

Interview: Urszula Orzel - General Manager, MSD

Bulgaria



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18.10.2017

Tags: [Bulgaria](#), [MSD](#), [Pharma](#), [Market Access](#), [Patient Access](#), [CSR](#)

Urszula Orzel, general manager at MSD Bulgaria, explains how the affiliate has become one of the fastest growing players in the country and emphasizes that pharmaceutical companies are not merely manufacturers of drugs, but should also be socially committed.

This is your first time as a country manager. How did you prepare yourself for this big jump?

Coming to Bulgaria has been a milestone in my professional career because it has extended my responsibilities and professional perspectives. In terms of preparation, it has been a continuous work since I started in the pharmaceutical industry from the bottom and had the opportunity to develop myself through the organization to understand all of the perspectives within the business.

Additionally, in my opinion, relationships with authorities and market access are two of the main points in the Bulgarian pharmaceutical sector and my prior position as market access director in Poland has been a really useful lever to succeed in my current role. Nonetheless, besides any preparation, the true insights are gained once you are on the field since there are always unexpected situations.

You have been in Bulgaria for three years now. What is the most important thing you have learned about the Bulgarian market?

From a non-directly related business perspective, there are some obvious cultural differences between the north and the south of the CEE region, especially in terms of human touch and timelines. In this case, the key words are flexibility and an open mind-set to understand the local ways.

From the pharmaceutical business standpoint, I have perceived a really strong level of collaboration between all stakeholders; from industry and physicians to government and patients. In fact, such a collaboration leads the development of the national healthcare system and ensures that all needs are met in a balanced way. This is quite a unique characteristic of the Bulgarian market and I believe that the rest of the European countries should take it as best practice.

How would you evaluate the Bulgarian market access environment and its openness to innovation and the dialogue that you have with the authorities?

Market access in Bulgaria is a challenging task and needs to be assessed from many different angles.

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It is well known that the Bulgarian regulation is constantly changing and this dynamism creates an unstable environment in which it is more difficult to do accurate business predictions. However, looking beyond, this dynamism is driven by changing environment, healthcare budget challenges and the urgent need for improvement.

Expanding access to innovation is a global concern as public healthcare budgets are constantly being squeezed and thus limit the patients' access to the latest discoveries. More specifically, according to the latest report of European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations (EFPIA), Bulgaria is ranked as one of the countries with the highest number of days to get innovation accessible in the market. I do observe significant improvement and willingness of the national authorities to bring innovative medicines to the patients.

What specific situation has MSD experienced in Bulgaria that shows this willingness of the government to enlarge patients' access to innovative treatments?

I am proud to confirm that this intention from the government is being translated into facts. Indeed, globally, MSD recently discovered a top-notch blockbuster to target immune oncology – and Bulgaria has been one of the fastest countries in Europe to get this medicine available for the Bulgarian patients.

In which therapeutic areas are MSD strongly positioned in the country?

The three main areas in which we focus our efforts are: Immuno-oncology, Hepatitis C (HCV), and vaccines. There is a huge unmet need in the aforementioned three areas in Bulgaria and MSD has the duty as well as the capabilities to play a key role in cure and prevention of these health burdens and be a preferred partner.

Globally, there are some movements against the usage of vaccines. How is this reflected in Bulgaria?

From a global standpoint, I am very sad to see the scientific predictions that 1.5 million children will die in 2018 due to diseases that could be prevented by vaccination. Personally, I am a strong supporter of prevention and, in this sense, vaccines. Having said that, the anti-vaccine movement is also somehow present in Bulgaria and not only the industry but also the government should implement medical education campaigns supported by reliable data to argue against their arguments.

How is MSD collaborating with doctors and patient organizations to raise the bar of quality treatments as well as therapeutic area knowledge in Bulgaria?

I believe that pharmaceutical companies are not just drug manufacturers and, therefore, doing business is just one part of our operations. The pharmaceutical industry has the duty to develop CSR activities to create health breakthroughs based on each company's expertise; this is certainly the case of MSD in Bulgaria.

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We are closely collaborating with the medical universities, patient organizations, and physicians to develop knowledge around our therapeutic areas through information exchange. Furthermore, last year, MSD Bulgaria allocated over 370 working hours to develop CSR initiatives to help orphans and children with special needs as well as substantial help for the charity activities on preserving Bulgarian nature.

You were appointed global executive ambassador of MSD's global CSR initiative, 'MSD for Mothers' back in 2016. How would you assess its implementation in Bulgaria?

'MSD for Mothers' is a really important initiative that aims to eradicate maternal mortality. In fact, this mortality can be totally preventable through medical education to mothers as well as midwives and better access to healthcare services.

Also in Bulgaria 'MSD for Mothers' is helping in prevention as no women shall die giving birth!

Focusing on MSD's operations in Bulgaria, how would you assess the performance of the affiliate under your tenure?

Honestly, I am very proud of the Bulgarian affiliate's performance over the last few years, being positioned as one of the fastest growing pharmaceutical companies in the country. These results are the outcome of a successful combination of the high level of professionalism in the team, the right product portfolio, and the right business approach in terms of creating healthcare breakthroughs.

In 2015, pharmaceutical companies invested around USD 350 million in conducting clinical research in Bulgaria, representing one of the main areas of investments from research-based players. Having said that, in which ways has the affiliate taken part in the Bulgarian clinical development arena?

MSD is strongly investing in developing clinical research in Bulgaria. We believe in the quality of the country in this regard in terms of service, professionals' knowledge, and patients' recruitment. In fact, Bulgaria is participating in the clinical development of the most modern therapies of MSD that will eventually be accessible in the market.

What are your main priorities to continue driving MSD Bulgaria's success moving forward?

The main priority on my agenda is to ensure that the Bulgarian patients have access to our latest treatments available in the global market. Secondly, I want to develop my team of highly qualified professionals to support the operations of MSD in the country. Finally, and related to the aforementioned goals, I want to keep investing in the growth of the affiliate in terms of business volume and capabilities.

The Bulgarian market is one of the smallest in Europe and it is clamped by tough price regulations as well as long mechanisms. Why in these conditions do you feel companies should pay more attention to Bulgaria?

First, from a macro standpoint, the Bulgarian economy has been steadily growing over recent years and it is expected to maintain this performance in the future. Second, related to fiscal attractiveness, the corporate taxes in Bulgaria are somehow more glamorous than its neighboring countries with 10 percent of corporate taxes. Third, from the human capital standpoint, the level of education in general and physicians in particular is really high. Fourth, from the pure healthcare

perspective, the pharmaceutical market has been growing at a pace of 7-10 percent on annual basis during the last decade due to the unmet needs in the country and the willingness of the government to reduce the health gap.

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