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### EUROPEAN SPAS ASSOCIATION (ESPA) AS THE EXAMPLE OF THE CLUSTER IN THE TOURIST INDUSTRY

#### abstract

Clusters are forms of coopetition (cooperation and competition) in industrial sectors as well as in service sectors. A tourism cluster can be defined as a net of tourism companies that have a common goal to increase the demand on the tourism services they offer. The aim of the article is to present the European Spas Association (ESPA) as an example of the concept of clusters in the tourism industry. ESPA is a global organization that stimulates its members, mainly spas and health resorts, to cooperate with their competitors in order to: promote the spa industry, enhance the quality of the tourism services and protect the European nature. The article also lists other advantages of being a member of the cluster and shows thereby the importance of cooperating with the competitors instead of – which is unfortunately still very common – combating them.

**Keywords:** cluster, tourism industry, coopetition, cooperation, spas

#### Introduction

With increasing occurrence clusters commonly witnessed in production areas, appear in service sectors such as tourism. The Creation of clusters is the best solution to increase an enterprise's competitiveness. In modern market economy,

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a cooperation of companies emerging from one and the same branch implies a number of advantages for the society living in the area of operations of clusters e.g. a decrease of the costs of production as well the promotion of technology transfer, employment growth and it even improves the quality of life (Zakrzewska-Krzyś, 2008). Clusters, including tourism clusters, currently constitute one of the most advantageous solutions in the area of cooperation of entities such as companies, research centers and local or regional authorities. They induce the growth of entrepreneurship on given area, increasing quality of services and therefore happiness of clients.

The aim of this article is to portray European Spas Association as a tourism cluster with global relevance.

## **1. Essence of a cluster**

Specialized literature provides multiple definitions of cluster. The most popular and classic definition proposed by M.E. Porter states that clusters are ‘geographic aggregations of:

- mutually dependent companies,
- specialized suppliers,
- service providing entities,
- companies operating in similar areas,
- associated institutions (such as universities, normalizing units and branch associations) in particular areas, competing with each other, but also cooperating’ (Porter, 2001, p. 246).

From a geographical perspective, “clusters may exist in the boundaries of one city, state, country or even group of adjacent countries” (Aleksandrova, 2007, p. 21). Each definition of cluster bases on three rules: geographical proximity of companies, strong mutual connections between them as well as an institutionalized net of cooperation (Małachowska, 2008, p. 245).

Clusters might become aggregations of entities conducting activities of a particular nature: industrial or service (including tourism). Their main factors include: spatial concentration, mutual competition and cooperation (therefore so called: cooptation) as well as common trajectory of growth and development based on numerous ties and relationships of branches of entities constituting a cluster (Czernek, 2012, p. 56).

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A cluster is a concept of enterprises working and cooperating in given institutional, organizational and cultural structures. Membership is not a necessity in clusters and the basis of cooperation consists of social norms and value combined with the synergy of economical and organizational actions such as: designing common visions, missions, marketing strategies, the coordination of capital acquiring strategies, shaping relations with local authorities or political, social and local government environments. This added value is also expressed in external and internal benefits such as the availability of suppliers, supportive services, labor market, research papers and clients (Niedzielski et. al., 2008, p. 109; GondaSoroczyńska, 2011, p. 438).

Clusters are groups of independent enterprises and associated institutions which:

- cooperate and compete with each other,
- are concentrated geographically in one or a few regions, however clusters can have even global reach,
- specialize in a given area and use common technologies and abilities,
- include both traditional and modern branches,
- are institutionalized (there is a cluster's coordinator) or not institutionalized (Gorynia and Jankowska, 2008, p. 38).

Clusters (groups) can be a source of emergence and maintenance of competitive advantage of enterprises, regions and countries. Clusters are inducing internal growth of resources (so called endogenous potential) of a given place (Gorynia and Jankowska, 2008, p. 38).

The benefits of the engagement in such a network of cooperation include:

- an increase in innovativeness and the consequential expansion of products' offer, leading to an increase in the number of clients, of employment, profits and turnover,
- an increase in the effectiveness of promotion through cooperation and better use of resources,
- easier acquisition of means of development and promotion,
- effective human resource management,
- a decrease of risks,
- rationalization of operational activities, due to knowledge from cooperating companies (Zajadacz and Śniadek, 2010, p. 171).

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## **2. Tourism clusters**

Basically, the formation of associations, touristic organizations, consortia which include touristic service companies, self-governmental units or research and development centers is similar to the creation of clusters. Therefore, it can be assumed that the tourism branch has been self-developing towards clusters all along (Zajadacz and Śniadek, 2010, p. 170).

A tourism cluster is an active net of tourism producers cooperating on a basis of a geographical brand (brand product – area destination) mutually competing with quality and uniqueness of their offered tourism services (Kaczmarek, et. al., 2010, p. 403).

Basic features of each tourism cluster include (Kaczmarek et. al., 2010, p. 403):

- space – entities are functioning on a given area,
- relations – there are social and economic ties existing between operating and active entities,
- net – relations between entities and their environment are an essential part of a cluster.

For tourism clusters it is natural to fulfill the necessity of geographical aggregation – they usually are operating around touristic attractions of some kind – in case of ESPA around cities with rejuvenating properties. The placement of those properties sets the localization for their extent – degree of aggregation, and attractiveness – a size of a cluster, measured with a number of entities providing services for tourists (Kusa, 2008, pp. 512–513).

The concept of a cluster assumes that it is formed by entities with particular goals, agglomerating around a given activity (for example rejuvenating tourism, SPA & Wellness), including within its reach: region, mezz-region or even macroregion, such as in case of European Spas Association (ESPA).

The functioning of tourism clusters (nets of cooperation), due to the engagement of many entities, enables mutual planning or the creation of tourism development strategies, common promotion, the creation of tourism products as well as the introduction of new technologies and common education (trainings, conferences) with regard to the region or mezz-region.

The basis for the creation of such a net of cooperation – a cluster (also a tourism one) is choosing a leader, for example a–tourism organization or an association, which should guarantee strong leadership (Zajadacz and Śniadek, 2010, p. 172). A natural leader of a cluster can be a branch association (ESPA

serve as an example) providing a network of contacts, since the membership in such an association demonstrates willingness to cooperate with other entities. An association uniting the majority of entities acting on a specific market represents a serious partner to institutions which are responsible for regional growth, especially in the field of tourism. In a situation of lack or weakness of local tourism associations, an initiative to create a net of cooperation should be realized by other institutions such as science centers and local or regional administrative units (Kusa, 2008, p. 519).

### **3. The essence of European Spas association and its members**

The European Spas Association (ESPA) is a non-profit and non-governmental association, founded in 1995 in Brussels. It is an umbrella organization for spa associations (clusters) in Europe and it has members in 20 European countries. Its purpose goes beyond the ones of a typical cluster: promoting its members (spas and balneology) and stimulating the co-operation and competition; but it also implies the protection of the natural features of the environment, such as water and the climate within Europe. In order to achieve the above-mentioned aims, the ESPA established the following subgoals:

- monitoring of projects for the development of spas and health resorts,
- to stimulate and organize the exchange of experience, best practice and know-how between members,
- establishing programs for health and well-being products and arrangement of strategies in order to bring forward prevention and rehabilitation for all Europeans,
- promoting and improving the standards in all spas and health resorts within Europe,
- the support of spa research,
- the organization of common training programs and seminars,
- the determination of a structure for the European spa industry,
- establishing a framework for a collaborative marketing for ESPA member countries.

Table 1. ESPA members' goals

Country	Association	Website	Main goals of the national association	Main benefits of being an ESPA member

Bulgaria	Bulgarian Union of Balneology and SPA Tourism	www.bubspa.org	to present and popularize Bulgaria as a modern health SPA and wellness destination on the Bulgarian and international tourist markets	a common policy in the field of SPA and wellness tourism within the Europe
Denmark	Spa & Wellness of Denmark	www.kur-spawellness.dk	advising, planning, educating within health tourism topics	to maintain a quality standard in spa areas
Estonia	Estonian Spa Association	www.estonianspas.eu	to support popularity of spas	being recognized as a country with quality spas
Germany	The Cure ( <i>Die Kur</i> )	www.die-neuekur.de	promoting health resorts in Germany	not specified
Hungary	Spas in Hungary	www.spasinhungary.com	to spread information about Hungarian quality spa cities	not specified
Iceland	The NLFÍ Spa and Medical Clinic	www.hnlfí.is	to build up clients' health and improve their quality of life and well-being	not specified
Poland	The Association of Polish Spa-Communities	www.sgurp.pl	promoting of Polish health resorts and their natural medicinal resources	not specified
Portugal	Portuguese Spas Association	www.termasdeportugal.pt	seeks to promote and develop thermals and Portuguese spas technically, economically and socially	as a Vice-Chairman of ESPA it influences the improving of spas quality in Europe
Slovakia	Association of Slovak Spas	www.ask.sk	represent the interests of its members to the government	improving the level of services and implementation of common marketing-strategies

Spain	The National Association of Spas	www.balnearios.org	to set up promotional strategies and plans according to the situation of the market, and to coordinate and define the logistics of the promotion and communication actions	increase of the service quality in Spain's spas
Turkey	Turkish Spas Thalasso and Health Resorts Association	www.spa-turkey.com	to protect the common interests of spas, thalasso, health and cure centers in Turkey and ensure their financial and moral strength in an organized way	developing relationships and being quickly informed about new ideas, concepts and creative innovations

Source: own elaboration, based on the official websites of the ESPA members.

In essence, the major mission of ESPA is mainly the coordination of the European health resorts market. The second objective is to create more competitiveness within the members to improve the general quality. Last but not least, ESPA aims for promoting the health resort therapy.

The goals of ESPA members and the main benefits of their participation in the cluster are shown in Table 1.

It is obvious that members benefit from their participation in the ESPA community. Firstly, it is easier to participate in a European Union project. The European Commission allocates parts of the EU budget to support associations in various ways, e.g. calls for tender, subsidies (grants), funds and other financing programs. There are for instance health and wellness tourism programs in the EU like EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) and Calypso. One of the greatest advantages of the ESPA membership is to take advantage of the broad network to find suitable project partners for the European Union, as well as grants and contracts via a permanent access to current information within the association. This is essential for defining and elaborating projects. All projects intend to create new jobs and to secure existing ones.

Furthermore, the members can profit from the ESPA co-operation with the following partners:

- European Social Insurance Platform (ESIP),
- International Society of Medical Hydrology and Climatology (ISMH), – SSI Berlin Institut für Tourismus und Marketing.

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These partnerships enable the ESPA members to participate in an international exchange of knowledge by using exclusive services (such as the access to documents, scientific research results and discussion forums).

Another advantage of being a participant of the cluster is the fact that ESPA founded subassociations, called sections. There are three sections: Thalasso, Peloid and Radon. For instance the Radon Association EURADON brings together 18 parties which are interested in promoting the use of naturally occurring radon as a means of treating medical conditions as well as educating the public and doctors about the curing effects of using natural radon. Moreover, the association also organizes conferences in order to announce all of the substantial information which is relevant for the participants.

There are many tools which ESPA makes use of to promote the association, to attract new members and to communicate within the cluster. The following major instruments are used with the help of the achievements mentioned above (Barbosa, 2011):

- printed materials (brochures, flyers in different languages),
- PR & Events (meetings with leading tour operators, attendance at relevant trade fairs, contacts with the media, e-newsletters every two months distributed via email, websites and social media),
- internal marketing (reports on the ESPA activities, news and publications about the market and about opportunities for the Spa industry, information and documents related to EU programs and policies, conversations with experts in order to support the EU member countries),
- internet (professional and up-to-date website),
- social media (Twitter, Facebook and a YouTube-Channel will be coming soon).

Such a wide range of tools are very advantageous for the ESPA members and allow a simple and fast communication, cooperation and competition.

However, having the intention of developing transparency and competition, ESPA has started its own quality certificate, EuropeSpa med (the first international certificate for health resorts in Europe) and EuropeSpa wellness. Some of the organizational aspects that are examined are: compliance, human resources, quality management and quality assurance. ESPA assigns a mystery shopper, who carries out the audit check and assigns the certification for the next three years (Smith and Puczko, 2012, p. 188). That is another great possibility for its members to maintain or even increase the quality of the spa and wellness goods and services.



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## Conclusions

The emergence of tourism clusters has become a popular, global phenomenon. The European Spas Association (ESPA) is an example of a cluster with international, macro-regional meaning, associated with entities from different European countries along and around particular touristic attractions, which can be cities with rejuvenating properties as well as SPA & Wellness objects. Touristic clusters are an opportunity of joint marketing for each country, region or city. However, mutual competition and cooperation of enterprises who are members of a cluster is characteristic for such a form of branch cooperation.

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