

## **Statement of opinion**

**from Prof. Svetla Rakadzhyska, PhD, member of the Scientific Jury in accordance with Order № R-109-247 from 13.06.2022 of the Rector of the Medical University of Varna**

**Re:** 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** – PhD student 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.

Scientific supervisor: **Prof. Todorka Kostadinova, PhD**

This statement of opinion is based on a decision of the Scientific Jury, specified in Protocol №1 from 15.06.2022.

### **1. 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 in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its Application and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at the Medical University of 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 PhD student has collected the required credits with positive certification grades during the period of study in the doctoral program.

Siyka Katsarova's dissertation thesis explores the possibilities for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria as a destination all the year round, seeking for practical and applied

aspects of solutions for overcoming the existing difficulties and discrepancies in the current Bulgarian practice. The issue under study is topical and dissertable due to the increasing role of health care, including in health tourism, in its complex manifestations to warrant continuous, comfortable and healthy lifestyle for the people.

The dissertation thesis covers a total of 136 pages. From a structural point of view, it includes an introduction, main text in three chapters and a separate part “Conclusions and recommendations”, conclusions, bibliography and five appendices. The main text contains 9 tables and 15 figures. The bibliography contains 133 sources, of which 24 in Cyrillic and 109 in Latin, including 83 internet addresses.

## **2. Characteristics and evaluation of the dissertation thesis content**

In her introduction, the PhD student Siyka Katsarova argues convincingly in favour of the topicality and the importance of the studied issue. She makes an analysis and assessment of the unique advantages of Bulgaria as a destination which may turn it into a competitive player on the international market as a destination for health tourism all the year round, which can be useful to the resource ministries as the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of the Environment and Waters and the Ministry of Regional Development and Civil Construction in establishing a sustainable policy for its development.

The aim of the dissertation paper formulated by Siyka Katsarova is **“to analyse the possibilities of Bulgaria for developing health tourism all the year round with a focus on the fields of medical tourism, medical SPA, SPA and wellness tourism and in view of its positioning on the international market as a destination offering quality in this specialised tourist product”** (p. 8 of the dissertation and the dissertation summary). To this purpose, five research tasks are formulated: to analyse and summarise the state of the facilities (medical SPA and SPA hotels certified according to the Bulgarian legislation); the staff potential and the needs of the tourist sector regarding medical SPA and SPA tourism; to study the opinion of the experts in the field of medical SPA and SPA tourism – managers employed on a yearly basis at medical SPA and SPA hotels; medical SPA centres; the regions (including the medical ones) in which Bulgaria can be competitive on the market of health tourism; to design a model for successful development of health tourism in Bulgaria through innovative portfolio of therapies and its positioning as a destination offering a competitive product.

**The main research thesis is that “there are positive attitudes for Bulgaria to continue more purposefully and with greater public resource (including through EC**

**programmes for the programme period 2021-2027, to stimulate the development of health tourism all the year round by means of economic instruments directed specifically to the SPA destinations (in different municipalities)** (p. 7, dissertation, p. 8 dissertation summary).

The PhD student Siyka Katsarova defines as **object of the study various experiments (Bulgarian and international) as well as owners and managers of medical SPA and SPA hotels on the territory of Bulgaria, and subject of her research study the attitudes toward the development of health tourism and foregrounding the leading subdivisions which are part of the total product** (p. 9 dissertation summary and dissertation).

**The limitations of the study include:** only facilities whose concept is built on the basis of a natural resource, including climate, water, peloids (for health tourism) and innovation (for medical tourism); the opinion is studied only of owners/managers of hotels, certified by the Ministry of Tourism in accordance with Regulation № 2 from 29 January 2016 concerning the conditions and the procedure for certifying a “balneological (medical SPA) centre” , “SPA centre”, “wellness centre” and “thalassotherapy centre”, issued by the Ministry of Tourism

and the Ministry of Health, published in the State Gazette, issue 11 from 9 February 2016.

**The temporal and territorial scope of the study** encompasses the period between November 2018 and November 2021, the destinations being Varna, Sofia, Pomorie, Kyustendil, Velingrad, Sandanski and Pavel Banya, respectively.

**The methodology** of the research combines quantitative and qualitative methods: content analysis, questionnaire study and in-depth interviews. Graphic analysis is used to visualize the information. The in-depth interviews were carried out by the PhD student personally. The study includes 51 respondents.

Chapter I **“Theoretical aspects of health (medical, medical SPA, SPA and wellness) tourism”** focusses on the main interpretations of the term “health tourism” and the combination of its comprising elements - medical, medical SPA, SPA and wellness. The author examines numerous factors influencing the understanding, interpretation and development of health tourism; summarized information is offered about the market of health tourism – supply and demand, accounting for the incomplete, incomparable and sporadic information; some specific managerial (regulatory) and marketing aspects are marked in the development of health tourism worldwide and in the Republic of Bulgaria.

Situational analysis is provided of the medical SPA, SPA and wellness tourism in the Republic of Bulgaria, which the PhD student Siyka Katsarova defends by means of strategic

documents by the Bulgarian ministries of tourism, health, labour and social policy, the statements of opinion by the Bulgarian balneology and SPA association, as well as on the basis of her long personal professional experience in the field of tourism at national and European level.

Chapter II **“Good practices in the field of health tourism in Europe”** reveals main trends in the development of health tourism in Europe through the positioning of balneotherapy in the health systems of the European SPA associations. A detailed presentation is offered of good practices for the development of health tourism in Germany and Hungary, which are in the classifications of the countries developing international health tourism as European destinations. The conclusions are drawn that the way of conducting a total state policy, market positions, reputation, product sustainability and competitiveness regarding the development of health tourism is an example to be followed by our country.

Chapter III **“Attitudes and possibilities for a market orientation and positioning of certified Bulgarian medical SPA and SPA centres on the international market”** is dedicated to the results from the conducted in-depth interviews whose aim is to give meaning and content to the attitudes and possibilities for the development of health tourism in our country (content aspect of the research subject, as indicated by the PhD student). It is observed that the focus in the preparation of offer proposals to clients falls firstly on health – prevention (complex offers with individual therapies and procedures associated with health promotion and prevention of diseases, using the mineral resource. They are followed by offers based only on the use of the available natural resources due to the fact that almost all the hotels include in the cost per night the free usage of the water and wellness products in the zones of relax and this fact is also cost-effective for the customers. Thirdly, the emphasis is on offers associated with health – treatment (prophylaxis and rehabilitation) and fourthly, on sport and reconvalescence (mainly in the mountain climatic and seaside resorts), the conclusion being that health prevention and prophylaxis are in unison with the policy adopted in the recent years by the Bulgaria, to promote the traditional Bulgarian product based on the curative natural resource in combination with modern procedures, techniques and products. Regarding the state of the market, it is observed that the most important market on which the business relies is the Bulgarian one (95% of the centres work mainly with this market), followed by the European market (56,5%). The Russian market ranks third (52,2%), and the fourth is the Balkan market (Greece, Romania, Macedonia -17,4%), followed by the market of Israel. At the same time, the study reveals wishes, declared by the respondents for diversification of the market orientation with a supremacy of Europe -73.9% of the

respondents; 69,9% wish to increase their market share from Russia and Israel, 26.1% - the share of the Bulgarian market, 21.7% - of the Balkan market, but interestingly enough, without any commitment for expansion of the offered product associated with preventive medicine (health prophylaxis and prevention). Only 4% of the respondents are ready for change.

Special attention is duly paid to the possibilities for utilisation of the country resources for the development of holistic medicine and application of complex health products in medical SPA, SPA and wellness centres as opposed to the negative consequences for the people's health and way of life as a result of the COVID-19 pandemia.

Chapter IV of the main text of the dissertation paper is entitled "Conclusions and recommendations" and in fact it compiles in the presented model for the organisation of health tourism, adapted from T. Angelova, PhD, for balneology, Siyka Katsarova's idea for the unification of the efforts of the various stakeholders associated with the formation of the cost chain in health tourism with the general policies and strategies in the field of the sustainable development of tourism in the country.

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

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

I accept the contributions of the dissertation thesis, formulated by PhD student Siyka Katsarova in the dissertation summary. The analyses and the theoretical generalization based on diverse theoretical and empirical information can certainly serve as a basis for solution of significant scientific and applied problems related to the development of health tourism in Bulgaria as a destination with a focus on:

- Medical SPA, SPA and wellness tourism;
- Competitiveness of the destination on the international market of health tourism;
- Inclusion of Bulgaria as a destination in the list of those proposing adequate solutions for overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's health and way of life;
- The collaboration among all the participants in the establishment of a cost chain in health tourism.

### **4. Recommendations and questions**

I would like to recommend to PhD student Siyka Katsarova to use the results from the dissertation paper for subsequent specification of the possibilities for the development of health tourism all the year round in destination Bulgaria; to become an initiator for the formation of an interdisciplinary team of collaborators to expand the results from this study and make them public through a publication of a monograph in Bulgarian and English language. It will be useful for all stakeholders involved in the process of health tourism development.

### **5. Dissertation summary and publication of the thesis**

Siyka Katsarova has 5 actual publications in scientific journals related to the topic of the dissertation.

The dissertation summary reflects the structure and the content of the study in a correct manner, the emphasis is laid on the most important points and conclusions of the research and the application of the model of organisation of health tourism in Bulgaria.

### **6. Conclusion**

Siyka Katsarova's dissertation thesis presents a systematic study of a topical and important problem, e.g. the positioning of Bulgaria on the international market as a destination for health, medical, SPA and wellness tourism all the year round. The author demonstrates excellent theoretical and practical knowledge as well as strategic vision for the development of health tourism in Bulgaria. The research field is too broad and offers opportunities for continuation of the studies.

**I have a fully positive opinion about the dissertation study.** It meets the requirements of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its application and the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at Medical University "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna. **I am fully convinced to propose to the Scientific Jury to confer to PhD student Siyka Anastasova Katsarova the educational and scientific degree "Philosophy Doctor" in the scientific specialty "Organization and management outside the field of material production (in healthcare)", professional field 3.7. Administration and management.**

13/07/2022

Varna

Member of the Scientific Jury:

/Prof. Svetla Rakadzhiska, PhD/