

# Innovation in Hotel Enterprises During the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Ukraine Conflict. Poland: Case Study

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**Abstract:** Entrepreneurship is one of the most important components of the modern market economy. Important features of entrepreneurship include expansiveness, innovation and the ability for companies to adapt to changing environmental conditions. These elements are also noticeable in the case of hotel companies, which are among the oldest types of business entities operating in the world. Innovation in hospitality contributes to the improvement of competitive market positioning, as well as effects on the interest of customers. The aim of the publication is to discuss current examples of innovative activities of hotel companies. The article takes into account the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on innovations within these enterprises. For the purpose of achieving the objectives of the publication, the Polish hotel market was taken into account. The subject of the publication concerns an important issue of innovation in the hotel industry. The hotel sector has been particularly affected by unexpected changes in the economic environment. However, despite the difficult situation and uncertain future, the Polish hospitality still provides the examples of innovative activities worth discussing. The motives for choosing the subject of the publication are also the author's personal scientific interests, as well as a limited number of the references on this subject, especially from the most recent period. The paper describes and discusses the concept of innovation, especially in the hotel sector. The examples of the innovative activities in the Polish and foreign hotel companies are described. The most important achievements and successes in this field are presented. The article poses the following research thesis: The Covid-19 pandemic and the war crisis have not significantly affected innovation in the hotel companies in Poland. The article was created using book materials, journals, and netographic information. The research method used in the publication is the analysis of the existing data and literary criticism. The results of the research positively verify the thesis.

**Keywords:** Global pandemic, hospitality, creativity, ingenuity, war in Ukraine.

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## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is an important pillar of the market economy. Its important features, such as innovation, contribute to the creation and implementation of modern solutions in organisations. As in other branches of the economy, innovation is also a characteristic of hotel companies. Many of them are distinguished by rich traditions and achievements in the field of inventiveness.

The aim of the publication is to discuss current examples of innovative activities of these hotel companies. The article ponders over the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the innovative activities these enterprises. For the purpose of achieving the objectives of the publication, the Polish hotel market was taken into account.

The subject of the publication focused on the concept of innovation in these Polish hotel companies. The hotel sector in Poland has been strongly influenced by the global pandemic since its outbreak in 2020, and later by the war in Ukraine. However, it is worth analysing the latest achievements of the national hospitality in the field of innovation despite the uncertain situation. The paper describes and discusses the concept of innovation, especially the progress in the hotel sector. The examples of innovation in the Polish and foreign hotel companies are described. The most important achievements and successes in this field are presented.

The article poses the following research thesis: The epidemic and the war have not significantly affected innovation in the hotel industry in Poland. The article was created using book materials, journals, and netographic information. The research method used in the publication is the analysis of the existing data and literary criticism. The results of the research positively verify the thesis.

## 2. The concept of innovation and innovativeness in hotel industry

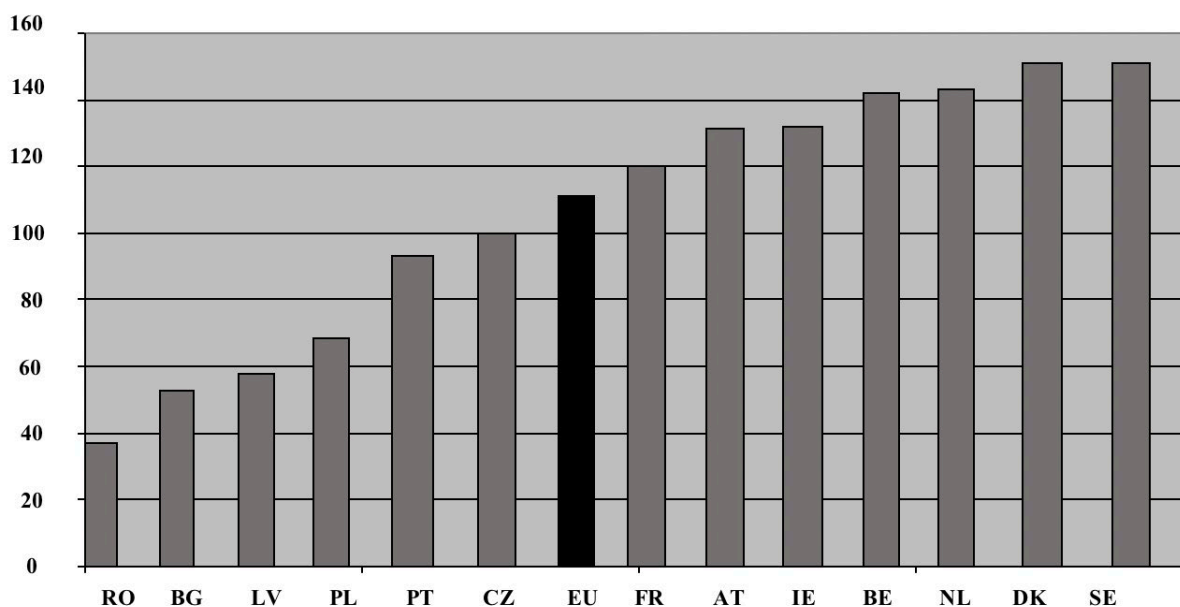
Innovation is an important element determining the level of development of each country's economy. Innovations and their implementation provide progress and also provide an opportunity for entrepreneurs from various industries to realise bold and ambitious dreams and ideas. Innovations allow for competition in the market, achieving positive financial results and building growth of the company's value in the long term. The terms innovation and innovativeness are understood differently in the literature. When defining innovation, both narrow and broad approaches are presented (Weresa 2022). Nevertheless, the latter, inspired by J.

Schumpeter, is dominant. The narrow approach refers to the changes based on the new or previously not used knowledge and the commercialisation of a product or process. The broad approach emphasises, inter alia, the use of knowledge to create new knowledge, the introduction of new elements, new means of satisfying human needs, or beneficial changes resulting from the environmental needs and observations (Schumpeter 1960).

The definition of innovation also clearly highlights two trends. The first, in which the emphasis is placed on the process (innovation as a process, sequence of activities); and the second, in which the result is highlighted, namely new solutions. Many scientists perceive innovation as the implementation of certain ideas, actions, systems, strategies, programs, devices, processes, products or services that are new to the organisation (Sołtysik 2021). Innovation is defined as the process of the creative use of knowledge, the transformation of the knowledge possessed by an organisation or acquired from external sources - into new products, services or processes (Cavagnoli 2011).

Innovation has long been part of the European Union policy. In 1986 the Single European Act was adopted, which identified the problem of competitiveness of European goods as one of the priorities of the Community's policy. The subsequent treaties expanded the list of domains to be covered by these pro-innovation policies. The latest treaty, the so-called Lisbon Treaty, solidified the problem of innovation as one of the most important directions of the EU policy (Sozanski 2010).

The level of innovativeness in the economies of European countries is subject to regular analyses. The Innovation Indices of the selected European Union countries in 2022 are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Innovation index of selected EU countries**

Source: Self-study based on <https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/>.

The analysis of the data in Figure 1 indicates that Sweden and Denmark are among the leading innovators in the European Union. Poland's position is below the EU average in this respect. According to many experts, the level of innovativeness of a given economy has a direct impact on the effectiveness of work and the level of income achieved.

The introduction of innovation in enterprises can be an important means to rationalise and save money, as well as to activate the market forces that promote the development of the economy and improve the quality of life, society or the region. In addition, it creates a completely new picture of the market orientation, in which innovation, not prices and costs, will become the main element of competition and strengthening the economic condition of the company. For the purposes of research and comparative analyses, the classification of innovations proposed by the OECD specialists is recommended, included in the so-called Oslo Manual. The Oslo Manual distinguishes the following innovations (<https://www.oecd.org/>):

- Product,
- Procedural,

- Organisational,
- Marketing.

Product innovations are the launch of a new or improved material good (product) or service. In addition, they also include the improvement of some product parameters including the terms of their functionality. The examples include adding additional elements to a regular sales offer (e.g., sports equipment rental) or combining services and products that together will create an inviting tourism package.

Process innovations are mostly related to the modern ICT technologies. They are implemented in order to increase the productivity of the company and to facilitate reaching customers. The examples of this type of innovation include modern booking systems or hotel check-in systems or scanners that allow passengers to be identified based on their irises.

Organisational innovations generally refer to the principles of business operation and internal and external relations. In the service sphere, this type refers to the organisation of the workplace and the introduction of management and control techniques.

Marketing innovations include the introduction of a new marketing method combined with significant changes in the product design, positioning, promotion, pricing and distribution. An example is the implementation of loyalty programs. Popular communication channels in this case are the social media (e.g., Facebook) or the Internet (Walenciuk, Dłużewska 2018). In addition, the literature also includes social innovations, in addition to those mentioned above. These involve changes in the incentive techniques for employees. An example is paying on a piecework basis instead of per hour worked (Taylor 1997).

As in other branches of the economy, innovation has been operating in the hotel industry (Dominik 2013) or catering industry (Sarker 2012) for years. New solutions are an element of marketing and strategic management of hotel companies. The implementation of innovations also builds the brand and recognition of a particular hotel company among other competing facilities in the market (Sztorc 2015). The offers of the most modern hotels are increasingly delighting not only with the fervent fans of technology, but above all the tourists and professionals travelling on business. Innovation in the hotel industry can take various forms (Jędrasiak 2013). Most often, it is commonly associated with the process of implementing new smart solutions, including the introduction of robots replacing traditional operations, artificial intelligence, as well as modern applications controlling residence functions. Nowadays, fashionable boutique and historic hotels often apply technology more typical of spaceships. It is also relatively common to notice the cooperation between facilities in spreading innovation (Najda-Janoszka 2012). The examples of the most innovative hotels in the world are presented in table 1. Innovation is also identified with the process of implementing new solutions and upgrades in the architecture of the construction, of the facilities themselves and the arrangement of the residence spaces (Puciato 2013). Another area of innovation implementation is the production of goods and the provision of accommodation and catering services. Innovation also increasingly involves the process of introducing modern hotel facilities

**Table 1: Examples of the most innovative hotels in the world in 2023**

Hotel name	Location	Innovation characteristics
Fly Zoo Hotel	Hangzhou, China	Services based on the use of artificial intelligence
Hen na Ha Hotel	Tokyo, Japan	The use of artificial intelligence and robots in guest service
The Yotel	New York, USA	Cabins to replace rooms, robots to serve guests
Aloft Cupertino	California, USA	Boutique hotel stylistically referring to Apple, robots to serve guests
The Ling	Las Vegas, USA	The object is fully controlled by WeChat application
Eccleston Square Pimlico	London, UK	Boutique facility using modern technology and iPod
The Code Hotel	Rome, Italy	Boutique facility with modern solutions and chromotherapy
City Hub	Amsterdam, The Netherlands	Capsule hotel with virtual tourist guide
Smart Hotel	Rome, Italy	Historic boutique hotel using smart technology

Source: Own elaboration based on: <https://apagroup.pl/>.

The data in Table 1 indicate a geographical diversity in hotel innovation and the frequent use of modern applications in the control of guest residence functions. The global pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have not limited the development of innovation in global hospitality.

### 3. Evolution and current situation of the hotel industry in Poland

The beginnings of hotel development in Poland were in the early Middle Ages. The first lodging facility to survive to modern times was the Hospice of the Joanite order, founded in 1187 in Poznań. In the following years, inns and taverns were created throughout the country. In 1693, the first hotel complex called Marywil (from the French language "Marie-Ville") was created, which existed until 1825. The mid-19th century brought further development of the Polish hospitality industry. More and more hotels were built. In Poznań, the Bazar Hotel was opened, in Warsaw, the Vienna Hotel (Hotel Wiedeński) and the European Hotel (Hotel Europejski), in Kraków, the French Hotel (Hotel Francuski) and many other facilities of this type (Błądek, Tulibacki 2003) were built. From the very beginning, the Polish hospitality industry has tried to draw examples from the most modern European solutions.

In Poland, the first buildings that were built from the beginning where purposed for use as hotels and today are called historic hotels and these began to appear at the turn of the 20th century. They were mainly established in Poland's largest cities (Liszewski 2008). Among the oldest historical hotels in Poland, which operate to this day, is considered the Pod Różą Hotel in Kraków, which was established in the early 19th century in a historic tenement house from the 14th century. One of the oldest city hotels in Poland is the Bazar Hotel in Poznań dating from 1841, which is currently undergoing a renovation process and does not provide hotel services (Bombicki 1995). In the 19th century, old castles were also adapted for the hotel business. One of the earliest was Chojnik Castle near Jelenia Góra (Chorowska, Dudziak, Jaworski, Kwaśniewski, 2009). However, most historical hotels began to appear at the beginning of the 20th century. These were mainly city hotels, located in large cities (Table 2).

**Table 2: Examples of the first hotels in Poland, the highest categories operating in 2023**

Hotel name	Categorisation	Number of rooms	Year of creation	Location
Pod Różą Hotel	*****	56	Ca. 1800	Kraków
Europejski Hotel	*****	106	1877	Warsaw
Grand Hotel	*****	64	1887	Kraków
Monopol Hotel	*****	121	1892	Wrocław
Pod Ortem Hotel	****	75	1896	Bydgoszcz
Bristol Hotel	*****	205	1901	Warsaw
Monopol Hotel	*****	108	1903	Katowice
Francuski Hotel	****	42	1912	Kraków
Polonia Palace Hotel	****	206	1913	Warsaw

Source: Own elaboration.

The real flourishing of the Polish hotel industry in quantitative and qualitative terms, and a significant advance in innovation, has occurred since the 1990s. The new political conditions attracted foreign investors and many domestic entrepreneurs. At the same time, the market demand for high-quality hotel services from domestic and foreign guests increased. These factors positively influenced the situation of the Polish hospitality industry. In 1990, there were 499 hotels and 57 396 hotel beds in Poland. Only in the period from 1990 to 2010, more than 1.2 thousand hotels and almost 100 thousand hotel beds (<https://stat.gov.pl/>) appeared in Poland.

Among the private Polish investors, the Likus family (the Likus Hotele&Restauracje) invested the most in the hotel market, with more than PLN 360 million, Tadeusz Gołębiowski (the Gołębiowski Hotels) with about PLN 350 million, Małgorzata Chechlińska (Trip Group) with about PLN 250 million and Andrzej Dowgiałło (Anders Group) with about PLN 150 million. Among hotel chains, investors contributed the most (over PLN 900 million) to the facilities operating under the Starwood chain brands (Sheraton, Westin, Le Meridien). The Orbis/Accor chain spent more than PLN 700 million on investments, while Norway's Qubus spent approximately PLN 300 million. These entities were also the first innovators in the domestic hotel industry (Levansky 2023).

In Poland, in 2021, there were 2521 facilities classified as hotels with almost 297 thousand hotel beds. This means that compared to 2020, there was a slight increase in the number of facilities of 0.9%, while in hotel beds of 7.4%. The number of hotels, hotel rooms and hotel investments in Poland in the years 2011-2021 is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Number of hotels, hotel rooms and hotel investments in Poland in the 2011-2021**

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Number of hotels	1877	2014	2107	2250	2316	2465	2540	2592	2635	2498	2521
Numer of hotels rooms increased in thousands	93 141	100 100	105 783	113 965	117 448	126 165	130 081	136 080	141 383	135 995	144 549
Value of investment hotel (in mln PLN)	2489	3820	2368	3110	1860	2769	1885	1993	2635	1216	3383

Source: Own elaboration based on <https://issuu.com/>.

The data in Table 2 show a noticeable slump in trends in the Polish hotel market in 2020, and a return to a positive trend in 2021. There have been increasingly active hotel chains in Poland since the 1970s, especially from France and the USA. A summary of the results of the largest hotel chains operating in Poland in 2019-2022 is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: The largest hotel chains in Poland in the 2019-2022s.**

Name	Location	Established in	Number of hotels/ rooms in 2019	Number of hotels/ rooms in 2020	Number of hotels/ rooms in 2021	Number of hotels/ rooms in 2022
Accor	Paris, France	1967	75/12773	80/13305	82/13489	84/13980
PHH	Warsaw, Poland	2018	-	25/2638	26/2856	54/5851
Hilton Worldwide Holdings	McLean, Virginia, USA	1919	20/3452	22/3739	23/3906	26/4276
Marriott International	Bethesda, Maryland, USA	1927	15/3335	17/3645	17/3645	20/4200
Radisson	Minneapolis, USA, Brussels, Belgium	1960	11/2504	13/3018	15/3551	15/3551

Source: Own elaboration based on: <https://www.e-hotelarz.pl/>.

The analysis of the data in Table 4 leads to the conclusion that in Poland, the French conglomerate Accor plays the biggest role in the chain hotel industry. Currently, chain hotels in Poland account for 25% of the total supply of rooms in Poland. Despite the global pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine, the development of the domestic hotel industry has not stopped. Newly built facilities often astonish with their size, architecture or original solutions. A list of the most spectacular hotel facilities in Poland opened in 2021 and 2022 is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: The largest and most spectacular hotel facilities in Poland, opened in 2021 and 2022**

Name	Location	Categorization	Number of rooms
Cristal Resort	Wisła	*****	491
Olimp IV	Kołobrzeg	****	350
NYX Hotel	Warsaw	****	331
AC by Marriott	Kraków	****	300
Mercure	Katowice	****	268
Uphagen Manor House	Gdańsk	****	256
Arche Hotel Poloneza II	Warsaw	***	250
Focus Premium	Warsaw	****	234
Radisson	Kołobrzeg	****	209
Wyndham	Wrocław	*****	205
Mercure	Kraków	****	195

Source: own eleboartion based on: <https://www.e-hotelarz.pl/>.

#### 4. Innovation in Polish hospitality in the Covid – 19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine

With the popularization of the hotel industry in Poland, there have been trends indicating the increasing level of innovation of many facilities. Innovation, on the one hand, is supposed to be a way to stand out in the tourism market; and on the other hand, a magnet for customers longing for novelty. The Polish hospitality industry is trying to respond with its creative ideas to the global trends in this area. In Polish hotels, as in the rest of the

world, it is possible to notice the examples of product innovation, process innovation, organisational innovation, marketing innovation, as well as social innovation. As in other countries, the highest category hotels and network hotels, which can count on substantive support from their corporate headquarters, lead in the implementation of innovation (Tesone 2009). The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine has not stopped these innovative trends observed before 2019.

One of the examples of innovations used in the Polish hotels is the increasing use of robots in guest service. BellaBot is an innovative waiter robot used since the end of 2021, serving in the hotel restaurants (Figure 2). The interactive machine delivers products, receives dishes and reacts emotionally to the interest of the guests. Its innovative character also evoked considerable interest from the customers themselves, especially children, and can also be considered from a marketing approach. Currently, the robot is used in catering departments of approximately 10 domestic hotels, among others the Marriott Hotel, the O3 Hotel (Warsaw), the Metropolo Hotel (Kraków), the Cristal Hotel (Białystok), the Miodowy Hotel (Dzierżonów), the Green Mountain Hotel (Karpacz), the Bacówka Hotel (Radawa), the Fox Hotel (Wolborz). Apart from hotels, robots are used in numerous independent restaurants, retail outlets and entertainment zones (<https://puduroboty.pl/>).



**Figure 2: BellaBot Robot**

Source: [https://d-art.ppstatic.pl/kadry/k/r/1/67/61/62a88e58c7608\\_o\\_large.jpg](https://d-art.ppstatic.pl/kadry/k/r/1/67/61/62a88e58c7608_o_large.jpg).

Another example of innovation in the Polish hotel industry is the bolder architecture of newly built facilities. Some hotels impress with the grandeur of their spaces and the number of hotel rooms, while others prefer intimacy and unusual arrangements. New hotels often exploit former industrial spaces of closed industrial buildings. All of these activities increase the interest of hotel guests.

In the middle of 2020, a large facility was opened, which is part of the Sugar Factory Żnin Conference and Leisure Centre (the Cukrownia Żnin). The 310-room loft-style hotel was built in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century sugar factory operating until the 1990s. The hotel is part of a large 35-hectare complex with an area of 40 thousand square meters. The facility's innovation consists of direct access to a huge conference space (2300 m<sup>2</sup>), a cinema room for 100 people, a spa centre with aquapark, a museum of sugar and optimism, a rehabilitation centre with a medical clinic and a commercial park. In addition, the guests have at their disposal a bowling club, own brewery, restaurants, pitches, auditorium, and also the beach on the lake with a beach bar and a kitesurfing school. Also innovative is the integration of holiday homes and a newly built residential development into the complex (<https://arche.pl/>).

At the end of 2021, Uphagen Manor House in Gdańsk was opened. The facility was built in the buildings of the former municipal hospital, which is rather an uncommon phenomenon in Poland. The industrial decor exposes relics of a bygone era. Original bricks, cradle vaults and high, raw concrete ceilings supported by original structural beams are on display. The interiors are illuminated by colourful neon signs creating a unique atmosphere. In addition to the main building housing the hotel, the complex includes an annex and a factory with additional rooms. In the building of the former boiler room there are two conference rooms with an area of 234 m<sup>2</sup>, and in the building of the tenement there is a foundation, whose beneficiaries run their own cafe. Additionally, the hotel offers its customers the opportunity to purchase rooms under the condo system (<https://arche.pl/>).

Another outstanding property is the LALALA Arthotel in Sopot. This is a concept reaching beyond a typical hotel. Each of the rooms is individually designed. Seven rooms, with strange numbers, which are an interesting composition of paintings in contrasting colours, and for their decor use furs, crystals, wood, and metal in various combinations. The door of one room is knocked on by a knocker, in another one, there are curtains with giraffes prancing about, and in room number 100, there is a surreal paradise of surprises. The hotel operates a self-service reception desk (<https://www.lalala.lu/>).

The most spectacular hotel investments in Poland are undoubtedly the first, located fully on the water the Feel Harmony Hotel (Figure 3). This boutique facility with 72 rooms in a modular structure is under construction and is to be opened in the summer of 2023 in Gdańsk at the Motława River near Ołowianka Island, in the vicinity of the Baltic Philharmonic and the AmberSky observation wheel. The hotel, which belongs to the category of floating hotels, will consist of three connected and permanently moored houseboats at a specially prepared wharf. It will offer, inter alia, a sauna and a restaurant with a terrace, where it will be possible to pull up and moor a kayak or motorboat, as formally the Feel Harmony will be a marina with a hotel function. The hotel is supposed to be a connection between nature and the bustling city (<https://www.e-hotelarz.pl/>).



**Figure 3: The Feel Harmony Hotel in Gdańsk**

Source: <https://bi.im-g.pl/im/da/45/1a/z27547610AMP,W-Gdansk-powstanie-pierwszy-w-Polsce-hotel-na-wod.jpg>.

In mid-2023, the largest and one of the most modern hotels in Poland, the Gołębiowski Pobierowo Hotel, will also be opened after several years of construction. The hotel is built on the premises of a former military unit. The facility will ultimately offer 1200 rooms and 2200 beds, 16 conference rooms for 4 thousand people, a sports centre with halls and pitches and two cinemas (<https://nto.pl/hotel-golebiowski-w-pobierowie-wyglada-naprawie-gotowy-mowia-o-nim-dubaj-nad-baltykiem-ma-byc-otwarty-w-pierwszym-kwartale-roku/ar/c3-17176581>).

Another element of innovation in domestic hotels can be modern solutions in the field of residence organisation and guest service. The pioneers and leaders of innovation in this area include the Blow Up Hall 50/50 Hotel in Poznań. Its name was inspired by the film *Blow-up* by an Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni. The title is also the name of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's electronic installation project, around which the hotel was arranged. The name of the hotel and the numbers 50/50 means the proportion of pleasure to art. The hotel does not have a reception. Instead of a key, the guests receive an iPhone, which allows them to find and open the door to a particular room using interactive screens. The iPhones are also equipped with the information enabling free use of 24-hour concierge services – booking a table, ordering a taxi and obtaining information about cultural events in Poznań and its surroundings. Due to the ownership changes in 2023, further modern modifications of the facility (<https://www.capitalapart.pl/hotel-blow-hall-5050-noclegi-w-poznaniu-dla-koneser%C3%B3w>) are expected.

In February 2023, the Alto Hotel in Żory joined the group of the most modern hotels in Poland. There is no traditional reception in the hotel. Neither are there keys to the rooms. The guests receive a room code via SMS after they book and pay for their stay at a special touch-screen desk with a check-in system located on the first

floor. Everything was designed in an intuitive and simple way. This innovative solution enables checking in quickly and easily at the hotel. Upon check-in, the system additionally prints the code, which is also the key to the room, to the hotel entrances at night and to the lift. The advantage of this "Self Check-in" system is also that the guests do not need to check out. The system itself will automatically lock the code (<https://www.zory24.pl/>) when the hotel day ends.

## 5. Conclusions

The global pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have not significantly affected the development of innovation within the Polish hospitality industry. Despite temporary perturbations, the closedown of some facilities, ownership changes and the overall increase in operating costs, innovation in the domestic hotel industry has not disappeared. In Poland, there are still impressive and bold hotels being built that stand out with their modernity in the market. In the country since the late 1990s, there has been an expansion of boutique hospitality, which amazes with its originality of design solutions. This includes modernist buildings with their futuristic solutions. In many cases, innovation in hotels cannot only increase the interest of guests, but also reduce the cost of operations. Robotisation, the replacement of reception desks with the iPhones for guest services can improve a facility's economic situation and increase its competitiveness in the market. Indeed, receptionists and waiters are among the most frequently rotating jobs in the hotel industry. Another important conclusion is the fact of the wide scope of innovations introduced, which can be observed in product, organisational, but also marketing or process aspects.

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