

# Interview: Aleksandar Ciric - General Manager, Novo Nordisk Slovakia

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*Slovakia is a very welcoming environment for innovative players*

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*A native of Serbia, Aleksandar Ciric provides his first impressions of the Slovak market and business atmosphere, emphasizing the transparency and market accessibility. His current priority at Novo Nordisk is to develop the local organization by developing its people in order to maintain a competitive edge.*

## **After eight months in Slovakia, what are your first impressions of the market and how does it compare to Serbia where you were based beforehand?**

In comparison to my experience in Serbia, the market is much more developed here. From a Novo Nordisk perspective, it is one of the best markets for innovative companies, and I would say that Slovakia is a very welcoming environment for innovative players; the market is easily accessible in comparison to most of the other eastern European countries. This was very different from my experience in Serbia where a new drug had not been introduced to the market for many years.

The Slovak environment benefits patients most, as they have the opportunity to be treated with the latest innovation. Novo Nordisk prides itself on its innovations for diabetes and hemophilia. We have a solid pipeline and our focus is on giving the patients the opportunity to be treated with the best options available.

The second insight is that the system is transparent regarding market access and pricing and this is a good country for large corporations because this transparency allows us to plan ahead. We

know how we will be able to price our products for extended periods of time, we also know how the market works, and what we can expect in terms of market access and the timelines for product launches.

**What are your priorities and what is your mandate in this new role and within the region?**

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My priorities are mainly oriented internally with a focus on developing our employees and filling vacancies with the best people available. This is the most crucial way to prepare for the future. Externally we face fierce competition as companies within the sector rush to launch everything they can as quickly as they can. We realize that in order to compete in this saturated market we have to focus on being prepared with the best people.

When it comes to recruiting the best talent, we do face challenges in Slovakia for certain positions. As an example, we have been seeking for several months for a sales manager. However, when we were looking for staff for our clinical division, we were able to find the right talent quickly. It really depends on the position. Scientific roles are easier to recruit in the country rather than business related positions.

**How strategically important are the operations for Novo Nordisk in Slovakia relative to the CEE region and Europe at large, especially with the prevalence of diabetes quite high here?**

Roughly, about one in ten people suffer from diabetes in the world, and about half of these people do not know they have the disease. Of the people that are aware, many are not treated on time or with the right medication, and still others are not compliant with their treatment. We refer to this as the “rule of halves” and after factoring in this rule, it is calculated that only six per cent of the total population with diabetes globally have the disease under control. This issue is not meliorating and the rate at which the population is getting diabetes is only increasing. This is why there needs to be a joint effort with both the public and private sector to ensure that this percentage of the population that has diabetes does not increase and instead decreases through prevention programs and early diagnosis.

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Many people do not realize the consequences of diabetes. The disease does not cause any immediate physical pain and people that postpone visit to doctor can go even ten to twenty years

unaware of the fact that they are afflicted with the disease. Some extreme stories describe people losing their eyesight or having kidney failures without even knowing that they had diabetes. Often people go to the doctor when they are at the stage of the disease that they need to have an amputation, and this is because of neglected doctor check-ups that could have prevented such severe outcomes.

When it comes down to Slovakia, the country's diabetes rate is on par with the world and regional averages. Slovakia is however not a high-risk country for diabetes, which is more prevalent in countries that favor a lifestyle of unhealthy eating and minimal exercise.

The strategic importance of this particular affiliate is related to the size of its population. Slovakia counts 5.4 million inhabitants overall; without a doubt, we are not as strategically important as Poland for example with its 38.5 million people, but we are a priority over smaller countries. I would add that Slovakia's importance has increased due to the ease of market access I elaborated on earlier, and the wide portfolio that we have available here.

**In terms of revenues, what are your star products in the Slovak market?**

Our focus is on the products that we are able to launch here, and it is primarily about bringing to patients the best treatments available. Of course we maintain our supply of all of our medicines registered in Slovakia, but I would highlight that our focus is on the drugs that are most beneficial to the patients and the ones that improve their quality of life. For example, we just recently launched a combination therapy of insulin and a molecule called GLP1 available in one product. This is the first of this type of innovation and it is already available for the Slovakian patients.

**In terms of other therapeutic efforts what other categories do you have here?**

The majority of our efforts is in diabetes, with a second focus area in hemophilia. That being said, we do have products in growth hormones and hormone replacement therapy for women in menopause. These products are available in most of the countries in which Novo Nordisk operates, and the hormone specific products are high quality even if they are not new additions to our portfolio. Diabetes makes up roughly 80 per cent of our revenue with Hemophilia as the second largest revenue driver.

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**During an interview with Novo Nordisk in Algeria they told us about ways the company had to adapt to the culture using the example of involving religious leaders in the health dialogue due to the impacts of fasting during Ramadan on diabetes; although this serves as one extreme, what are some of the ways that Novo Nordisk must adapt to the culture within Slovakia?**

Through my observations here in Slovakia I have not noticed the need for significant adaptations. I would say that the mentality of the people here and the culture is more or less the same as in Serbia. That said, I have witnessed that Novo Nordisk does make an effort to adapt and blend its culture within each country it operates.

**You mentioned the intense competition within the Slovak market and other multinationals such as Lilly and Sanofi are strong here; how does Novo Nordisk differentiate itself when providing innovative products is a common goal?**

It is not all about Lilly and Sanofi which are competing in the insulin segment; however, now that diabetes treatment has evolved there are many additional treatment options for the early stages of diabetes just after diagnosis. Here almost every company has available products. This adds an additional layer of complexity for not only running the business, but also for the doctors choosing the right treatment for the patient, and for the patients in terms of understanding the treatment options.

Doctors need to be updated on the medications, and the companies need to do their part in spreading the message about their products. Our marketing operations are standard within the industry with a focus on sales, we also have a medical department that encourages dialogue with doctors, and in addition we have a clinical department that is in house. Slovakia is in this way able to export knowledge from these clinics that participate in the trials. This is one of the benefits that we offer the country because it puts Slovakia on an international stage and allows the doctors here to participate in the same trials as doctors in the US, Japan and China.

**Could you elaborate on your relationship with the government? Slovakia, like all of the European healthcare systems is involved in the financing, and sustainability of the system. Diabetes is one of the diseases in which preventative healthcare could take significant costs out of the system. Does Novo Nordisk collaborate with the state in emphasizing preventative healthcare?**

In Slovakia the government collaborates with patient associations to put this emphasis on preventative healthcare. Novo Nordisk does joint projects that support early detection around the

world and within Slovakia. This is one of my long-term goals and we are open to any collaboration that can help in this way.

**Just a few days ago, Novo Nordisk announced the departure of Lars Sorensen after several years heading extremely successfully the Group. Any comments on this change of global management?**

Our previous CEO, Lars Sørensen led the company for many years and through enormous success. He leaves a tremendous legacy behind; however, coming from the general management perspective in Slovakia I do not foresee any immediate impact on our operations. The company has taken good care to choose a successor with internal continuity. The new CEO Lars Fruergaard Jorgensen shares the same vision as his predecessor.

**You mentioned the “Novo Nordisk Way”. What does the Novo Nordisk Way mean to you?**

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The Novo Way is in how we do our job every day. It is also about how we behave with our stakeholders including doctors, patients, and the overall external environment. This is reflected in each affiliate no matter how small or big it is. The essence of our work is the triple bottom line in terms of social, environmental and financial responsibility that we always have to be aware of.

**What is the final message you would like to send to our international audience?**

Slovakia is a very nice country to live in, located in beautiful central Europe and I see it as an ideal place to spend a life or at least some part of it. Also, the system is transparent and stable which allows me time to focus on other aspects of the business, such as the internal strategy and developing our people.

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