



Evaluation of the Effects of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic on Health Tourism: The Case of Eskişehir

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to reveal the effects of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on Eskişehir's health tourism. The data of the study were collected through Zoom, which is a face to face and online meeting program with local and private sector tourism stakeholders in Eskişehir between 23.12.2020-08.01.2021. Descriptive analysis method was used in analyzing the data. As a result of the study, it was revealed that the decrease in the visits to the country for health purposes due to the fear of getting sick and security concerns, negatively affected the health tourism of Eskişehir. Also, it is another output of the study that the city has an important potential in health tourism and that more importance should be given to promotional activities by taking lessons from these negative experiences. In addition, in the study, it is predicted that the health policies followed by Turkey during the pandemic process are successful and that there will be important developments in the health tourism of Turkey and Eskişehir after the pandemic.

Keywords: Health tourism, Tourism stakeholders, Pandemic, Coronavirus (Covid-19), Eskişehir.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, koronavirüs (Covid-19) pandemisinin Eskişehir'in sağlık turizmi üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Çalışmanın verileri, 23.12.2020-08.01.2021 tarihleri arasında Eskişehir'deki kamu ve özel sektör turizm paydaşlarıyla yüz yüze görüşme ve çevrimiçi görüşme programı olan Zoom aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Verilerin çözümlenmesinde betimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Çalışma sonucunda, hastalanma korkusu ve güvenlik endişeleri nedeniyle sağlık amaçlı ülkeye yapılan ziyaretlerin azalmasının Eskişehir'in sağlık turizmini olumsuz etkilediği ortaya konmuştur. Bunun yanı sıra, şehrin sağlık turizminde önemli bir potansiyele sahip olduğu, yaşanan bu olumsuzluklardan ders çıkarılarak tanıtım faaliyetlerine daha fazla önem verilmesi gerektiği çalışmanın diğer bir çıktısıdır. Ek olarak çalışmada, Türkiye'nin pandemi sürecinde izlediği sağlık politikalarının başarılı olduğu ve Türkiye'nin ve Eskişehir'in sağlık turizminde pandemi sonrasında önemli gelişmeler yaşanması öngörülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sağlık turizmi, Turizm paydaşları, Pandemi, Koronavirüs (Covid-19), Eskişehir.

INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) is a virus first identified on January 13, 2020, as a result of the evaluation of a group of patients who experienced respiratory symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath) in Wuhan Province, China, in late December (TR Ministry of Health, 2021). Today, it still continues at the level of a pandemic and has spread to Asia, Europe and the Americas outside of China, affecting the whole world (Turkish Academy of Sciences, 2020). Coronavirus (Covid-19), which emerged in Wuhan province of China at the end of December 2019 and affected the whole world in a short time, was declared as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic that is ongoing today has caused the deaths of more than 3

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million people worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). In Turkey, approximately 42 thousand people have died (TR Ministry of Health, 2021) from the pandemic since 11 March 2020, when the first case was seen (TR Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Public Health, 2021).

Today, many countries have started vaccination studies. In addition to vaccination studies, countries continue to take some measures (such as curfews, international travel restrictions, and the obligation to wear a mask) in order to prevent the risk of transmission of the coronavirus pandemic (Bakar and Rosbi, 2020; Jin et al., 2021). These measures taken to control the pandemic and prevent the spread of the virus have affected many sectors. Tourism, which is an important source of income for countries, is one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic (Skare et al., 2021). This is due to the fragile nature of the tourism industry, and it is immediately affected by adverse events such as terror events, war, political events, natural disasters, economic crises and epidemics (Çıtak and Çalış, 2020; Çoban, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has seriously affected health tourism as well as in other types of tourism. There are studies on coronavirus pandemic and health tourism in the literature (Abbaspour et al., 2020; Al-Shamsi et al., 2020; Bağcı, et al., 2020; Çınar and Özkaya, 2020; Hakim et al., 2020; Nal, 2020; Tatum, 2020). However, a study on coronavirus pandemic and Eskişehir's health tourism has not yet been found in the literature. In this context, the question of this research is as follows; What are the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on Eskişehir's health tourism? From this point of view, it is aimed to reveal the effects of coronavirus pandemic on Eskişehir's health tourism in this study. For this purpose, interviews were held with public and private sector tourism stakeholders in Eskişehir and the data were analyzed by descriptive analysis method. The findings obtained by the analysis of the data were interpreted by adhering to the relevant literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coronavirus Pandemic and Tourism

Coronaviruses (Covid-19) are a family of viruses that cause respiratory infections, ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The New Type Coronavirus pandemic, which emerged in Wuhan, China has affected the whole world (TR Ministry of Health, 2021). Due to the rapid increase in the number of cases worldwide and the death rates due to the epidemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus epidemic as an “international public health emergency” on 30 January 2020, and a global epidemic (pandemic) on 11 March 2020 (TR Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Public Health, 2020). Today, it is known that vaccination studies are carried out in many countries in order to prevent pandemic. As of 6 May 2021, the total number of confirmed cases worldwide was reported as 154,815,600 and the number of deaths due to the pandemic was reported as 3,236,104 (World Health Organization, 2020).

According to the statement of the World Tourism Organization, travel and tourism are among the sectors most affected by the coronavirus pandemic (UNWTO, 2020). Measures taken to prevent the spread of the pandemic, such as closing international borders, canceling flights, travel restrictions and quarantine practices, and suspending the activities of tourism businesses, negatively affected tourism activities (Baum and Hai, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020, p. 7). Due to these measures taken to prevent the pandemic, international travel and tourism activities have come to a halt, and there has been a serious decrease in the number of tourists and revenues from tourism. In 2020, the number of international travelers decreased by 74% compared to the previous year. Due to this decline in the number of tourists, there was a loss of

USD 1.3 trillion in export revenue from international tourism. For this reason, the World Tourism Organization stated that 2020 is the “worst year in the history of tourism” (UNWTO, World Tourism Barometer, 2020).

Coronavirus Pandemic and Health Tourism

Health tourism, expressed as “*people's travel from where they live to other places for health purpose*” (Ross, 2001), is an important type of tourism for countries due to its contribution to the economy. According to the report of the Global Health Institute (2018), health tourism expenditures, which were 563.2 billion dollars in 2015, are estimated to reach 639.4 billion dollars in 2017 (Global Wellness Tourism Economy, 2018). Turkey is a country that has an important potential to get more shares in the field of health tourism in the world and in the European market. It is known that many health tourists from different countries prefer Turkey for treatment especially in recent years.

According to 2020 data, there are 1534 hospitals in Turkey, including Ministry of Health (900) hospitals, university hospitals (68) and private hospitals (566). The total number of beds is 251.182, including the Ministry of Health (156.965), university (41.987) and private (52.230). The bed occupancy rate is 52.5% and the average hospital stay is 4.5 in 2020 in Turkey (TR Ministry of Health, Health Statistics Yearbook, 2020). Turkey offers low cost, high quality and technologically equipped services in many health areas such as plastic and aesthetic surgery, hair transplantation, eye surgery, IVF, open heart surgery, skin diseases, check-up, cancer treatments, ear-nose-throat, dialysis and cardiovascular surgery, gynecology, neurosurgery, orthopedics, dental, spa and physical therapy rehabilitation (İçöz, 2009). In addition, thermal tourism potential, which is known as the locomotive of health tourism, is quite high in Turkey (Bülbül, 2015). In Turkey, which is rich in thermal resources, there are approximately 1300 thermal facilities with temperatures ranging from 20 to 110 degrees Celsius (Tengilimoğlu and Gürcü, 2017).

As in other types of tourism, the coronavirus pandemic has seriously affected health tourism, which has developed in recent years and is among alternative tourism types. The number of tourists visiting Turkey decreased from 51 million in 2019 to approximately 15 million in 2020. Among the total number of tourists visiting Turkey, the number of health tourists decreased from 662 thousand in 2019 to 388 thousand in 2020 (Turkish Statistical Institution (TUIK), 2020). The reason for the decline in the number of tourists and health tourists in 2020 is international travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. This change in the number of tourists has also been reflected in the spending of tourists. Tourism revenue, which was approximately 34 billion dollars in 2019, decreased to approximately 12 billion dollars in 2020. Health tourism revenue decreased from approximately 1 million dollars in 2019 to approximately 548 thousand dollars in 2020 (Turkish Statistical Institution (TUIK), 2020). In 2020, compared to the previous year, there was a serious decrease in total tourism revenues and therefore in health tourism revenues due to the coronavirus pandemic affecting Turkey, as in the whole world.

METHOD

The objective of this study is to determine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Eskişehir's health tourism. For this purpose, interview technique, which is a qualitative data collection technique, was used in the study. In this context, semi-structured interview questions were prepared using the literature (Çınar and Özkaya, 2020; Çoban and Özel, 2022) the opinions of tourism experts were taken during the preparation of these questions in order to ensure the scope validity of the study. According to the feedback of the experts, the interview questions were partially revised. Then, pilot interviews were conducted with two participants

before the interviews in order to test the comprehensibility of the interview questions by the participants. According to the pilot interviews with the participants, the interview questions were finally revised.

Maximum diversity sampling, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in the study. Purposeful sampling is a method used in discovering and explaining facts and events for many situations (Yıldırım and Şimsek, 2011). Maximum diversity sampling is the determination of internal analogous different situations related to the problem studied in the universe and administering the study on these situations (Büyüköztürk et al., 2009). Public and private sector tourism stakeholders (9) in Eskişehir were included in the scope of the study. Health workers, hospitality business managers, chambers of tradesmen, provincial health directorate, provincial culture and tourism directorate and governorship, public and private sector tourism stakeholders are the participants of the study. The main reason for the inclusion of public and private sector tourism stakeholders in the study is that these stakeholders play an active role in decisions and practices regarding health tourism in Eskişehir.

The interviews were held face-to-face (5) and through the online video conversation application Zoom (4) with the public and private sector tourism stakeholders in Eskişehir on 23.12.2020 to 08.01.2021. Face to face interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants. Before the interviews, meeting appointments were made from the participants via e-mail and telephone. Considering the availability of the participants, interviews were started. In order to increase the construct validity of the study, the participants were given detailed information about each phase of the study before starting the interviews (Yıldırım and Şimsek, 2011) and participants' approvals were obtained for recording the interviews. In addition to the audio recording, the video interviews made through Zoom were recorded with the consent of the participants. In the interviews, it was determined that all the questions were correctly understood by the participants. Interview times range from 04.49 to 35.29 minutes. After the data started to repeat, the researcher ended the data collection process. The study data were directly converted into text by the researcher in computer environment and analyzed by descriptive analysis method. Table 1 contains general information about the tourism stakeholder who participated in the interview.

Table 1. General Information on Tourism Stakeholder

Participants	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation
P1	34	Male	Postgraduate	Doctor
P2	42	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Hotel manager
P3	44	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Travel agency manager
P4	60	Female	Postgraduate	Doctor
P5	54	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Public local person
P6	44	Male	Postgraduate	Doctor
P7	65	Male	Associate Degree	Public local person
P8	44	Male	Postgraduate	Medicine Academician
P9	44	Male	Bachelor's Degree	Public local person

Eskişehir

Eskişehir, which has started to gain momentum in domestic tourism and has come to the fore with city tourism in recent years, provides health services in 10 hospitals of the Ministry of Health, six private hospitals and a university hospital with a total bed capacity of 3,576 (Eskişehir Metropolitan Municipality, 2020). The average bed occupancy rate of hospitals is 68.8%. The average length of stay of individuals in hospitals is 4.7 days (TR Ministry of Health, Health Statistics Yearbook, 2019). In addition, there are three thermal hotels with tourism operation certificates in Eskişehir (Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2022). The total bed capacity of these thermal hotels is approximately 489. It is possible to say

that Eskişehir has also an important potential for health tourism, which has started to gain momentum in domestic tourism and has come to the fore with city tourism in recent years. Particularly in the last five years, Eskişehir has developed in the field of health tourism, and many patients come from countries such as England, Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Syria. These patients receive various health services such as stomach, heart and eye surgeries, physical therapy and rehabilitation, hair transplantation and aesthetics (http-1). In addition to health services, Eskişehir also has an important thermal tourism potential with its hot spring resources. The hot springs in the city center consist of approximately 15 Turkish baths and accommodation facilities. With their hydrogeological and hyperthermal properties, these hot springs are used in the treatment of cardiovascular diseases, painful diseases, rheumatic diseases, inflammatory and traumatic nerve diseases, diabetes, gout and kidney stones, and also have a beautifying effect on the skin (Tourism Master Plan of Eskişehir, 2011).

Kızılınler and Sakarılıca region, which is among the important thermal resources in Eskişehir, was declared as Thermal Tourism Center by the decision of the Council of Ministers. There are also different places with thermal water resources in Eskişehir in terms of both the properties and therapeutic benefits of thermal waters. Hasırca, Mihalgazi-Gümele, Alpu, Mihalicçık, Sivrihisar, Ilıcaköy, Seyitgazi, Çifteler are among them. The spas and hot springs in these regions are used for the treatment of many diseases (Emir and Metin, 2020).

Eskişehir has an important position in the country's transportation system. It is an important stop on the roads connecting Istanbul with Central Anatolia and Ankara with Southern Marmara and Western Anatolia. Eskişehir's main highway connection is the Istanbul-Eskişehir-Ankara state road (Eskişehir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

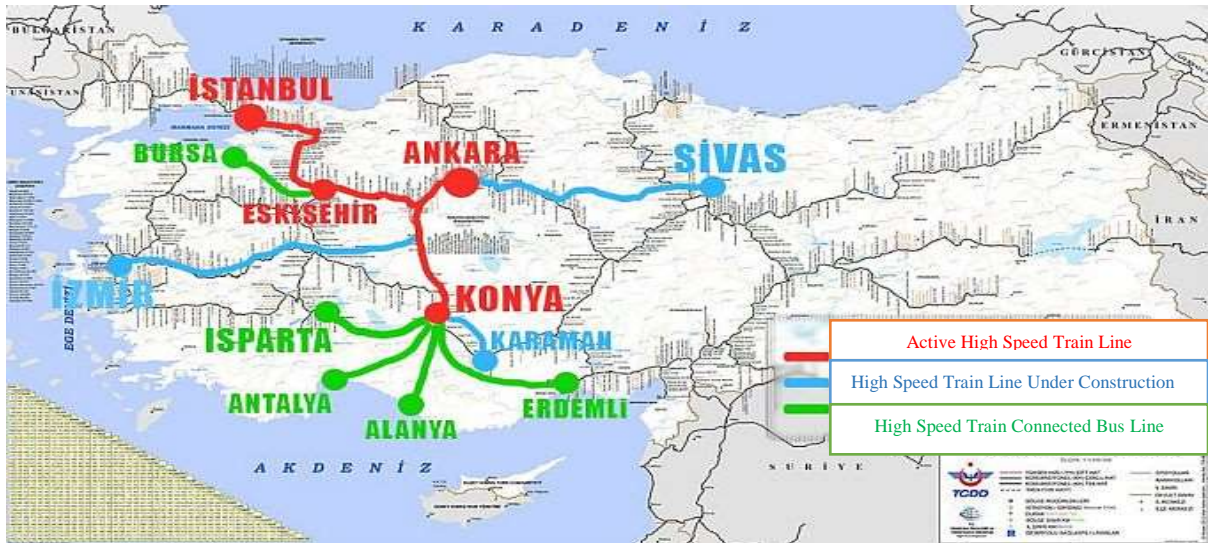


Figure 1. Map of High Speed Train Lines. Source: <https://rayhaber.com> (http-2).

FINDINGS

In this part of the study, the findings obtained from the data collected within the scope of the study are included.

Eskişehir's Development in Health Tourism

Although most of the participants argue that Eskişehir has an important potential in the field of health tourism, they state that the promotion and marketing activities of the city regarding health tourism are insufficient. Participants also consider that the city has shown a

slow development in health tourism, but will become better over time. Stating that Eskişehir's development in the field of health tourism is slow but this has the potential to develop, the views of P2 are as follows: *“Eskişehir can be much more advanced in health tourism than it is now. Its development to date has been somewhat slow. But I think this development can accelerate even more and we can make Eskişehir a health tourism brand”* (P2). P5 emphasizes the lack of promotion of Eskişehir's health tourism with the following words: *“Eskişehir has actually developed itself as a city and completed its infrastructure. Private hospitals and city hospital made significant investments. What is missing is marketing and making the destination known. Last year, we started working to hold an international summit in Eskişehir. However, we could not hold our event at the end of September 2020 due to the pandemic”* (P5).

The Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic on Eskişehir’s Health Tourism

The majority of the participants state that the pandemic has negative repercussions on the city's health tourism. In addition, some participants emphasize that lessons should be taken from this negative situation brought about by the pandemic and the importance of promotional activities. P3 expresses the negative effects of the pandemic on Eskişehir's health tourism with the following words: *“We have a 70% loss in health tourism in 2020 due to the pandemic, we could have reached 30% capacity. Likewise, Eskişehir got its share from this too. After people came to Istanbul and Ankara, they hesitated to travel from there to the next destination because of the pandemic. Therefore, Eskişehir's loss in health tourism during the pandemic was at least 90-95%”* (P3). The views of P4 on the subject are as follows: *“The pandemic greatly affected Eskişehir in health tourism. In 2019, we focused on intensive promotions and wanted to introduce our city abroad. We were thinking of planning a thermal tourism summit for nearly 350 foreigners from 60 countries on thermal, health, elderly tourism and alternative tourism. Unfortunately, we were unable to do this due to the pandemic. The lesson we need to take from this is to pay more attention to the promotion of health tourism before we have bad experiences such as a pandemic. We understood the importance of promotion better. This was a lesson for us”* (P4).

Health Policies Followed by Turkey and Supports Provided by the Public During the Pandemic Period

Almost all of the participants state that the health policies followed during the pandemic are successful and the support provided by the public is sufficient. Stating that health policies are successful and this will contribute to the promotion of health tourism in the country, P8's views on the subject are as follows: *“Turkey has followed a very good process regarding health. We can even turn this into an opportunity abroad. The patients were never left without hospital and treatment. The state provided all necessary medical assistance. Turkey has tested its health in this regard with very high scores. Thus, we have become a more reliable country in both health and tourism in the world. These are the proofs of our promise, ‘We are good in medicine in the world, we want to treat you well’, which we used in advertising”* (P4). The views of P6 on the subject are as follows: *“There was no bed problem in hospitals in Turkey, including Eskişehir. We did not have to choose and hospitalize patients in intensive care. I think Turkey is successful in its health policy. Health service in Turkey cannot even be compared with the health service in another country. We really have a health system working with heart and soul during the pandemic”* (P6).

Possible Developments in Health Tourism both in Turkey and Eskişehir After the Pandemic

Most of the participants state that there will be positive developments in health tourism after the pandemic. The views of P4 on the subject are as follows: *“When the pandemic is over, everyone will take care of their patients and tourists from abroad more. People kept coming for*

health tourism when airlines started operating. For example, we hosted our patient from Sudan last week at the hotel for a month during the treatment process. They left here very satisfied. They even witnessed that we obeyed the pandemic rules. I think, after the pandemic, all tourism professionals will look more favorably on health tourism activities” (P4). Stating that Eskişehir's location is advantageous in terms of health tourism, P7's views on the subject are as follows: “I believe that the city will gain a great momentum when we eliminate the shortcomings and make Eskişehir a thermal tourism center. The most important advantage of Eskişehir is that it is close to all cities and all airports and that it is the intersection point of Turkey with connection roads. In order to take advantage of these, I believe that we will eliminate our shortcomings and make the city better economically” (P7). P9 expresses with the following words that Eskişehir has an important potential in health tourism: “Eskişehir has a serious potential in health tourism. I think many tourists will prefer Eskişehir when returning to normal after the pandemic. Because patients wait for an appointment up to 6 months even for rheumatology in their own countries. But when they come by plane, they can be examined here on the same day or within a day or two. Therefore, I believe Eskişehir has a long way to go in health tourism” (P9).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results obtained from the study, Eskişehir has an important potential in health tourism with its health services, well-equipped hospitals and large bed capacity. In addition to these, Eskişehir, with its central location, offers easy transportation to many cities through its airline, railway and road transportation network, which provides great convenience in terms of health tourism. On the other hand, it was found in the study that despite Eskişehir's high health tourism potential, the city's development in health tourism is slow and has not reached the desired level yet. This is due to the city's deficiencies in advertising, marketing and promotion strategies for health tourism.

It was concluded in the study that the Covid-19 pandemic, which affected the whole world, negatively affected Eskişehir's health tourism. Due to the fear of getting sick and security concerns, the decrease in visits to the country for health purposes and the loss of economic income for health tourism are among these negativities. In addition, the travel restrictive measures taken by the state to reduce the impact of the pandemic negatively affected the development of health tourism in the region. This conclusion is similar to the conclusions of Çınar and Özkaya's study (2020). Çınar and Özkaya (2020), in their studies to determine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on health tourism activities, concluded that the pandemic caused serious damages in the economies of the countries for many years and the health tourism sector was directly and adversely affected by these damages.

Another result of the study is that lessons should be taken from the negative effects of the pandemic on Eskişehir, the shortcomings regarding this should be eliminated and promotional activities should be increased more. Additionally, another important result obtained from the study is that there are deficiencies in the planning and promotion activities of Eskişehir's health tourism. The view of the majority of the participants is that although the city has completed its infrastructure in health tourism, sufficient promotional activities have not been carried out, especially in the foreign market. Before the pandemic, a summit with international participation was planned for Eskişehir's health tourism, but it could not be held due to the pandemic. Therefore, the current inadequacy of publicity in the city's health tourism is seen as an important setback with the absence of this summit. In this context, it is the common point that is emphasized that lessons should be learned from the negative effects of the pandemic on Eskişehir (the importance of publicity should be understood and resources should

be used effectively before the pandemic occurs), the deficiencies should be eliminated and promotional activities should be given more space.

The majority of the participants argue that the health policies followed by Turkey and the measures taken by the public during the pandemic are sufficient. In a study (2020), Nal determined that the Ministry of Health started to take some measures within the scope of preventive health services before no case was seen in Turkey yet (Nal, 2020). It is also stated in this study that Turkey's successful management of this crisis process will provide significant advantages in the promotion of health tourism abroad. According to the participants, crises are not only seen as a threat, but can create new opportunities if managed well. Existing studies support these results. In a study by Everingham and Chassagne (2020), despite the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic, its positive aspects were emphasized, as it may create some opportunities in terms of planning tourism activities in different ways in the future. Similarly, in a study by Fouda et al., (2020), it was concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic brought along some opportunities besides its negative effects.

As a result, positive developments are expected in health tourism both in Turkey and Eskişehir after the pandemic. It is considered that Eskişehir, which showed important developments in health tourism before the pandemic, will continue this development after the pandemic. The facts that health tourists preferred Eskişehir without hesitation to receive health services, were satisfied with the service they received and intended to come back to the city are indications of this. Therefore, following the correct strategies throughout the pandemic, it is predicted that important developments will happen regarding the city's health tourism after the pandemic. This study was administered before the pandemic is over, and an evaluation can be made about Eskişehir's health tourism after the pandemic. In the study, some recommendations for the sector were developed.

- Cooperation of stakeholders (local people, municipalities, non-governmental organizations, universities) for the development of health tourism in Eskişehir and the evaluation of available resources,
- Continuously following the most up-to-date health-related practices at home and abroad and integrating these practices into the city's health tourism practices,
- Considering the advantages of health tourism as a type of tourism that can be realized in all seasons and evaluating investments in the region within this scope,
- Giving importance to the promotion of Eskişehir's health tourism potential, especially in the foreign market, and allocating sufficient budget for this,

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