

## CONSULTING ASSESSMENT OF THE POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTH TOURIST AREAS: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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### **Abstract**

The study is based on current trends in the global development of Health Tourism and the emerging demand for services related to health, rehabilitation, and health prevention, as well as the high concentration of resources in the tourist regions of Bulgaria. A huge potential for development of the tourist destinations beyond the known ones, is emerging; all thanks to more than 3,500 mineral springs found in Bulgaria.

*Purpose* – the study aims exploring the possibility of economic use of mineral water resources in favor of tourism and the incorporation of great amount of unusable resources within the available ones of the tourist areas. This would lead on one hand to an overall development of the sector and an additional contribution to the GDP and on the other hand would bring sustainable growth of the tourist regions and a year-around development of the tourist services across the entire country. The study is found also on the fact that in Bulgaria there are many spas and thermal centers dated back to the Roman and Byzantine Empires. The consulting assessment attempts to reveal at length and to find an economic argument for the development of the health tourist areas. The realization of the potential of Health Tourism would have a positive effect on the entire industry, as well as the accompanying economic activities. It is also mandatory to define the necessity for development of human resources and management capacity, as needed in the tourist regions and in the process of investment in the concept of Health Tourism.

*Methodology* – to achieve the set goal and to solve the resulting tasks in the article, the systematic approach and traditional research methods were used: historical, comparative, the method of analysis and synthesis, the method of observation, the method of grouping, the method of survey and interview, graphic methods, differentiated, analytical, combined, etc. Our and specialized literature was studied. The experience of countries with a developed tourism industry and the results of a survey in tourist complexes were used.

*Contribution* – of the research is the aim of the project in this respect is to upgrade at least two Bulgarian tourist regions/destinations in the direction of Smart Destinations. From a policy point of view, it is necessary to realise that in order to achieve the growth of tourism revenues and contribution to GDP, it is necessary to have a clear, long-term, and comprehensive vision. Approach – The integration of different tools of destination marketing management with a focus on Health components that will brand Bulgaria as a four-season destination, make it more recognizable as a destination for prevention, recovery, and recreation in conditions of need for health and safety for every potential tourist.

*Findings* – The consulting business and its application in tourism, as well as the potential for development and management of the newly created tourist areas in Bulgaria, specializing in the field of health tourism. Bulgaria has undeveloped resources of health tourism and resource potential to position itself as a 4-season Smart Destination for Health & MICE tourism.

**Keywords** consulting assessment, development, potential, Bulgaria health destination.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Tourist zoning has been a very discussed and reasoned topic in the development of Bulgarian tourism in recent years. The management models of the marketing structures of the destinations have been studied, to be interpreted by experts and operators, as well as to be adapted to the Bulgarian conditions for the development of health tourism in certain tourist areas in Bulgaria.

The good practices of leading consulting companies in the field of destinations can be applied in carrying out consulting assessments for the development and management of tourist areas by the Marketing Organizations of the destinations. The creation of methodologies by management consultants for research and assessment of the development possibilities of individual tourist areas is a challenge aiming to successfully develop and manage tourist places.

The present study deals with issues related to the consulting business and its application in tourism, as well as the potential for development and management of the newly created tourist areas in Bulgaria, specializing in the field of health tourism. The object of research is consulting companies working in the field of tourism. The subject of research is consulting projects related to opportunities for the application of good practices in the management of health tourism destinations/regions, by means of marketing organizations of the destinations. The purpose of the development is related to the thesis that through research, adaptation, and application of consulting experience in the marketing management of destinations, as well as knowledge of their specific resource potential for the development of health tourism, successful models can be developed with a methodology for improving the management of new tourist areas in Bulgaria. The tasks set and proven in the research are related to analyzing the resource potential of health tourism destinations, as well as researching good practices in management consulting of leading companies in the field of tourism and creating a project model for assessment of the development potential and the management of a tourist area with a focus on health tourism.

### **1. ANALYSIS OF THE STATE OF RESEARCH ON THE PROBLEM OF TOURIST ZONING**

The importance of tourism and the benefits of its development determine the need for strategic activities and coordination of market participants. The main goal of strategic planning at macro- and meso- levels is to lead to successful results and meet the market's needs. The reason behind it is rather objective and stems from the need for a common vision, long-term molding of social, cultural, and ecological impact of tourism in the destinations; problems with resource provisioning in various areas; the development of the destination with increasing competition and a dynamic market (Ianeva, 2014).

The matter of the specialization and the way the product offering is perceived in specific tourist areas in Bulgaria, as well as its sustainable development, is gaining more and more relevance and is becoming a basis for research by many specialists in the scientific and practical sphere (Ianeva & All, 2021, 67).

According to the trends and forecasts considered in the “Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism in Bulgaria” 2014-2030 prepared by the Ministry of Economy and Energy, “...inter-European tourism will emphasize the diversification of tourist products and the offer of thematic tourist products in the field of cultural heritage, modern culture, protected natural areas, health tourism, historical, sport, religious, business tourism and others”. Amongst the main priorities is increasing the share of specialized types of tourism, leading to year-round and more intensive business. With its vast informational resource, the Internet enables tourists to check hotels, weather forecasts; it provides information on local cuisine, and can allow tourists to connect with each other and to voice opinions about the destination of choice. Thus, the huge informational resource available to modern tourists presents tourism entrepreneurs with completely new challenges. Given the new demands of tourists, they are forced to make new and significant investments with a projected high return on investment. The development and promotion of specialized tourism products, according to a study by Ianeva and Georgieva (Ianeva and Georgieva, 2018), is seen as a means of overcoming the problem of seasonality and creating an emotional connection of foreign tourists with Bulgaria.

Destinations are defined as a geographical area that is perceived by visitors as a unique entity with a political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning. This definition enables Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to be responsible for the planning and marketing of the region and to have the power and resources to take action towards strategic objectives. According to a study by Ianeva and Tsonev (Ianeva and Tsonev, 2016), they offer a mix of tourism products and services that are consumed as the brand of the destination. Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd and Wanhill (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd and Wanhill, 1998) found in their study that destinations are places to which people travel and where they choose to stay for a period of time in order to experience certain traits and characteristics – an attraction acceptance of a certain kind. (Leiper, 1995). Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd and Wanhill, (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd and Wanhill, 1998, 1) found in their study that destinations are defined as facilities and service centers designed to meet the needs of tourists.

Based on separate geographical areas in a respective region, leading to the development of different types of tourism, a concept for the regionalization of tourism in the country has been prepared. In practice, the National Center for Territorial Development prepares it by order of the Ministry of Economy and Energy (currently the Ministry of Tourism), in direct connection with the implementation of the new Law on Tourism (of 26.03.2013. According to Art. 15. 1) of this law, the identification of tourist areas in the country is done for the purpose of forming regional tourist products and carrying out regional marketing and advertising. The Act (2013) aims for the establishment of Tourism Area Management Organizations or also known as Destination Marketing Organizations and defines their functions.

Generally speaking, the provisions of the Tourism Act (2013) define regions as marketing tourism organizations called Tourism Region Management Organizations, the management of which is related to the performance of activities in three main directions: Creation of regional tourism products; Implementation of regional marketing and advertising and Coordination and management of tourism at a regional level.

Based on analysis of some main destination management models, it can be concluded that none of them mentions the creation of regional tourism products as an activity of destination marketing organizations. It is no coincidence that the tourism business in Bulgaria disputes the initiative of the Ministry of Tourism to invest in the development of such products. As noticed, the remaining two activities related to marketing and advertising, as well as coordination and management, are mainly represented in the descriptive and conceptual model and should find wide application in the management of tourist areas in Bulgaria (Portarska, 2018,777).

These models, as well as the application of the consulting business and its good practices, can contribute to proper functioning of the newly created Destination Management Organizations in Bulgaria in health tourism areas, which is why the research and adaptation of such is necessary in the present study.

## **2. POTENTIAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTH TOURISM IN BULGARIA**

Bulgaria is a popular destination for health tourism and prevention (Eurostat yearbook 2010). Bulgaria has rich traditions in the area for a number of reasons, and the presence of mineral springs proven to be beneficial to health is amongst the most popular areas of health tourism in Bulgaria. Many spa resorts across Bulgaria offer a variety of specialized professional services (Tsonev, Basmadzhieva, 2016, 131).

Hot springs bathing is a \$56 billion commercial industry worldwide, and systematic reviews suggest hot springs bathing (balneotherapy – BT) has a positive impact on chronic pain and musculoskeletal conditions, yet there are no known reviews on BT and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Clark-Kennedy, Kennedy, Cohen & Conduit 2021,69-92). In most cases, health tourism (Ianeva, M., Basmadzhieva, St. 2021Prague) in Bulgaria is combined with relaxation in the Black Sea or mountain resorts, with visits to balneological centres offering good opportunities for rehabilitation and recovery, e.g., after surgical interventions. Across the European Union, there is a trend towards increased mobility of patients and healthcare professionals. This is a prerequisite for better accessibility and higher quality of health care in order to attract patients. In general, according to various studies, foreign tourists are left with very good impressions and reviews of the health tourism in Bulgaria. Our biggest competitors in the field of health tourism are Turkey, the Czech Republic and Poland.

Of fundamental importance for the development of health tourism in the country is the availability of resources that favor its development.

Among Bulgaria's most valuable natural resources are the diversity and abundance of: Hydrothermal mineral water, Healing mud, Sea, Healthy Salutary Sea and mountain climate, beautiful nature, and picturesque landscapes, over 1,600 springs, of which over more than 600 are mineral springs, located mainly at the foot of the mountains, Dozens of lagoons and deposits of healing mud, Sources of healing peat.

Bulgaria ranks second in Europe after Iceland in the number of mineral springs, providing all types of mineral water existing in nature (Eurostat yearbook 2010, 6).

Bulgaria's **hydro-mineral resources** are particularly numerous, diverse, and often unique. Together with the drilling undertaken in recent years the usable capacity of the mineral springs has grown to 4500 l/s or 389 million l/day (24 hours). Taking into account that 200 liters per day are needed for the therapy and service of one tourist, the daily capacity of the mineral springs of Bulgaria can provide an amount of mineral, respectively thermal water, for almost 1.9 million people per day or about 33 million people per year (considered for a 20-day course of spa therapy and a 25-day period for annual renewal of the facilities). This amount of thermal and mineral water is sufficient not only to satisfy the needs of the Bulgarian population for spa therapy, prevention, rehabilitation, recovery, and sports, but also the needs of international tourism. However, currently only 10% of the mineral water capacity is being used.

Based on this, Bulgaria has the great potential to become a world destination for health tourism. When creating the vision of the development of health tourism, the capacity of the resource should be respected in a way that the capacity of the tourist sites does not exceed the flow rate of the water. On the other hand, it is necessary to put effort into creating a complex service, combining health tourism with other tourist resources.

It is important to note the following facts:

- Bulgaria is second in Europe after Iceland and ahead of countries with proven traditions in balneology in terms of existing, developed, and registered (certified) mineral water resources.

- More than 600 mineral water springs have been discovered and studied in Bulgaria, grouped in nearly 240 deposits, with 1,600 springs with a total flow rate of 4,900 l/s., but a small part of them is used for balneotherapy. In southern Bulgaria, predominate natural deposits, and in northern Bulgaria - through drilling. A large part of the mineral waters in Bulgaria spring from a great depth, which is a guarantee of their purity. Currently, 1.5% of water is used for drinking and bottling and less than 0.4% for spa treatment.

Temperature (10°C - 103°C) with proven healing properties.

In Bulgaria there are almost all types of mineral waters that can be found in the world. According to their chemical composition, mineral waters are carbonated - contain more than 500 mg/l of carbon dioxide, hydrogen sulphide - more than 10 mg/l of hydrogen sulphide, nitrogenous - with increased alkalinity, low mineralization and often rich in microelements and radioactive waters - radon waters. According to the temperature of the water, the mineral springs are cold (hypothermal) - up to 20 °C; warm (subthermal) – 21-37 °C; warm (thermal) – 37-42 °C and hot (hyperthermal) above 42 °C. The majority of the springs in Bulgaria - over 80% - have a low total mineralization, with solids content below 1g/l (Ministry of Economy and Energy, 2014, 49-50).

The second main element of the Bulgarian balneological resources is the healing mud (Luga.bg, 21.09.2015), called poloid. In Bulgaria, 4 types of therapeutic mud can be found: sea lagoon mud, peat, and spring mud as well as bentonite clay. Sea mud has the greatest application in medical treatment. This mud is formed in coastal (sea) lakes and represents (along with salty lake water and magnesium lye residues from salt production) a unique healing raw material unknown to most of Europe. The deposits of this mud are located along the Black Sea coast of the country. There are 10 deposits of new and fossil peat in the country, but only 2 of them have been well studied and have practical application. The deposits of spring mud (healing mud) in Bulgaria are 2.

There are long-standing traditions in balneotherapy - use of the power of mineral springs dates back to ancient times. It originates from the Thracians, who were famous for being excellent healers. The deities associated with the cult of water and health were honored. The "Holy Springs of Thrace" became famous throughout the Roman Empire. The ancient Greeks also widely used the Bulgarian mineral waters and worshiped them, which is evident from the minted coins. Later, these lands were conquered by the Romans, who continued to improve the areas around the healing springs. Mineral springs are used both for treatment and for toning and keeping in good shape. The remains of spectacular ancient Thracian and especially Roman and other facilities, which once served for hydrotherapy purposes, testify to this. Remains of thermal baths, balneological facilities, asklepiones, nymphaeums near the springs have been preserved from Roman times to the present days, among them being Augusta - Hisarya, Odessos - Varna, Aqua Calidae - Burgas, Tonzos - Sliven, Serdika - Sofia, Ulpia Pautalia - Kyustendil, Skaptopara - Blagoevgrad, Germanea - Sapareva Banya, Dezudava - Sandanski, etc.

In more recent times and to this day, our balneo- and climate resorts have been formed in these places, and their resources are used for treatment and recreation. The economic transformation that the country has experienced in the last 20 years has required a complete reorganization of the spa sector in the country. Thus, a part of the recreation and tourism facilities are sold, and the rest are renovated. In recent years, there has been a shift in the interest of investors from seasonal sea and ski tourism to year-round spa tourism. There is active construction of modern balneo and spa complexes in the interior of the country (Ministry of Economy and Energy, 2014, 51).

Bulgaria also appeared on the European spa map due to the following factors: There are many hotels, sanatoriums, clinics, but also the possibility to buy vacation homes, hotels (real estate at good prices in the mountain and the Black Sea resorts). Modern spa hotels and spa centers offer year-round spa and wellness packages and medical programs. Almost all are 4- or 5-star establishments and have swimming pools, saunas, solariums, fitness centers, gyms, beauty salons, etc. and teams of well-trained professionals.

The main advantage of the Bulgarian balneo destinations is that they are located in areas with an extremely favorable climate. The combination of these natural features with the modern hotel base of seaside resorts such as Albena and mountain resorts such as Bansko and Velingrad, make Bulgaria an excellent destination for year-round balneo treatment and relaxation.

Bulgaria ranks first in Europe according to the availability and variety of mineral waters and spa resorts. It provides significant opportunities for recreation and tourism with its 102 resorts: 34 of national importance (five mountainous and ten on the seacoast); 68 of local importance (spa, forest, and coast).

Bulgaria has 58 spa resorts, 55 climatic mountain resorts and 48 climatic sea resorts. In December 2019 a competition held by the Ministry of Tourism determined which are the new Bulgarian Eden destinations ("Best European destinations") under the project "Health and spa tourism GRO/SME/18/C/065 - Bulgaria Sanus per Aquam, (Health and spa tourism GRO/SME/18/C/065, 2019). The municipality of Kostenets is placed first,



followed by the municipality of Samokov (Belchin village), the municipality of Banite, the municipality of Sapareva Banya and the municipality of Ardino.

With regards to external marketing in the policy of the Ministry of Tourism and more specifically in the advertising clips with which Bulgaria is promoted as a tourist destination, it is of importance to know whether specific resources are shown as a competitive advantage for our territory, in order to highlight the satisfaction of a specific consumer motive for undertaking a tourist trip (Ianeva, Basmadzhieva, 513-523).

In this regard, when analyzing the advertising clip for the European Presidency of Bulgaria, published in 2018, it is clear it highlights mostly natural resources related to the main types of tourism - sea and mountain, as well as folklore traditions and customs, including rosewood, bagpipe playing, and kukeri. Several shots showcase architectural and historical landmarks, cultural events and festivals, religious and business buildings that could tie into some of the specialized types of tourism. The clip does not include showings of resorts, only certain landmarks, and we find no correlation to health tourism, and more specifically spa, balneology, or medical tourism. The sea remains the only resource featured in the clip that is related to this specific type of tourism.

Most of the spa and medical tourism centers listed above are built in smaller municipalities. Most of them dispose of favorable conditions for combining preventive and curative activities with other attractions to diversify the tourist product. It is of interest whether there is a procedure for certification of a destination for Medical/Spa tourism in Bulgaria. In January 2020, the first meeting was held between the vice-president of the European Spa Association (ESPA), the chairman of the Bulgarian Union of Balneology and Spa (BSBSPA) and the mayor of Velingrad, aiming to discuss the possibilities of certifying Velingrad as a tourist destination for health tourism, in the context of the positioning of Bulgaria and Bulgarian medical/spa and spa hotels on the German health insurance market.

The above listed regions are conditionally divided into 7 by the Ministry of Tourism (see Figure 1.2.1.) The cities and localities included in them are summarized in Table 1.2.1. Balneo and spa destinations in Bulgaria:

Figure 1.2.1. **Balneo and spa destinations in Bulgaria**



Ref of the figure 1.2.1

**Table 1.2.1. Balneo and spa destinations in Bulgaria (by cities and localities)**

Destination	Cities and localities
Black Sea balneo and SPA destination (Black Sea SPA Riviera)	Shabla - Rusalka - Balchik - Balchishka Tuzla - Albena - Kranevo - Golden Sands - Riviera - St. St. Konstantin and Elena - Varna - Mouth of the Kamchia River - Pomorie - Burgas - Burgas Mineral Baths
Sofia balneo and SPA destination (Thermes of Constantine the Great)	Sofia (Sofia-center-Gorna Banya-Ovcha Kupel - Kniazhevo) – Pancharevo – Bankya – Momin Prohod – Kostenets – Dolna Banya – Pchelinski Mineral Baths – Belchinsky Mineral Baths – Sapareva Banya
Southwest balneo and SPA destination (Health along the Struma and Mesta river valleys)	Kyustendil – Blagoevgrad – Sandanski – Rupite – Marikostinovo – Banya (Guliina Banya) – Dobrinishte – Ognyanovo
Srednogorska balneo and SPA destination (Water and roses for kings)	Panagyurishte - Banya (Panagyursko) – Strelcha – Krasnovo – Hisar – Banya (Karlovsko) – Pavel Banya – Ovoshtnik (Kazanlak) – Yagoda (Maglizh)
Rhodope balneo and SPA destination (Health and longevity in the mountain of Orpheus)	Belovo - Varvara - Velingrad - Draginovo - Rakitovo - Narechenski mineral baths - Beden mineral baths - Devin - Mikhalkovo - Baths (Smolyan)
Southeast Balneo and SPA Destination (Neolithic SPA)	Starozagorski mineral baths - Bath, Kortenski mineral baths (Nova Zagora) - Sliven mineral baths - Mineral baths, Haskovo
Staroplaninska balneo and SPA destination (The strength of the Balkans)	Burzia - Spanchevtsi - Varshets - Shipkovo - Chiflik – Voneshta voda

Source: Author's systematization based on data of the Ministry of Tourism

In Table 1.2.2. is presented a ranking of Economy.bg (Economy.bg, 2015) of the most popular spa resorts in Bulgaria according to the healing properties of their water:

**Table 1.2.2.: Ranking of the most popular spa resorts in Bulgaria according to the healing properties of their water**

SPA resort	Healing features of water
Velingrad	Beneficial influence of the musculoskeletal system, improvement of the condition in neurological diseases, hypertension, gynaecological diseases, renal-urological, respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases
Sandanski	Beneficial effect in diseases of the respiratory tract, arthro-rheumatism, locomotor system, peripheral nervous system and others.
Sapareva banya	It treats diseases of the musculoskeletal system, the peripheral nervous system, gynaecological diseases, diseases of the skin, upper respiratory tract and others.
Bankya	Treatment of cardiovascular diseases and damage to the nervous system.
Hisarya	Treats kidney-urological, biliary, gastrointestinal, liver diseases, as well as diseases of the musculoskeletal system.
Devin	It treats diseases of the musculoskeletal system, the nervous system, the reproductive system, skin diseases, gastrointestinal, biliary-hepatic, kidney-urological, respiratory system diseases and others.
Varshets	It treats diseases of the nervous system, the cardiovascular system and the musculoskeletal system.



Shipkovo	Treatment of diseases of the gastrointestinal tract, liver-biliary, kidney diseases, problems with the musculoskeletal system and the peripheral nervous system.
Albena	Treatment of respiratory disorders, cardiovascular diseases, disorders of the musculoskeletal system, neurological, gynaecological, skin and other diseases.
Zlatni pyasatsi	Treatment of arthritis, stress conditions, neuroses, chronic pharyngitis, bronchitis, asthma.
Pomorie	Beneficial effect in diseases of the musculoskeletal system, gynaecological, surgical and traumatic, skin, peripheral nervous, cardiovascular diseases and others.
Narechenski bani	It treats nervous, diabetic, endocrine, and other diseases.
Pavel banya	Treatment of degenerative and inflammatory orthopaedic diseases of the musculoskeletal system, post-traumatic and orthopaedic conditions, joint and peri-articular inflammatory diseases, diseases of the peripheral nervous system and others.
Kostenets	Diseases of the musculoskeletal system, the peripheral nervous system, and gynecological diseases.
Momin prohod	It treats diseases of the respiratory, cardiovascular, nervous, and digestive systems, as well as problems of substance metabolism and allergies.
Slivenski mineralni bani	Treats gastrointestinal and liver-biliary diseases, diseases of the peripheral nervous system.
Starozagorski mineralni bani	It treats diseases of the musculoskeletal system, the peripheral nervous system, gynecological, renal-urological, gastrointestinal and liver-biliary diseases.
Mineralni bani, Haskovo	Treatment and prevention of diseases of the musculoskeletal system, the peripheral nervous system, gynecological diseases and others.
Banya	Balneotherapy and prevention of chronic inflammatory diseases of the musculoskeletal system, for old injuries, rheumatism, sciatica, lumbago, discopathy, chronic gynecological diseases, urological and skin diseases and others.
Kyustendil	Treatment of diseases of the musculoskeletal system, gynecological diseases and traumatic and inflammatory diseases.
Ognyanovo	Diseases of the locomotor system, endocrine, respiratory and digestive systems, metabolism, nervous, gynecological and cardiovascular diseases.
Strelcha	It treats the peripheral nervous system, the musculoskeletal system, the internal organs, improves sleep, self-esteem and appetite.
Banya, Karlovo	Calms the nerves and helps diseases of the bone system.

Source: Author's systematization by research of Economy.bg

In Bulgaria, there is a wide variety of specialized superstructures, including **spa hotels** and other accommodation facilities.

### 3. APPLICATION OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTING FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURIST REGIONS IN BULGARIA

The application of management consultancy in tourism is multifaceted and is determined by the different types of needs of the tourism business, as well as by specific consumer requirements and problems during different periods of time. The successful application of management consulting in solving an uncertainty or problem in tourism is widely applied in practice not only by American but also by European consulting companies, some of which have been operating on the Bulgarian market in recent years and whose

experience can be applied to the development of tourism areas and their specialised products. Three of the largest European firms that also specialize in consulting services for the tourism industry are Travel Team Consulting, Locum Consulting and PA Consulting (Ianeva, 2020).

Travel Team Consulting (TTC) specializes in travel consulting and has experience in resolving problematic and crisis situations from practice. The projects that can be studied and applied to the Bulgarian tourist regions according to their specificity are:

A project for the preparation and implementation of training on the specificities of sustainable tourism in Rimini, Italy. The training is targeting tour operators and aims to reveal the practices and principles of sustainable tourism. The training is carried out for a staff of 30 people, representatives of tour operators and environmental organisations. It covers topics such as distribution channel management, destination management, environmental status, communications, and other topics. The tour operators involved together organise around thirty million trips a year.

Another project looks at the consultancy support provided to the South Seas Resort Company (SSRC) brand and the centralisation of eight independent hotels. Centralization includes tour sales, reservations, direct mail, high-tech reservation making equipment that facilitates communications directly with the designated hotel. These innovations open the hotel's communications to tour operators in the United States and Canada, and around the world. The TTC also opened a representative office in London, supervised and provided guidance to hotel staff and promoted, hired, and managed the company's travel agency (Ianeva, 2010). *A similar type of centralisation could be implemented by destination marketing organisations who would manage the formed tourism districts in the country in order to contact outbound foreign tour operators to send tourists to the respective tourist location.*

In order to implement direct sales with the creation of an **online platform in a specific tourist area**, the project of the British Airways TTC consultancy company can be applied, in which an initial online strategy is developed that balances direct sales through their own website with sales through other internet portals. The strategies are being separated to change existing customer behaviour and 'move' customers away from the more expensive traditional channels to the better value for money flights.

TTC assists Delta Airlines in reservation management, on-site cargo sales and group sales. Consulting assistance is also provided in the areas of marketing and sales, international market development, vacation package development, loyalty programs for corporate and leisure travellers, maintaining relationships with international travel organizations, and managing the company's travel agency. Throughout the project, TTC encourages Delta to maintain a high quality of service and retain positions in commercial organizations such as travel agencies, corporate travel departments, etc. *This type of project activity would also help tourism regions in Bulgaria to create a **network of destination businesses** to attract tourists from emirate destinations, as well as develop loyalty programs for the sites in the tourism region.*

Another best practice in TTC's project work is with Avis Rent a Car to create and

implement vacation programs aimed at a targeted segment of customers from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. TTC establishes **marketing partnerships** with airlines, cruise lines, resorts, and hotels. The team also develops tactical print materials, brand communications, customer loyalty programs and direct marketing initiatives. In addition, TTC manages an eight-person team of marketers and exceeds set revenue targets by more than 100%. *Marketing partnerships are at the core of the development of tourism regions under their additional specialization.*

Another project with **Travel Guard International** is the creation of special programs with insurance for tour operators, cruise lines, destinations, and resort groups. It is the creation of **specialised programmes in tourist areas** that will be one of the main tasks that could be carried out not only by tour operators but also by tourism consultancy firms.

For the company Room Results, TTS is developing a special Internet-based **return management program** to help accommodations (hotels, apartments, villas, and condos) optimize their relationships with other sellers. By providing a true team of professionals to manage website positioning, pricing, inventory, advertising opportunities and to control competing Internet activities, TTC helps Room Results' suppliers control their inventory, income, and time, with a shift from marginal business in e-commerce to 60% of sales being made on the Internet.

For IGT, TTC recommends a solution that allows travel suppliers to populate content, availability, and pricing information into one **central information collection system**. This solution also supports IGT-owned travel distributors by supplying them with the necessary information via CDD. The implementation of the project takes six months and includes a full market assessment, recommendations and negotiations with the chosen solution provider, implementation, and staff training. *A similar centralised system could be implemented in digital form for the new tourist areas in the country.*

Applying the practices of the leading tourism consultancy **Travel Team Consulting (TTC), as well as the others mentioned**, a consultancy assessment of the development potential of tourism areas can be made by developing a methodology based on the best practices identified to assess the absence, presence and extent of implementation of such practices in order to create an improved tourism area management model that can be offered to destination marketing organisations to work more efficiently (Ianeva, 2016).

Applying the marketing management, namely the management of the activities of tourist destinations and their organizations or the so-called DMOs (destination marketing organizations) in making decisions about their management, both the internal capabilities of the organization and the requirements of the external environment are taken into account (Tsonev, 2017).

For the purpose of a successful management at the mesolevel in the developed tourism countries in Europe, the so-called Destination Marketing Organizations are established, which have a number of rights and obligations in terms of successful and sustainable

development as well as promotion of the respective tourist area.

In Bulgaria, the issues related to the management of destination marketing organizations have been partially studied, but a number of foreign authors such as Lundtorp, Wanhill, Kozak, Tinsley, Lynch, Kerr, Barron, Wood, Bonham, Mak, Howie, and others have worked in this direction, and their analyses have been applied in practice by many European tourism countries.

Indeed, destination marketing organisations serve to facilitate the relationship between the private sector, the public sector, and other stakeholders. Working together, their decisions influence the strategic development of tourism destinations (Ianeva and Basmadhzieva, 2021, 101-110).

The main objective of a destination marketing organisation is to create a **management plan and marketing strategy for destinations**. In this way, the core function of the organisation becomes the 'destination entrepreneur' and acts as a catalyst and organiser for tourism realisation. *In this regard, consultancy projects can assist the MODs and help to create or refine a plan and strategy for the development of the tourism area.*

In the management science, tourism marketing management is integrating both approaches. Marketing management (Tsonev, 2017, 185-190) allows to reach the goals of the organization through a complete orientation towards the consumers and satisfying their desires and needs. The advantages of marketing management lie in the ability to synchronize the structure of demand with the structure of supply by forming the necessary assortment of tourism products, conducting a flexible pricing policy, and creating an effective sales promotion system. This and other approaches are applied by consultancy firms in order to develop and successfully manage tourist areas.

The theory and practice of tourism area management around the world is based on two models – a descriptive model (Presenza, 2004) and the conceptual model, developed by Dore and Crouch (Dore and Crouch 2003), as well as research by leading consultancies, an evaluation system can be created. As the main activities of destinations are based on external marketing and internal destination development.

*According to a recent study by (Arbogas, Deng and Maumbe, 2007), of the Internal Destination Development activities, management consultants need to mainly focus on stakeholder coordination as well as visit management and information sharing across different platforms on the specifics and specialized products of a particular tourism area.*

Internal marketing or internal destination development is also applied through the descriptive model, which is associated with the *categorisation of possible activities of destination marketing organisations*. Both the conceptual and descriptive models take into account external and internal influences.

The study can be proposed as a draft model for studying and evaluating the possibilities for the development and management of a separate tourist region specialized in the field

of Health Tourism as a main specialization, as well as in the field of Smart Destination for MICE & Entertainment tourism (Experience economy activates Bulgarian tourists in The Mall - hope for business in times of crisis) as an additional specialization.

Such a model (Ianeva, Tsonev, 2019, 404-414) would include evaluation criteria based on internal and external destination development and management activities. The first four criteria are formed based on internal activities and the fifth based on external marketing:

1. stakeholder coordination activities.
2. the categorisation of possible activities of destination marketing organisations.
3. human resource management.
4. visitor management.
5. information sharing through dedicated platforms.

In these criteria, it would be appropriate to find a place in the destination evaluation model for indicators such as:

- staff training project.
- creation or updating of an online platform in a specific tourist area.
- creation of a network of businesses in the destination to attract tourists from destinations emblematic for Bulgaria.
- establishing marketing partnerships with tourism enterprises outside the tourist area.
- creation of complex specialized programs in the tourist region.
- development of a dedicated internet-based return management programme to help accommodation establishments (hotels, apartments, villas and B&Bs) to optimise relationships with other vendors.
- creation of a central information collection system.

Through such an assessment of the development and management potential of a tourist area, consultants can develop a plan and strategy for the effective management of a tourist area through which the destination marketing organisation can develop specialised tourism products and promote the area in the international and domestic tourism market.

## CONCLUSION

Bulgaria has the resource potential to position itself as a 4-season Smart Destination for Health & MICE (Ianeva, Georgieva, 2021, 111-119) & Entertainment. The present paper study, as discussed above, can be used as a basis of a model for the development and management of a separate tourist regions in Bulgaria with main specialization in the presented three specialized types of tourism, but could find **opportunities** for developing the studies of other prior for the Bulgarian tourism market specialized types of tourism, which have the potential to create a year-round destination.

Further examinations of the specific tourism regions, with their main and additional specialisation can discover various ways to implement marketing tools for improvement of the tourism strategy in Bulgaria and attracting more tourism flows back in the country.

The object of the study is **limited** to examine certain specialized types of tourism, which are considered priority for the development of tourism in Bulgaria, in terms of the available natural resources and material base. Another obstacle, imposing the limitation

of the selected types of tourism is the current situation of changes in the tourist demand, which redirects tourists to Health Tourism destinations and turns them into a sustainable tourism destination.

The examined priority types of tourism will also attract more solvent tourists all year round. To focus on creating sensory experiences during the tourists' visit through culinary and wine, aromas of rose oil, lavender, and others, typical for some Bulgarian tourist regions, as well as with the national and regional menus already created in the tourist areas. To focus on the opportunities for digitalization of health tourism in Bulgaria, the activation of specialized programs of tour operators in terms of information tours for journalists, tour operators and influencers in the country to raise information about the opportunities of the Bulgarian tourism. The exposure of some tourist areas in Bulgaria as Smart Destinations for 4-season Health & MICE & Entertainment tourism will provide an opportunity for growth and sustainability of Bulgarian business. Such a policy in Bulgaria should be a priority in tourism destination/city management. (Ianeva, M., Basmadzhieva, St., 2020, p.303-311) This thesis is necessitated due to the resource endowment in terms of availability of the spa resources in most of the tourist areas as well as high category superstructure. Another argument is that we already have destination leaders in both health and business tourism as well as tourism smart cities with certificates and awards received. Velingrad proved its place as such a leader for 2021, ranking after Sofia in the number of nights spent. In business, the best practices of leaders in a specific area are also one of the criteria according to which applying them in other tourist places with an identical profile can multiply the effect and lead not only to growth, but also to rebranding. Such good practice has been implemented through the effective marketing management of Velingrad and the Western Rhodopes, known as the Spa Capital of the Balkans, and in 2022 by obtaining the Meeting destination certificate.

As a result, the product portfolio is expanded and positioned as a higher-end destination, combining health (balneo and spa) and business (MICE) tourism (Ianeva, Doneva, 2022) Such a model should be extended to include initiatives for the development of smart components, following the example of the city of Sozopol with the Smart City Award for 2021. Its leading position in the Tourism Smart City category was secured as a result of several factors. The municipal administration offers more than 145 electronic services, keeps up-to-date information on social networks. Sozopol offers to its tourists free wi-fi zones and a mobile app with information about services and emblematic sites. The aim of the project in this respect is to upgrade at least two Bulgarian tourist regions/destinations in the direction of Smart Destinations. From a policy point of view, it is necessary to realise that in order to achieve the growth of tourism revenues and contribution to GDP, it is necessary to have a clear, long-term, and comprehensive vision. Tourism is a value-added business and market activities are the collaboration of different services and bring a common added value. Such initiatives are a clear example of this awareness and the possibility of a multiplier effect of the two different industries It is the integration of different tools of destination marketing management with a focus on Health components that will brand Bulgaria as a four-season destination, make it more recognizable as a destination for prevention, recovery and recreation in conditions of need for health and safety for every potential tourist.

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