

THE CONTRIBUTION OF EUROPEAN STANDARDS IN IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF NATIONAL HOTEL PRODUCT

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***Abstract:** European professional associations such as HOTREC (Hotels, Restaurants & Cafés in Europe) are engaged in establishing quality standards for hospitality facilities and in assessment of their applicability in European countries. Tourism is one of the leading industries in Europe and in the rest of the world. Its future development is conditioned by adequate market profiling and positioning of the national tourist product. However, the premise of the international competitiveness of the national tourist product is to establish the required quality standards of its material basis, namely hotel product. Categorization is the process of ranking hotels according to quality. Category is verified rank of quality and it guarantees the fulfillment of certain standards. In European countries we can observe significant differences in categorization criteria and standards of the hotel. This leads to a mismatch of national hotel products quality, which reflects negatively on the relationship between expected and perceived quality of the customer. Inconsistency the quality of basic, hospitality components of tourist product limits the possibility of manifestation his authentic, attractive components. Therefore, the creation of European hotel categorization standards by the HOTREC is an important step towards harmonization of the quality of national hotel products. It is also a step towards creating an integrated European hotel product, with globally applicable quality standards.*

***Keywords:** European standards, quality, hotel product, categorization, standardization*

Introduction

The level of tourism development of a country, or a region is measured, among other, by the quality of national hotel product. The quality of the hotel product is a complex market category. Generally accepted method of rating the quality of hotel product is the categorization. Categorization is the process of ranking hotels according to quality. Categorization is conducted on the basis of established

standards. Categorization guarantees customers quality at a specified price. However, there is still a big incompatibility in the standard categorization of hotels in different countries, even among EU members. European cooperation in tourism promotes Europe as a complex tourist macro-region that seeks the preservation of national authenticity of each country. Highlighting the national tourism specificities aims to the affirmation of tradition, ethnic heritage, culture, art, gastronomy, revitalization of rural areas. Today, ethno tourism is the growing trend in Europe. The development of ethno tourism is an opportunity for European countries to be repositioned on the international tourist market. The trends on the demand side also show great interest in selective forms of tourism. The need for learning about culture, customs, folklore, residents of other countries at the present time is very strong and is an important motive for tourist travel. Tourism has evolved meeting the needs of customers for tourist services, up to experiences. Today, tourism does not sale tourist services, according to marketing experts. Today, tourism sales experience. However, this experience may be compromised by inappropriate quality of hotel services. It is therefore necessary for European cooperation in tourism, more to focus on the harmonization of hotel offer quality in certain countries.

MAIN SPECIFICITIES OF HOTEL CATEGORIZATION

The practical importance of categorization is reflected in a market verification of obtained hotel category. This refers to the ability of hospitality companies to achieve their economic goals, and thus maintain the level of service corresponds to the appropriate category. The marketing approach to business in the heart of the action raises customers' wishes and requirements. Variations in the structure of hotel offer quality are achieved by categorization. The lowest category provides a guarantee that a minimum service quality is ensured. This implies that the corresponding price increased with increasing the category. Categorization, therefore, offers a choice to market segments of different purchasing power. Competition and market can be good regulators of necessary minimum quality and price of services, primarily in developed countries with a long tourist tradition. However, the involvement of a growing number of countries with different degrees of socio-economic development in the tourist receptive, on the one hand, and the participation of various population groups in domestic and international tourist movements, on the other hand, increases the need for hotel categorization.

The criteria of categorization can be classified into two main groups: Criteria of technical and technological nature and Criteria of organizational and personnel nature. The first set of criteria concerns the construction, furnishing and decorating hotel facility. The other set of criteria concerns the area of services. Among the criteria of technical and technological nature, as well as most important ones are (Kosar, 2010):

- Surface of the hotel lobby, bedrooms, bathrooms, F&B areas;
- Structure and capacity of bedrooms;
- Bedrooms equipment;
- Number of bedrooms with bathroom;
- The relation between accommodation providing capacity and restaurant services providing;
- Other equipment (lifts, air conditioning, in-room mini bars, in-room security safe, TV, other in-room facilities, parking lots and garages, horticultural areas around the facility, etc.).

Organizational and personnel criteria include:

- Range of services;
- Way of providing services;
- Working time providing various services;
- Professional competence and staff appearance.

Hotel categorization is a complex and comprehensive process. This is confirmed by numerous and heterogeneous criteria. For better understanding criteria and method of categorization, it should point to the different approaches in the world.

There are various jurisdictions for implementing hotel categorization. Categorization can be considered from three main aspects. The first is the market aspect. It occurs in developed market economies, with a high level of tourist and business culture. Stimulating business environment promotes healthy competition. In such circumstances, the network of organizations that gather demand, works well. Tourist organization, automobile alliances and similar associations dealing with customer information and protection, appear as creators and evaluators meeting the categorization standards. Facilities that are not up to the criteria of these organizations are not eligible to enter the list of recommended. This means that they are not adjusted to market requirements of potential customers, resulting in their disadvantaged position compared to competition.

The second is professional aspect. This aspect recognizes the authority of professional associations of the chambers of commerce and

of national hotel associations. These associations affirm, protect, and promote the hotel industry. This is reflected in regulating the criteria of categorization, as well as in supervision of their implementation.

The third is the legislative aspect. It implies the active role of government using its mechanisms to prescribe the criteria of categorization. Usually it comes to the adoption of appropriate legislation with the relevant regulations. When it comes to implementing the standard categorization government jurisdiction can be transferred to the regional and local level.

Approaches to categorization may differ depending on whether it comes to public or private sector. In the case of a clearly defined role of government in this process, the differences between private and public sectors usually are not shown. However, it frequently happens that the accommodation facilities of the public sector are categorized according to the regulations adopted by government, under the supervision of the appropriate committees established by the relevant ministry. On the other hand, facilities in the private sector tend to be categorized according to the rules adopted by professional associations. This means that in one country professional and legislative aspect of categorization can be combined. Depending on which aspect of the categorization works, varies the degree of obligation. The market aspect is not meant to obligation. Professional aspect can be characterized as partly liable, since the obligation of categorization generally refers only to facilities affiliated to branch associations. Application of legislative aspect mainly means the obligation of categorization.

For example, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Hungary have laws defining the hotel rating. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland the rating is defined by the respective hotel industry association using a five-star system ("History & development", hotelsterne.ch, accessed 14. November 2010).

WORLDWIDE INCONSISTENCY OF CATEGORIZATION STANDARDS

The more common hotel classification systems include 'star' rating, letter grading, from 'A' to 'F', diamond or simply a 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' footnote to accommodation such as hostels and motels. Systems using terms such as Deluxe/ Luxury, First Class/ Superior, Tourist Class/ Standard, and Budget Class/ Economy are more widely accepted as hotel types, rather than hotel standards.

According to Michelin Guide (Le Guide Rouge: Paris 2003.), a 1-Star hotel provides a limited range of amenities and services, but adheres to a high standard of facility-wide cleanliness. A 2-Star hotel provides good accommodation and better equipped bedrooms, each with a telephone and attached private bathroom. A 3-Star hotel has more spacious rooms and adds high-class decorations and furnishings and color TV. It also offers one or more bars or lounges. A 4-Star hotel is much more comfortable and larger, and provides excellent cuisine, room service, and other amenities. A 5-Star hotel offers most luxurious premises, widest range of guest services, as well as swimming pool and sport and exercise facilities. There is no standard method of assigning these ratings, and compliance with customers requirements is voluntary. A US hotel with a certain rating, for example, may look very different from a European or Asian hotel with the same rating, and would provide a different level of amenities, range of facilities, and quality of service. Whereas hotel chains assure uniform standards throughout, non-chain hotels (even within the same country) may not agree on the same standards. The Official Hotel Guide which is published in the US, and followed world wide has its own classification scheme that ranks hotels as follows (<http://www.keytoamerica.com/page.asp?id=hotelgrades>):

Deluxe: This will be an outstanding hotel. Guest and public rooms are elegant and luxurious. There are high standards of service and excellent facilities.

Moderate Deluxe: This will be a deluxe standard, although some accommodation and public areas may offer a less pronounced degree of luxury. In other instances the hotel may be a famous name with a well-established reputation.

Superior First Class: More often than not, this will be a superior modern hotel although it may be an older one that is exceptionally maintained. All offer very comfortable and tastefully furnished accommodation and public areas.

First Class: This will be a dependable and comfortable hotel with standardized rooms.

Moderate First Class: This is essentially a first class establishment with comfortable but sometimes simple accommodations. Public areas may be limited but generally provide all the essentials a guest requires.

Superior Tourist Class: This is primarily a mid-market economy hotel. Accommodations are well kept and functional. Usually public rooms and facilities are limited.

Tourist Class: This will be a property for the budget traveler providing basic room amenities, but few services. Those properties are

often in locations convenient to highways and national parks.

In Great Britain and in United States of America hotel classification criteria are created by automobile associations (AA and AAA). AA rating system, created in Great Britain focuses on a consumer's perspective on accommodation properties. The objective was to introduce a classification system easily understood by the consumer. This system is part of the description of properties seen in travel books.

Minimum requirements for AA are follows (www.theaa.com):

One Star Hotels

Hotels in this classification are likely to be small and independently owned, with a family atmosphere. Services may be provided by the owner and family on an informal basis. There may be a limited range of facilities and meals may be fairly simple. Lunch, for example, may not be served. Some bedrooms may not have en suite bath/shower rooms. Maintenance, cleanliness and comfort should, however, always be of an acceptable standard.

Two Star Hotels

In this classification hotels will typically be small to medium sized and offer more extensive facilities than at the one star level. Some business hotels come into the two star classification and guests can expect comfortable, well equipped, overnight accommodation, usually with an en-suite bath/shower room. Reception and other staff will aim for a more professional presentation than at the one star level, and offer a wider range of straightforward services, including food and drink.

Three Star Hotels

At this level, hotels are usually of a size to support higher staffing levels, and a significantly greater quality and range of facilities than at the lower star classifications. Reception and the other public rooms will be more spacious and the restaurant will normally also cater for non-residents. All bedrooms will have fully en suite bath and shower rooms and offer a good standard of comfort and equipment, such as a hair dryer, direct dial telephone, toiletries in the bathroom. Some room service can be expected, and some provision for business travelers.

Four Star Hotels

Expectations at this level include a degree of luxury as well as quality in the furnishings, decor and equipment, in every area of the hotel. Bedrooms will also usually offer more space than at the lower star levels, and well designed, coordinated furnishings and decor. The en-suite bathrooms will have both bath and fixed shower. There will be a

high enough ratio of staff to guests to provide porter services, 24-hour room service, laundry and dry-cleaning. The restaurant will demonstrate a serious approach to its cuisine.

Five Star Hotels

Amenities at the highest level include: spacious and luxurious accommodation throughout the hotel, matching the best international standards. Interior design should impress with its quality and attention to detail, comfort and elegance. Furnishings should be immaculate. Services should be formal, well supervised and flawless in attention to guests' needs, without being intrusive. The restaurant will demonstrate a high level of technical skill, producing dishes to the highest international standards. Staff will be knowledgeable, helpful, well versed in all aspects of customer care, combining efficiency with courtesy.

Some hotel companies have claimed a six or seven-star rating for their operation. As no organization or formal body awards or recognizes any rating over five-star deluxe, such claims are predominantly used for advertising purposes. AAA chose to use diamonds instead of stars. The AAA Diamond Rating Process is North America's premier hotel rating program. Approximately 32,000 hotels throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean are AAA approved and diamond rated. To apply for evaluation, properties must first meet 27 essential requirements based on member expectations — cleanliness, comfort, security, and safety. Properties selected for evaluation must demonstrate the strict quality guidelines required to be AAA approved. Properties that are AAA approved are assigned a rating of one to five AAA diamonds, ranging from simple to luxurious. The Diamond ratings indicate the extensiveness of services, amenities, and décor provided.

Requirements for AAA are follows (www.autoclubsouth.aaa.com):

One Diamond:

These establishments typically appeal to the budget-minded traveler. They provide essential, no-frills accommodations. They meet the basic requirements pertaining to comfort, cleanliness, and hospitality.

Two Diamonds:

These establishments appeal to the traveler seeking more than the basic accommodations. There are modest enhancements to the overall physical attributes, design elements, and amenities of the facility typically at a moderate price.

Three Diamonds:

These establishments appeal to the traveler with comprehensive needs. Properties are multifaceted with a distinguished style, including marked upgrades in the quality of physical attributes, amenities, and level of comfort provided.

Four Diamonds:

These establishments are upscale in all areas. Accommodations are progressively more refined and stylish. The physical attributes reflect an obvious enhanced level of quality throughout. The fundamental hallmarks at this level include an extensive array of amenities combined with a high degree of hospitality, service, and attention to detail.

Five Diamonds:

These establishments reflect the characteristics of the ultimate in luxury and sophistication. Accommodations are first class. The physical attributes are extraordinary in every manner. The fundamental hallmarks at this level are to meticulously serve and exceed all guest expectations while maintaining an impeccable standard of excellence. Many personalized services and amenities enhance an unmatched level of comfort.

There is so far no international classification which has been adopted. There have been attempts at unifying the classification system so that it becomes an internationally recognized and reliable standard, but they have all failed. It has been considered that hotel classification standards should result from a private and independent initiative. This may be the case of the World Hotel Rating (WHR) project, which notably aims to set international classification standards and rating criteria along the lines of a world star-rating system. It will also establish an information platform on the hotel industry which will be multilingual and multicultural.

EUROPEAN STANDARDS OF CATEGORIZATION

The ECC-Net (The European Consumer Centers' Network) is a European network consisting of 29 European Consumer Centers, in all EU Member States, including Iceland and Norway. The mission of the ECC-Net is to provide information on consumer rights under EU legislation and on opportunities offered by the single markets, in order to create consumer confidence in cross-border transactions. The aim of

the ECC-Net is to provide advice and support to individual consumers in defending their rights when dealing with business entities based in different Member States. The ECC Net collects information and analyses trends on selected topics at national and EU level, on the basis of its practical experience in dealing with consumers. The ECC-Net plays an important role in guaranteeing consumer rights, real choice and full market transparency (http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/index_en.htm). On the basis of registered cases, the ECC-Net has observed that the classification of hotel establishments is a problem for European consumers. Therefore, the project named “Classification of Hotel Establishments within the European Union (E.U.)” was initiated in 2009.

The Report on the Classification of Hotel Establishments within the EU is the result of the first survey conducted by the ECC-Net and focuses on the classification systems of hotel establishments. The development of new technologies makes it easier for hotel companies to offer their services to an unlimited number of potential customers within the EU. The main purpose of the Report is to provide a description of the 29 systems of categorization. The Report outlines each system, giving detailed information about all the possible categories within a given Member State. The main purpose of this report is also to analyze difficulties encountered by European consumers, to indicate the main problem areas and describe the main differences among the various classification systems.

Due to the personal character of the hotel services and direct contact between hoteliers and guests, there are great difficulties in implementing the standardization of working processes. Different countries, because of cultural traditions, national and otherwise, are using specific rating systems, which prevent the application of a single classification system worldwide. In most countries, the criteria of categorization are often based on the availability of certain elements of the equipment or services at the hotel. Usually, a qualitative assessment of the criteria is lacking. If there is, a qualitative assessment is usually generalized and leaves a lot of space for subjective evaluation. Criteria for categorization of hotels in different countries need to meet customers’ expectations. Therefore they are not static, but should be changed in accordance with customer requirements. In certain countries, depending on numerous social, economic, cultural and political factors, these criteria are changing more slowly than the others. Therefore, tangible differences in categorization systems in different countries are evident. This report emphasized the need for harmonization standards of

hotel categorization on the European level and initiated activity of HOTREC in this field.

The HOTREC (Hotels, Restaurants & Cafés in Europe) is a European association of 39 associations from 24 European countries. HOTREC represents the hotel, restaurant and café industry at European level. The sector counts 1,7 million businesses, with almost 92% of them being micro enterprises employing less than 10 people. The industry provides some 9.5 million jobs in the EU alone. In 2004, at a conference in Bergen a hotel classification system was drafted in order to harmonize national standards. In 2007 HOTREC launched the European Hospitality Quality scheme (EHQ) which has since accredited the existing national inspection bodies for hotel rating. At the HOTREC General Assembly, held in Barcelona in 2009, 21 principles had been adopted for the setting-up and/or review of national/regional hotel classification systems in Europe.

These principles are the following (www.hotrec.eu):

1. Classification systems must ensure that accurate information is provided to the guests;
2. Classification systems should display their criteria (summary and full list) online to the guests via www.hotelstars.org at least in English and their national language;
3. Information about the star category of each individual hotel as well as the classification system on which this rating is based should be made transparent for the consumer;
4. Compliance with legal requirements is a prerequisite to classification;
5. Classification systems must ensure cleanliness and proper maintenance of the establishments in all star categories;
6. Classification systems should encourage the use of quality management tools;
7. Tour operators and travel agents, as well as hotel booking and review sites are invited to use the official classification. If they use their own rating scheme alongside, they should specify so;
8. Classification systems should ensure that accurate and up-to-date data on the rating of establishments are provided to tour operators, travel agents, hotel booking and review sites;
9. The number of stars obtainable shall be one to five;
10. Stars must be granted/confirmed only after a control;

11. This control must take place regularly;
12. This control must take place on site;
13. Complaints by customers relating to classification should be dealt with in a systematic manner;
14. Explanation for classification decisions have to be made available to the hotel concerned;
15. Every classification system must allow for an appeal by the hotel concerned against the result of the classification;
16. Classification systems should have some range of flexibility in the application of their criteria;
17. Classification criteria should be regularly adjusted to market requirements. A systematic inventory process of the criteria should take place regularly;
18. Whenever research on consumer expectations in relation to classification is carried out in one country, it is desirable that the results are made available to all HOTREC member associations;
19. When classification systems are set up/reviewed, equipment and service criteria should be emphasized in order to facilitate European and international harmonization efforts;
20. When classification systems and criteria are set up /reviewed, cooperation with other countries is encouraged in order to facilitate European and international harmonization efforts;
21. Classification systems should always involve the hospitality industry. In the countries, where the classification system is regulated and/or operated by public authorities, it is essential that the public authorities work in close partnership with the private sector.

That in 2009 was a year of intensive European cooperation in the field of hotel standards, confirms the establishment of Hotel stars Union. Under the patronage of HOTREC the hotel associations of Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland have created the Hotel stars Union (<http://hotelstars.eu>). In the meantime, during 2011, the following countries joined the Hotel stars Union: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Luxembourg. In 2012 Malta

was joining the system as the first Mediterranean country. In 2013 Belgium, Denmark and Greece were following to enter the Hotelstars Union.

Their partnership provides a harmonized hotel classification with common criteria and procedures in the participating countries. The main criteria are in quality management, wellness and sleeping accommodation (<http://www.hotelstars.eu>). Besides some obligatory criteria, each Hotel stars level requires a minimal sum of points. Based on excerpt from the catalog of criteria, the main features of certain levels of hotel categorization can be seen in The Table no. 1.

Table no. 1- Hotel stars criteria

Hotel star		Excerpt of the catalogue of criteria
One star:	<i>Tourist</i>	100% of the rooms with shower/WC or bath tub/WC - Daily room cleaning - 100% of the rooms with color -TV together with remote control - Table and chair - Soap or body wash - Reception service - Facsimile at the reception - Publicly available telephone for guests - Extended breakfast - Beverage offer in the hotel - Deposit possibility
One star S	<i>Superior Tourist</i>	The Superior flag is provided when the additional service and accommodation provisions are not sufficient for the next Hotel star. The bathroom facilities are usually at the same level as for two stars hotels but built from cheaper materials. The cost for regular inspection by independent associations is waived as well.
Two stars	<i>Standard</i>	In addition to the single star (*) hotels: - Breakfast buffet - Reading light next to the bed - Bath essence or shower gel - * Bath towels - Linen shelves - Offer of sanitary products (e.g. toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving kit) - Credit Cards
Two stars S	<i>Superior Standard</i>	The Superior flag is provided when the additional service and accommodation provisions are not sufficient for the next Hotel star. The Standard-Superior does usually offer the same service level as three-star hotels but the interiors of the hotel are smaller and cheaper so that the three stars were not to be awarded by the inspection body. A two-star superior does not require mystery guesting.
Three stars	<i>Comfort</i>	In addition to the standard star (***) hotels: - Reception opened 14 hours, accessible by phone 24 hours from inside and outside, bilingual staff (e.g. German/English) - Three piece

		<p>suite at the reception, luggage service - Beverage offer in the room - Telephone in the room - Internet access in the room or in the public area - Heating facility in the bathroom, hair-dryer, cleansing tissue - Dressing mirror, place to put the luggage/suitcase - Sewing kit, shoe polish utensils, laundry and ironing service - Additional pillow and additional blanket on demand - Systematic complaint management system</p>
Three stars S	<i>Superior Comfort</i>	<p>The Superior flag is provided when the additional service and accommodation provisions are not sufficient for the next Hotel star. The accommodation facilities for a superior hotel need to be on a modern level and fully renovated which is checked regularly.</p>
Four stars	<i>First Class</i>	<p>In addition to the comfort star (***) hotels: - Reception opened 18 hours, accessible by phone 24 hours from inside and outside - Lobby with seats and beverage service - Breakfast buffet or breakfast menu card via room service – Mini bar or 24 hours beverages via room service - Upholstered chair/couch with side table - Bath robe and slippers on demand - Cosmetic products (e.g. shower cap, nail file, cotton swabs), vanity mirror, tray of a large scale in the bathroom) - Internet access and internet terminal - "À la carte"-restaurant</p>
Four stars S	<i>First Class Superior</i>	<p>The Superior flag is provided when the first class hotel has a proven high quality not only in the rooms. The superior hotels provide for additional facilities in the hotel like a sauna or a workout room. The quality is checked regularly by mystery guesing of an external inspection service.</p>
Five stars	<i>Luxury</i>	<p>In addition to the first class (****) hotels: - Reception opened 24 hours, multilingual staff - Doorman-service or valet parking - Concierge, page boy - Spacious reception hall with several seats and beverage service - Personalized greeting for each guest with fresh flowers or a present in the room – Mini bar and food and beverage offer via room service during 24 hours - Personal care products in flacons - Internet-PC in the room - Safe in the room - Ironing service (return within 1 h), shoe polish service - Turndown service in the evening - Mystery guesing</p>
Five stars S	<i>Superior Luxury</i>	<p>The Luxury star hotels need to attain high expectations of an international guest service. The Superior Luxury star is only awarded with a system of intensive guest care.</p>

Source: www.hotelstars.eu

European Hotel star system is very detailed and prescribed criteria are very high. There are even ten levels of ranking hotels. The level “Superior” indicates the zone between the two categories. Facilities

marked with “Superior” have additional contents over the prescribed criteria for their category, but these additional contents are not enough for a higher category.

Conclusion

The activities of European professional organizations in order to harmonize the quality of hotel offer in the EU countries have been intensified at the end of the first decade 21st century. HOTREC organization has established a unique system of categorization, introducing European hotel standards and the corresponding hotel ranking. This system should guarantee customers European quality of hotel services at the selected level. The system is set up on a voluntary basis. However, it is still a relatively small number of countries involved. The reason for this is the obligation of introducing additional standards and continuous maintenance of the established criteria. On these undertakings many countries are not ready yet. It is therefore necessary to further promote these standards, to motivate the country to introduce them, clearly highlighting the benefits to be gained thereby. For countries not yet members of the EU, these standards are a guideline for improving the existing national criteria of categorization. Approximation to EU standards, all the individual countries make a major step towards the harmonization and improvement of European hotel offer. Standards are set flexibly, which means that there is no danger of supply unification and choking of national identity. The national identity of the hotel product can and should be developed simultaneously with the European standards of categorization. It is reflected in the style of hotel construction, interior decoration, the national food specialties and beverages, cultural amenities in the hotel. The harmonization of hotel offer at European level will open a wider space for the placement the national tourism values. Inconsistency of hotel offer quality will no longer be a limiting factor of choice tourist destination that, by its resources, particularly by ethno-cultural heritage, attracts travelers from Europe.

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