

NEMO Barometer on political influence in museums in Europe



Network of European
Museum Organisations

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INTRODUCTION

Polarisation is growing everywhere in Europe, and museums are affected by it, too. Museums are often considered to be neutral spaces for cultural preservation and education, but they are increasingly becoming arenas of political contention, facing pressures from various political groups. Governments, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders often aim to shape how history, identity, and values are presented.

With this barometer, NEMO, the Network of European Museum Organisations, seeks to explore these dynamics, examining the extent to which political influences shape the work of European museums and how professionals within these institutions navigate such challenges. The results of this barometer informed the discussions of [NEMO's European Museum Conference 'Can we talk? Museums facing polarisation'](#) in November 2024, with key themes revolving around the role of museums in bridging societal divides, strategies for navigating political pressures in socio-political debates, and ways to amplify the voices of underrepresented groups.

The data presented in this barometer highlights the challenging circumstances faced by the European museum sector amidst increasing societal polarisation. This development is frequently leading to intense, and sometimes uncontrollable, pressure on museum operations. The responses confirm the concern of the museum community that growing political influence on museums can significantly weaken the functioning and reputation of European museums as reliable institutions, jeopardising their capacity to work impartially and maintain their independence.

Following the conference and reflecting the responses in the barometer, the NEMO Executive Board issued a [statement addressing the increasing challenges museums face due to political interference](#) and societal polarisation. The statement reaffirms NEMO's commitment to uphold and support the integrity, independence, and resilience of museums across Europe.

ABOUT THE BAROMETER

The underlying questionnaire for this barometer was addressed to national museum organisations, museums and other organisations¹ in summer 2024². 153 responses from 31 countries were collected.

The questionnaire guaranteed respondents full anonymity due to the sensitive nature of selected questions and does not disclose any individual or respondent identifiable information. For this reason the following summary only provides an overview of the general situation of the European museum landscape, including the parts of information that reflect prevailing tendencies, and does not explicitly interpret the data provided.

¹ Other organisations include mainly museum consultancy and public research infrastructures. See detailed overview of respondents in the disclaimer.

² Survey period: 18.07.2024-06.09.2024

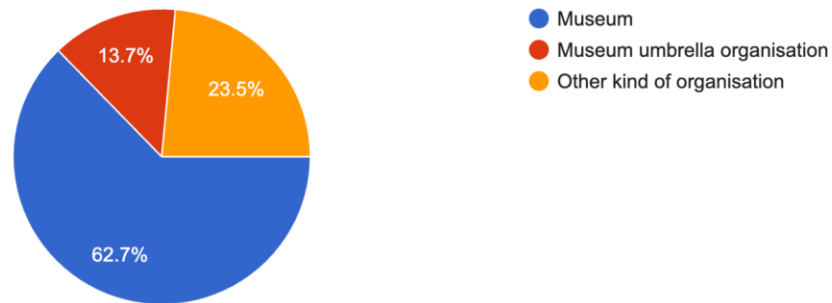
However, the data suggests an urgent need for more in-depth investigation in the future of the various mechanisms of political influence on museums. A scientific article about the results of this barometer, that will provide deeper analysis and interpretation of the data, will be published later in 2025.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

Type of organisation responding

153 responses



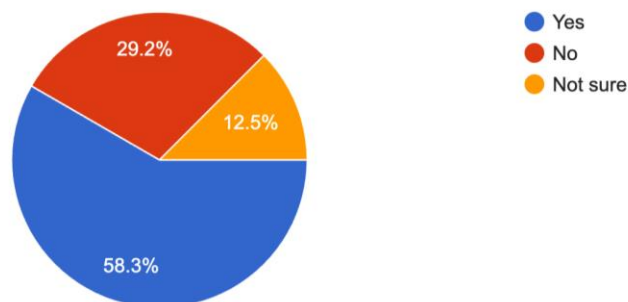
Almost two thirds of the respondents of the questionnaire are individual museums. It is interesting however that national museum umbrella organisations from 13 different European countries responded, providing a general overview of the national sector level situation.

POLITICAL PRESSURE ON MUSEUMS

The questionnaire asked museums, national museum organisations and other organisations individually about their perception on whether museums are subject to political pressure.

Responses from museums

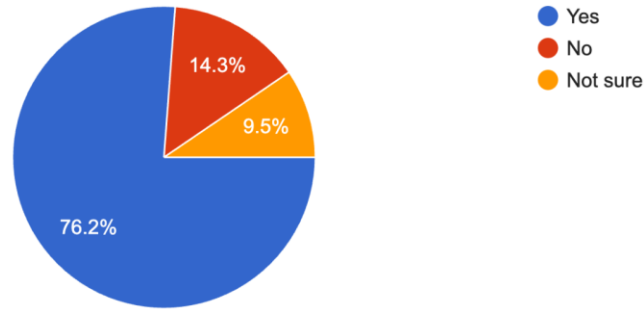
96 responses



Almost 6 out of 10 museums responded that they feel that their museum's vision or (parts of its) programme is subject to political pressure. Almost 3 out of 10 museums responded they do not feel their museum is subject to political pressure.

Responses from national museum organisations

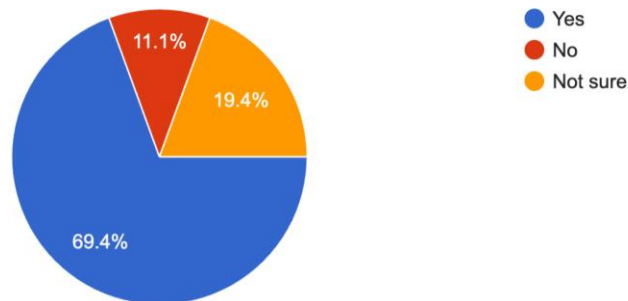
21 responses



More than three quarters of national museum organisations respond that the museums in their country are subject to political pressure, while only 14% state that they feel museums are not subject to political pressure.

Responses from other organisations

36 responses



Almost 7 out of 10 other organisations respond that museums are subject to political pressure in their country. Only 1 in 10 organisations responded that museums are not subject to political pressure.

DIMENSIONS OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE

The questionnaire asked which areas experienced the most political influence, if such influence was exerted on museums. The following table gives an overview of the three most mentioned fields of political influence, according to respondents' groups. There were however many different fields of political influence expressed.

	MUSEUMS	NATIONAL MUSEUM ORGANISATIONS	OTHER ORGANISATIONS
Budget	73,8%	89,5%	74,2%
Programmes/ Exhibitions	51,2%	73,7%	74,2%
Public political positioning	11,3%	36,8%	35,5%

Political influence on museums' budgets is the most witnessed area of influence by all three respondents' groups, with more than 7 in 10 respondents in the museums and other organisations respondent group, and almost 9 in 10 respondents of national museum organisations naming this area. Another frequently mentioned area of political influence across all respondents' groups was Programmes/ Exhibitions.

Public political positioning (through mandatory public statements on political situations, or the disallowing of doing so) was also named in various contexts by all respondent groups, mainly by national museum organisations and other organisations with more than 3 in 10 respondents.

KEY THEMES OF HOW POLITICAL INFLUENCE IS MANIFESTED

The questionnaire asked how respondents feel that political influence is manifested, and especially where the pressure would come from. The following list of themes has emerged from a synthesis of different responses provided.³

- 1. Funding and budgetary constraints**
 - > Dependence on government funding
 - > Impact of budget cuts
- 2. Influence on public actions**
 - > programmes and exhibitions: terminating exhibitions, themes being featured or cancelled
- 3. Political interference in governance**
 - > political appointment of directors and board members
 - > pressure to align with political agendas
- 4. Pressure from interest groups and public opinion influence**
 - > censorship, self-censorship or obligation to publish statements

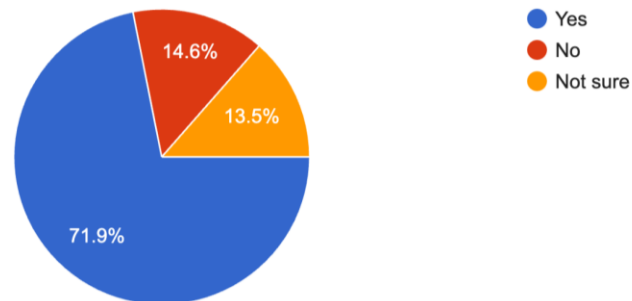
³ Note that patterns from answers provided have been analysed with the help of Chat GPT.

THE RISE OF POLARISATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSEUMS

The questionnaire wanted to know if respondents feel there is a rise of polarisation in their country in general.

Responses of museums

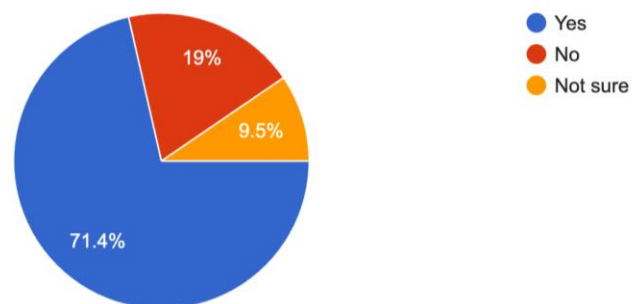
96 responses



More than 7 in 10 museums feel that there is a rise of polarisation in their countries. Only 1.5 museums out of 10 do not feel that there is a rise of polarisation in their countries.

Responses of national museum organisations

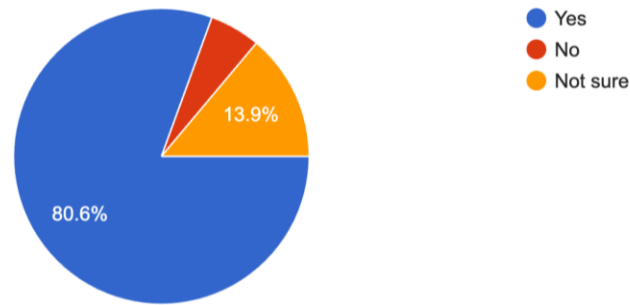
21 responses



More than 7 in 10 national museum organisations feel that there is a rise of polarisation in their countries. Less than 2 out of 10 do not feel that there is a rise in polarisation in their countries.

Responses of other organisations

36 responses



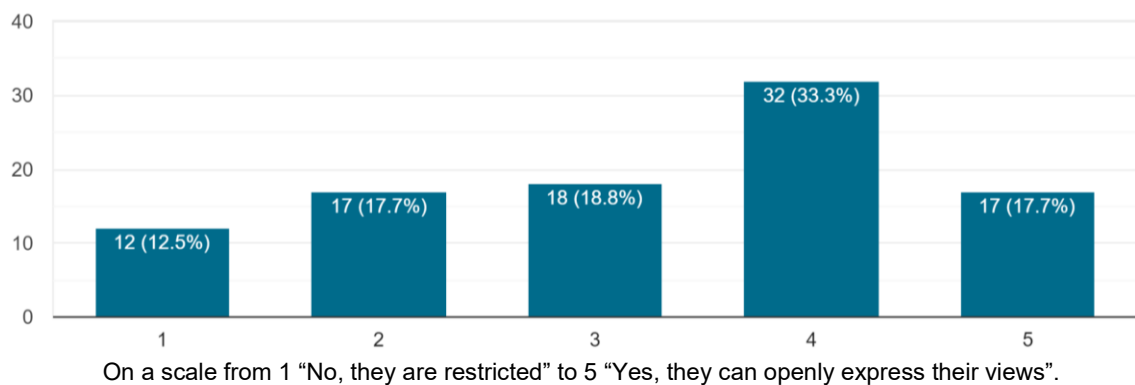
More than 8 in 10 other organisations feel that there is a rise of polarisation in their countries. Less than 1 out of 10 do not feel that there is a rise of polarisation in their countries.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN THE CONTEXT OF RISING POLARISATION

Looking at the role of museums in polarised societies, the focus and questions in this section are guided towards museums only.

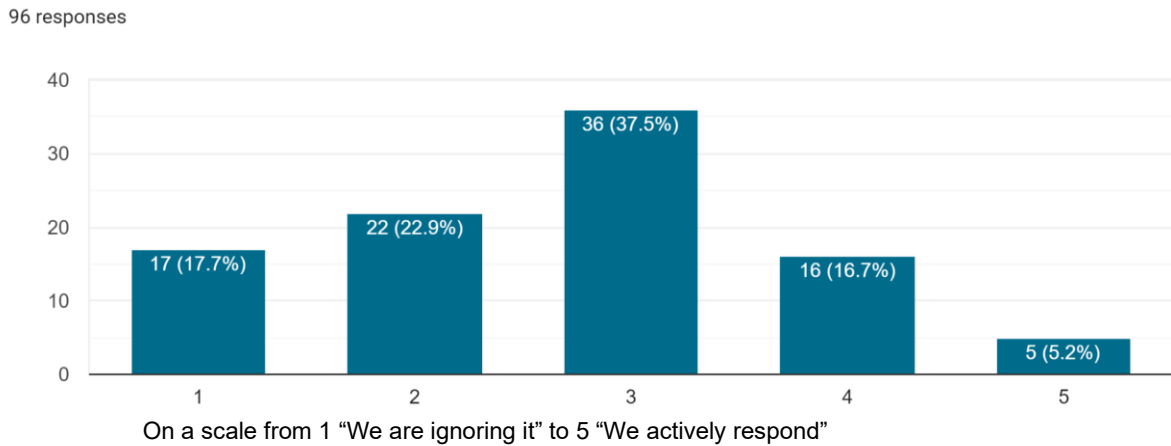
Museums were asked whether they felt they could openly express their views without being judged for them.

96 responses



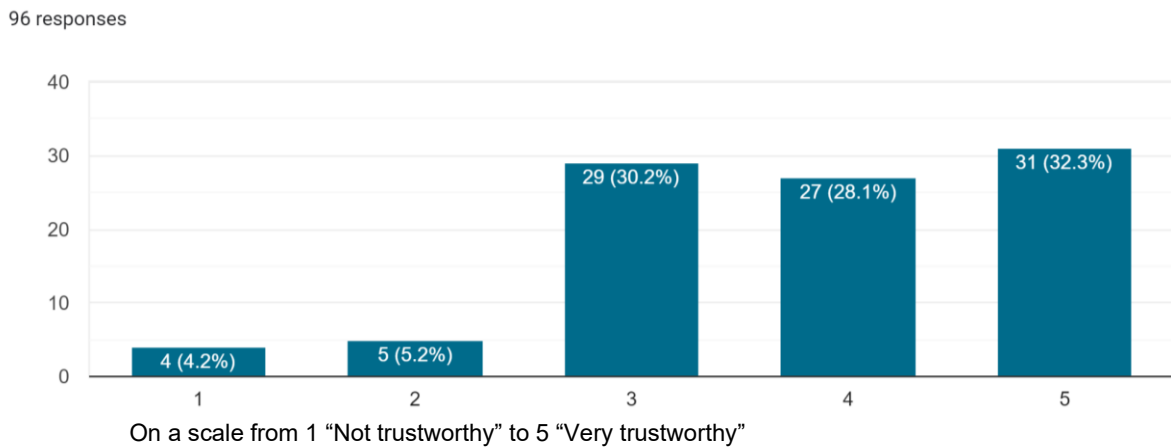
5 in 10 museums respond that museums can openly express their views (including scale answers 4 and 5), while 3 in 10 museums rather feel that museums are restricted (including scale answers 1 and 2).

Museums were asked how they respond to topics that are heating up public debate, whether of political, ideological or other nature.



More than 4 in 10 museums respond that they are rather ignoring topics that heat up the public debate (including scale answers 1 and 2), while only 2 in 10 museums claim to actively respond to them (including scale answers 4 and 5).

Museums were asked whether they think they are considered trustworthy agents in society by the public.



6 in 10 museums respond that museums are considered very trustworthy by the public (including scale answers 4 and 5), while not even 1 in 10 museums claim that museums are not considered trustworthy by the public (including scale answers 1 and 2).

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This barometer would not have been possible without the courageous museum professionals all over Europe responding to it. NEMO wants to thank all respondents for their contributions and hopes that this present summary will help inform the museum sector and help advocate for museums continuing their work for society as independent and trustworthy institutions.

Our gratitude goes out to NEMO executive board member Paulina Florjanowicz, who has initiated this overview, provided the main content of the questionnaire, and has helped analyse the data.

DISCLAIMER

This barometer, including the underlying data from the questionnaire was gathered, analysed and interpreted by NEMO in collaboration with Paulina Florjanowicz, Executive Board member of NEMO.

This was a voluntary questionnaire, without traceability or accountability for the accuracy of statements from participating individuals, nor verification of their profession. Any identifying attributes of the respondents shall remain private under the management of NEMO.

The results are a partial view yet capture a European perspective of the current state of the museum sector.

The following describes some of the harmonizing efforts undergone on the raw results of the online questionnaire:

- Country names were translated and harmonized; (i.e. "GREECE" became "Greece" and "Netherlands" became "The Netherlands").
- Responses from countries outside of the Council of Europe members states were not considered.
- Spelling mistakes were corrected in order to group the correctly if needed.
- Chat GPT was used to find patterns in open answer fields and define emerging common themes and challenges in the responses.
- Incomprehensible responses were deleted.
- The respondents in category "other organisations" were harmonised according to their field in the following groups:
 - Consultancy/Service Providers for museums (34% of the respondents in "other organisations").
 - Public Research Institute/Universities (12% of the respondents in "other organisations").
 - Public Bodies for Museums (9% of the respondents in "other organisations")
 - other museum umbrella organisation (9% of the respondents in "other organisations").
 - Culture Field NGO (8% of the respondents in "other organisations").
 - Library (incl. museum) (6% of the respondents in "other organisations").
 - other (non-culture sector) (6% of the respondents in "other organisations").

While submissions and results are not guaranteed as representative of current circumstances in their respective localities, this report nonetheless offers a view into the perceived challenges faced by museums in the context of political influence.