Interview: Ljubiša Mitof-Višurski – General Manager Adria Region, AbbVie



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Ljubiša Mitof-Višurski, general manager for AbbVie Adria, discusses the main challenges, opportunities and synergies the Adria region has to offer. He underlines the key healthcare initiatives AbbVie engages with in the region, as well as the crucial role the company plays in bringing innovative solutions to patients.

Can you provide our international readership with an overview of the Adria region that you are responsible for, as well as the primary synergies between the countries?

The term 'Adria' is most commonly used to describe ex-Yugoslavian countries plus Albania. The region stretches from the states situated south-east of Germany, between the Central-European link, with Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic amongst others and continues up to Russian Federation and across to Greece. Because this region comprises EU members, non-EU members, EU candidates, and the countries that do not yet meet the EU criteria to be a candidate – there are specific dynamics and complexities to be considered here.

From the aspect of the pharmaceutical business, it means that, as a regional director, I am managing portfolios with EU approved products, as well as non-EU approved products, which internally is a highly complex process. I do get the feeling sometimes, that I am managing the micro-cosmos, full of different synergies, diversity, and challenges, that country managers responsible for a single country do not face. They are dealing with one regulatory field, one Ministry

of Health, one registration agency, and so on. For me, the Adria region is like a micro-universe, and I need to take care of the different planets that have very different needs.

Can you discuss the strongest characteristics those markets have in common as well as opportunities waiting to be discovered in the region?

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Specific differences are very apparent in areas such as religion, language, income levels and GDP spending, amongst others. Apart from that, these countries have vast similarities and synergies. First and foremost, their healthcare systems come from The Beveridge Model. In this system, healthcare is provided and financed by the government through tax payments and is managed by one single state-owned provider.

What are the key strategies and competitive advantages that consolidate AbbVie's positioning in the region?

We have approached the area using tools and skills similar to the ones international companies are using to manage similar countries. We have set up a system of acquiring knowledge in one state and implementing it to another country. Afterwards, we approach them in one holistic strategy. The critical sense of our position requires us to consider cross-country approaches and cross-country collaborations.

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Our teams are working on the cross-country business, and as such, you can see the way how we are doing business. We have technologies in place that allow us to communicate smoothly and exchange information in order to collaborate between countries. Having a loyal team is also a cornerstone of the business.

AbbVie's motto is to provide solutions to the most stringent health challenges.

For this region in particular, what are those health challenges and what initiatives and partnerships can help to address them?

We are a biotechnological and biopharmaceutical company, specializing in finding and providing new molecules and solutions for the unmet needs of patients across the region. Those answers are connected to the research and development of new proposals that is very costly. Our products are state-of-the art and positioning them within low-middle income countries is one of the challenges AbbVie faces in the region.

We see Croatia increasing healthcare funds and systems which leads to a rise of innovation in Croatia, but the whole area of the Balkans is still somewhat slow. Focusing on Serbia, we notice that there is some movement and institutional changes that are slowly closing the gap, like governments putting innovation as their priority, changes in Ministry of Health by imposing and incentivizing innovation, as well as innovative products being brought to the market and to the country.

One thing to keep in mind, however, is that the state is vast and the funds needed to foster innovation are substantial. To give you a sense of size, Serbia has 7.2 million citizens and a pharmaceutical market worth EUR 0.6 billion. Slovenia has two million people and a pharmaceutical market of EUR 0.6 billion, and Croatia is a nation of four million people with a pharmaceutical budget of EUR 0.6 billion.

Can you provide us with the overview of the main therapeutic areas, as well as initiatives AbbVie is involved in to increase patient outcomes in the region?

Our strategy is to go beyond the pill and to go beyond the products. This is our fundamental objective to set up and that we have been working on since 2012. The idea of going beyond the pill means that apart from providing the single molecule, the single drug or a single cure, we are providing additional health services to make a distinction between the other companies and us and to provide a fantastic level of care. AbbVie, as a responsible partner of the healthcare system, has established a program to help healthcare professionals affected by diseases and to cure them without any expense.

Regarding therapeutic areas, we are solid in virology, neurology and of course in immunology, with Humira. Humira has enormous potential to grow in this region, and what’s more, we have a new recent focus on the development of our oncology portfolio. These are the pillars that we are building our success upon.

What are the strategies to consolidate and further grow AbbVie in the region?

The characteristics of this region includes the fact that there is very little information about what is happening here and as such we would like to give a broader perspective to the outside world of the region’s hidden potential. We have created the momentum of the post-war era, which, instead of focusing on the challenges and the differences, is focused on synergies and similarities. As an example, AbbVie Adria employs a team of 60 professionals, almost equally divided between countries and none of those teams have only one nationality. We use it to our advantage, sharing the knowledge and expertise picked up and shared through different backgrounds, which will be a

big part of consolidating our presence in the region. We are a fulfilling operating system that looks to function across, what I like to call, my universe in this area. I am very, very proud of that cross-country collaboration.

What potential does Serbia have to become the hub for the pharmaceutical industry in the region?

Serbia, with Belgrade as its capital, has vast potential to become the hub for the region and in some ways, it is already close to such achievement. Corporate taxation policies are particularly attractive for the companies wishing to operate from Belgrade.

The highly skilled and well-educated workforce that we see here is also a significant advantage. However, there is a flip side of the coin. Concerning legislation, laws, and bylaws, Serbia has to work towards simplifying the regulations and business models, so that external companies have easy access to the market and do not have to worry about too much bureaucracy.

We have high aims and a long-term, all-embracing vision. In five years, we aim to have a considerable advantage over Central Europe. We are ready for improvements, the whole region is working together to achieve that and if you come back to the country by 2022 you will see the tremendous potential this region will fulfil.

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