study on motivational aspects of decision-making for a vacation in Bulgaria [8, pp. 298] „Focus on yourself“ is listed among the main ones. This motif, according to the authors, is based on giving of oneself. It is based on the need to pay attention to your needs and desires, to take care of your health, to think about your future and life. It includes the elements of „taking care of my health“ as a psycho-physical need, „thinking about myself and what I want to do next“ and „physically exerting myself with sports or movement“. The study reveals the health care as a more common motive for people over 55 years old, while thinking about oneself and about the future is a travel motive for younger people – up to 34 years old. Thus, the factor „to take care of my health“ is soaring as a push factor to practice health tourism in Bulgaria [14, pp. 306).

Last 15 years the country starts developing health tourism, based on the natural healing recourses-remedies the country has /healing waters over 600 mineral springs with different mineralization up to 103oC and healing climate/, historical traditions since Thracians and



Romans times and very good educational system in the field. The membership of Bulgarian in the European spa association family (2007) helps the country to create its own national standards that are already part of the legislation (Tourism Act, Regulation 2., 2016). It regulates the order and minimum requirements for construction, furnishing and equipment, servicing, services offered and professional and linguistic qualification of the personnel, which must be met by the Bulgarian „Medical SPA Center”, „SPA Center”, „Wellness Center” and „Thalassotherapy”. According to the official information from the Ministry of Tourism, till the end of June 2025 the certified centers are as follows: 185 certified centers (40 Medical spas; 110 – spa centers and 35 – Wellness centers).

1.1.1 Medical SPA tourism (balneological tourism): a special form of tourism, offering tourist health procedures based on natural remedies (mineral water and/or therapeutic mud) through diverse therapeutic programs provided in specially designed rooms and areas intended for diagnostics, rehabilitation and prophylaxis [1,8, 9, 11].

Thalassotherapy tourism is part of the medical-SPA tourism. It offers tourists programs and rituals which involve use of sea water and/or natural by-products, and/or firth mud through classical and non-traditional therapeutic methods of influence aimed at the mental, emotional and physical health recovery and at beauty care of the human body, and are held in specifically designed rooms and areas necessarily close to the beach.

1.1.2. SPA tourism: a special form of tourism offering tourists various procedures, programs and rituals involving use of water – mineral, spring or other permitted by law and/or therapeutic mud and/or sea water and/or other natural factors, applying classical and non-traditional methods of influence aimed at anti-stress, relax and mental and physical recovery, as well as at beauty of the human body [1,8, 9, 11].

1.1.3. Wellness (wellness) tourism: a special form of tourism offering tourists various recreational and cosmetic and beauty treatments, programs and antistress rituals, as well as holistic approaches to achieve physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, professional and social welfare of the personality [1,8, 9, 11].

1.1.4. Medical tourism: a special form of tourism for people travelling to a country other than their own to receive medical treatment.

In September, 2019 with the Federal Association of Health Insurance Funds (GKV Spitzenverband), Germany accepts Bulgaria in the list of Member States of the European Community, Contracting Parties to the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) and Switzerland, for which outpatient assistance services in recognized resorts (Article 23, paragraph 2 of the Social Code – SGB V) are eligible for reimbursement of expenses and services used in Bulgaria for preventive medicine (ambulant services). The approval of the quality in the outpatient medical care was an important step in the process of rebranding the image of Bulgaria as a destination for 365 days health tourism and create the opportunity for international patients using their health insurances. In 2023, private insurance companies from Austria recognized the high quality of services for recovery and rehabilitation in Bulgaria, and the first contracts between Bulgarian investors and private insurance companies in Bulgaria have already been concluded.

Bulgaria has a number of strategic and practical advantages that, with good planning and communication, can position it as a preferred medical travel destination for international patients.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE HEALTH TOURISM FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMY OF TOURISM.

Of key importance are the cooperation and partnerships among the various stakeholders involved in the value chain of health tourism: destinations, authorities, local communities, accommodation and transport, providers, intermediaries. Health tourism can be better integrated into the overall tourism policies.

- development of health tourism creates conditions for year-round occupancy of the establishments built for the purpose and for keeping the staff who have chosen to work in Bulgaria. The biggest challenge is the parallel adequate development of human resources which underpin the design and development of the tourist product. The development of the specialized tourist infrastructure significantly outstrips the development and training of the staff working in tourism. In addition, there is a tendency for the outflow of trained staff abroad, due to the impossibility of keeping them in Bulgaria with good working conditions (mainly in the financial aspect).

- health tourism could help address seasonality because it does not necessarily follow a seasonal model, contrary to other tourism segments;

- health tourism could also contribute to tourism dispersion because a lot of wellness and medical establishments could be positioned in the outskirts of the cities and towns and in rural areas;

Health tourism is specified as a priority product in the National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria for the period 2014-2030[8, 9, 10].

The following main purposes and objectives to be addressed by the Ministry of Tourism are singled out:

- Making health prevention the key public objective by creating a mechanism for issuing vouchers and improving the use of the rich mineral resources to the benefit of the society;

- Initiative to design uniform programs for training and qualification of the people working in the area of SPA and wellness tourism within the European Union;

- Defining the product-market matrix of health tourism in Bulgaria – leading products (prevention, rehabilitation, medical lines – dental medicine, etc., well-being, etc) of health tourism with breakdown by priority market (Russia, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Romania, Turkey, Serbia, Greece and the Bulgarian domestic market);

- Defining the specific communication mix (advertising, promotion, direct marketing, PR) for concentrated presentation of the health tourism products on the domestic and on the priority foreign markets, concentrated advertising campaign with presentation of the Bulgarian balneo-SPA product;

- Support for development of marketing skills of entrepreneurs to pack, offer and communicate health tourism products in the country and abroad;

- Permanent inclusion of health tourism in the set of tourism types and forms promoted during participation with national and representative stands in international, national and regional tourism exhibitions and exchanges;

- Communicational use of the good image of Bulgarian health education for the promotion of health tourism;

- Partnership with specialised foreign tour operators to include Bulgarian health resorts in their special catalogues;

- Building successful PPP by developing incentive and exchange programs aiming to improve the image of health tourism on the international and the national market.



As part of the Strategy for development of health tourism, each destination should also discuss the travel facilitation issues:

- Diversification of the major markets and segments;
- Attracting investments;
- Creating a regulatory framework, including legislation, incentives and standards;
- Service and infrastructure quality;
- Training and skills development;
- Accreditation and certification of health tourism establishments and practices.

The presented model below (prepared by T. Angelova, MD for a decertation about opportunities for positioning Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism [13], has been expanded to provide methodological support in the practical implementation of the goals of health tourism and partnerships in the process of developing Bulgaria as an European destination for health tourism.

Model: HEALTH TOURISM /key stakeholders/

- A. Academical society /academically supported services and studies/ .
- B. Health tourism subtypes:
 - Prevention – spa and wellness centers;
 - Prophylaxis /primary and secondary -spa, balneotherapy and thalassotherapy (medical spa centers);
 - Treatment /conservatively and operatively / rehabilitation (rehabilitation clinics, medical centers, hospitals, dental clinics);
- C. Public coordination of the system /Ministry of tourism, Ministry of health, Ministry of ministry of labor and social policy, Ministry of regional development and public works, Ministry of environment and water);

4: CONCLUSIONS.

In support of the claim that health tourism should be considered as part of the healthcare system, and not just as a form of leisure tourism, comes the proposal to the European Commission (February 2021) by the Manifesto Group [6, 15] a document called „Call to Action: Accelerating Social and Economic Recovery through Investment in Sustainable Tourism Development”.

Argument 1: Investing in the development of health tourism will help reduce public health costs. Funding programs specifically targeting prevention and health promotion will further improve sustainability and productivity in Europe (incl. Bulgaria).

Argument 2. Recent reports on health tourism (European Parliament report in 2017 and the Health Tourism Report launched by UNWTO & ETC in 2018) show that increasing the share of health tourism can reduce tourism seasonality, improve sustainability and the quality of work and help reduce healthcare costs through prevention measures and reduced drug consumption. (Ref. HTI partner); It is necessary to continue investing in a comprehensive study of health tourism;

It is very important for the managers to apply modern tools of management and marketing communication in the management of health tourism destination. Particular characteristics of the health tourism products are having an influence on the usage and effectiveness of traditional forms of marketing communication (advertising, exhibitions, etc.) during the presentation of a health tourism destination. At the same time, because of the

globalization and the technological progress they require combination between classical tools and new modern trends of marketing communication. Undoubtedly, the travel and tourism industry play an important role in the global economy. Technology of artificial intelligence, 5G and Fin-tech advances, mobile payment, apps, tourism platforms and social media are overturning the consumption patterns and forms of traveling, leading to industrial transformation of tourism and hospitality. To promote sustainability of tourism will be the greatest challenge for the travel industry today and in the near future through various emerging tools and rapidly developing technology [7].

It is necessary to create a national digital platform for health tourism, with which Bulgaria can show its ambitious to develop as a „Smart Destination for Health Tourism“. Such a platform, which can be the so-called „Health Seeker“ would cover all the process that will lead the individual client to the realization of a health holiday – online consultation with a medical specialist, preparation of an individual program for prevention and rehabilitation, recommendation for destination and site, providing the best and latest offers, possibility for direct reservation. The platform can be expanded with proposals what will support the development of medical tourism in particular.

In the National Strategy for sustainable Development of Tourism of Bulgaria (with a horizon 2040 it is important to include product and annual plans for tourism development concerning the individual tourist regions. This is an important element in order to create conditions for balanced and integrated development at the regional level. Defining regional priorities and setting goals in connection with the development of health tourism in tourist areas. There are nine tourist regions, determined by the Minister of Tourism No T-RD-14-63/15.05.2015. Law on Tourism – Charter 3 Tourist zoning (renewed in the State Newspaper in 2013.last changes from 4.05.2018).

By including health tourism in the regional development plans, it will be possible for the management of the municipalities to include health tourism in the municipal development plans and to look for additional sources of funding.

Health tourism should be developed with targeted state support, as an integrated system in which the responsible state institutions and other stakeholders formulate their strategies and policies in a way that leads to creating attractive conditions for treatment or recreation for tourism users and provides enterprises and employees in the sector a secure and sustainable perspective.

Bulgaria should position itself as a competitive health tourism destination, which offers a sustainable product at European level.

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