

Rethinking museum value in times of crisis: a European perspective¹

The aim of this paper is to discuss how European museums redefine their public value in response to societal challenges facing Europe today; how the public value of museums, as part of cultural heritage, is addressed in recent policy initiatives and developments in the EU; what is the role of NEMO, the Network of European Museum Organisations as a link between the European museum community and the EU and as an advocacy network striving to influence European policies.

I. Europe in crisis – not just about money. A role for museums?

Europe is facing a most severe economic crisis, which formally started 6 years ago and has been having a huge impact on the financial sustainability of cultural institutions, including museums, ever since. However, it has become abundantly clear that the so called crisis in Europe is not merely economic, it is not just about money, and neither is it short term. What Europe is undergoing now is profound transition that is also felt as a crisis of political and social values and ultimately, an identity crisis that has long-term implications for the life of European citizens and the shaping of public policies. Political, social and religious tensions, deepening inequalities, growing unemployment, especially among young people, rising nationalism, a growing distrust in political institutions and the European unification project itself have created a climate of instability and uncertainty about the future.



¹ This paper was originally presented at the 8th Ibero-american Meeting of Museums “Future paths for museums: trends and challenges in diversity”, session on challenges for public policies (Lisbon, 13-15 October 2014).

In addition to all this, Europe is called on today to deal with global, worldwide challenges which are relevant to the current situation and future development of its cultural sector. These include: the growth of population combined with a parallel increase of the average life expectancy, in other words, the growth of an ageing population, the concentration of the majority of the world population in urban centers, migration and increased mobility, also reflected in the growth of international (cultural) tourism, the digital shift, and finally, a growing concern on sustainability in its wider context, environmental, financial, social and cultural. These are all elements of a rapidly shifting reality, conditions of a transitional period whose outcomes are yet to be understood.

Where do museums stand in this change? How do they respond to change? How is their response reflected in policy making?

If we start from the assumption that museums not just mirror change going on in society but can also help shape change as active social agents, we can understand why museums are now faced with a most pressing need to critically review their situation, rethink their sense of purpose, reposition themselves in society and highlight their value for it. Essentially, this means that they not only have to adapt to change or become more resilient to endure the ongoing interrelated crises, but also that they have to explore their full potential to make a change for society, to help it recover from its depression, to contribute to the collective prosperity and the well-being of citizens and, ultimately, to a more sustainable future for Europe.

Before turning to examine how this need has been addressed by the museum sector and European policy makers, let's have a quick look at the situation of museums in Europe and the problems they have been facing ever since the so-called crisis started:

II. European museums in times of crisis or coping with growing public demand and constantly dwindling resources

Since World War II Europe has witnessed a proliferation, expansion and diversification of its museum sector. According to ICOM, there are 38.000 museums in Europe in a total of 55.000 museums in the world. For many decades, European museums have lived in conditions of continuous growth, which was interrupted in most European countries due to changes brought about by the "crisis".

In the last 5-6 years, the great majority of governments in Europe introduced severe cuts in their budgets for culture and heritage, which, matched with the decrease of revenues from the private sector (private sponsorship, corporate financing), have had a devastating effect on museums, not least major ones. It is perhaps noteworthy to mention two things: first, that the most profound impact of the cuts, paradoxically, has been felt in countries that have been the most generous to the arts, like the UK, and the Netherlands, and secondly, that in some cases, the cuts have been less a result of the financial crisis and more one of political or ideological preferences.

This was the case in the Netherlands where the cuts and the financial reorganisation of the sector implemented in 2011 came as a result of a fierce anti-cultural rhetoric from the conservative coalition government. From 2012 to 2013, federal financing for the arts dropped by 22%, while

local, regional and provincial governments account for an additional decline in subsidies. The political climate has changed since then but the cuts already put in place will be in effect until at least 2017.

In the UK, after more than a decade referred to as “the golden age for the arts” during which the public financial support for museums almost doubled, more than half of museums saw their budget cut in 2012, with nearly a quarter closing off all or part of their sites to the public and a considerable number among them forced to reduce staff and services. Local authority museums were the ones suffering most, while it is foreseen that by 2020 a quarter of them will close or merge with another organisation.

That said, neither the biggest cities nor the most important museums in Europe have been spared. Grand, emblematic museums in European capitals, such as the Louvre in Paris or the Prado and the Reina Sofia in Madrid have seen their state subsidies decrease year after year (up to 30%), forcing them to cancel major exhibitions or resort to crowdfunding campaigns to purchase important artworks and enrich their collections and counterbalance shrinking acquisition funds. Both France and Spain have experienced the steepest budget cuts for culture in many years of their recent history.



Bosnian National Museum closed.

<http://scrapetv.com/News/newsbrief/international/images-1/bosnian-national-museum-closed.jpg>

In Italy and Greece, austerity measures to combat public debt and meet targets for aid from the EU in the last several years, have meant there is little money left over for anything but the bare necessities. In Italy, a full third was slashed from the culture budget in the period from 2009-2012, while according to a report for the Ministry of Culture, the average cultural organization reduced its budget or volume of activity by almost 50%. In the same period, the Greek Ministry of Culture budget dropped by 30%. This was felt across the public and private sector, with museums reducing their opening hours or temporarily closing parts of their collections. Measures with an

indirect impact on public museum personnel in both countries included the reduction or freezing of salaries of civil servants.

Coming to the end of this sketchy report on the state of the sector in times of stringent financial measures, two things are important to keep in mind: first, that wherever public budget cuts were imposed, the culture budget has been the first to cut. And this is largely due to prevailing perceptions of culture as a “nice-to-have” add-on, a luxury, among policy makers. In the words of Mark Taylor, the former director of the UK Museums Association: “Museums are easy targets...they are quite often put down as elitism”. Secondly, an obvious conclusion: museums across Europe are facing the paradox of an increasing public demand and unprecedented cuts in resources. In other terms, they are asked to uphold professional standards and deliver more while their value is questioned, their existence is under threat and they are affected by complex societal challenges mentioned before.



© Museum 2020, Museums Association UK

How do they move forward then? How do they envision their future and the future of the society they serve?

III. Future visions of a more open, cooperative and socially responsible museum sector

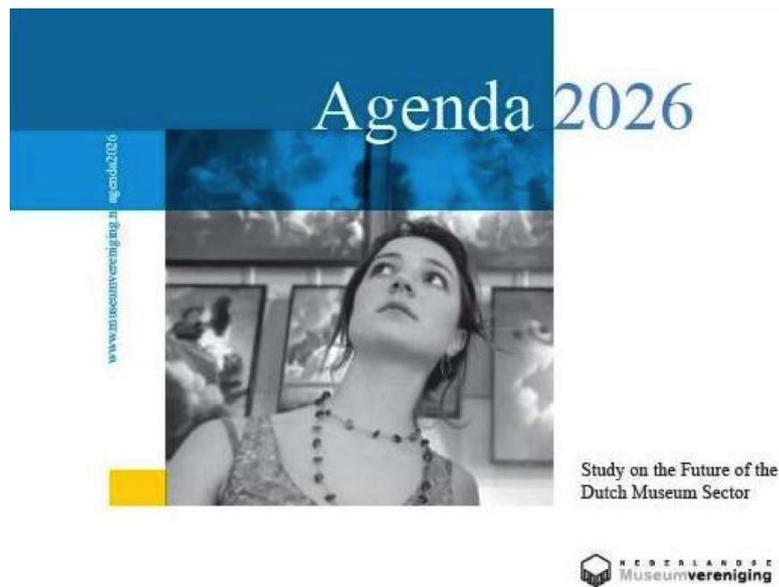
It comes as no surprise that “times of crisis” have prompted much reflection on how the sector will look like in the near future, how it should prepare to endure and respond to change.



LEM/The Learning Museum project, a recent EU-funded project which brought together more than 20 partners from 17 European countries, including individual museums, museum associations, museum umbrella organisations, Ministries and researchers, was launched in 2011 to serve as a research and information sharing network on this very issue: how museums as learning organisations themselves, as learners in constant interaction with their surroundings can better address change. During its three-year operation, the network conducted Europe-wide surveys, organised conferences and study visits, collected best practice examples and produced reports on various issues of current concern, such as the ageing population, intercultural dialogue and adult learning in museums. The main findings of one

of its final reports exploring “Key trends in 21st museums in Europe” can be summed up in a number of qualities critical to the resilience and future health of the museum sector: a combination of virtual and physical; sustainability; participatory and inclusive approach; adaptability; creativity.

Turning now to see how the issue of forecasting and preparing for the future was dealt with at country level by the museum sector itself but also the Culture Ministry, we will focus on a good practice example coming from the Netherlands.



© Cover of the Agenda 2026, Netherlands Museums Association

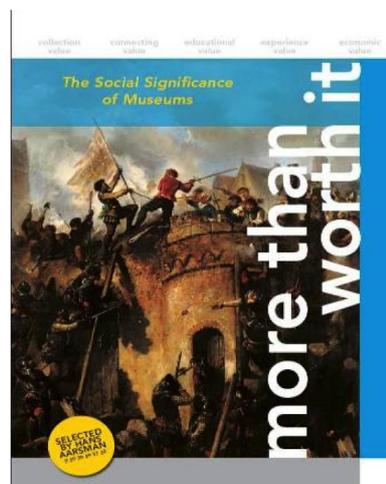
Since the 1970s, and particularly in the '80s and '90s, artists and cultural organizations across the Netherlands were supported almost exclusively by the state. There was almost no culture of private sponsorship and corporate financing for the arts was limited.

As the director of the Netherlands Museum Association, Siebe Weide, notes, “since the mid-nineties the museums had been experiencing a golden decade; they were the darlings of the government, be it national or local”. Their value was not questioned, neither their subsidies. The change of the political landscape together with the crisis meant that culture was suddenly regarded by policy makers, and even the public, as “an elitist left wing hobby”. The initial reaction of the museum, and largely, the cultural world, was one of anger, frustration and denial, but it gradually shifted towards a more pragmatic and proactive approach.

In 2010, the Netherlands Museums Association initiated a reflection exercise, a study on the future of the Dutch museum sector. Its outcomes were presented in the Agenda 2026 report. This study singled out six major trends which were predicted to be most relevant to the Dutch museum sector, and namely, population ageing, growth of international cultural tourism, cuts in subsidies, development of metropolitan areas with the parallel shrinking of rural ones, the digitized society and greater European influence. The potential effects of these six forecasted trends were then assessed with regard to small, medium-sized and large museums. Not

surprisingly, the report concludes that small museums will be the least capable to handle pressure and adapt to the forecasted developments. Unlike the large museums, whose situation will virtually remain unchanged, according to this report, the medium sized museums will undergo far-reaching changes, including mergers, and they are expected to decline in number but increase in importance. As for the segment of the small museums, the report stated that this would most likely be trimmed down and only the ones with distinctive profiles, products and strong basis of support from their local communities will survive.

In 2011, one year after the Agenda 2026, and in the midst of a most unfavourable climate for museums whose budget had been cut by 20%, the Association set out to determine the social significance of the museum sector in a new report and campaign under the title “More than worth it”.

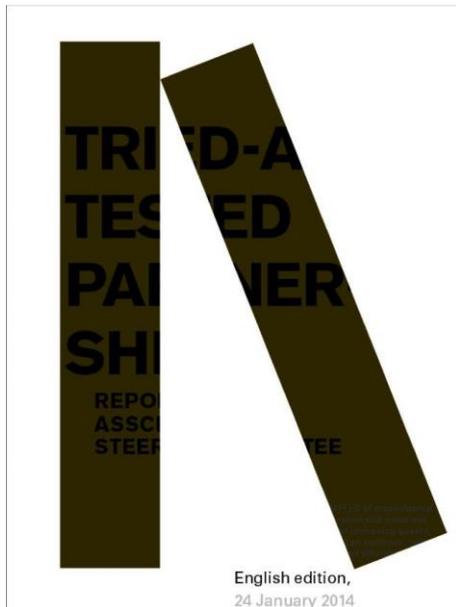


© Netherlands Museums Association. Cover image: Herman F.C. ten Kate (1862), Beleg van Alkmaar (Siege of Alkmaar); Spanish troops attack the city, 18 September 1573, collection of Stedelijk Museum Alkmaar.

This publication described five core values that together make up the social value of museums: collection, educational connecting, experience and economic value. Taking into account that museums were increasingly striving to build on alliances in their communities in order to find a new balance between private initiative, government and the market, “More than worth it” sought, on one hand, to highlight the actual public benefits that museums generate, and thus justify their reliance on public funds, and on the other hand, to urge the museum sector, government and the private sector to join forces and seize the opportunity, invest in these values and capitalise on them. The report advised museums to choose from these values to better profile themselves as potential partners when trying to form alliances with other stakeholders and other sector. It made a bold statement about the significance of the sector for society and targeted all stakeholders, museums, government, civil organisations, educational institutions, the media and the private sector, with a view to mobilising them as potential partners. Did it actually help to change things?

The following year the government announced a second round of sizeable cuts for state-funded museums together with plans to review the organisation of the sector and make it less costly. To this end the Minister asked advice from the Council for Culture. Museums turned to their Association with the wish to determine their own direction and retain control of their future. The

Association decided to set up a committee of museum directors and non-museum academics tasked with investigating how best to consolidate the museum sector. This committee's recommendations can be summed up in one word: cooperation. Cooperation between museums, between museums and municipalities, between museums and the civil society, between museums and other parties (e.g. education, culture, business, healthcare). The Committee's proposal received widespread support not just among museums themselves but also from the Minister of Culture. Instead of leaving the job to the Culture Council, she decided to actively involve museums through their Association in developing the criteria for the new organisation scheme and even made available an additional budget to pursue this cooperation agenda further.



© Netherlands Museums Association and NEMO

This is how the “Tried-and-Tested Partnerships” report came to light! At the invitation of their Association, museums across the country submitted over a thousand examples of different forms of repeated and sustainable cooperation under specific themes, the benefits of which are analysed in this report. These range from museum networks to programmatic agreements, to organisational cooperation through to mergers and touch upon all aspects of museum work (from combined tickets and advertisement campaigns, to joint acquisitions, exhibitions, education, research, conservation, fundraising, advocacy etc.). This inventory of inspirational examples illustrate how cooperation can be the solution to cutting costs or increasing revenues, sharing museum knowledge, developing audiences and giving greater visibility to collections. It also bears proof to the

Committee's findings: that an individual museum will not survive in an increasingly competitive environment and that the way forward is for museums to engage more and more structurally in alliances. As a follow-up to this report, the Association has embarked on developing existing models into a practical manual of do's and don'ts for cooperation, as well as on exploring more areas of cooperation in the next years (like reinforcement of social lobby). So much about the Dutch success story!

Another strong urge to build a new vision for the future and encourage change in the sector has come from across the Channel, the United Kingdom. Impelled by the same climate of political adversity and financial constraints, and with a view to making a case for the public value of the sector, two years ago the UK Museums Association launched its “Museums 2020” campaign – an initiative to create a clear and united vision for UK museums.



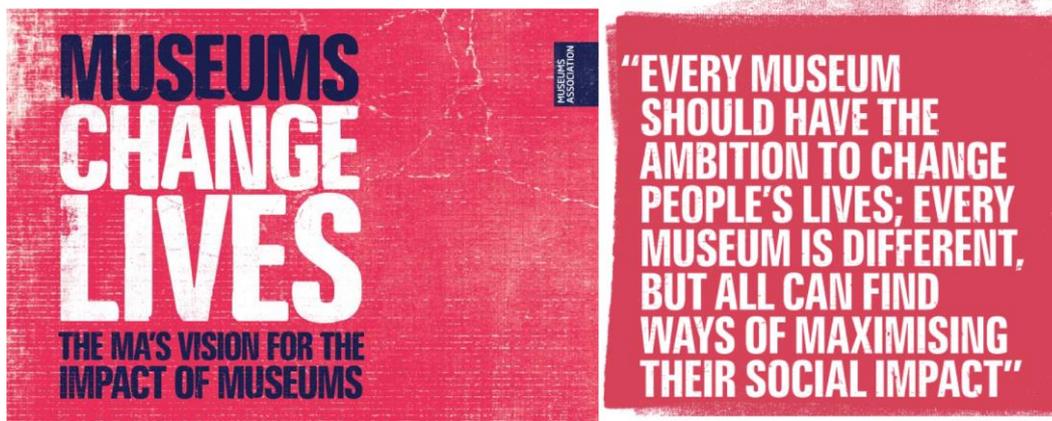
© Museums Association UK

In the UK, central government, local authorities and the Heritage Lottery Fund provide core funding to museums, including the independent museum sector. With national strategies for museums in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland and the Arts Council taking over responsibility for museums in England, the Museums Association as a UK-wide organisation is well placed to develop a collective thinking, a strategic response to current challenges. At the time the “Museums 2020” initiative started, the sector had already seen museums closing down, or losing their staff and cutting down their public services, while attendance figures were on the rise and public demand was increasing. New cuts were on the horizon. The Association chose to open public debate on the social impact of the sector. “Museums 2020” focused on four core themes – community, society, individuals and the environment.

Its basic premise was that museums should aim to make an explicit contribution to improving lives and tackling society's problems. It was meant to set a challenge to each museum "to move on from a generalised sense that it provides public benefit by merely existing, to identifying how it can best make a defined and explicit contribution." As Maurice Davies, a leading figure behind the “Museums 2020” campaign notes, “this focus on impact means starting from the outside and looking in. That’s fairly new territory for the Museums Association as previously we’ ve tended to start from what museums have – for example their collections or the workforce”. “Museums 2020” was much more than a discussion paper. It was a country-wide campaign that lasted several months and opened up conversations with people inside and outside museums. It included online debates, workshops, research into public attitude to museums and consultation with multiple stakeholders. According to its initiators, this strong sense of social purpose and the vision to link museums with well-being and quality of life was shared and supported by the great majority of people who were involved. Moreover, the research into public attitudes to museums showed that the public shared a positive view of the sector, and trusted museums highly.

The follow-up to “Museums 2020” came in 2013 with the “Museums Change Lives”, another vision document and campaign, which aimed to demonstrate how museums can support positive social change. It sought to explain how museums enhance wellbeing, create better places and inspire people and ideas, as well as to provide guidance to institutions on how to improve their

social impact. It also invited professionals and the public to share their experiences through social media on how museums have changed their lives or the lives of others for the better. Much in the same vein as the Dutch “More than Worth it” initiative, it aimed to enthuse people in museums to increase their impact, encourage funders to support museums in becoming more relevant to their communities and show other organisations the potential partnerships they could have with museums. Naturally, the underpinning principle of all this was that museums are not neutral spaces and that active public participation changes museums for the better. According to the “Museums change lives” campaign, emerging themes of museum activity that will grow in the future are: social justice/social purpose, well-being of communities, participation, partnership, and engagement with contemporary issues.



© UK Museums Association

Is it enough to have a strong vision document making confident assertions on the positive impact of museum work? It is certainly one step towards lifting the spirit of museum professionals at hard times and engaging them in more “audience focused” work. The next step of the UK Museums Association is to engage in lobbying activities, try to get funders and decision makers share and actively support its vision.

These two case studies - of the Netherlands and the UK - evolving in parallel in the last several years and having so much in common, testify to the fact that museums are more now more than ever willing to claim for themselves a more active role in society as agents of change. They serve to demonstrate that seizing the opportunity for tomorrow requires the development of new types of relationships with the public, across institutions and with other sectors.

The value of museums for society as well as the need for enhanced cooperation were also highlighted in the Lisbon Declaration, the outcome of an ICOM-Europe and ICOM-Portugal conference held in Lisbon in 2013. The Lisbon Declaration recognised museums as “important investments for a better society” and as “positives engines of development rather than sources of expenditure” and made an appeal to European governments and EU institutions to support museums to face the crisis and build the future by promoting cooperation and networks.

So, the question is now: if museums and their professionals’ organisations have recognised the need to become more participatory, inclusive, collaborative, resilient, sustainable, if they are convinced of their significance as contributors to the well-being and quality of life of their

communities, if they are ready to embrace and inspire change, HOW are they to effectively communicate their vision and convey this message to policy and decision makers at EU level? And what does it take for their vision to become a European vision? How can it be embedded in “project Europe”? And finally, how can European cooperation through networks like NEMO help to achieve this?

IV. A shift in vision, a shift in advocacy: The role of NEMO in the context of recent EU policy developments in the field of cultural heritage.

NEMO, the Network of European Museum Organisations, is an independent network of museum organisations, a European umbrella of national museum umbrella organisations. It was founded in 1992 at the time of the Maastricht Treaty when culture was mentioned for the first time in European policies and museums felt the need to be represented at EU level. NEMO brings together civil society organisations working for museums at national scale (i.e. museums associations or other non-governmental organisations) and – where these do not exist - national Culture Ministries from all over Europe. It is the collective voice of museums in Europe and acts as a lobbying body for museums towards the Commission, the European Parliament and the EU Council of Ministers. The strategic framework guiding its actions is based on four core museum values, namely the collection, social, educational and economic value.

NEMO promotes exchange of knowledge and expertise among its members and provides training opportunities to help raise professionalism and strengthen museums organisations across Europe. Most importantly, it is active in the political arena, by providing advocacy for museums in the context of consultations, EU expert groups, cooperation with other culture- or heritage-related civil society organisations. NEMO tries to raise visibility of museums, make their voice heard, and give them a more prominent position at EU level; to influence policymaking and funding decisions; to embed the public value of museums and cultural heritage in the EU vision for the future; to build a case for museums, as bearers of shared values, generators of a sense of belonging among European citizens, and at the same time, as important components of its strategic agenda for recovery from the crisis and economic and social development. NEMO advocates for the impact of museums in other sectors like education, tourism, health and social care, urban development, innovation, and pushes for new benchmarks when measuring this impact. All this, it does not do alone, but through dialogue and cooperation with other civil society actors in the area of culture. NEMO has been actively contributing, through advocacy and consultation, to a number of positive – for cultural heritage and museums as part of it - initiatives and policy developments at EU level in the last two years. These include:

- The **“New Narrative for Europe”**, a reflection exercise on a visionary framework for Europe and a public debate launched by the Ex-President Barroso in April 2013. This vision document urged for the re-alignment of emphasis recognizing that European unity is not based only on the economy and that cultural heritage is a “powerful instrument that provides a sense of belonging amongst and between European citizens”.
- Conferences on cultural heritage organized by successive **EU-Presidencies** (Belgium in 2010, Lithuania in 2013, Greece and Italy in 2014). They all stressed the same aspects: a. the interaction between cultural heritage and other sectors/policy fields where the EU

has wider decision making power, b. the potential of cultural heritage for sustainability in its economic, social and environmental dimension, and c. the need for more cooperation between different stakeholders including the public sector, the private sector and the civil society. These conferences achieved in creating a shared body of knowledge and a political momentum for cultural heritage at EU level.

- The **“Council Conclusions on cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable Europe”** initiated by the Greek Presidency and adopted by European Culture Ministers in May 2014. It was the first time that conclusions dedicated to cultural heritage were adopted and this was embraced with enthusiasm by the sector and civil society organizations like Europa Nostra. These conclusions recognized that cultural heritage creates and enhances social capital and underlined its specific role in achieving the goals of Europe 2020, the EU’s growth strategy. They also invited the Commission to “pursue the analysis of the economic and social impact of cultural heritage in the EU and contribute to the development of a strategic approach”. In response to this invitation, the Commission launched two months later , in July 2014 its
- **Communication “Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe”**, a policy document dedicated to the role of cultural heritage in the EU agenda. The Communication recognized that the contribution of cultural heritage to economic growth and social cohesion was undervalued, examined how the societal value of the sector is addressed in current actions and funding programmes and highlighted the opportunities for Member States and stakeholders to work more closely across borders and with the Commission to address the many challenges facing the heritage sector, and also to ensure that cultural heritage makes an even stronger contribution to a sustainable Europe.
- **“Cultural heritage counts for Europe”**, a project undertaken by the civil society platform Heritage Alliance 3.3, which set out to gather, analyse, consolidate and widely disseminate qualitative and quantitative research and data from across Europe to document the economic and social impact of cultural heritage. It is expected to produce results by mid-2015.

As we are now approaching the end of the Italian Presidency (second half of 2014), we expect to see two more important developments: a. a new set of Council Conclusions on the participatory governance of cultural heritage, emphasizing the need to move towards a multi-stakeholder approach to heritage governance, b. the adoption of a new Work Plan for Culture to run from 2015 to 2018, which includes cultural heritage as a priority and focuses on topics such as audience development, social inclusion, innovative management and financing methods for heritage and identifying new skills and training needs of heritage professionals in the digital environment. In concrete terms, this means that in the next four years Ministries across Europe will cooperate through expert groups to map and compare national policies, identify good practice and prepare recommendations to national governments, heritage institutions and the EU on each of those topics. In addition, a debate among European Culture Ministers on the contribution of the Cultural and Creative Sectors, including cultural heritage, to the goals of EU 2020 strategy with a view to informing the revision of the strategy in 2015 is foreseen for the Council of Ministers on 25 November 2014.

What do these developments reveal about tendencies or challenges for cultural heritage policies? In my view, cultural heritage policy trends which are constantly gaining ground and will most likely grow stronger in the future include:

- promoting access to and participation in cultural heritage, also addressing the role of digital means in changing the way content is created, accessed, disseminated and used.
- exploring new and alternative financing models for cultural heritage, diversifying revenue sources and exploring new opportunities for funding, including innovative partnership schemes combining public (national and regional), private and European sources as well as community-based models.
- promoting participation to the governance of cultural heritage, reinforcing engagement of the civil society in decision making, development, implementation and monitoring of policies
- promoting the cross-cutting, transversal character of cultural heritage and better integrating cultural heritage policy objectives into other policy fields (“mainstreaming”), e.g. regional development, social cohesion, education, trade, foreign affairs, environment, tourism, research and innovation.
- developing appropriate (qualitative and quantitative) evaluation tools to assess the impact of cultural heritage on society, in order to make a convincing case for the sector.
- strengthening capacity and skills of professionals to help them address current challenges.