Call for Papers Issue 2/2027 of Zeitschrift für Diversitätsforschung und -management

Backlash discourses: One step forward, two steps back?
Contestations around DEI in organizations

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Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) both as a goal of social movements and as part of organizational strategies has always been subject to cycles of attention – at times they gained momentum and visibility, at others they have been contested and challenged. Over recent decades, however, DEI initiatives have become increasingly institutionalized and differentiated in organizational contexts – at least in the Global North (Frieß et al. 2020). At the legal and political level, equality and diversity policies are firmly embedded in the European Union through extensive legislation, funding strategies, policy frameworks, and anti-discrimination regulations. Yet this development has been far from linear and has consistently been contested. It has long been marked by setbacks and counter-movements (Hark/Villa 2015) and is currently facing renewed and intensified attacks – not only in response to the repressive policies introduced since the inauguration of the current U.S. administration in 2025. In several countries – for instance Hungary, Poland, and Germany to name a few – public debates around diversity have become increasingly polarized, and political and legal achievements in the field of equality and diversity are being rolled back. From a historical perspective, resistance and backlash have always been part of broader societal struggles over equality and participation. This raises the question of what distinguishes the present moment, in which many commentators see intensified attacks on equality and diversity initiatives.

The aim of this special issue is, hence, to analyze, situate, and critically discuss developments that have increasingly been described in public discourse as a "DEI backlash." We seek contributions that examine the implication of this phenomenon for organizations and organization studies – also in its historical and political contexts. The current counter movement is neither unprecedented nor a uniquely U.S.-American phenomenon. Populist parties and their narratives targeting minority groups, alongside broader anti-democratic political forces, openly challenge achievements in equality and diversity policy and undermine such initiatives both overtly and covertly. Recent examples include the repression and criminalization of organizers and participants of the Budapest Pride in Hungary. Moreover, the rise of right-wing, racist, sexist, anti-LGBTIQA+, and fascist movements is not limited to the Global North but is also evident in the Global South (see Özbilgin in Ng et al. 2025a). Still, research on DEI in these geographical contexts – and particularly on backlash discourses – remains limited (see Lee 2023).

More broadly, DEI can be understood as a *traveling concept* (Bührmann 2020a; Czarniawska/Joerges 1996): a situated concept that emerges at a specific historical and geographical moment and is subsequently adapted, appropriated, contested, enacted, and implemented in different ways across contexts (see Bührmann 2020b: 65). Organizations respond to changing political and social environments in different ways. Some adapt their strategies by downsizing or renaming Diversity, Equity & Inclusion departments – for example, reframing them in terms of "belonging" – thereby rendering DEI strategies less visible. Others respond proactively by reaffirming and strengthening their commitment to DEI. These developments have recently been addressed in several scholarly interventions (Ng et al. 2025b; Aguinis et al. 2025).

With this special issue, we invite contributions that examine the polarization around DEI currently observable from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. We welcome submissions from all fields of research.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Conceptualizing backlash: How can the concept of 'backlash' be situated theoretically and empirically? What exactly do we refer to when we speak of backlash in the context of DEI? What societal and power-related struggles over participation underpin this phenomenon?

- Historical perspectives: How can the current backlash be characterized against the backdrop of a longer historical perspective? What contributions can (historical) discourse analyses of diversity management – its developments, interpretations, and societal tensions – make to understanding contemporary dynamics?

- Political and societal contexts: In what broader contexts of right-wing populism, autocratization, societal polarization, and anti-democratic movements can current developments be positioned in?

- Organizational dynamics: How are 'boundaries of the sayable' shifting within organizations? Do societal polarizations influence the implementation and acceptance of DEI initiatives within organizations?

- Organizational responses: How do organizations respond to changing geopolitical environments with regard to their DEI initiatives? What strategies can be identified, including deliberately taking a stance against the backlash? How do current backlash discourses affect DEI actors?

Submission types

For the double-blind peer-reviewed section of this special issue, we invite *full-length academic articles* with both theoretical-conceptual as well as empirical orientations. Manuscripts should be 35,000 to a maximum of 45,000 characters (including spaces).

In addition, we welcome short contributions from both academia and practice, including research project outlines, concise statements and (potentially provocative) position pieces, as well as practice-based examples and reports. These contributions should be 12,000 to 15,000 characters (including spaces). Contributions are possible in German as well as in English.

Submission process

The selection of contributions will follow a *two-stage review process*. For both submission categories, authors are initially invited to submit an extended abstract of approximately 400 words (excluding references) until 30 April 2026. Authors receive feedback on their proposals by 1 June 2026. Full-length academic articles must be submitted by 1 November 2026, short contributions must be submitted by 1 February 2027.

All submissions for this special issue – including proposals and completed manuscripts – should be sent by email to the guest editors. Also questions regarding this special issue can be directed to: Diversity_Heft227@proton.me

Further information on manuscript preparation and submission guidelines, as well as opportunities to submit open-topic contributions to this and other issues of ZDfm, can be found on the journal website under "Manuscript Submissions": zdfm.budrich-journals.de

We look forward to receiving your submissions.

The guest editors,

Helga Eberherr, Alexander Fleischmann, Wiebke Frieß

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