



BRAIN DRAIN'S ECONOMIC IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELLNESS AND SPA TOURISM IN BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The National Sports Academy "V. Levski" in Bulgaria is a leading educational and scientific institution in Europe for producing specialised personnel in the field of Wellness & Spa tourism. The majority of graduates students (Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degree) immediately find high-paying jobs abroad and leave the country. **Methods:** This paper aims to discuss and analyse the ongoing brain drain in the Bulgarian Wellness & Spa tourism industry. The study examines changes in values and beliefs that have significant impacts on employment, labor, and human behavior. **Results:** The high salaries offered to specialized personnel in the field of Wellness & Spa tourism has resulted in an annual brain drain to countries such as Europe, the USA, and the Emirates. Despite historical traditions, Bulgarian Wellness & Spa businesses are struggling due to the shortage of well-trained personnel. **Discussion:** This paper discusses changes in lifestyle and the underlying causes for the permanent shortage of qualified employees in the Wellness & Spa tourism industry. The negative economic impact of brain drain on Bulgaria as a tourist destination is also emphasised. **Conclusion:** The brain drain in the Bulgarian Wellness & Spa tourism industry is affecting operational, managerial, and scientific staff. It is essential to implement policy changes to safeguard the sector. These policies should aim to attract and retain specialized personnel, as well as offer competitive salaries and benefits. Failure to address brain drain could lead to long-term negative impacts on the Bulgarian economy and the country's Wellness & Spa industry.

Key words: brain drain, economic impact, specialised staff, Bulgarian Wellness & Spa sector, Policy changes

INTRODUCTION

Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso Tourism have several positive aspects from a societal perspective (1, 2). Firstly, it generates a significant number of job opportunities, thereby serving as a substantial source of income (3-5). This sector has experienced an annual growth rate of 13%, further bolstering its economic significance (6, 7). Furthermore, the recreational industry holds significant importance in the development and enrichment of specific services that promote a healthy lifestyle (8). This encompasses various aspects, such as catering to the needs of

expectant mothers in urban environments (9-12), supporting educational institutions (13-15) and fitness centres (16-19), and catering to the demands of niche tourism (20). This expansion is supported by advancements in technology, which enable the allocation of funds towards preserving natural resources or utilizing them for tourism purposes. These practices also help to promote and conserve the rich natural heritage of various regions. The integrated utilisation of natural resources within Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourist centres and destinations contributes to the overall improvement of these locations. This holistic approach leads to better-quality tourist experiences and ultimately enhances the overall quality of life for visitors and local communities alike. The National Sports Academy "V. Levski" in Bulgaria is a leading educational and scientific institution in Europe for producing

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specialised personnel in the field of Wellness & Spa tourism. The majority of graduated students (Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctoral degree) immediately find high-paying jobs abroad and leave the country. Methods: This paper aims to discuss and analyse the ongoing brain drain in Wellness & SPA sector (21). Skilled professionals with accredited diplomas are essential in the recreational industry as they possess the necessary expertise to effectively promote products and services (22). A minimum requirement for these professionals is proficiency in at least two languages. This language proficiency enables them to reach a broader audience and effectively market the offerings of the recreational industry.

METHODS

Aim: This study aimed to examine the factors contributing to the significant brain drain in the Bulgarian Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism industry.

Object:

The focus is on finding effective measures to mitigate the negative economic consequences of brain drain on Bulgaria as a tourist destination.

Subject: A research investigation was carried out on 160 individuals who were involved in Niche tourism, specifically focusing on Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso services. The study predominantly included participants from Bulgaria, with an average age of 31 years, and an equal distribution of both male and female participants. The participants were classified according to their experience and involvement in Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso Tourism.

Expertise and Funding: The participants, including employed individuals and those pursuing education in the field, willingly agreed to share their data and opinions for publication. The research spanned a period of one year, from May 2022 to May 2023, during which a psychometric study was conducted to assess the viewpoints of the participants.

Procedures: The results were analysed to determine the relative importance of various indicators for the efficacy of the water procedures. The survey also explored the desired content and design of a new zone oriented recreational programs that are being developed to support personnel in this industry. This new recreational programs will serve as a

tool to improving the quality of services in the Niche tourism sector.

RESULTS

The high salaries offered (more than 5 times) to specialised personnel in the field of Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism has resulted in a brain drain to countries such as Europe, the USA, and the Emirates. Despite historical traditions, Bulgarian Wellness & Spa businesses are struggling due to the shortage of well-trained personnel. The phenomenon of brain drain in the Bulgarian Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism industry refers to the emigration or loss of skilled and talented individuals from the sector. Only within the EU, over 200 million people of different ages apply Wellness&Spa&Thalasso practices, aqua programs, or Eastern relaxation techniques for health prevention and Recreation. The number of vacations related to traveling to a destination for Niche Tourism (offering Wellness packages) has increased drastically during the period of 2017-2019, but the lack of specialised personnel with at least two languages remains a global problem. According to scientific data from the Global Wellness Institute, the shortage of qualified personnel with specific knowledge and skills for Wellness &Spa is around 180,000 people. In the last 10 years, Bulgaria has become a European scientific and educational leader by successfully integrating six new programs for specialized personnel in Niche Tourism, in two professional fields of healthcare and sports, from Bachelor's to Doctoral level. The development of a new European profession, Wellness Instructor, is funded through the Erasmus+ program (KA2). In February 2018, a project was won and a contract was signed for the construction and development of the Centre of Excellence "Heritage BG". The priority area was "creative and recreational industries" under the operational program "Science and Education for Intellectual Growth," co-financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds for the programming period 2014-2020. Thus, Bulgaria is the first country to accredit and integrate a complete educational continuum from secondary school to doctoral level (in Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso culture). Simultaneously, the highest level of scientific infrastructure in Europe is being developed - the Bulgarian Centre for Excellence in the Creative and Recreational Industry ("Heritage BG") and

its specialised scientific unit for social innovations, recreational human design, and Niche Tourism. The new laboratory for innovation in the recreational, wellness industry, and Niche Tourism is modelled within the Centre for High Achievement and supports the creation of a knowledge-based economy. The accredited Bulgarian educational model for training personnel in Wellness and Spa culture will produce young specialists for European and interdisciplinary professional development through completion of specialized bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. Some of the best European practices have been analysed and transferred based on the analysis and conclusions of international market research, as well as specialized talents in the recreational industry and Niche Tourism. Graduates from the programs of the National Sports Academy "V. Levski" possess solid knowledge,

professional, and personal competencies for effective organizational and methodological approaches such as: knowledge, intellectual and practical skills for various health impacts based on natural resources and holistic approaches. They have a high motivation to offer and provide quality health services tailored to the needs of clients and a healthy lifestyle for wellness quality of life. Opinions are contradictory, and expectations for growth in Wellness&Spa&Thalasso tourism are projected to occur in 2024 and beyond, but the actual situation shows growth as early as 2022, and the revenues in 2023 (for the first two quarters) surprised analysts. Despite energy and financial crises, there is an observed orientation of tourists towards regional destinations offering Wellness&Spa&Thalasso services. (Figure 1 - Source: UNWTO. 2023. World Tourism Barometer):

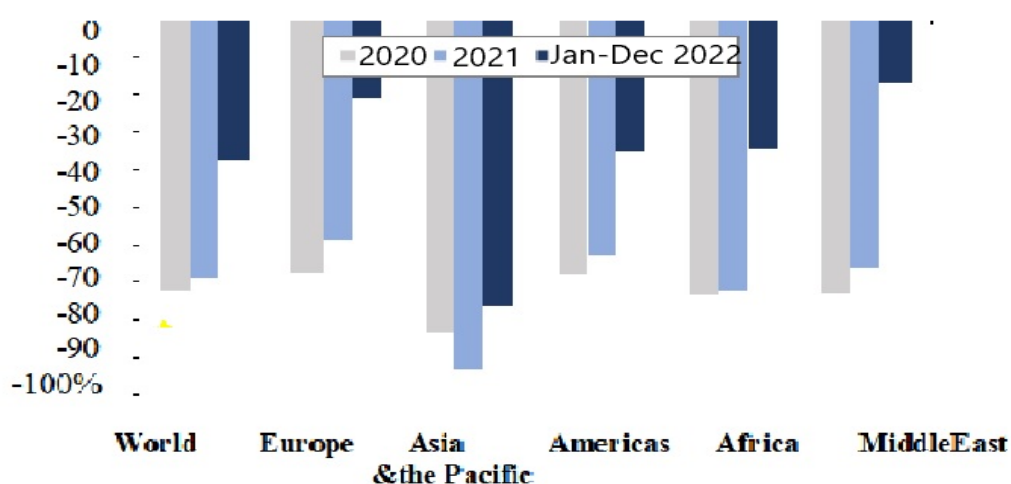


Figure 1. International Tourists Arrivals in %.

Demand and choice are influenced by the surrounding environment (atmosphere) through psychological, cultural, social, professional, economic, and religious factors, as well as the organoleptic aspects (taste, content, colour, appearance, aromas) in the case of food. Both internationally and locally, it can be observed that the employment rate is struggling to exceed 50% for 2022. (Table 1).

The overall data shows that by 2022, Bulgaria has a balanced number of accommodation facilities (between 332 and 407) with the following profile: over 250 beds; 100-249 beds; fewer than 25 beds, and three times more between 25 and 100 beds. These data indicate diverse conditions and, consequently, different spaces and opportunities for offering specialized services. Room occupancy was

53.5% with a bed occupancy rate of 38.1% (NSI 2022). This means that the profile of tourists consists mainly of independent travel for specific purposes such as work, projects, exchanges (educational or scientific), and significantly fewer family trips. It logically follows that there is a need to reconsider management decisions and improve and expand services to balance revenues, regardless of the smaller number of tourists. The focus should be on providing innovative recreational opportunities that require specialized personnel. This leads to the negative effect of the brain drain of well-trained and accredited program graduates, resulting in a shortage of qualified specialists. Several factors contribute to this concerning trend, which can be analysed as follows:

Limited Career Opportunities: One of the primary reasons for brain drain in the industry is the limited career advancement opportunities available to professionals. The lack of well-defined career paths, growth prospects, and

recognition within the industry can discourage skilled individuals from staying in Bulgaria and instead seek opportunities abroad where they perceive better chances for career development.

Table 1. The hotels' activity in 2022 according to their services. Source: NSI. www.nsi.bg

| Capacity | Accommodation places in number | Rooms in number | Room occupation in % | Beds in number | Beds occupation in % | Реализирани нощувки – брой | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| | | | | | | Total | Bulgarian | International |
| Общо | 2 276 | 130 060 | 53.5 | 294 183 | 38.1 | 22 116 958 | 9 560 189 | 12 556 769 |
| под 25 легла | 407 | 3 764 | 22.1 | 7 131 | 17.9 | 357 410 | 292 282 | 65 128 |
| от 25 до 99 легла | 1 165 | 27 325 | 35.3 | 55 950 | 26.9 | 3 740 967 | 2 682 049 | 1 058 918 |
| от 100 до 249 легла | 372 | 27 762 | 49.5 | 57 225 | 38.0 | 4 834 407 | 2 949 875 | 1 884 532 |
| 250 легла и повече | 332 | 71 209 | 68.2 | 173 877 | 44.8 | 13 184 174 | 3 635 983 | 9 548 191 |

***Included are categorised hotels with 10 and more beds offering health from nature.

Low Wages and Financial Incentives: Another significant factor contributing to brain drain is the relatively low wages and financial incentives offered in the Bulgarian Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism sector. Professionals in the industry may find more attractive compensation packages in other countries, making it enticing for them to leave in search of higher earnings and better financial stability.

Lack of Professional Development and Training: The absence of comprehensive professional development programs and training opportunities can also drive talented individuals to seek better prospects elsewhere. The industry needs to invest in continuous skill enhancement, leadership development, and specialized training to retain professionals and encourage their growth within the sector.

Inadequate Working Conditions: Unfavourable working conditions, including long hours, high stress levels, and a lack of work-life balance, can contribute to professionals seeking opportunities in more conducive environments. If the work environment is not supportive or fails to prioritize employee well-being, individuals may choose to leave the industry altogether or migrate to countries that offer better working conditions.

Limited Research and Innovation: The lack of investment in research and innovation within the Bulgarian Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso

tourism industry can hinder its growth and attractiveness. Without advancements in technologies, practices, and services, professionals may perceive limited opportunities for innovation and professional fulfillment, pushing them to explore more innovative environments abroad.

Perception of Limited Industry Development: If professionals perceive a lack of growth and development in the overall industry, they may feel inclined to seek opportunities in countries where the Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism sectors are more dynamic and progressive. Factors such as infrastructure development, government support, and industry collaboration play a crucial role in shaping this perception.

DISCUSSION

This paper discusses changes in lifestyle and the underlying causes for the permanent shortage of qualified employees in the Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism industry. The negative economic impact of brain drain on Bulgaria as a tourist destination is also emphasised. Brain waste can occur when individuals invest in acquiring training and expertise but fail to utilize them after emigrating. This situation arises when, for example, a Filipino doctor ends up working as a nurse in London or when an Italian engineer becomes a waiter in Germany. The competitiveness of the Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso tourism industry heavily relies on specialists with diverse knowledge, skills, work

ethics, and professional conduct. To thrive in this industry, it is crucial to attract a young and competitive workforce that can deliver high-quality professional Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso services that meet European standards and satisfy the current demands of society and service users. The tourism sector requires the inflow of talented individuals who can contribute to the advancement of the industry and provide exceptional experiences in Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso services.

CONCLUSION

The Bulgarian Wellness & Spa & Thalasso tourism industry is currently facing a brain drain, which is impacting its operational, managerial, and scientific workforce. It is crucial to implement policy reforms in order to safeguard this sector. These policies should concentrate on attracting and retaining specialized professionals by providing competitive salaries and benefits. Failing to address the brain drain issue may result in long-term negative consequences for the Bulgarian Niche tourism economy and the Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso industry of the country. To tackle these challenges effectively, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This approach should prioritize the creation of appealing career opportunities, enhancement of working conditions, investment in professional development, encouragement of research and innovation, and promotion of growth in the Wellness, Spa, and Thalasso industry. By addressing these factors, the brain drain within the Bulgarian Niche tourism industry can be alleviated, leading to a more sustainable and prosperous sector.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest was declared by the authors and the institutions.

Financial Disclosure: The developed analysis is with the financial support of the project BG05M2OP001-1.001-0001 "Building and developing a Centre of Excellence "Heritage BG", funded by the Operational Program "Science and Education for Smart Growth".

Declarations of informed consent have been signed regarding the publication of survey data.

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