

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION AND MARKETING ACTIVITIES IN TOURISM – A CASE STUDY OF THE HEALTH-TOUR PROJECT

¹Béla Muhi – ²Diona Đurđević – ³Pavle Parnicki

¹Professor, Educons University, Faculty of Business Economics, Sremska Kamenica, Republic of Serbia; bela.muhi@educons.edu.rs

²Professor, Educons University, Faculty of Business Economics, Sremska Kamenica, Republic of Serbia; diona.djurdjevic@educons.edu.rs

³Professor, Educons University, Faculty of Business Economics, Sremska Kamenica, Republic of Serbia; pavle.parnicki@educons.edu.rs

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Abstract

Health tourism has a long tradition and importance both in Serbia (including the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) and in Hungary. The Strategy of Tourism Development in the Republic of Serbia as well as the Program of Tourism Development in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina highlight health tourism (together with its subcategories of medical and spa/wellness tourism) as one of the key types of tourism which has serious potential for attracting local and international tourists. Following the suggestions and strategic orientation of these documents, a Study of Health Tourism Development in APV has been prepared, within the project “HEALTH-TOUR - Health Tourism – Good Tourism: Joint Development of Health Tourism in the Hungary-Serbia Cross-Border Region.” The project is realized within the cross-border program of cooperation between Hungary and the Republic of Serbia, financed by the European Union (IPA INTERREG). The aim of this paper is to present some aspects of the project and to show the possibilities of cross-border cooperation in tourism, especially in the field of marketing.

Keywords: health tourism, cross border cooperation, marketing, Vojvodina

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HATÁRON ÁTNYÚLÓ EGYÜTTMŰKÖDÉS ÉS TURISZTIKAI MARKETINGTEVÉKENYSÉGEK – ESETTANULMÁNY EGY EGÉSZSÉGTURISZTIKAI PROJEKTRŐL

Absztrakt

A Szerb Köztársaság turizmusfejlesztési stratégiája, valamint a Vajdasági Autonóm Tartomány Turizmusfejlesztési Programja az egészségturizmust (alkategóriáival, a gyógyászati és gyógyfürdő-, illetve wellnessturizmus együtt) az egyik kulcsfontosságú fejlesztési irányként jelöli meg. Ez olyan turizmustípus, amely komoly potenciállal rendelkezik a helyi és nemzetközi turisták vonzása tekintetében egyaránt. Ezen dokumentumok javaslatait és stratégiai irányvonalát követve készült el az „EGÉSZSÉG-TÚRA – Egészségturizmus – Jó turizmus: Az egészségturizmus közös fejlesztése a Magyarország-Szerbia határmenti régióban” című projekt. A projekt a Magyarország és a Szerb Köztársaság határon átnyúló együttműködési programja keretében valósult meg, az Európai Unió (IPA INTERREG) finanszírozásával. E tanulmány célja a projekt néhány aspektusának bemutatása, valamint a határon átnyúló turisztikai együttműködések lehetőségeinek bemutatása, különösen a marketing területén.

Kulcsszavak: városmarketing, városmárka, városimázs, okos város, Vajdaság

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1. Introduction

The capacities of health tourism in the HU-SRB cross-border region are significant (especially in Vojvodina and Bács-Kiskun County). On the one hand, the main opportunities are based on rich thermal-geological resources and springs of mineral water, as well as on the long-lasting tradition of using those resources for therapeutic purposes. On the other hand, this opportunity is also based on the high standards of medical education and the accessibility of a certain type of high-quality medical services, for a significantly lower price than in other countries, which is suitable for the development of health tourism in the cross-border region. Despite its capacities, Vojvodina and the HU-SRB cross-border region still face under-utilization of the available capacities. Consequently, the first task of the HEALTH-TOUR project was the improvement of the economy and tourism in the HU-SRB cross-border region by attracting a higher number of tourists for longer stays in the region through mutual development of tourism, based on health, medical and spa/therapeutic potential of the cross-border region, i.e. the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia Programme Area. The project also created a framework for management and coordination of joint preparation of the development concept for the HU-SRB cross-border region, produced within the project. The goal of the project was to present the plan for health tourism development, introduce market shortages and needs and offer solutions for the improvement of social, economic and ecologically sustainable tourism in the HU-SRB region while respecting ethical and legal norms and solving open questions.

2. Health tourism

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in the world today. According to data provided by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2022), international tourism receipts grew to hit the USD 1 trillion mark in 2022, growing 50% in real terms compared to 2021, driven by an important rebound in international travel. International visitor spending reached 64% of pre-pandemic levels. According to the estimates made by UNWTO, it is expected that the number of international tourist arrivals will grow by 3.3% every year by 2030, thus reaching 1.8 billion arrivals. Europe is the leader in the number of arrivals right now, receiving over 50% of all arrivals. In terms of Europe, Southern Europe and the Mediterranean area are expected to have the largest number of arrivals.

According to the forecasts made by UNWTO, the demand of future tourists will be aimed towards shorter yet more frequent trips, a decrease in mass tourism and an increase in individual trips, discovering new and unexplored destinations, as well as the development of new, specific types of tourism which have become more and more interesting to the contemporary tourist.

If we focus only on the European market, continental destinations offering attractive shorter vacations (short breaks) are getting increasingly popular, both for foreign and local guests. But, with the rise in tourism demand, the demand in every type of tourism is rising. With the ever-growing competition on the global level, the need for strong branding of destinations and tourism offers is becoming stronger. Short breaks are gaining more popularity outside the main summer and winter seasons as well. In view of with these new trends, destinations need to create and offer attractive content that can be consumed in a shorter period of time. One of these new content offers can be health tourism.

Even though people include tourism into their lives for many reasons (business, congress attendance, visiting friends, cultural and/or spiritual enrichment etc.), the most common and oldest reason to travel as a tourist is to improve one's health.

According to COOK (2008) "health tourism, with a focus on good health, general wellbeing and its pursuit, is not a new phenomenon." For example, in Italy and throughout the Roman provinces, Ancient Romans constructed resorts with thermal health spas, and Ancient Greeks

would travel to Epidauria [on the Saronic Gulf] to visit the sanctuary of the healing god, Asklepios, who revealed remedies to them in their dreams.

Many authors who did research on health tourism point out that this is a “limited field of medicine and tourism” or “shared field of healthcare and tourism.” According to BENNETT et al. (2004) health tourism is “any pleasure-orientated tourism which involves an element of stress relief.” HENDERSON (2004) views health tourism as “travel where the primary purpose is treatment in pursuit of better health that may involve hedonistic indulgences of spas and alternative therapies.” According to SPASOJEVIĆ – ŠUŠIĆ (2010) “health tourism represents a wide range of activities, from wellness and spa treatments to all kinds of cosmetic services and most complicated medical operations.”

There are many different reasons for travelling for health care. According to GUY et al. (2015) “the most frequent arguments to travel for health care are lower costs, getting treatment that is not available in the home country, shorter waiting times, better quality and attractiveness of combination of vacation and medical treatment abroad.”

According to the UNWTO (2016), health tourism is categorized into two groups: medical and wellness. Medical tourism services involve the use of evidence-based medical healing resources and services. This may include diagnosis, treatment, cure, prevention and rehabilitation. Wellness tourism aims to improve and balance all of the main domains of human life including physical, mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual and spiritual health.

Health tourism is demanding when it comes to specialized (medical) infrastructure and staff, which is not the case with many other types of tourism. Therefore, it is understandable that services in health tourism tend to be more expensive than those in other types. The resource base of health tourism consists of natural healing factors (medicinal thermo-mineral waters, medicinal clay, crude oil, healing climate, medical infrastructure, professional staff). The content of the stays is often supplemented with local monuments and cultural and gastronomic programs.

As mentioned above, a subcategory of health tourism is medical tourism. The combination of medicine and tourism is a relatively new type of tourism, reaching a high rate of growth worldwide. SMITH – PUCZKO (2009) have defined medical tourism as “traveling to destinations to undergo medical treatments such as surgery or other specialist interventions.” Therefore, medical tourism is described as the travel to a distinct place to achieve a specific cure for a disease, ailment or condition, taken by patients looking for lower costs, higher quality, better access and/or different health care. This definition highlights the ‘requisite’ to travel for medical purposes, i.e., being illness-oriented because the primarily travel motivation is related to cure or treatment of a particular illness or medical condition. According to CONNELL (2008), medical tourism is “where people travel, often long distances, to overseas destinations to obtain medical, dental and surgical care while simultaneously being holidaymakers, in a more conventional sense.”

Medical tourism can have two major forms: surgical and therapeutic. There is a clear distinction between the two. Surgical certainly involves certain operations, whereas therapeutic means participating in healing treatments. An increasingly frequent reason for travel is seeking medical services, the reason being the price of medical services in receptive countries, which is often lower when compared to those in the countries where tourists come from. Complex medical treatments require the services of specialized medical institutions and expert medical staff. Thus, it is a matter of trips that have the goal to offer different, often serious medical services such as surgery, organ transplants, plastic surgery, and dental interventions. Besides the price, a key factor in the medical tourism destination offer is the standard of the medical services, the expertise of the medical staff, and the technological equipment of the hospitals and

offices which offer such services, as well as the attractiveness of the destination itself. The concentration of medical institutions is usually higher in larger urban regions. Aside from medical services, medical tourism arrangements include accommodation (mainly in hotels of higher quality), excursions, and tours.

While following modern trends in health tourism, it is also important to mention an emerging term: wellness tourism. Wellness is, above all, a lifestyle that leans towards optimal health and well-being⁴ where the body and mind become one. Wellness can be considered a state of well-being that combines the harmony of body, mind, and soul with self-responsibility, physical activity, cosmetic care, healthy eating, relaxation, meditation, mental activity, education and social contact as its fundamental elements. MUELLER – KAUFMANN (2001) define wellness tourism as the “sum of all the relationships and phenomena resulting from a journey to a different place to proactively pursue activities that preserve or promote personal health and well-being.”

According to COOK (2008), “in today’s climate, healthcare has become a global market, with emerging, developing and developed countries competing for health tourists.” Package deals of health, wellness and medical services in the form of organized travel are a modern trend in the market. Globalization of the world’s economy has also led to the globalization of the health and medical market. There are a number of specialized travel agencies around the world that organize package deals for traveling abroad where health programs or surgeries are combined with a pleasant vacation.

Health tourism has a long tradition and importance both in Serbia (including the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) and in Hungary. According to STRACK (2021), health tourism is a key element of tourism in Hungary. The settlements with certified health resorts are the flagships of Hungarian health tourism, with a large number of settlements that have less than 5,000 permanent inhabitants represented among them. The growing popularity and demand for health tourism has the potential to have an impact on the municipalities with a health tourism offer.

3. Health tourism in Vojvodina

There are very few environments, in Europe and the entire world, which can be proud of their diversity, and that fact is exactly the potential advantage of tourism in Vojvodina. The diversity of Vojvodina is not only shown through its demographics and social culture but through its geography as well. Vojvodina has everything, from plains with a lot of boweries and farms, lakes and rivers, with the Danube being its most famous river, to green slopes of Fruška Gora, rich in breathtaking natural beauty, as well as a large number of monasteries, i.e., cultural, historic and religious sights. Vojvodina has superior natural and anthropogenic values and resources, it is rich in natural and cultural heritage; in urban environments with unique architecture and lifestyle; in watercourses, lakes, networks of canals and thermo-mineral springs.

Vojvodina has an exceptionally good traffic position, given that its territory contains multimodal European corridors X with the basic route and arm Xb and Corridor VII. In addition, several international road and rail routes are running through the province. Also, Vojvodina has open access to the sea through the river Danube (Corridor VII), which is an international fairway.

Different strategies for tourism development have shown that Vojvodina is an attractive destination with a potential for the development of different types of tourism (rural, hunting, city, gastronomic, business, excursion, wine, manifestation, sport, religious, and health). Also,

⁴ The term *wellness* is coined by blending two terms - *well-being* and *fitness*.

the strategies have shown that there are numerous reasons that motivate tourists to travel to Vojvodina.

As was stated in the Program for the Development of Tourism in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (2022–2025), the analysis of tourist arrivals in Vojvodina in the last ten years shows a recovery on the market, after the fall in the demand for tourist services in 2020 and 2021. There has been an increase, and that trend is still holding up. In the given time period, the number of tourist arrivals has increased 4.6% a year, noting that the number of foreign tourists increased at a higher pace (9%) than the number of domestic guests (2%). Visitors stay in Vojvodina for 2.5 days on average, but there are significant discrepancies according to location; generally, foreigners stay for shorter periods than do domestic guests, except when it comes to Novi Sad and Subotica. It is important to emphasize that stays in spas are significantly longer. The average stay in Spa Junaković, for example, is 7.6 days for domestic guests, and 4 days for foreigners, while in Spa Rusanda, locals stay for 9.4 days and foreigners for 8.2. The discrepancy is a consequence of the way the spas are used, with medical and rehabilitation purposes being the main attractions. Tourists sometimes stay for more days because of the complexity of some medical services and interventions.

In Vojvodina, the offer of health tourism is mostly located in spas (Junaković, Kanjiža, Vrdnik, Rusanda, etc.) and bigger cities (mostly Novi Sad and Subotica). Modern private polyclinics, wellness/spa centers and accommodation of higher categories represent the health tourism offer in bigger cities of the province. The activation and sustainable use of the thermo-mineral springs and balneological potential is of extreme importance as stated in the Program for the Development of Tourism in Vojvodina.⁵ When talking about it on a grand scale, the balneological potential presents itself as a developmental opportunity for all natural healing factors (thermal water, gas, peloid, air) present throughout the province. It is assumed that each of the 45 municipalities and cities of Vojvodina has one or more of these healing resources.

4. Propositions for the development of health tourism in the cross-border region

Cross-border tourism cooperation has become increasingly popular in the last decades and especially within the European Union through Interreg-programmes. An increasing number of EU-funded Interreg programmes have incorporated tourism as an important component of cross-border development. There are several positive outcomes associated with joint cross-border collaboration, including infrastructural development, strengthened regional identity and marketing, improved regional economy, and catalyst for innovation and knowledge transfer.

In the past few years, several cross-border projects in the field of health tourism have been developed across Europe. With resources and health and tourist potential of the cross-border region of Serbia and Hungary in mind, with good organization, efficient marketing and key stakeholder engagement, health tourism is expected to rise to a higher level and the region can become one of the most attractive health tourism destinations not just in these parts of Europe but beyond as well. As an example of successful practice, we can consider realized projects in the field of health tourism in Europe, which attract both local and international tourists even after the completion of the project cycle.

⁵ The study represents the all-encompassing analysis of the potentials of natural health resources, which besides underground water, include medical clay, gas and climate. There are six categories of exploitation of natural factors on selected locations in Vojvodina and they are public drinking fountains, medical clay exploitation, public baths, wellness and spa, sport and recreation centers, water parks, specialized hospitals and rehabilitation centers.

Example 1 Nordic Wellbeing (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden)

Within the project, an innovative offer for wellbeing tourism has been developed in the Nordic countries. Nordic wellbeing tourism employs a holistic approach to health, incorporating all elements of wellbeing (body, relaxation, health and mind). Aside from tourist and health stakeholders, healthy food producers, sport and recreational programs and many others have been included in the project, in which natural environment care has been accentuated.

Example 2 WeLDest (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Finland and Great Britain)

The main goal of the project is the formation of a joint health and wellness tourism offer of the participating countries. Both state and private stakeholders are included in the project. A manual on health tourism has been published to be used by all parties wishing to provide health tourism services. Additionally, a blog for information and knowledge transfer has been launched.

Example 3 Medical spa and wellness in the Visegrád Space (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary)

The goal of the project is to form a joint health tourism offer, especially medical and wellness/spa tourism in the region of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, also known as Visegrád Space. A multi-language database of health institutions and wellness/spa service providers of the region has been created within the project.

Example 4 Off to Spas (Hungary, Romania)

The goal of the project is to upgrade the offer of health tourism that includes thermal water (balneological resources) in spa cities such as Hévíz (Hungary), Covasna (Romania), etc.

Example 5 Wellness 3 Plus - Development of a cross-border wellness destination by connecting countryside tourist products (Slovenia, Croatia)

The main goal of the project is to develop a model for cross-border cooperation and to create a cross-border wellness tourism destination which will be recognizable by its three theme packages: active vacation-nature, gastronomic experience and culture. Cross-border tourism and cycling tours have been created and maps and catalogs with natural and cultural heritage of the region have been printed.

Example 6 HEALTH-TOUR project (Hungary, Serbia)

The capacities of health tourism in the HU-SRB cross-border region are considered high (especially in Vojvodina and Bács-Kiskun County). The main resources and opportunities are based on rich thermal-geological resources and springs of mineral water at both sides of the border, as well as on the long-lasting tradition of using those resources for therapeutic purposes. This opportunity is also based on the accessibility of a certain type of high-quality medical services, at a significantly lower price than in other countries, which is suitable for the development of health tourism in the cross-border region.

Despite its capacities, Vojvodina and the HU-SRB cross-border region still faces under-utilization. Consequently, the first task of the HEALTH-TOUR project is the improvement of the economy and tourism in the HU-SRB cross-border region by attracting a higher number of tourists for longer stays through the mutual development of tourism, based on health, medical, spa and therapeutic and tourist potential of the Interreg-IPA CBC Hungary-Serbia Programme Area.

The expert team from Hungary and Serbia came up with efficient procedures and opportunities for introducing new services, buying equipment for the functions of health, wellness and medical tourism, focusing on improving the quality of health services as well as strengthening the capacities through accredited programmes of continued medical education.

Some weaknesses show that further work on marketing (above all, on promotion and advertising) is necessary. Thus, it is useful to define criteria and to encourage the institutions interested in dealing with health tourism towards a joint presentation (related, the support of the governing Provincial Secretariats of the APV government and their mutual collaboration is required), as well as a more intensive communication with the stakeholders – decision-makers on the provincial level.

Within the “HEALTH-TOUR - Health Tourism – Good Tourism: Joint Development of Health Tourism in the HU-SRB Cross-Border Region” project, an interactive digital map has been created with leading service providers in the field of health tourism, and a trilingual brochure with a detailed description, pictures, and contacts also printed. A website, a Facebook and Instagram profile have been created to promote health tourism in the cross-border region.

5. Proposals for intensifying the marketing activities of health tourism in Hungary-Vojvodina cross-border region

The analysis of the instruments of the marketing mix offer of health, medical and wellness services in Vojvodina (done within the project) shows that promotion requires further development. The aforementioned analysis shows that, thanks to the excellent competence of the medical staff, the services in the current offer are of high quality. The services also keep up with the global trends and the buildings and rooms where one can receive services are well-equipped and the service-providing process is at a high level. Additionally, significant promotional efforts can be noticed, but what makes these services especially attractive is their affordable price. The existing offer of health, medical and wellness services in Vojvodina has a significant potential for future development and affirmation on the international market as well as branding the destination.

Current promotional activities of the health and medical service offer in Vojvodina are mainly aimed towards promotion via the Internet and fairs. Service providers offer information about their services on their websites. The Tourism Organization of Vojvodina participates in regional and international fairs and it mainly promotes the joint tourist offer in Vojvodina. It is clear that these efforts need to be further developed, intensified and aimed towards potential, mainly foreign users for achieving market affirmation of the health tourism offer in the region. Specialized web sites as a communication tool in health tourism have advantage as travellers can obtain information, compare costs and make reservation easily if online access is available.

According to the analysis of the marketing mix instruments of the health, medical and wellness service offer of Vojvodina and according to the SWOT analysis (all done within this project) as well as in view of the current marketing practice in the field of health tourism in Vojvodina and the successful market practice of developed health tourism of Hungary, the following proposals for intensifying the marketing activities in order to achieve market affirmation of the health tourism offer in Vojvodina are suggested:

- Creating a joint offer of health tourism in Vojvodina and Southern Hungary: The joint offer of health tourism needs to include medical and health service providers, accommodation capacities, potential transport providers, tourist agencies as well as the recommendations for hospitality facilities and tourist attractions that might interest potential service users. Such a singular offer, health service provider and stakeholder database could significantly improve the appeal of Vojvodina as a health tourism destination and attract foreign users.
- Branding Vojvodina as a health tourism destination: Once the joint offer of health tourism has been created, it is necessary to intensify the efforts for branding Vojvodina as a health tourism destination. Special attention needs to be paid to choosing elements of the brand that are different from other health tourism destinations (for example: multiculturalism, polylingual

population, local population hospitality, cultural and historical heritage etc). The promises of the brand need to be carefully crafted. Integrated marketing communication needs to be aimed towards target groups of users (via fairs, the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina website, the Facebook page and YouTube channel of the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina, e.g., a short promotional video about the health tourism offer).

- Presenting Vojvodina as a health tourism destination on travel blogs: Active participation on blogs about the subject of health tourism in order to present health tourism services as well as the entire tourist offer of Vojvodina.

- Presenting the health tourism offer of Vojvodina by the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina at international fairs: Doing so on the stand of the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina at fairs using brochures, fliers and posters.

- Collaboration with international tourist agencies offering services i.e. health tourism deals: Intensifying the collaboration with international agencies in the field of health tourism and welcoming their representatives to Vojvodina in order to present the potential and services in the domain of this type of tourism.

- Health tourism fair organization: Organizing a specialized fair for health tourism could attract a large number of service providers, stakeholders and international partakers and draw significant media attention.

- Intensifying of cooperation between the Tourism Organization of Vojvodina with tourist organizations on the municipality levels in the field of health tourism in the region: It is necessary to achieve such intensive cooperation to promote the health tourism offer and allow more quality services to be provided to potential users.

- Intensifying the general activities of the Cluster of health tourism of Vojvodina (in order to achieve better promotion towards target groups of users and establish better promotion towards existing and potential stakeholders): The Cluster of health tourism of Vojvodina has a Facebook page, yet the analysis of the cluster website shows that it is inactive. It is necessary to work on activating and updating this website.

- Raising awareness of the significance and potentials of health tourism in Vojvodina: The Tourism Organization of Vojvodina as well as tourism organizations on the municipality level could use their websites and other communication channels to show the local population and potential stakeholders the significance and potential of health tourism development. They can also point out possible ways how service providers can join the efforts towards the realization of the health tourism offer. Within formerly mentioned strategies, organizing workshops on the municipality level which would focus on the significance and possibilities of joining health tourism trends would also be of great importance.

- Using digital and online platforms to gather information on the health tourism offer in Vojvodina and ways to make reservations: The fact that international users can engage with such means to gather information on destinations and the tourist offer is very important.

- Monitoring satisfaction levels of health tourism users in Vojvodina: Providing surveys to users after the treatment (giving out short questionnaires or sending them via e-mail). If users employ a tourist agency, it is best for the survey to be conducted by the agency. The level of satisfaction does not only provide feedback to service providers but also shows possibilities of advancement of certain services. A high satisfaction level of users directly affects word-of-mouth promotion because service users trust other satisfied users and user recommendations.

- Building long-term connections with users/tourists in the health tourism field in Vojvodina: Creating loyalty programs is one area, together with the need of service providers to establish

continuous communication with users even after their treatments (loyalty programs, happy birthday and happy holiday wishes, personalized service notifications based on previously provided services that might interest a certain user; e.g., via e-mail).

All proposed activities should contribute to market affirmation of the health tourism of Vojvodina as a health tourism destination in order to attract a larger number of visitors.

6. Conclusion

Today, programmes of health tourism are among the fastest-growing segments of the world's tourism offers, not only because of the demographic changes, especially the aging of the baby boomer generation that is the biggest consumer of today's health tourism, but also because of some general changes in social values that put more emphasis on a healthy lifestyle.

Health tourism (together with its subcategories of medical and spa/wellness tourism), currently generates a significant number of travelers and financial traffic on the international level, and their development affects the expansion of national healthcare systems. Thus, health tourism plays a key economic role for the destinations where such type of tourist activity can be organized. The significance includes direct financial impact (paying for services) and indirect impact (increase in existing accommodation capacities, the consummation of different hospitality services, etc.)

The capacities of health tourism in the HU-SRB cross-border region are considered high. With resources, health and tourist potential of the cross-border region of Serbia and Hungary (especially Vojvodina and Bács-Kiskun County), good organization, efficient marketing and key stakeholder engagement, health tourism is expected to rise to a higher level, and the region can become one of the most attractive health tourism destinations.

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