



Sea Garden, Varna



Varna Region, Bulgaria

General overview

The Varna Region, one of 28 regions in Bulgaria, is situated in the northeast of the country. Its capital city, Varna, which is the biggest Black Sea port in Bulgaria, is an attractive touristic, cultural and educational centre. Both region and city have well-developed infrastructures. Divided into 12 municipalities, the region spans a total area of 3819 km² and is home to 470 124 people (2020) (1).

In 2020, the Varna Region's relatively good demographic development contributed to its being able to retain its place among the Bulgarian regions. It is second only to the capital in terms of the proportion of population living in urban areas – 84% versus 74% nationally – which accounts for the relatively high population density (2). The gross domestic product per capita was €7991.5 and life expectancy at birth for males and females,

respectively, was 72 and 78.8 years in 2020. Total mortality per 100 000 in the region was 1590 for males and 1360 for females in the same year (3).

A large proportion of households has good access to public health and transport services. Varna is among the regions with the best results in the field of education. The net enrollment of children in grades 5–8 increased slightly in 2019, to just below the national average. At the same time, the proportions of dropouts from primary and secondary education, as well as of repeaters, reduced to levels considerably lower than the respective average national figures. The proportion of children repeating a class dropped to 0.5%, versus the national average of 0.9% (2).

The proportion of people with health insurance continued to rise in 2019, reaching 84%, though

it was still below the national average of 89%. The number of general practitioners (GP) is very close to the country's average; that of specialist physicians is higher. However, the numbers for nurses, midwives and other health personnel, compared to average European levels, are low. A

substantial number of hospitals provide acute care (440 beds per 100 000 population) (2).

The Varna Region is the third biggest in Bulgaria, and a very important economic centre.

Regional activities linked to the WHO European Programme of Work

The following activities are linked to the three core priorities of the European Programme of Work (EPW): ((i) moving towards Universal

Health Coverage (UHC); (ii) promoting health and well-being; and (iii) protecting against health emergencies.



Moving towards UHC

A compulsory health insurance system was introduced in Bulgaria in the late 1990s. At present, the Bulgarian health-care system is financed by a public–private mix. Public financing is mainly provided by social health-insurance contributions managed by the National Health Insurance Fund, representing 41.9% of total health expenditure in 2015. Private expenditure on health (mostly out-of-pocket) reached 48.9% of total expenditure in 2015 and constitutes the largest source of health financing in Bulgaria. Up to 12% of the population is uninsured (4).

An adequate range of services in primary, specialist and acute outpatient hospital care and treatment is accessible, covered by the compulsory public health-insurance system in Bulgaria. The GP is the central figure in primary care and acts as a gatekeeper for specialized ambulatory and hospital care. Inpatient care is delivered through an extensive, but unevenly distributed, network of public and private hospitals.

There are specific problems, however, in relation to access to systematic, comprehensive, basic screening for breast, cervical and colon cancer, as well as long-term care and rehabilitation. The rate of screening coverage in the country is among the lowest in Europe (5).

Services for rehabilitation are in place, but their use is not adequately covered by the public health insurance system. At the same time, due to a very high incidence and prevalence of stroke, musculoskeletal and other disabling chronic conditions, as well as to population ageing, the lack of adequate rehabilitation is a serious threat to quality of life and, thus, the health-care system.

Responsibility for the management of health services does not lie with the regions, but with the municipalities at the local level.



Promoting health and well-being

Activities in the Varna Region have a special focus, namely, people with unequal life chances and limited access to necessary services. A wide network of more than 30 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provides home care to people in need of it, as well as services for children and adults with disabilities. The Varna Municipality runs more than 50 activities to support the NGOs. More than 5000 users are, or have been, involved in these activities, which include:

- patronage care (the provision of integrated health and social services at home);
- provision of warm food at home for people living below poverty line, alone, or in quarantine.
- deinstitutionalization of children (successfully completed);



Protecting against health emergencies

The Varna Region experienced a health emergency at the beginning of 2020. To deal with it, the regional authorities established a headquarters, involving representatives of the regional and municipal authorities and partners from all relevant institutions (all health institutions and social-care services, emergency care, the police, media, representatives of minority groups, etc.). The regional headquarters was responsible for the leadership, management and delegation of tasks and responsibilities.

The adequate organizational response provided prevented serious health and social problems.

Actions linked to the EPW flagship initiatives

(The Mental Health Coalition; Empowerment through digital health; The European Immunization Agenda 2030; Healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insights.)

Initiatives relative to the Mental Health Coalition

One of the important regional health initiatives is directed towards the preventive treatment and rehabilitation of people with drug addiction. This is provided in collaboration with the Department of

Psychiatry of the Varna Medical University. Mental-health problems in older people and people with physical disabilities are also a priority.

Initiatives relative to empowerment through digital health

In 2018, the regional authorities initiated a mission, entitled, "Varna – City of Knowledge". One of the

aims of the mission was to improve the health and medical services through digitalization (6,7).

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic and the strong resistance among the population to vaccines, the region initiated activities to educate the public about and promote vaccination.

Initiative relative to healthy behaviours: incorporating behavioural and cultural insight

A specific focus of the health activities in the Varna Region is collaboration with the Roma minority group. A very successful Roma-related mediation programme is currently underway, the aim of which is to assure that the health needs of culture-specific people are met.

Initiative specific to the Varna Region

A specific health priority of the Varna Region is children's health, with a special focus on early child development. Most of the activities and initiatives in this area are aimed at children, especially the youngest.

The three most important topics for collaboration within the Regions for Health Network

These are:

1. reduction of health inequalities with a focus on children and people with disabilities, as well as minority groups;
2. development of a sustainable healthy environment;
3. improvement of the health services through digitalization.

Main partners and collaborators

These are:

- Medical University Varna;
- Regional Hospital "St. Anna" and University Hospital "St Marina";
- Specialized hospital for obstetric and gynecological acute care;
- Medical centre for rehabilitation and sports medicine;
- Regional public health centre;
- a network of health professionals in nurseries and schools in the region.

- Karin Dom Foundation;
- Union for support of people with mental disabilities, Varna;
- Association “Save women”;
- Community centre for environment and sustainable development;
- Tourist club “Native Balkans”.

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¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all URLs accessed 20 May 2022.