

## **WellSpaV4 Project**



# **Opportunities and Challenges for V4 Spas**

## **WELCOME**

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# Aims and Achievements of the Project

- **Aims of the project:** This project focuses on spa development in the V4 region and analyses the extent to which traditional medical spas can be adapted to attract and accommodate commercial (non-state-funded) guests and international tourists. This includes the development of infrastructure, the upgrading and regeneration of facilities, the improvement of service quality and the enhancement of visitor experiences within specific destinations and facilities.

- **The project is a collaboration between researchers from four Universities:**

- **Czech Republic:** Lucie Sobotkova, University of Pardubice
- **Hungary:** Melanie Kay Smith, Budapest Metropolitan University
- **Poland:** Diana Dryglas, AGH University of Science and Technology
- **Slovakia:** Jan Derco, Technical University of Kosice



- **As part of the project we have undertaken the following:**

- The establishment of a network of spa experts from the V4 countries and wider region
- The publication of a special issue of the *International Journal of Spa and Wellness* entitled:
- **From Medical to Wellness: Challenges and Opportunities for Spas**
- A Delphi Study consisting of two rounds of interviews with 28 spa experts
- A report in English comparing research data from the four countries
- Four reports in the national languages of the V4 countries with detailed research about spa development in Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia

- **Website address for reports and details of publications:** <https://www.infota.org/wellspav4konf/>

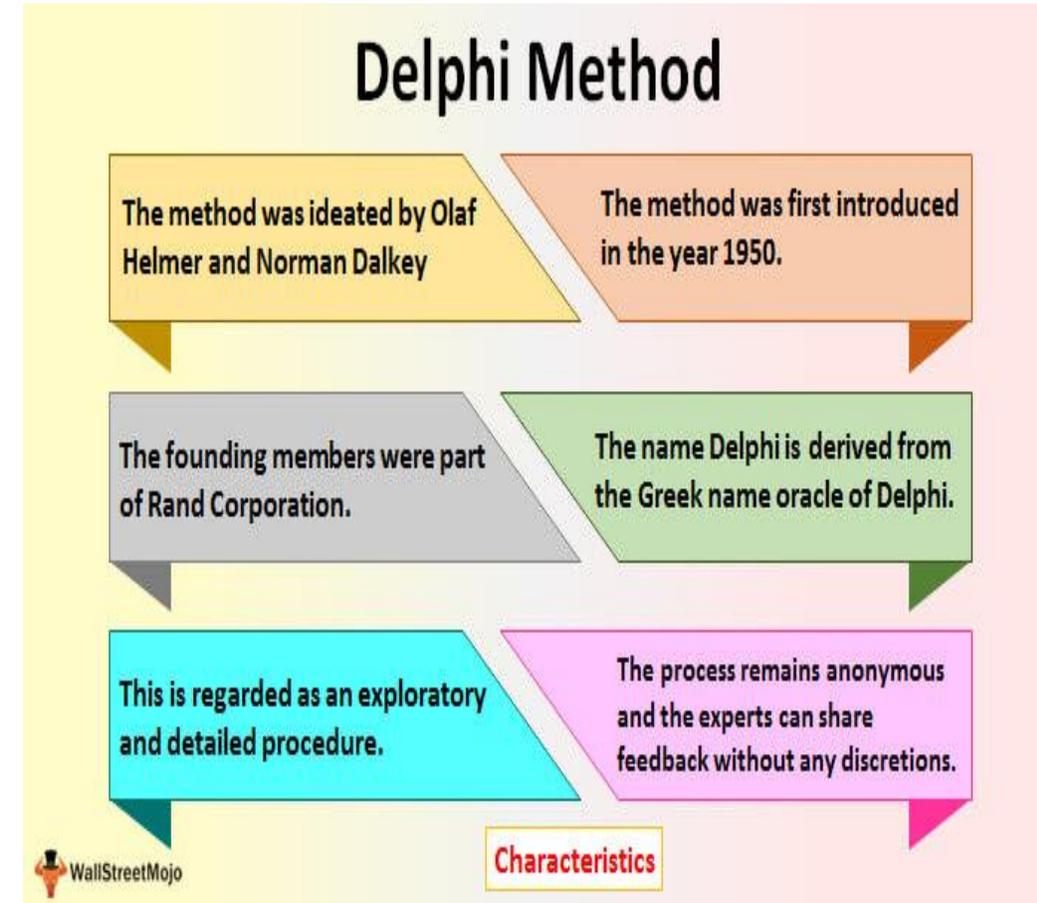
# Background to the Study



- During the Socialist period (1945-1989) the emphasis in spa development was mainly on providing health-enhancing facilities for residents and domestic tourists. Balneotherapy (the use of medical waters in spa treatments) typically consisted of a range of therapeutic treatments administered over three or four weeks.
- Although some intra-regional tourism existed at that time, especially to spa towns, the emphasis was much more on the domestic markets.
- After 1989, the situation started to change and tourism development accelerated once the V4 countries joined the EU in 2004. Their expectations of spas were sometimes different from those of the previous domestic and inter-regional tourists and it implied the need to upgrade and invest in spa development to improve quality and services.
- However, funding was often lacking despite some ongoing government support for balneotherapy. EU fund helped with renovations from 2004 onwards.
- The V4 countries show some similarities to other countries in the region. For example, research on wellbeing and health tourism was undertaken in eleven Balkan countries (several of which are post-socialist including Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia (Smith and Kiss, 2015).
- A lack of funding for renovations and the much-needed upgrading of infrastructure was highlighted in this study, as well as the need for better quality and friendlier service. Although many staff are medically educated, they are not trained enough in customer service. More effective marketing would also be required.
- The potential for wellness services and wellness tourism were also explored in the research.

# Delphi Study Research

- The chosen method for collecting data was a Delphi Study, which was undertaken in 2020-2021.
- It is undertaken with a group of carefully selected experts in a specific field (**here: spas**).
- Experts receive a 1<sup>st</sup> round of questions based on specific issues which the researchers then analyse. They send a 2nd round of questions to the same respondents based on the analysis of their 1<sup>st</sup> round responses.
- Best practice for the method includes using a minimum of 10 expert participants and at least two rounds of questions (Gordon, 1994) (**here: 2 rounds**).
- 15-35 participants is ideal (Miller, 2001) (**here: 28**).
- An acceptable attrition (drop-out) rate would be between 20% and 25% (Miller, 2001) (**here: 21%**).
- The aim is to reach a **consensus** (agreement) of opinion.
- Opinions were gathered from 28 interviewees: 9 from Hungary, 7 from Poland, 6 from the Czech Republic and 5 from Slovakia plus one geothermal expert from Bulgaria. In the second round, 22 participants responded.

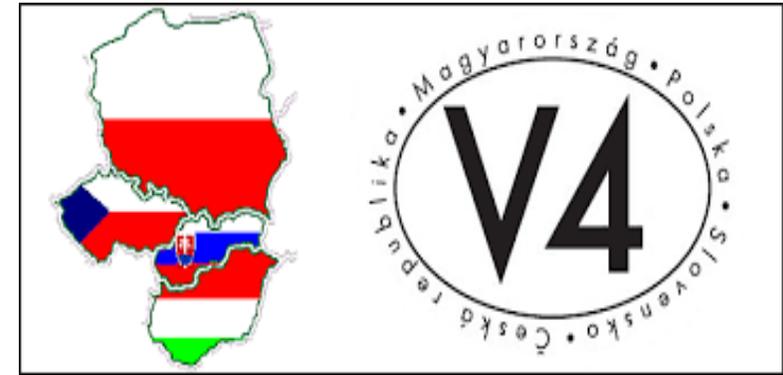


# Delphi Themes



1. Main challenges for thermal baths and medical spas in your country in the post-Socialist era (1990 onwards)?
2. Share of government support (health insurance) compared to self-funding. Has this changed over time?
3. Local resident and domestic tourists' use of spas. Growth or decline?
4. What impacts (if any) has international tourism development had on your country's thermal baths and spas?
5. What does wellness mean in your country, what kinds of wellness activities have been introduced and who uses them?
6. Any conflicts between user groups (e.g. medical and wellness guests; older and younger generations; men and women; international tourists and local residents; different nationality guests)?
7. Use of customer satisfaction evaluation systems and monitoring of quality.
8. Collaborations or networks of spas in your country or between the V4 countries? Main roles and benefits?
9. Future challenges, opportunities or development options for your country's spas?
10. How did the COVID-19 situation affect your spas? How is the situation being handled?

# Summary of Findings



- **The data from the V4 countries contains many similarities:**
- This includes the problems of meeting quality standards for paying and international guests, but not being able to fund this through state or health insurance funds.
- In all countries, state funding has been reduced since 1990 and the number of self-paying guests is slowly rising. EU funds have mainly helped with renovation and infrastructural developments.
- Low salaries and lack of education for employees and the difficulties of recruiting a qualified workforce.
- Addressing special needs of different segments of guests. There was a consensus that the main priorities should be infrastructural improvements followed by creating quality services for new, often self-paying or international guests.
- Wellness treatments are growing in popularity especially among younger and foreign guests, but emphasis is still placed firstly on physical health restoration.
- Medical wellness, preventative care and healthy lifestyle advice is growing but is not yet well established.
- The main future challenges are connected to further infrastructure, service and quality improvements, for which constant monitoring is required, better segmentation as well as increasing digitalisation.