

## STATEMENT OF OPINION

from Assoc. Dr. Stella Ivanova Baltova,

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**Regarding:** Procedure for defending dissertation thesis "**Possibilities for positioning Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism**", authored by **Siyka Anastasova Katsarova** – doctoral candidate on individual studies for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Philosophy Doctor” in the field of “Organization and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)”, professional field 3.7. “Administration and management” in higher education 3. Social, economic and law sciences.

**Author of the dissertation: Siyka Anastasova Katsarova**  
**Scientific supervisor: Prof. Todorka Kostadinova, PhD**

**Grounds for preparing the review:** Order No. R-109-247/13.06.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University - Varna to determine the composition of the scientific jury and decision of the scientific jury, specified in Protocol No. 1 of 15.06.2022.

### **1. Data on the procedure and on the doctoral candidate**

#### **1.1. Procedure and doctoral training data**

Siyka Anastasova Katsarova studied in the doctoral program "Organization and management outside the sphere of material production (in health care)" at the department "Economics and management of health care", faculty "Public Health" at the Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna in the period 2018-2021 in professional direction 3.7. Administration and management, field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences. All necessary documents for the present procedure according to 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 - Varna have been submitted. The individual study plan with the necessary credits has been completed, all exams for doctoral minimums have been successfully passed, which proves that the studies have been successfully completed. During the entire period of study in the doctoral program, the doctoral candidate's attestation grades are positive. Directed with the right of defense by Order of the Rector of the MU - Varna No. R-109-484 of 18.11.2021 on the basis of the Decision of the Faculty council of the Faculty of Public Health (protocol No. 173/09.11.2021)

#### **1.2. Information about the doctoral candidate**

Siyka Anastasova Katsarova graduated from the Master's program in "Marketing and Management" at Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" in 2000. and immediately started working at "Pamporovo" JSC. She continued her career development at "Royal Holiday" EAD in the field of sales management, and later commercial marketing director at "Sharlopov Hotels" AD. Already in this period, she began to successively work at administrative management positions in organizations related to health tourism as the deputy chairman of the



Board of the Bulgarian Union of Balneology and Spa Tourism (BSBSPA), and since 2018 she is its chairman. Her expert and managerial qualities contribute a lot to raising the prestige of BSBSPA and the international exposure of the organization, and are highly appreciated. Since 2016, she has held the position of vice president of the European Spa Association (ESPA), where she actively works for the development of spa and wellness tourism.

In parallel, she developed her own business in the field of medical tourism as a managing partner in "MEDSPA BG", operating in the markets of Bulgaria and Germany. He is a member of the Board of the German-Bulgarian Chamber of Industry and Commerce. Over the years, he actively participated in the National Council for Tourism under the Minister of Tourism, worked with persistence to build the policy for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria.

Doctoral candidate Katsarova is a member of the Medical University - Varna "Alumni Club and Friends" and participates in scientific forums and charitable initiatives during her studies in the doctoral program.

I know the doctoral candidate as a well-established professional with proven competences and knowledge in the field of development and management of the health tourism product in its various directions and following her mission in this field. Additional qualifications in the fields of marketing, management and international relations form a good basis for the development of her research interests in the field of health tourism.

## **2. General characteristics of the presented dissertation thesis**

The dissertation presented for review is developed in a volume of 136 standard pages. It is structured as follows: introduction, main text systematized in three chapters, conclusions and recommendations, conclusion, references and appendices. Structurally, the dissertation thesis is logically sustained, with a good balance between the individual parts.

The reference to the literature used contains 133 literary sources, of which 24 titles are in Cyrillic, 109 are in Latin, including 83 internet addresses and research and analysis of articles in scientific and periodicals, monographs, books, legal documents, statistical sources, analyzes and reports of national and international organizations, etc. The content of the used literary sources correspond to the research area of the dissertation work. The predominant part of the used literary sources were published in the last five years, which shows the relevance of the researched thematic area and the relevance of the cited research results. The scientific research and the results obtained are well illustrated with 15 figures and 9 tables in the main text, all with the source used indicated.

At the end of the dissertation thesis, 5 appendices are distinguished according to its content in a volume of 28 pages, which present important highlights of the applied methodology and data from the conducted own quantitative and qualitative research.

The dissertation thesis is designed according to the technical requirements, and together with the abstract and the presented scientific publications on the topic (total of 5 in number), represent a complete product of independent scientific research. The introduction contains the necessary components such as definition of the topic, degree of development of the problem and review of scientific literature on the topic, object and subject of the research, aim and tasks of the dissertation thesis, research methodology, research thesis, limitations of the research.

The dissertation is dedicated to a current and important economic, social and management issue that has acquired new dimensions for Bulgaria in the last few years - the opportunities for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria in all seasons and the positioning of Bulgaria as a year-round health destination on the international market , medical, spa and wellness tourism.



The actuality derives from:

- The problem of the correct positioning of tourist destination Bulgaria in the international markets, specifically for health tourism, has not been studied to a sufficient extent and has not been solved both from a research and an applied point of view. The reasons for this are due to the lack of a unified understanding of health tourism and its components, , on the one hand, and on the other hand - to the establishing of new forms of health tourism such as spa, wellness, medical tourism, emerging from traditional balneotherapy, which create new demand markets and consumption;
- High competitiveness of the product has not been achieved, nor has it been made widely available to citizens in the country, nor has it achieved deserved exposure on international markets, and the doctoral candidate precisely formulates these deficits in the introduction;
- Knowledge about health tourism in Bulgaria and about the possibilities for its correct positioning is incomplete, fragmented, it requires system based study of processes and consistency in the development of policies, markets and new scientific and applied knowledge;
- In today's highly dynamic and variable competitive environment for the development of health tourism, influenced by policies to increase the quality of life by improving the health status of the population, the pandemic caused by Covid-19 has heightens the importance of health prevention and post treatment, which could be provided through the forms of health tourism.

The defined subject and object are clearly distinguished, and directly related to the main objective, the research thesis, the set research tasks.

The subject of the research is the attitudes towards the development of health tourism and the highlighting of the leading sub-directions that are part of the general product (page 9 of the dissertation).

The object of the dissertation, defined by the author, are Bulgarian and international experts in the field of health tourism, owners and managers of medical-SPA and SPA hotels on the territory of Bulgaria.

Based on the critical literature review, the aim of the dissertation research is clearly defined - "to investigate the possibilities of Bulgaria for the development of year-round health tourism with an emphasis on medical tourism, medical-SPA, SPA and wellness tourism with a view to positioning the country on the international market as a destination offering quality in this specialized tourism product' (p. 8 in the dissertation). With the achievement of the goal set in this way, a solution to a scientific problem is sought, which will support the relevant institutions in Bulgaria - the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Environment and Water, the Ministry of Regional Development in building a more sustainable policy for the development of this important tourist product for the national economy.

The achievement of the main objective is the result of the fulfillment of five research tasks, from which the research methods and the structure of the dissertation derive. The last task presents the final result of realizing the goal of the research - developing a model for the successful development of health tourism in Bulgaria through an innovative portfolio of treatments and the positioning of the country as a destination offering a competitive product for health, spa, wellness and medical tourism.

In general, goals and objectives are of interest to any researcher.

The defended research thesis is that "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), the upgrading of the existing material base and



improving 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" (p. 7 in the dissertation).

The limitations of the study include the study of the attitudes towards the development of health and medical tourism in Bulgaria only in the innovative, unique and quality directions of the product, which would be of interest to the international client/patient; second - only objects whose concept is built on the basis of a natural resource are considered - incl. climate, water, peloids (for health tourism) and innovation (for medical tourism) and thirdly – only the opinion of owners/managers of hotels certified by the Ministry of Tourism, according to Ordinance No. 2 of January 29, 2016, is studied. on the terms and conditions for certification of "balneotherapy (medical SPA) center", "SPA center", "wellness center" and "thalassotherapy center", issued by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Health, published SG No. 11 of February 9, 2016.

The temporal and territorial scope of the study covers the period from November 2018 to November 2021 and the destinations Varna, Sofia, Pomorie, Kyustendil, Velingrad, Sandanski, Pavel Banya.

An adequate methodological toolkit was applied, which includes a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods: content analysis, in-depth interview and survey. The in-depth interviews were conducted personally by the doctoral candidate and covered 51 respondents.

On the whole, the dissertation research has a practical-applied character.

### **3. Evaluation of the obtained scientific and scientific-applied results**

The dissertation thesis is presented in three chapters. A good balance has been achieved in terms of their volumes, as well as their individual paragraphs. To present her research in a dynamic, quality-of-life and understudied field, the author has adopted a classic approach of structuring a dissertation with clearly distinguishable and logically linked theoretical-methodological, analytical and project parts, which in their completion represent an independent completed research.

**The first chapter, based** on a critical literature review, examines theoretical positions on the researched problem. The theoretical aspects of health (medical, medical-spa, spa and wellness) tourism are analyzed and summarized, with a focus on clarifying the factors influencing the development of these forms of tourism. They are listed as primary factors the motivation for a healthy lifestyle and health care and public health insurance, health care policies in the European Union, including in the light of the European Union (EU) Directive on cross-border mobility, the global nature of financial markets, investments in new technologies in medicine and others. For the purposes of the study, the characteristics of the health tourism market as a whole and in the context of global supply and demand are derived.

In the presented situational analysis, conclusions are drawn correctly in evolutionary order about the state policy in the tourism sector in Bulgaria and the private investments that led to the development of modern spa and wellness tourism from the beginning of 2000, processes developing in parallel with the trend to improve health condition through the power of nature combined with appropriate procedures. The natural resource for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria is presented and the advantages of the Bulgarian spa resorts are analyzed. The accompanying problems since then to achieve quality development of these products are outlined, such as staffing and the protection of the interests of professionals, overcoming imitations, lack of a undivided regulatory framework, etc.

**The second chapter** is devoted to an analysis of understandings of health tourism (balneology and spa), presented through good practices in several European countries,



focusing on two well-established health tourism destinations – Germany and Hungary. The importance of the timely development of rehabilitation programs for patients "after recovery from COVID-19" in clinical centers in Germany is deduced, and it is justified that the realization is also due to the fact that "medicine and wellness work together, hand in hand in Germany" (p. 52). It is impressive that users of these services, mainly medical treatment in Germany are from 177 countries in 2018, a circumstance that is an unequivocal argument for promoting the year-round development of health tourism in Bulgaria given the presence of excellent natural resources and a good superstructure and expertise. From an economic point of view, the revenue from medical tourism alone in Germany in 2018 amounted to 1.2 billion euros. It should be pointed out here that on page 53 of the dissertation, an error was made, which I consider to be technical, namely, instead of 1.2 billion euros, 1.2 million euros is indicated.

In this chapter, the state of development of health tourism in Hungary has been studied, based on the specific forms of health tourism in the destination (Table 8), its resource provision and the undoubtedly necessary place is allocated in the analysis of state policy in the field of health care and support of the health tourism sector, especially after the country's accession to the European Union in 2004.

The results of the comparative analysis of the two destinations provoke the author to make a comparative analysis of the positioning of balneotherapy in the health systems of the members of the European Spa Association (ESPA) through the reimbursement status of balneotherapy by the health systems (funds) in the member states of the European Union, who are members of the European SPA Association, including Bulgaria. The need to distinguish between spa therapy and balneotherapy is clearly stated, as they are reimbursed differently in the insurance systems of the ESPA member states. This allows the doctoral student to draw the categorical conclusion that the priorities in Bulgaria's health tourism policy should be in the medical-SPA, thalassotherapy and SPA sub-directions before the SPA and wellness directions. Successful positioning in international markets with these products can only be achieved through a comprehensive state policy in the field of health care and reimbursement of health services, and financial support for marketing activities.

The comparative analysis, the identified problems and challenges for the development of health tourism in Hungary at the end of the second chapter are the starting point for the conducted independent empirical research, which is the basis of the third chapter of the dissertation work.

The research character of the doctoral student and her analytical and comprehensive skills in applying the results of the research are most strongly manifested **precisely in the third chapter of the dissertation**. I can define what has been achieved in this chapter as the most important contribution of the work, which is arrived at logically and consistently. The results of an independent empirical study of the attitudes and existing demand, supply and market orientation of key certified Bulgarian medical spas and spa centers are presented for the purposes of the dissertation research. To achieve this goal, three research tasks have been specified: (1) analysis of the supply and identification of priorities in the development of programs for health prevention, prevention and rehabilitation, specialized spa menus by medical-SPAs and spa centers; (2) analysis of demand and preferences when choosing medical-SPA, SPA and wellness centers by customers - comparative assessment; (3) deriving marketing objectives to expand the portfolio, both of programs and services, and of markets in which to offer them.

A good impression is made here by the construction of this chapter in three parts: (1) Empirical research and analysis of the state of the "Medical-SPA and SPA tourism" sector, after their activity has been approved; (2) Empirical research and analysis of the attitudes of the existing supply, demand, market orientation of the key certified Bulgarian medical spas



and spa centers; (3) Comparative analysis and discussion regarding the attitudes towards priority directions in conducting balneotherapy in Europe in epidemiological aspects. Each part has a logically justified structure, ending with conclusions and proposals for making management decisions of a scientific and applied nature. In their entirety, individually and as a whole, they lead to significant conclusions that point not only to the resource, demand and supply as significant prerequisites for achieving a good year-round positioning of Bulgaria on the international health tourism market. Cooperation and partnerships among the various stakeholders involved in the health tourism value chain are identified as key factors: destinations, authorities, local communities, accommodation and transport, suppliers, intermediaries - "health tourism can be better integrated into overall policies in the field of tourism through cooperation with stakeholders" (p. 77 in the dissertation).

The significance and contribution of this chapter is also contained in the proposed **recommendations defined by the author as "operational and conceptual in nature"** and the derived proposals for both policies and solutions of an immediate nature with a view to using the current financial resource under the Recovery Plan and Sustainability of Bulgaria, as specific projects have been proposed through which to find practically measured results and the recommendations based on them from the scientific research in the dissertation thesis.

Based on the theoretical statements, the comparative study of good practices in Europe, the analysis of strategic documents and the results of the own research, a model for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria is proposed (fig. 15, page 94), adapted according to the model of Dr. Tanya Angelova. Through the presented, defined by the doctoral candidate as an innovative portfolio, the model represents methodological support in the practical implementation of the goals of health tourism and the positioning of Bulgaria on the European spa, wellness and health tourism market. Significant elements, interrelationships and visions for the implementation of the model have found place here, such as changes in the regulatory framework, intensive development of specific directions in health tourism, building the country's image on the international market as a year-round destination for health tourism.

**The conclusion** summarizes the achieved scientific and scientific-applied results in the dissertation work. The list of used literary sources and the appendices have been prepared in accordance with accepted standards.

#### **4. Evaluation of scientific and scientific-applied contributions**

The careful reading of the dissertation thesis, the publications in which the scientific views and results of the research work of the doctoral candidate Siyka Katsarova are presented, show a commitment to scientific research in the field of health tourism, which the scientific community can count on in the future. The conducted research has led to results that have a scientific-applied nature and value for improving knowledge in the field of health tourism in Bulgaria and positioning the country on the international market, and the proposed model builds on the applied value.

I support the author's main scientific and scientific-applied contributions (5 in number), identified in the dissertation and formulated in the dissertation summary:

- 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.

The indicated results and contributions are the personal work of the doctoral candidate and faithfully reflect the achieved results, creating a prerequisite for continuing and deepening the scientific research, which I wish and recommend to her.

### **5. Evaluation of dissertation publications**

The doctoral candidate has published the main results of the research on the topic of her dissertation in a monograph chapter co-authored in English, two independent articles in a Bulgarian journal, one in Bulgarian and the other in English, one co-authored article in a scientific journal in English, and one co-authored article in a scientific journal in Bulgarian. They were published in the period 2019-2021 and reflect the main points and achievements related to the work on the topic of the dissertation.

Acquaintance with the scientific publications gives reason to reveal the dedication and responsibility of the doctoral candidate to research the challenges related to the possibilities of positioning Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health tourism. The volume of publications and the very good cooperation with other proven researchers as co-authors prove her ability to carry out independent and consistent analyzes in a field that needs a systematic in-depth research, as well as dynamically developing at the theoretical and practical level.

The presented publications cover the minimum scientometric requirements for obtaining an educational and scientific degree "Philosophy Doctor" in professional direction 3.7 Administration and management, according to the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Rules for its Application and the Rules for the Development of the Academic Staff of the Medical university - Varna .

### **6. Evaluation of the dissertation summary**

The dissertation summary is presented in a form that meets the requirements, reflecting in a volume of 60 pages the content of the dissertation and the main scientific and scientific-applied results. In the abstract, the guidelines for future research on the subject and recommendations for business of a conceptual and operational nature are also set forth in the dissertation. The statement of contributions correctly reflects the results achieved by the author. A list of the author's publications on the topic of the dissertation has been added.

### **7. Critical remarks, recommendations and questions**

I don't have any particular critical remarks except some of a technical nature. The dissertation is an author's product that certifies the doctoral candidate's research capabilities and professional competence on the research topic and her pursuit of comprehensiveness combined with specific dimensions.

I would like to address some recommendations and questions to the doctoral candidate, which in no way detract from the results achieved in the dissertation thesis.

1. I believe that Siyka Katsarova should in the future continue her research in terms of creating a model for evaluating marketing activity in the public sector regarding the positioning of destination Bulgaria on international markets as a year-round destination for



health tourism and its integration into the strategies of the interested public institutions, as well as a study of barriers in this area and their overcoming.

2. The main contribution of the dissertation is the created model for the organization of health tourism in Bulgaria. It is claimed that the model is 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 in the European spa, wellness and health market. **My question is how would the author go about validating and proving this model?**

### **8. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I can state that the presented dissertation work of Siyka Anastasova Katsarova is a completed independent scientific study dedicated to a clearly defined, current and significant social, economic and management problem in an area significant and challenging both for the scientific community and for practice. It is an author's research, carried out in good faith, in which the doctoral candidate demonstrates that she has a research mindset, is able to conduct independent scientific research and analyze empirical results in order to derive and propose practical solutions. The set goals and tasks of the research have been successfully fulfilled, and results of a scientific and scientific-applied nature have been achieved.

With conviction, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation thesis on the topic "Possibilities for positioning Bulgaria on the international market as a year-round destination for health, medical, spa and wellness tourism", **authored by Siyka Anastasova Katsarova** and I would like to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Siyka Anastasova Katsarova the educational and scientific degree "**Philosophy Doctor**", professional field 3.7. Administration and management (Organization and management outside the sphere of material production (in healthcare)).

13/07/2022  
Sofia

  
Reviewer: .....  
(Assoc. Prof. Stella Baltova, PhD)