



**Speech of Dr. Yordanka Chobanova,
Head of the EU Commission's Representation in Bulgaria at European Commission at
the Opening of the HealthXchange Summit 2026 in Varna**

First, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the organisers for their tireless work, which has made it possible for us to come together here today.

Bulgaria is honoured to host this summit in its maritime capital, Varna. This choice conveys a clear message. Bulgaria has been making significant progress in SPA tourism with a 15-percent increase of foreign visitors in recent years. This means, more Europeans discover why it is worth choosing Bulgaria. And our recent accession to the eurozone is further boosting our prospects for growth.

We have remarkably rich assets – in Bulgaria, but also across Europe as a whole. Our first asset is nature: climate, air, water, forests, herbs, seas, mountains. Secondly, we have the people: the tourism and medical professionals, the entrepreneurs, the innovators, the networks, the researchers... Our third potential is the physical and the cultural infrastructure – resorts, roads, facilities, traditions, arts and crafts. And fourthly, we have the governance structure: local, national, and EU institutions and policies. These four pillars should interact in synergy – to ensure sustainable development for the health tourism sector.

In this context, the European Commission stands ready to provide investments and support. We are rolling out new opportunities; now is the time to harness their potential. Let's think...: reduce waste in medical facilities; better waste management; increase circularity in health practices; improve green supply chains; environmental impact monitoring technologies... These are not just dreams for the future – these are examples of real projects that are happening in Europe today.

I know that many of you are personally involved in EU-funded initiatives or aspire to become part of such consortia. So, I will outline some avenues for support at the EU level. First, on prevention.

The future medicine should help people stay healthy rather than just treat sickness. The Commission believes that healthcare systems should embed personalised prevention. With this, they will reduce costs and become more efficient. Because now, chronic diseases cause 90% of deaths and 85% of disabilities in Europe.

To address this transformation, our flagship programme, Horizon Europe, is already supporting many pioneer initiatives, such as the European Partnership for Personalised Medicine; the European Partnership on transforming health and care systems; and the PROPHET project.

PROPHET is unique because it combines genomics, behaviour, and environment to create a single health roadmap. It isn't just a few doctors in a room; it's a co-creation effort involving 18 partner organisations across 13 countries, all working together to make sure that by 2030, your doctor can give you a prevention plan – as unique as your fingerprint.

Second, on the green and digital transition in the tourism sector.

Many medical spas are fully benefitting already – they adopt renewable energy, such as geothermal heating and solar-powered resorts. The EU Green Deal's goal is to have climate-neutral tourism by 2050. The Innovation Fund offers grants for spas transitioning to zero-emission models. The Digital Europe Programme supports smart health tourism, like blockchain systems to certify organic herbal products.

Also, spas can market themselves as eco-friendly destinations through the European Tourism Agenda 2030, which promotes sustainable wellness tourism.

Third, on rural revitalisation.

Many of Europe's spa towns are in rural or disadvantaged regions, where they can serve as anchors for local economies and job creation.

Several dedicated calls for projects will be launched to support regional clusters that combine tourism, agriculture, and health – through EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas.

Also, we have upcoming calls that are directly relevant to rural areas, bioeconomy and natural resources under the Horizon Work Programme for 2026-2027.

Our cohesion policy also supports health innovation. For example, through the Interregional Innovation Investment Instrument. We have now 70 projects that cover digital health, data management, smart ageing, and active healthy lifestyle solutions.

Finally, Europe's Strategy for European Life Sciences also supports health innovations and a more competitive healthcare system. We want to create vibrant R&I ecosystems, simplify regulatory processes, and facilitate access to finance in the EU.

In conclusion, my message is that:

Collaboration is key. Do your best to participate more actively in EU research programmes. Build partnerships. Use the EU instruments and networks. Even if you have a very early-stage idea, you can turn it into a viable startup, a successful business. Who can provide mentorship? Try the European Institute of Innovation and Technology and the dedicated programme "Jumpstarter", part of Horizon Europe. The thematic domains include technologies that support long-term wellness and active ageing. Or check the "Women TechEU" – specifically supporting women-led "deep-tech" startups, working on health and wellness innovation.

I have sought to outline the key opportunities to set the stage for the rich discussions in the panels to come. As an institution, the Commission seeks to gather the views of the experts, practitioners, and all stakeholders. So, I look forward to hearing your perspectives.

I wish you an engaging and productive conference!

Dr. Yordanka Chobanova