

Right-Wing Populism and Museums: Findings from an Interview Study in the UK, Poland, and Germany

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the growing research on right-wing populism's increasing impact on cultural and heritage institutions, presenting findings from an interview study with museum professionals in Poland, Germany, and the UK. Our comparative analysis highlights the multifarious ways populist politics affect museum work, including potentially violent interventions that target museum staff and more diffuse forms of influence on museums that are not under direct political pressure. In anticipation of negative consequences, museum staff may avoid issues that they anticipate will lead to public hostility or political interference, modifying curatorial practice and effectively self-censoring. These findings underscore the complex power dynamics museums navigate in a political climate marked by the resurgence of right-wing populism and attempts to instrumentalize cultural heritage and institutional life for political purposes.

Introduction

The rise of right-wing populism across Europe has had profound implications for all social spheres and institutions. Museums can become tools and targets of populist politics due to their capacity to engender national identities and represent cultural 'others' (Bennett 1995; Macdonald 2013; Smith 2006). Current research at the intersection of populism and the politics of heritage (for example, Blokker 2022; Niklasson 2023), memory (Kaya 2020; Volk 2022), and museums (Bozoğlu 2019) has highlighted that museums may be used to create or present populist heritage (Bonacchi 2022), to rewrite history and alter public memory (Neumann 2024), and to appropriate and instrumentalize heritage for political gain (Eckersley 2020).

Populism is classically understood as a polarizing and antagonistic form of politics that mobilizes 'the people' against 'the elite' (Mudde 2004: 543) and 'outsiders' (Brubaker 2020: 51). According to Ayhan Kaya and Chiara de Cesari (2020: 7-8), European right-wing populism involves strong notions of 'anti-elitism, anti-intellectualism, [...] racism, nationalism, nativism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia and anti-immigration ideologies'. Populism politicizes heritage for national (and often racialized) identity-making (Leser et al. 2024: 4-6). This use of heritage poses challenges for museums that need to be explored in more depth (Message 2022: 9).

In this paper, we, the authors, present findings from a large-scale exploratory interview study with museum professionals in Poland, Germany, and the United Kingdom to contribute to this growing body of research in three ways. First, we provide an analytical perspective, focusing on the core practices of museum work and the experiences of museum staff. We interviewed a range of professionals, from museum directors to freelance tour guides, who work (or have worked) in diverse museums and who have experienced populist interventions in their activities. Second, we present a comparative perspective across three European countries where the diverse constitutions of the populist right have different effects on cultural governance and institutions. Third, our research adds to anthropological and ethnographic studies on the workings of populism more broadly (Herzfeld 2019; Leser and Pates 2021; Mazzarella 2019), highlighting the importance of the impact of populist politics on, and entanglements with, social

and cultural practices and spheres of heritage and museums in Europe.

Our research shows that right-wing populism can have harmful effects on museums, including symbolic and political violence, and that these effects are not limited to those directly under political pressure from populist governments. In anticipation of negative consequences, museum staff avoid topics they expect may lead to hostility or political interference, modifying curatorial practice and effectively self-censoring. Museums may also fall into traps when they anticipate issues that are not necessarily populist concerns. Before detailing our findings, which provide a nuanced understanding of how museums in Europe are affected by the rise of the right, we summarize the state of existing research and explain the methodological design of our study.

The Populist Use of Museums

Museums are powerful institutions. Not only do museums affect the communities in which they are embedded (Smith 2014: 5), but they are themselves embedded in and affected by the social-political landscapes in which they operate (Gray 2015: 8–13). As Tony Bennett (1995) has argued, public museums must be understood as institutions of modern governance that produce *authorized* knowledge, shape and disseminate *objective* truths, and govern cultural norms. Historically, such museums have been institutionalized ‘as repositories and manifestations of national identity and cultural achievement’ (Smith 2006: 18), and they are thus ‘[f]irmly rooted in European modernity, colonialism and the ideology of the nation-state’ (Niklasson 2023: 4). This historical legacy and the power of museums to represent and (re-) produce beliefs about identity and belonging make these institutions politically powerful (Smith et al. 2024: 5; Macdonald 2013). This power has been appropriated by contemporary right-wing populist projects that aim to reinvigorate exclusionary nationalist ideologies (Leser et al. 2024: 5–6), but equally this power provides museum staff with the opportunity to reject such appropriations and stem the flow of right-wing populism.

Against the backdrop of the rising far right across Europe, ‘museums occupy an ambivalent position of being both conscripts in the populist project and potential agents of change’ (Balkenhol and Modest 2020: 188). Museums are attractive as sites of populist politicisation when they continue to invoke ‘colonial taxonomies and territorially circumscribed ethnonational categories’ (Niklasson 2023: 17). These categories can be appropriated by populists to exclude others based on ethnonational divisions. Indeed, recent studies have shown that heritage and collective memories are strategically instrumentalized by right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe (Eckersley 2020; De Cesari and Kaya 2020; Kaya 2020; Niklasson 2023; Niklasson and Hølleland 2018; Smith et al. 2024: 7; Volk 2022). Ayhan Kaya (2020), for example, argues that right-wing populist parties, such as France’s *Front National* and Germany’s *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), manipulate authorized heritage discourses to build support for their political agendas. At the level of political discourse, right-wing strategies include rhetorical devices of ‘past presencing’ (Macdonald 2013): using imaginaries of the past such as national myths of heroism and martyrdom for political gain in the present (for instance, Bevernage et al. 2024; Blokker 2023; Bonacchi 2022; Bonacchi et al. 2018; Farrell-Banks 2023).

This paper focuses specifically on how the rise of the right affects museums. The first level at which politics and museums meet is at the level of cultural governance: the institutional bodies and policies that govern how museums operate. State-funded museums are directly affected by cultural policies and may experience interference when political decisions made by cultural ministries, boards, councils, and other governing bodies do not align with their institutional policies and practices.¹ In countries such as Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland where right-wing parties are in power (or in the case of Poland have been in power recently, from 2015 to 2023), cultural policies have been imposed in the form of top-down replacements of directors of cultural institutions, including museums. A study commissioned by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) focusing on Eastern European and Southeastern European countries emphasized that museum directors are often appointed by the national Ministry of Culture, and that museum board members and trustees as well as local stakeholders can act in their own interests, using opportunities for political interference and influence (Schramme

and King 2022; see also Gray 2015: 13; Millar and Miller 2025). In Poland, when the Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in 2015, one of their policies was the 'exchange of elites', which meant the removal of liberal decisionmakers, such as museum directors, and their replacement with PiS affiliates (Kurz 2019: 12). In the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the director, Paweł Machcewicz, was dismissed by the PiS government which, as he details in his book (2021: 1), accused him of 'lacking "the Polish point of view"', and described the museum as 'a tool to "disintegrate the Polish nation"'. In Turkey and Hungary, entirely new museums are being designed under populist party rule to support similar nationalist narratives (Bozoğlu 2019; Ugur-Cinar and Altınok 2021).

The second result of the rising right-wing for museums is that their collections, exhibitions, and narratives are being strategically altered by populist leaders. Polish museums, particularly in the case mentioned above of the Museum of the Second World War where changes were made to the exhibition to emphasize Polish heroism and martyrdom, illustrate this state censorship and 'symbolic violence' (Kobielska 2024: 321; Kazlauskaitė 2022; Radonić 2020; Siddi and Gaweda 2019).

Third, the rise of the right within democratic societies leads to political struggles, which find their way into the museum space in the form of public media debates about what is (not) and what should (not) be displayed (Palonen 2018; Sindbæk 2022). Museums that promote pluralism, diversity, and multivocality are struggling with public demands to include the voices of nationalist and right-wing movements (Zabalueva 2019: 48), or with demands from right-wing populist parties that call for 'the nation's colonial grandeur to be showcased' in ethnographic museums again (Balkenhol and Modest 2020: 174). Debates about the representational politics of museums also take place through digital technologies such as social media and online spaces, which are particularly useful for populist politicization (Farrell-Banks 2023; Stobiecka 2024).

In addition to the challenges outlined above, museums are affected at their very core – in the day-to-day work and the people who carry it out. In the following section, we present the methodological approach and scope of our interview study with museum professionals in Poland, Germany, and the UK, and a detailed overview of the multifarious impacts of populist politics on museums.

Studying the Impacts of Populist Politics on Museums in Poland, Germany, and the UK

The interviews were carried out as part of the research project 'Challenging Populist Truth-Making in Europe'.² The study was conducted by researchers in Poland, Germany, and the UK, and can be described as a 'multi-sited, multi-linked and multi-researcher' ethnographic project (Macdonald et al. 2018: 138). We conducted 39 semi-structured ethnographic interviews with museum professionals about their experiences of populist politics from 2021 through 2022 (see Table 1). Collaboratively, we analyzed these interviews using the qualitative coding software MaxQDA according to Grounded Theory principles (Strauss and Corbin 1994).³ We approached European museums as a 'constellation of difference' (Macdonald 2016: 4), and we considered varied sites, contexts, agents, and practices against the background of (challenging) populist politics. Our interviews were problem-centered, focusing on the effects of populist politics as a shared issue. Interviewees were encouraged to describe their experiences in their own words and to decide what to emphasize.

Holding interviews in three European countries allowed for a comparative perspective on populist politics that highlighted core similarities, for example, anti-migration sentiments. However, it also revealed key differences: first and foremost, the effects on cultural governance of different political systems and governments (Poland's right-wing populist government until 2023, Germany's growing far right amidst liberal leadership, and the UK's conservative rule and post-Brexit restructuring). The challenges to heritage also differed in each context (see, for example, Bevernage et al. 2024; De Cesari and Kaya 2020; Kaya 2020), with a focus on the Holocaust and National Socialism in Germany, on colonial legacies and slavery in the UK, and the heroism and martyrdom of the Poles during the Second World War in Poland. Furthermore, the funding structures of museums differed: in Poland and Germany most public

museums are state-funded, whereas many museums in the UK have charitable status or are funded by donors and foundations, making them less directly affected by state cultural governance.

Within each country, we chose a sample of different types of museums, including national museums and museums concerned with (parts of) national history that are, according to Clive Gray (2015: 12–13), particularly prone to being instrumentalized for right-wing populist claims about national identities. Equally, local history museums are used to make claims about regional identities and community narratives. However, we also included other types of museums in our sample because, as Gray notes, even those museums not directly concerned with (national and local) identities act ‘as representatives of broader political concerns’ (Gray 2015: 13). Various museums address topics such as migration, social movements, feminism, and climate change from different perspectives, which is why we included art, science, and archaeology museums in our sample.

We interviewed staff in different professional capacities, including museum directors, curators, educators, tour guides, freelancers, as well as employees responsible for social media and public relations, allowing for a variety of perspectives that reflect internal hierarchical power dynamics of work in museums. Most of our interviewees and the museums they work in have been anonymized, except where it was necessary to refer to specific sites (in which case the interviewees gave their consent).

The following analysis focuses, first, on political violence and the sense of exhaustion among museum workers; second, on quiet transformations and practices of self-censorship; third, on modes of anticipation; and fourth, on populist traps that may affect museums.

Political Violence and Workers’ Exhaustion

Our research shows that people working in museums experience a range of potentially violent forms of interference which staff describe as exhausting, demoralizing, and intimidating. The following example, in which a former director of a local history museum in a German town describes her own dismissal, illustrates this point.

The director was fired in 2021, a few months after the local election led to a minority government of the conservative party *Free Voters (Freie Wähler, FW)* in the municipal parliament. The party’s elected representatives took issue with the director’s curation of the museum program and events, for example, hosting a book presentation on the topic of the local history of right-wing violence. They accused her of hosting too many ‘political’ events in-house, of not promoting the local homeland (*Heimat*) history⁴ enough, and eventually suggested renaming the city museum the ‘Heimatmuseum’. The director told us that, from the time the new government took issue with her, she ‘received anonymous, threatening phone calls and they told me to be careful when walking home alone in the dark’.⁵ At times, she would find her bicycle tyres slashed when she left the house in the morning, and she found out that rumours accused her of being a member of Antifa, ‘an agent of the left-wing state’, and of ‘sleeping at work’. When she asked the local police for help, she was told they could not do anything if she did not know who was making the calls. In our interview, she described her experiences as a form of ‘constant psycho terror’ that lasted several months. In the beginning, she said she found it ridiculous and questioned whether she was just ‘imagining things’ – but in retrospect, she understood that she was a victim of political violence. She sought professional help from counseling services for victims of political violence, but ‘far too late’, because it took a long time for her ‘to reach the point where I could admit that I’m being politically targeted’. In the end, the local government cut her position out of the town’s budget, she lost her job, and the museum was closed. This was a loss to the community as well as to the individual.

This case, though extreme, was not unique. Across the sample of our interviews, we found multiple examples of overt political violence. Out of 39 interviewees from all three countries, six reported receiving anonymous threats (either by phone, post, or email); sixteen interviewees had experiences with online hate speech; five experienced smear campaigns against their person; and six reported forms of vandalism. Our sample is rather small and not encyclopaedic, and the impacts of populist politics on museums are more varied than these experiences of overt political violence; however, the interviewees reported hate crimes that

need to be taken seriously, especially when such crimes go unpunished and affect not only directors but other employees. An educator from a Polish museum described the problem:

[T]he director of the museum [...] has received many such threats in recent years, or [...] individual employees, well, threats related to the fact that here we are allegedly [...] falsifying history and very often these [...] qualify as criminal threats, death threats [...] and well, the cases are reported to the police, usually the perpetrators are not caught, of course.⁶

Such overt political violence joins a range of nonviolent practices that respondents described as interfering with their everyday work: budget cuts targeting liberal institutions and the dismissal and replacement of staff were, across our sample, experienced primarily in Poland under the PiS government (Machcewicz 2021), but also in Germany in the case mentioned above. Interviewees in all three countries reported being targets of politicized (social) media campaigns, political protests, and demonstrations, though to different degrees in each place. Particularly in Germany, directors reported receiving parliamentary motions from the AfD and being questioned by parliamentary cultural committees led by AfD members. In these instances, museums had to justify their reasons for certain activities, exhibitions, and programmes, as well as their decisions about funding and staffing. These and similar challenges have come in tandem with a set of 'difficult politics' that affect museums more broadly, like lack of funding and resources, social media challenges, and shifts in curatorial practice (Millar 2025).

It is important to analyze the power dynamics that are part of these right-wing interventions, especially those that constitute overt political violence. When our interviewees recounted these experiences, almost all expressed feelings of intimidation, discouragement, insecurity, fear, and, above all, debilitating exhaustion. Some interviewees talked about how such interventions influenced them. Many spoke of leaving their institutions or the sector. One museum director in Germany began to worry about the safety of her home after receiving anonymous threats: 'I get really stupid hate mail [...] It's really threatening. When I moved here, I thought, "I don't want to live on the ground floor... it has to be up higher"'.⁷ The political violence of intimidation directly influences the actions of museum workers, and it can lead them to anticipate worst-case scenarios and to censor themselves accordingly, as the next section illustrates.

Quiet Transformations and Self-Censorship

In Poland, forced interventions such as replacing museum directors and acts of state censorship under right-wing populist governments have been described as 'symbolic violence' (Kobielska 2024: 321). In our interview study, it became clear that these developments under the PiS government impacted museums even when they were not under direct political pressure to change their management and/or exhibitions. Directors pre-emptively modified their practices to avoid drawing unwanted attention to their institutions.

In 2019, the director of the National Museum in Warsaw, Jerzy Miziołek, decided to remove works by some of Poland's most recognizable female artists, allegedly due to their 'degrading nature'.⁸ The decision spurred a wave of civic protests, and the works were eventually returned to their places in the exhibition.⁹ An art museum curator, while recalling this incident, described a similar intervention by another national museum's director, which did not receive media attention:

[T]his censorship can be implemented in such a way that no one notices it at all, [...] for example, what happened at the XYZ Museum [...] [T]he permanent gallery was secretly changed. [...] [W]orks that were more ideologically glaring to the current authorities were removed, [...] for example, feminist works [...], or works about [...] transsexualism, and no one protested, because the previous permanent gallery was simply removed, and a new one was created. [...] a lot of, well, too political works were disposed of in such an intelligent way.¹⁰

The 'secret', 'intelligent', or, as other interviewees said, 'quiet' actions of the museum management evaded public scrutiny and thus avoided a need to take responsibility for censoring

the collection. The change was initiated by the museum director, without any apparent 'official' instructions from the government.¹¹ According to our interviewees, changes such as these were made pre-emptively so employees could remain 'safe' and not risk dismissals or budget cuts.

Self-censorship also manifests in museums being more cautious in their official communications. On social media, for example, museums may try to appear 'apolitical', as one museum educator explained:

[T]here were the Black Protests,¹² [...] and the person in charge of Facebook at the XYZ Museum [...] posted a picture on Facebook that depicted a woman in a black dress. The description didn't say anything about it being the Black Umbrellas¹³ or that we support it or anything like that, [...] but, [...] the person responsible for the post] got a scolding, a terrible one. [...] It was immediately taken down from Facebook, and a message was sent [to employees] that these kinds of, even not explicit, political statements cannot have a place on Facebook.¹⁴

In this case, museum management took measures to maintain the institution's appearance of neutrality by refusing to take a stance against the government's anti-abortion laws and in favour of abortion. However, the educator we interviewed argued that these measures did not render the museum apolitical but were in themselves political acts. By being silent, the staff were effectively complicit: 'by skipping this topic they also take part in this discussion'.¹⁵ Interestingly, the management of the same museum did not stay silent in an action called #LightsForBelarus at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, showing solidarity with an independent Belarus.¹⁶ This illustrates the selectivity of the museum management's decision to take a public stance on political issues only with clear encouragement from the Ministry.

In another museum, a curator told us about the director choosing to remove a work that referred to the protests against laws banning abortion. The removal did not go unnoticed. A local government body, the Marshall's Office,¹⁷ put the museum through a substantial audit process. On the one hand, this incident illustrates that national and local government bodies can act according to very different political interests and even oppose each other, and on the other hand, that self-censorship can have the opposite of the intended effects: in the words of the curator, 'this act of preventive censorship has just caused what the director wanted to avoid, which is unwanted interest in the institution'.¹⁸

Similar to state censorship and forced changes described previously, modifications made by staff in anticipation of negative consequences also reflect the 'ideological effects' of political powers (Gray 2015: 16ff.). As 'symbolic violence' (Kobielska 2024: 321), these actions affect museums that are not under political pressure to change their exhibitions. As we analyze further in the next section, fear of negative consequences for the museum and the people working in it can lead to pre-emptive censorship and avoidance. Exploring how museum workers emotionally experience the impact of populist actions that have not yet happened further highlights the role that feelings play in right-wing populist politics, and how these influence curatorial decision-making.

Anticipation

In our interviews, museum workers often expressed that they were 'not yet affected' by populism or 'not yet targeted', meaning that they had not experienced threats, violent attacks, or, (in the UK and Germany where right-wing populist governments are not in power), censorship coming from the top. An interviewee working in a smaller museum in the UK said this absence of negative attention was likely a result of the museum's size, and once the institution's publicity and reputation grow, the interviewee said, it would 'inevitably have to face a lot of these challenges'.¹⁹ A museum director from Germany anticipated that their institution would receive populist attention as it increasingly promotes values of diversity and addressed inequalities.²⁰

Even though they have not (yet) experienced negative responses, museum staff in many of our interviews anticipated becoming targets. This may reflect our methodologies, that is, that our interviews asked about populism. Yet, museum workers explained that anticipation affects their curatorial practice. Curators acknowledged that they avoid certain topics, particularly regarding migration and inclusion, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

As one phrased it, 'you start censoring yourself'.²¹

In contrast to the previous section where we showed that forms of self-censorship are applied to existing exhibitions, the following case demonstrates that fear can affect the curatorial process before an exhibition is even realized. At a small community museum in Germany, a board member described how the museum considered curating an exhibition on sexual self-determination, addressing pluralized sexualities. Their fear of a potential backlash hindered its realization, as the individual explained:

If we should ever realize this, it would be hell for our social media team. It doesn't matter how good this exhibition would be, this will be very exhausting and very difficult. Mostly because of external pressure, but also pressure from our community.²²

The interviewee addressed the challenges of hateful comments on social media: 'This expectation is something that's just exhausting. I really don't feel like having to anticipate stupid, insulting comments. And then I might pause for a moment and think, do we really need to do this now?'²³ In this context, the diffuse effects of populism manifest in concrete ways. The expectation of a hostile response to the museum results in seemingly paradoxical actions – through anticipation, the future is not only envisioned but also brought into action and projected into the present (see, Bryant and Knight 2019; Millar 2025: 76–78).

Anticipation often arose in our interviews when our interlocutors spoke about their use of social media. Social media platforms create an environment where attention can shift suddenly and unpredictably. The structure, algorithms, and features of these platforms, combined with their fast-paced nature and potential anonymity, foster a climate of uncertainty. In our interviews, fear was often expressed as anticipation of a potential hijacking of content by right-wing users, for example, when the museum's past-presenting narratives were not in line with right-wing nationalist narratives characterized by glorification of nation, antagonism toward others, or decontextualisation (cf. Niklasson 2023, Bevernage et al. 2024). For example, people working at World War II heritage sites in Germany would expect to see an 'increased awareness'²⁴ of right-wing backlash if they focused on the victims of the Holocaust in their online posts. However, apart from a few attempts to hijack such content, the expected 'negative' consequences were often absent. The social media manager of a heritage site at a former concentration camp described how in various meetings staff had discussed countermeasures to respond to the populist hijacking of a particular hashtag for Holocaust remembrance. No hijacking took place when the museum's content was posted under this hashtag. However, the anticipation of such challenges is based on a diffuse knowledge of how social media platforms and certain discursive fields create an environment that attracts populist attacks (Krämer 2017). The public relations manager of a heritage site reflected:

With certain topics, it's easy to anticipate that critical comments might arise. However, that's not always the case. Sometimes, we share posts where the content isn't directly relevant, yet a critical comment is still made or published about an entirely different issue – something completely unexpected because there's no real connection to the original topic.²⁵

In our interviews, museum staff shared how populism impacts their work, but it became clear that understandings of populism are often vague and difficult to grasp. Populism in our interviews proved to be a 'slippery' category (Mazzarella 2019: 47), infused with many associations, perceptions, and feelings. The self-censorship and quiet transformations described in the previous section reflect changes to existing displays; in the cases described in this section, anticipation prevented certain new topics from being introduced and addressed.

Populist Traps

As populism is a 'slippery' or amorphous phenomenon, museum staff have very different and diverse understandings of populism and how it might affect their future work. Some interviewees referred to populism as the process of simplifying social and political complexities into polarising binaries or soundbites; others referred to it as a form of political engagement

tied to negative emotions, such as hatred and fear; while others still associated populism with the popular, drawing on nostalgic imaginations of the past, 'the People,' and 'the Homeland'. Heritage sites and museums may well reinforce these ideals (Macdonald 2013). These various understandings of populism shape what staff anticipate might happen and what they do to prevent it. Sometimes, while anticipating and trying to avoid one type of populist attack, museums unwittingly encounter populist attacks from other directions. We describe this phenomenon as a trap that museums fall into, which we illustrate using two examples.

In 2021, the Jane Austen House Museum (JAHM) was criticized by right-wing media when it announced that staff had rewritten two interpretative panels to include information about the Austen family's link to the Atlantic slave trade. This knowledge was already widely known in literary circles, but the museum's decision to rewrite the panels quickly became the subject of large-scale media criticism calling this a 'BLM-inspired interrogation'²⁶ and 'woke madness' (McGrath 2021).²⁷ As well as the '*furor*' from news media, as the director of the JAHM referred to it, the museum also received messages on social media and handwritten letters, one of which asked: 'How can you besmirch the name of such a kind and gentle lady? You should be ashamed of yourselves'.²⁸ Although the director giggled as she remembered the letter, the comment revealed a trap of populist anti-elitism: not all elitism is equally detestable, nor can staff predict which types of elitism will elicit backlash.

For example, it might be expected that a museum dedicated to telling the story of Jane Austen might be the subject of anti-elite populist criticism since Austen's work appeals predominantly to white, middle-class, educated readers, and the JAHM's visitor base reflects that.²⁹ However, the elitism represented by Jane Austen's work, and by extension, her image and home, was a source of pride, as the letter indicates.³⁰ Instead, the JAHM was targeted only when its practices were perceived to be influenced by the 'woke' left-wing elite's emphasis on historical recontextualization (or 'revisionism', according to populist critics). This is an example of Rogers Brubaker's (2020) two-dimensional axis of populist appeals to the people, which are constructed not just according to a vertical anti-elite, but also according to a horizontal axis of being anti-outsider. In this example, the outsiders are the 'woke' museum interrogators 'rewriting history' with 'revisionist attacks'. In other populist framings, these outsiders may be migrants, queer people, leftist activists, and others. We can thus observe a discrepancy between the anticipated and actual when it comes to populism's enemies. The targets of attacks shift constantly and unexpectedly.

Secondly, we see a trap in the claim of neutrality. Although many in the field now accept that museums are not neutral, in some of our conversations, museum staff emphasized that their institutions presented scientific facts, which some interviewees treated as tantamount to objective, neutral, or 'apolitical' knowledge. For example, '[visitors] know that a relatively large part [of the exhibition is based on knowledge] that is relatively factual and argues from a scientific, and not a political, perspective'.³¹ Some museums recruited the expertise of other disciplines as evidence for their claims to factuality: 'we have a large number of academic experts with whom we talk in order to bring in different perspectives [...], but we don't do that in order to propagate a normative moral opinion with a pointing finger in the end'.³²

To avoid moralizing finger-pointing, a curator suggested that objects can offer multiple viewpoints, and can therefore be politically neutral:

Fast fashion is a much-contested subject. We put a pair of those Primark jeans, bought on the British high street, on display. You might come to fast fashion and say it's a democratizing force, [that it] enables those on different incomes to express their sense of style and feel part of a changing community of fashion, or identity. Or, you might say fast fashion is enabling, or furthered by, an ignorance of labour rights and building regulations. That object [the pair of jeans] can hold both of those views, but it's about bringing information to that object so that those views can be either more strongly held, or more discursively held.³³

This curator argued that the museum should merely 'lay the facts' before visitors. Other practitioners reflected critically on how populist politics have made it impossible even to 'lay the facts' out, since populism creates 'a situation where there's no objectivity anymore and no one can judge what's actually a fact'.³⁴ Demonstrating this, one curator from the UK asked

the question: 'whose facts?'

Populism is a challenge to all of us today and museums. [...] So, what is our particular responsibility? [...] There is also a body of research that suggests that museums are respected in a digital age, because they are places of fact, or reliable knowledge. [...] I'd like to think so too, but whose facts? And so, it's those questions that we have to hold in perspective when we come to the subject of populism.³⁵

This curator showed that the question of neutrality or factuality is a red herring that distracts from questions of feeling, of personal stories, of opinion, since facts are themselves fallible and used to different ends by various groups. To make claims of neutrality because a display is based on 'facts' is to fall into the trap of imagining that neutrality can exist at all. Museum workers feel trapped in their roles: on the one hand, practitioners know that museums are not neutral spaces, on the other hand, museums are often expected to be places of fact and reliable knowledge. Museums fall further into the trap when they try to use facts to counterbalance populism.

Conclusion

While museums are always affected by the sociopolitical and institutional landscapes in which they operate, our study highlights the complex power dynamics in which museums are embedded within the current political climate, which is marked by the rise of right-wing populism. Previous research has focused on populism and cultural governance (Bonet and Zamorano 2021; Machcewicz 2021; Schramme and King 2022); forceful changes to museum narratives and exhibitions (Kobielska 2024: 321; Kazlauskaitė 2022; Radonić 2020; Siddi and Gaweda 2019); and museums being caught up in populist public discourses (Balkenhol and Modest 2020; Palonen 2018; Sindbæk 2022; Zabalueva 2019). Our research with museum professionals in Germany, Poland, and the UK reveals how populist politics impact museum work at its core: they directly affect museum staff through political violence and intimidation. They indirectly affect everyday museum work by creating uncertainty, negative anticipation, and avoidance.

Museum employees experience a range of potentially violent intervention strategies. These are intimidating and directly affect their work. However, we found that even in the absence of direct political interference, such as the replacement of museum directors, populism has diffuse effects. For example, museum directors make pre-emptive changes on their own initiative to remain 'safe' and appear 'apolitical'. Anticipating negative consequences and hostility, museum staff avoid certain topics in curatorial practice, particularly those related to migration, race, and gender. Museums can also fall into traps by anticipating and censoring themes that are not necessarily populist concerns while failing to anticipate those topics that are controversial. Populist politics seek to instrumentalize the 'neutrality' of museums for their own advantage.

Museums are never entirely free from political interference, and right-wing populism is not their only challenge, but it comes in tandem with a set of trials that affect museums more broadly. The change of government in Poland in 2023 illustrates this: while PiS has been replaced by a liberal-conservative coalition, the difficult situation for Polish museums described in this paper did not automatically end. Under the new government, museum management continues to change exhibitions and avoid topics which they anticipate might lead to hostility without being forced to do so by a populist government or policy. The rise of the right has proven to be effectively impactful on museums in the form of intimidation, anticipation, and fear. While we need more research into how fear and self-censorship work in institutional settings to erode democratic life, we also need to promote museums' counter-strategies and networks of solidarity that successfully defend the values of a pluralistic democratic society.

Appendix*Table 1: List of Interviews*

Interview	Position	Type of Institution	Country	Date
1	Educator	Art Museum	Poland	06.04.2021
2	Curator	Ethnographic Museum	Poland	25.05.2021
3	Social Media Manager	Technical Museum	Germany	26.05.2021
4	Director	Local History Museum	Germany	26.05.2021
5	Group interview: 2 Curators	Ethnographic Museum	Germany	16.06.2021
6	Public Relations Manager	Heritage Site/Former Concentration Camp	Germany	22.06.2021
7	Education Manager	Historical Museum	Poland	27.07.2021
8	Director	Local History Museum	Germany	04.08.2021
9	Public Relations and Social Media Manager	Heritage Site/Culture Centre/Museum	Germany	11.08.2021
10	Director	Art Museum	Germany	13.08.2021
11	Board Member	Community Museum	Germany	25.08.2021
12	Freelancer	Various Museums	UK	25.08.2021
13	Director	Historical Museum	Germany	08.09.2021
14	Director	Local History Museum	Germany	14.09.2021
15	Director	Ethnographic Museum	Germany	16.09.2021
16	Diversity Manager	Archaeological Museum	Germany	22.09.2021
17	Curator	Art Museum	Germany	22.09.2021
18	Director	Local History Museum	UK	27.09.2021
19	Director	Living Heritage Site	Germany	01.10.2021
20	Group interview: Public Relations Manager, Curator, Event Manager, Education Department Manager, Diversity Manager	Science Museum	Germany	04.10.2021
21	Curator	Art Museum	UK	05.10.2021
22	Director	Military Museum	Germany	13.10.2021
23	Director	Pop-up Museum	UK	09.11.2021
24	Freelancer	Heritage Site/Various	UK	09.11.2021
25	Deputy Director	Historical Museum	Poland	09.11.2021
26	Educator	National Museum	Poland	15.11.2021
27	Director	Military Museum	Germany	18.11.2021

28	Communications Manager	Social History Museum	UK	24.11.2021
29	Director	Art Museum	Poland	25.11.2021
30	Project Team Leader	Art Museum/Culture Centre	Poland	30.11.2021
31	Manager of Guided Tours	Heritage Site/Historical Museum	Poland	09.12.2021
32	Curator	Art Museum	Poland	13.12.2021
33	Curator	Art Museum	Poland	23.02.2022
34	Curator	Art Museum	Poland	10.03.2022
35	Director	Social History Museum	UK	11.03.2022
36	Education Manager	Art Museum	Poland	18.03.2022
37	Education Manager	Social History Museum	UK	12.04.2022
38	Director	Social History Museum	UK	23.06.2022
39	Manager	Local History Museum	UK	13.07.2022

Notes

- 1 The examples of political interference in museums in various political climates are numerous. In the UK, for example, in 2020 the Department for Culture, Media & Sport under then-Secretary Oliver Dowden sent a letter to all nationally-funded museums and galleries stating that they must retain objects with difficult, contested, or colonial histories. This was partially in response to the removal, covering, and defacing of objects, especially public monuments. See Oliver Dowden (2020), 'Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government position on contested heritage', Gov.uk 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-culture-secretary-on-hm-government-position-on-contested-heritage>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- 2 'Challenging Populist Truth-Making in Europe: The Role of Museums in a Digital "Post-Truth" European Society (CHAPTER)' is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (2020–2026). The project is based at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at Humboldt University Berlin, the Ludwig Uhland Institute for Historical and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Tübingen, the Jagiellonian University (JU) in Krakow, and University College London (UCL).
- 3 Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that systematically generates theory from data through iterative cycles of data collection and coding, allowing theoretical concepts to emerge organically from empirical evidence.
- 4 *Heimat* is a German concept that evokes a sense of home, belonging, and cultural identity, which is often tied to geography, tradition, and community. While it has diverse meanings, from personal attachment to a place to national identity, it was appropriated by the National Socialists to promote exclusionary, racialized ideals. Today, right-wing and conservative groups continue to use the term to marginalize certain populations, reinforcing nationalist and anti-immigrant narratives.
- 5 This quotation and others in this paragraph: Museum Director, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 4 August 2021, Germany.

- ⁶ Manager of Guided Tours, interview by Marlena Nikody, digital recording, 9 December 2021, Poland.
- ⁷ Museum Director, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 16 September 2021, Germany.
- ⁸ Michalina Murawska, 'Prace Natalii LL i Katarzyny Kozyra usunięte z Muzeum Narodowego' ['Works by Natalia LL and Katarzyna Kozyra Removed from the National Museum'], Vogue Polska 2019. <https://www.vogue.pl/a/prace-natalii-ll-i-katarzyny-kozyry-usuniete-z-muzeum-narodowego>, accessed 10 April 2025; Karol Sienkiewicz, 'Kto się boi bananów Natalii LL, czyli dulszczyzna i cenzura w Muzeum Narodowym. Dyrektor Miziołek wyskoczył przed szereg' ['Who's Afraid of Natalia LL's Bananas, i.e. Grundyism and Censorship at the National Museum. Director Miziołek Jumped Ahead of the Pack'], wyborcza.pl 2019. <https://wyborcza.pl/7.112588.24708236.kto-sie-boi-bananow-natalii-ll-czyli-dulszczyzna-i-cenzura.html>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ⁹ Director Miziołek decided to keep the works on display until the reconstruction of the Gallery of 20th and 21st Century Art. Later, the exhibition underwent a complete transformation which entailed the removal of the forementioned works. From a present-day perspective, the former director's decision can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to subdue the controversy surrounding this affair. See Oliwia Bosomtwe, 'Bananowe zwycięstwo. Dyrektor MNW przywraca kontrowersyjne prace' [Banana Victory. MNW Director Restores Controversial Works'], Noizz 2019. <https://noizz.pl/kultura/prace-natalii-ll-i-katarzyny-kozyry-powroca-na-wystawe-w-mnw/rmync51>, accessed 10 April 2025; Marcin Cichoński, 'Koniec "afery bananowej"? Instalacja Natalii LL wraca do Muzeum Narodowego. Jest OŚWIADCZENIE dyrektora' ['The End of the 'Banana Scandal'? Natalia LL's Installation Returns to the National Museum. There is a STATEMENT from the director'], Dziennik.pl 2019. <https://kultura.dziennik.pl/news/artykuly/596703.muzeum-narodowe-afery-bananowa-natalia-ll-banany-miziolek-gender-katarzyna-kozyra.html>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ¹⁰ Curator, interview by Marlena Nikody, digital recording, 13 December 2021, Poland.
- ¹¹ Under the PiS government, there was no formal censorship apparatus, as was the case, for instance, in the communist period prior to 1990.
- ¹² In 2016, thousands of Polish women wearing black protested against tighter abortion laws and the end of prenatal screening. These were called the Black Protests. See Agnieszka Wądołowska, 'The Symbols of Poland's Abortion Protests Explained', Notes from Poland 2020. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/10/30/the-symbols-of-polands-abortion-protests-explained/>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ¹³ Some of the largest demonstrations took place in the autumn rain, and as a result umbrellas became a symbol of the Black Protests.
- ¹⁴ Museum Educator, interview by Marlena Nikody, digital recording, 15 November 2021, Poland.
- ¹⁵ Museum Educator, interview, 15 November 2021, Poland.
- ¹⁶ The #lightforbelarus action consisted of decorating the headquarters and facilities of cultural institutions and public buildings in Poland, Europe, and the rest of the world with the colours of the historic white-red-white flag of Belarus. In Poland, the initiators of the action on 12 and 13 September were the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, and the National Centre for Culture.
- ¹⁷ The person speaks about the office of a *voivodeship marshal* (Polish: *marszałek województwa*), who is the head of the provincial government for each of the sixteen *voivodeships* of Poland.

- ¹⁸ Curator, interview by Marlena Nikody, digital recording, 13 December 2021, Poland.
- ¹⁹ Communications Manager, interview by Alice Millar, digital recording, 24 November 2021, UK.
- ²⁰ Museum Director, interview by Pia Schramm, digital recording, 26 May 2021, Germany.
- ²¹ Museum Director, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 16 September 2021, Germany.
- ²² Board member, interview by Pia Schramm, digital recording, 25 August 2021, Germany.
- ²³ Board member, interview 25 August 2021.
- ²⁴ Public Relations and Social Media Manager, interview by Pia Schramm, digital recording, 11 August 2021, Germany.
- ²⁵ Public Relations and Social Media Manager, 11 August 2021, Germany.
- ²⁶ William Cole, 'Jane Austen Museum Launches BLM-Inspired "Interrogation" of Author's love for Drinking Tea and Wearing Cotton Due to Slave Trade Links', Mail Online 2021. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9486419/Jane-Austen-museum-launches-BLM-inspired-interrogation-authors-love-drinking-tea.html>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ²⁷ Ciaran McGrath, "'Woke Madness" Jane Austen Faces "Historical Investigation" Over Father's Slave Trade Link', Daily Express 2021. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1424900/jane-austen-news-slave-trade-links-colonialism-chawton-woke-black-lives-matter-blm>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- ²⁸ Museum Director, interview by Alice Millar, digital recording, 11 March 2022, UK.
- ²⁹ Readers of Jane Austen are not limited to the upper class, and the numerous spin-offs of Austen's work have made her reach broader. The JAHM Director noted in our interview that, from informal observations, the class distinction in their visitor base is less pronounced than one might expect, perhaps owing to the 'element of Austen [that] seems like a Cinderella story' and to Austen's subtle critiques of the patriarchy and class system throughout her novels. Nevertheless, the director described the museum's visitor base as 'overwhelmingly white middle class'.
- ³⁰ Pride in figures like Austen is a key part of the formation of national identity and the feeling of being an insider, as Macdonald's text *Memorylands* (2013) demonstrates.
- ³¹ Diversity Manager, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 22 September 2021, Germany.
- ³² Curator, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 4 October 2021, Germany.
- ³³ Curator, interview by Alice Millar, digital recording, 5 October 2021, UK.
- ³⁴ Museum Director, interview by Julia Leser, digital recording, 13 August 2021, Germany.
- ³⁵ Curator, interview by Alice Millar, digital recording, 5 October 2021, UK.

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