

Statement of opinion

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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,
**PhD student at the Department of Economics and Healthcare Management,
Faculty of Public Health, Medical University – Varna**

According to the Order No. P-109-247/13.06.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University - Varna and according to the decision of the Scientific Jury, I have been appointed to present a statement of opinion regarding the dissertation of Siyka Anastasova Katsarova on the topic: "Possibilities for the positioning of Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism" for obtaining a scientific and educational degree "Philosophy Doctor" in the doctoral program "Organization and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)", professional field 3.7. Administration and Management, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences.

I. General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation of Siyka Katsarova has a total volume of 136 standard pages, it is structured in three chapters, and a list of scientific publications in connection with the present dissertation work.

The theoretical foundation of the dissertation consists of a total of 133 cited sources - 24 in Cyrillic, 52 in Latin and 53 sources from the Internet, which correspond to the thematic research field and which the doctoral student used conscientiously. The main part of the literature are publications from the last 5-10 years, which ensures the relevance of the scientific opinions cited in the dissertation.

In the text of the dissertation, 15 figures and 9 tables are presented, all with the indicated national and international source used. Of these, fully authored products are those that summarize the results of the statistical processing of the primary data from the in-depth interviews conducted by the doctoral student.

The topic of the thesis is **dissertable** and its **relevance** is based on **the ever-increasing role of health, medical, spa and wellness tourism** in the context of:

- Effective integration of citizens and the possibility of strengthening the immune system and a healthy lifestyle;
- Expanding world tourism and enabling more and more people to travel for health purposes;
- Saving health care costs and providing jobs in rural areas;
- Prevention and rehabilitation, through balneology, including in the fight against COVID-19;
- The possibility of positioning Bulgaria on the map of Europe as a year-round destination offering a quality tourist product in this area.

Siyka Katsarova's dissertation combines empirical and scientific evidence for the positioning of Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism. In her work, Siyka Katsarova presents verified information about the possibilities for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria, analyzing the experience of European countries - Germany and Hungary.

The **research thesis** is based on the understanding that Bulgaria should continue to stimulate the development of year-round health tourism more purposefully and with greater public resources (including using European Union programs in the program period 2021-2027), through economic instruments specifically aimed at spa destinations (in different municipalities). The targeted improvement of the infrastructure directly related to the development of this specialized, sustainable form of tourism (renovation of historic mineral baths, renovation of pipelines, improvement of park areas, separation of spaces without car traffic), upgrading of the existing material base and improvement of the professional qualification and language skills of those employed in the sector would contribute to positioning

Bulgaria on the international market as a competitive European destination for year-round health tourism, offering excellent quality at a competitive price.

Although the dissertation research is focused on leading practical-applied aspects for the positioning of Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism, it poses questions in a broader plan. One of the leading problems that the doctoral candidate analyzes are the possibilities for the development of areas in health and medical tourism that are innovative, unique, high-quality and would be of interest to the international client/patient.

The aims, objectives, purpose, subject, limitations and methodology of the study are clearly and consistently stated. **The aim 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 positioning it on the international market as a destination offering quality in this specialized tourist product. The relevance and importance of the chosen topic are presented in the **introduction** of the dissertation, showing the professional commitment of the doctoral candidate.

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 general, the dissertation thesis has **three strenghts**, and **the first** of them is the broad presentation of information from the Bulgarian and foreign specialized literature on the researched problems, the analysis of the factors influencing the development of medical-spa, spa, wellness and medical tourism, and the developed situational an analysis that can serve as a basis for formulating adequate policies for the development of year-round health tourism for the reception of clients from Europe and the world.

The second strenght is the in-depth study of good practices in Europe, emphasizing the successful model of the leading destinations for international health tourism - Germany and Hungary. It has been correctly assessed that for the positioning of Bulgaria, both on the European and world markets, it is necessary to implement a comprehensive state policy in the sector and build market positions, reputation, product sustainability and competitiveness.

The third strenght of the dissertation thesis is the broad scope of research conducted regarding: **(1)** Management attitudes toward health tourism supply priorities and market orientation; **(2)** Assessment of the state of the sector as a result of the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; **(3)** Priority directions for conducting balneotherapy in Europe

and specifically in Bulgaria, and the development of **a set of tools for the development of health tourism** in our country. The results of these studies represent a very valuable basis for decision-making and professional action for managers, authorities, local communities, suppliers and intermediaries.

II. Contributions

The dissertation contains theoretical summaries and solutions to significant scientific and applied problems such as:

- 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, 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.

In this regard, the dissertation has an undoubted **contribution character**.

III. Recommendations and questions

I recommend Siyka Katsarova to publish the results of this development in a monograph. They will be useful for all stakeholders involved in the health tourism development process: destinations, authorities, local communities, accommodation and transport, suppliers, intermediaries, managers, media and society in general.

IV. Dissertation summary and publications on the dissertation

In connection with the topic of the dissertation, Siyka Katsarova has 5 real publications in scientific publications.

The dissertation summary correctly presents the structure and content of the work, emphasis is placed on the most important moments and conclusions from the research and the application of the model for the organization of health tourism in Bulgaria.

V. Conclusion

There 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**. The dissertation research offers an insight into the successful European models for health tourism and outlines the need to implement sustainable solutions for Bulgaria.

The research is focused on the topic and is logically sound.

In the dissertation, the doctoral student shows good knowledge, consistent search and extraction of practical solutions based on generalized empirical analysis.

All this gives me reason to propose to the Members of the Scientific Jury to award Siyka Anastasova Katsarova the scientific and educational degree "Philosophy Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Organization and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)" in professional field 3.7. Administration and Management.

11.07.2022

Varna

Member of the Scientific Jury:

(Assoc. Prof. G. Petrova, PhD)

