Interview: Aurélien Breton – General Manager, Servier Bulgaria



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Aurélien Breton, general manager at Servier Bulgaria, explains how the affiliate has performed under his tenure and highlights the importance of combining the right portfolio with a top-notch team to successfully navigate the business environment in Bulgaria.

This is your second country management position after Slovenia, and you arrived in Bulgaria exactly two years ago. How different was the Bulgarian reality from what you expected when you arrived?

I did not have any specific expectation but rather a kind of naïve position, willing to embrace my professional change and the Bulgarian culture as well as market trends. Having said that, it has been already two years since then and I am highly satisfied with the move.

Bulgaria is a place that easily permits finding the professional-personal balance with, I would say, high level of satisfaction on both sides. The social environment is really friendly and I would like to highlight the outstanding level of professionals both in terms of quality and loyalty.

What advice would you give to someone who has been freshly appointed as a general manager in Bulgaria?

Things are certainly less structured than in Western Europe, which is a common situation in Balkan countries. I would highly recommend surrounding yourself with internal or external professionals with deep market knowledge in order to speed up the understanding of the country's procedures, especially healthcare administrative processes. This will help any general manager to successfully navigate the affiliate through these types of administrative particularities.

Nevertheless, on the other side of the same coin, the openness of some public health institutions such as the Bulgarian Drug Agency (BDA) and the Ministry of Health towards helping the industry to comply with all these types of processes deserves to be highlighted. Furthermore, public institutions often put on the table new proposals and consult with the industry through the Bulgarian Association of Research-Based Pharmaceutical Manufacturers (ARPharM) in order to define the best way of development.

As a good example, concretely to Servier, we have been registering new licenses to sell some medical devices, which is something new for Servier as a group, and we have received really useful help from the BDA to fully comply with the national health administrative processes.

You mentioned the openness of the Bulgarian public health institutions towards dialoguing with the industry; can you expand on this?

The need for higher public healthcare expenditures in general and pharmaceuticals expenditure in particular is one of the main topics discussed in such roundtables. It is a matter of fact that Bulgaria has a vast array of unmet healthcare needs and both industry and government have the willingness as well as commitment to cover this healthcare gap.

Nonetheless, this situation does not have an easy solution since public funds are limited and drugs, even more if innovative, are not cheap. I am delighted to share that we have been able to reach some agreements that resulted in broader market access to high quality medicines in combination with cost containment initiatives such as the clawback system and further discounts – but there is still a long way to cover.

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Going back to the affiliate, what has been the presence of Servier in the country historically?

Next year, we are going to celebrate our 25th anniversary in Bulgaria. Servier opened its affiliate back in 1993, which is quite unique versus any big pharmaceutical presence in the country.

I believe that our satisfactory evolution in the country has been driven by our very targeted product portfolio with solid, reliable and affordable solutions, which is crucial for the CEE region in general and Bulgaria in particular, that target key national burdens such as diabetes and cardiovascular conditions.

How has the affiliate performed under your guidance and what are the main growth drivers in Bulgaria?

We have been satisfactorily growing during recent years, especially from the volume standpoint with more than double-digit growth of solutions marketed. In my opinion, we need to continue advancing in this direction in order to face the drastic fall in prices caused by the cost-containment pressures from the government.

Being more precise, we have developed our OTC division through strong communication programs with patients and pharmacists – it has been one of the main drivers of growth in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, I am also proud to confirm that we have experienced great performance from our Rx division in many different areas.

Globally the company is ranked 32nd but in Bulgaria it within the top 10. How do you explain why it is performing so well in the country?

As aforementioned, our product portfolio strategy has played a key role in Servier's success in Bulgaria. But, additionally, we have supported our solutions with a highly-educated and talented team, fully able to talk peer-to-peer with Bulgarian physicians. Indeed, we have invested a lot in training courses to ensure that our human capital remains at the forefront of medical knowledge in all our therapeutic areas.

One of the therapeutic areas that Servier is strongly positioned globally in is neuropsychiatric disorder, which is often associated with societal stigmas. How do you feel this situation is reflected in Bulgaria?

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Psychiatric diseases represent a serious medical problem for countries like Bulgaria. Unfortunately, Bulgarians are not satisfactorily educated about this topic and, therefore, there is a lot of space for action here. In fact, the number of psychiatric patients that are properly treated is very small because of associated stigmas.

We have been actively working with psychiatric professionals through awareness and medical education campaigns but I have hardly perceived any advancement of the country in this regard.

Servier is globally trying to reinforce its image as an oncology leader, how is this medical ambition reflected in Bulgaria?

In Bulgaria, the oncology market has been extremely developed during recent years with several innovative products arriving to the market. Nevertheless, despite having a better impact, these new drugs are more expensive and have a more restricted eligible population. Their introduction to the market has led to a less efficient allocation of public health funds to oncology due to a mismatch between the specific patients' bio variables and the innovative prescribed drugs' specifications.

Coming back to Servier, we currently have two oncology solutions that we expect to have registered in the reimbursement system by beginning next year. So far, we have received excellent feedback from oncology Bulgarian experts in this regard and, therefore, we are already training a team that will closely work with the medical community to successfully market these solutions in Bulgaria.

Ehealth is one of the cornerstones behind the Bulgarian national healthcare strategy for 2020 and it could help the country to gain transparency as well as effectiveness in the public health expenditure. In fact, when we interviewed Nikolay Petrov, Bulgaria's Minister of Health, he highlighted the role of the private industry in the successful implementation of this program. What are your conclusions on that point?

The development of ehealth capabilities in Bulgaria is a need for the entire national healthcare system and it requires strong collaboration between industry and public institutions. I believe that the digitalization of the healthcare system will result in a better as well as more transparent use of resources that will help the government to obtain the desired financial sustainability as well as effectiveness of the healthcare system.

We, the pharmaceutical industry, have a lot of expertise in this area and we are really willing to support the government in this journey. But, from my perspective, this is more a long-term project rather than a quick-win.

While Servier is investing around 25 percent of its sales in developing R&D activities, it has not brought any breakthrough innovations in quite some time now. How are you maintaining Servier's image as an innovative group in Bulgaria?

From the corporate philosophy standpoint, we want to be positioned as an innovative player, bringing added-value and high-quality healthcare solutions. In fact, just looking at the legal form of Servier, it is an independent group governed by a foundation meaning that that all profits are not distributed and, therefore, they are invested in R&D to discover innovative medicines or develop our existing ones. Hence, we are advancing in two different directions: developing our core portfolio through improving its outcomes or, in a longer-term vision, investing in identifying as well as developing breakthrough innovative drugs. Indeed, we expect to deliver new solutions as well as applications to the Bulgarian market by 2022-2023.

Concretely to Bulgaria, we have a significant footprint in conducting clinical trials in the country. Indeed, we currently have 5-10 clinical research projects developed in Bulgaria in key therapeutic areas such as cardiovascular and psychiatric-neurologic degenerative diseases. Furthermore, we are continuously dedicating significant amount of resources in medical education activities brining world-class key opinion leaders to Bulgaria to share their insights with the local medical talent.

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