

## REVIEW

**From Prof. Antoaneta Tsvetkova, PhD**

Director of the Medical College at the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna,  
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**Re:** dissertation thesis on "**Possibilities for positioning Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism**"

**Author:** Siyka Anastasova Katsarova

**For:** for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Philosophy Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, economic and law sciences, professional field 3.7. Administration and management, specialty "Organization and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)"

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Todorka Kostadinova, PhD

**Grounds for assigning the statement of opinion:** Order No. R-109-247/13.06.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University - Varna to determine the composition of the scientific jury.

### **I. Information about the procedure and general assessment of the dissertation**

According to the present procedure, all the necessary documents provided for in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Rules for its Application and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the University of Medicine - Varna have been submitted.

**Doctoral candidate Siyka Anastasova Katsarova** has completed training in the doctoral program "Organization and management outside the sphere of material production (in healthcare)" in professional direction 3.7. Administration and management, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences. The activities included in the individual study have been completed and the exams for doctoral minimums have been successfully passed. The doctoral student has collected the necessary credits with positive certification grades during the period of study in the doctoral program.

### **II. Brief biographical presentation of the candidate**

Siyka Katsarova has an impressive and very valuable professional experience in the field of tourism, marketing and international business. Immediately after obtaining a master's degree in

Marketing and Management at Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" in 2000. she started working at Pamporovo JSC and in the following stages of her professional development held various management positions in tourism - sales manager at "Royal Holiday" EAD, commercial marketing director at "Sharlopov Hotels" JSC, where she began her active work in the field of spa and wellness tourism. An assessment of her expertise and commitment is her election as the Chairman of the Board of the Bulgarian Union of Balneology and Spa in 2018. having previously been the Vice-Chairman in charge of International Relations, Europe, European Spa Association, Ministry of Tourism. Since 2016 is vice president of the European Spa Association (ESPA) and successfully combines these positions with her work as an entrepreneur and managing partner in "MEDSPA BG" in the field of medical tourism in Bulgaria and Germany. She is a member of the Board of Directors of German - Bulgarian Chamber of Industry.

The rich professional portfolio of Siyka Katsarova, the successful combination of her practical work as an expert, entrepreneur and leader at the national and international level, as well as additional qualifications in the field of marketing and international relations, build a sustainable basis for the development of her scientific and research qualities.

She is a member of the Alumni Club and Friends of the Graduate School of Medicine and participated in the club's scientific forums and charitable initiatives during her studies in the PhD program.

### **III. Characteristics and assessment of the dissertation thesis content**

In her introduction, Katsarova convincingly brings out the relevance and importance of the chosen topic. The objectives, tasks and methodology of the complex research are presented logically and consistently. **The main goal of the dissertation thesis** is to analyze the possibilities of Bulgaria for the development of year-round health tourism with a focus on the directions of medical tourism, medical-SPA, SPA and wellness tourism and with a view to its positioning on the international market as a destination offering quality in this specialized tourism product. The analysis and evaluation of the unique advantages with which destination Bulgaria can compete on the international market as a year-round destination for health tourism would help the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Environment and Water, Ministry of Regional Development in building a more sustainable policy for the development of this important for the economy tourism product.

In the literature review, the main attention is paid to the conceptual apparatus of health tourism (medical, medical-SPA, SPA and wellness) and the State regulation of the Republic of Bulgaria in the sector. The potential for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria has been analyzed and the main advantages of the Bulgarian spa resorts have been highlighted.

**In the first chapter**, a correct analysis of the information from the Bulgarian and foreign literature specialized in the researched problems is presented, an analysis of the factors influencing the development of medical-spa, spa, wellness and medical tourism is made and a situational analysis is developed. They can contribute to formulating adequate policies for the development of year-round health tourism in Bulgaria and making decisions based on empirical data.

**In the second chapter of the dissertation**, the in-depth study of good practices in Europe is done, emphasizing the successful model of the leading destinations for international health tourism - Germany and Hungary. I appreciate the courage of the author to formulate assessments and guidelines regarding the positioning of Bulgaria, both on the European and the world market, namely that it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive state policy in the sector. These assessments show the great professional experience and commitment of Katsarova, in which she emphasizes that for building market positions, reputation, product sustainability and competitiveness, state support, including financial, is mandatory and necessary.

**In the third chapter of the dissertation**, the results of the conducted studies are presented, which are of wide scope and useful for the practice of the management teams of spa centers and hotels, of the authorities at the national and local level, of the local communities, of the suppliers and intermediaries.

These studies are: (1) about management attitudes about health tourism supply priorities and market orientation; (2) to assess the state of the sector as a result of the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) for priority directions in conducting balneotherapy in Europe and specifically in Bulgaria, and the development of a set of tools for the development of health tourism in the country.

Based on the results obtained from the dissertation research and the comparative analysis of the results of the other main studies - the European study of ESPA and the study of Bulgarian Academy of Science at the initiative of the Ministry of Tourism, **a "Model for the development of health tourism" was developed**. It provides an opportunity through the presented innovative portfolio for methodological support in the practical implementation of the goals of health tourism and the positioning of Bulgaria on the European spa, wellness and health market.

**The conclusion** follows the logical structure of the dissertation thesis and is clearly formulated.

#### **IV. Contributions and significance of the study for the practice**

I accept the contributions of the dissertation, formulated in the dissertation summary, emphasizing that the study contains theoretical summaries and solutions regarding significant scientific and applied problems:

- The main stages in the development of Bulgaria as a competitive destination for health tourism are defined, with a focus on medical - SPA, SPA and wellness tourism;
- The areas have been identified and analyzed, incl. Medical areas, with which Bulgaria can compete on the health tourism market in Europe.
- A combined national survey was conducted, including the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, to discuss attitudes about the existing supply, demand, market orientation and positioning of Bulgaria in the European market of medical-SPA, SPA and wellness tourism.
- A model has been developed for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria through an innovative portfolio of treatments and its positioning as a destination offering a competitive product.
- Recommendations of an operational and conceptual nature for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria have been formulated.

#### **V. Dissertation summary and publications**

In relation with the topic of the dissertation, Siyka Katsarova has 5 publications in scientific journals.

The dissertation summary presents correctly the structure and content of the dissertation. It emphasizes the most important points and conclusions from the research and application of the model for the organization of health tourism in Bulgaria.

#### **VI. Questions, critical remarks and recommendations**

**I have the following question for PhD candidate Katsarova: "How are the issues of human resources for health tourism resolved in other European countries and what options can we implement in Bulgaria, considering the shortage of personnel in health care as well?"**

I recommend Siyka Katsarova to publish the results of her dissertation thesis in a monograph in Bulgarian and English. They will be useful for the training of future staff and teams in health tourism, for good communication between all stakeholders in health tourism and for making decisions based on empirical data and evidence.

#### **VII. Conclusion**

Siyka Katsarova's dissertation is a systematic study of a current and important problem - the positioning of Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health,



medical, spa and wellness tourism. In her dissertation thesis, the author demonstrates excellent theoretical and practical knowledge, consistency, conviction, commitment to practical solutions and a strategic vision for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria. Her positions nationally and internationally enable her to expand research and practice in health tourism, human health and well-being.

The dissertation meets the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Application and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna.

The listed arguments give me the conviction to give a positive assessment and propose that the educational and scientific degree "Philosophy Doctor" in scientific field "Organisation and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)" in professional field 3.7. Administration and management is conferred to **Siyka Anastasova Katsarova**.

**12/07/2022**  
**city of Varna**

**Reviewer:**   
**/Prof. Antoineta Tsvetkova, PhD./**