

English articles

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Articles of the week



Target is ending its diversity goals as a strong DEI opponent occupies the White House



By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Discount store chain Target said Friday that it would join rival Walmart and a number of other prominent American brands in scaling back diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives

that have come under attack from conservative activists and, as of this week, the White House.

The Minneapolis-based retailer said the changes to its “Belonging at the Bullseye” strategy would include ending a program it established to help Black employees build meaningful careers, improve the experience of Black shoppers and to promote Black-owned businesses following the police killing of George Floyd in 2020.

Target, which operates nearly 2,000 stores nationwide and employs more than 400,000 people, said it already had planned to end the racial program this year. The company said Friday that it also would conclude the diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, goals it previously set in three-year cycles.

The goals included hiring and promoting more women and members of racial minority groups, and recruiting more diverse suppliers, including businesses owned by people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, veterans and people with disabilities.

Target has long been a fierce corporate advocate for the rights of Black and LGBTQ+ people. In a memo to employees, Kiera Fernandez, Target's chief community impact and equity officer, described the DEI decisions as a “next chapter” in the company's decades-long process to create “inclusive work and guest environments that welcome all.”

“Many years of data, insights, listening and learning have been shaping this next chapter in our strategy,” Fernandez wrote in the memo, which Target shared Friday. “And as a retailer that serves millions of consumers every day, we understand the importance of staying in step with the evolving external landscape, now and in the future.”

There's no doubt the U.S. civil rights landscape has undergone a massive transformation in the five years since much of corporate America adopted DEI goals in response to the Black Lives Matter protests that followed Floyd's death in Minneapolis.

A 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed affirmative action in college admissions emboldened conservative groups to bring or threaten lawsuits targeting corporate initiatives such as employee resource groups and hiring practices that prioritize historically marginalized groups.

Walmart, McDonald's, Ford, Harley-Davidson and John Deere are among the well-known consumer brands that reduced or phased out their DEI commitments in recent months.

President Donald Trump this week signaled his administration's agreement with conservatives who argue that policies designed to increase minority representation by considering factors such as race, gender and sexual orientation are unconstitutional.

On his first day in office, Trump signed an executive order aimed at ending DEI programs across the federal government. The order calls for revoking all DEI mandates, policies, preferences and activities, along with the review and revision of existing employment practices, union contracts, and training policies or programs.

Still, some prominent companies have resisted public pressure to retreat from their diversity plans. On Thursday, Costco shareholders rejected a proposal urging the wholesale club operator to evaluate any risks posed by its diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

According to preliminary results shared by Costco executives, more than 98% of shares voted against the proposal submitted by a conservative think tank based in Washington. Costco's board of directors had recommended a no vote.

Apple's board and the CEO of JPMorgan bank also have expressed a commitment to preserving their companies' DEI activities.

Unlike some of the companies retooling or retiring their diversity initiatives, Target's work to build a more inclusive workforce predated 2020, and the company also was long seen as a trailblazer with respect to LGBTQ+ inclusion.

But the employee memo shared Friday said Target no longer would participate in surveys designed to gauge the effectiveness of its actions, including an annual index compiled by the Human Rights Campaign, a national LGBTQ+ rights organization. Target said it would further evaluate corporate partnerships to ensure they're connected directly to business objectives, but declined to share details.

Getting corporations to withdraw from the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index and to stop sponsoring Pride activities have been goals of DEI opponents.

Steering clear of a backlash from conservative customers and organizations is something that Target has tried to navigate for a while. As transgender rights became a more prominent issue in 2016, the company declared that "inclusivity is a core belief at Target" and said it supported transgender employees and customers using whichever restroom or fitting room "corresponds with their gender identity."

But after some customers threatened to boycott Target stores, the company said that more stores would make available a single-toilet bathroom with a door that could be locked.

In 2023, Target removed some of its Pride Month merchandise after online complaints and in-store confrontations that the retailer said threatened employees' well-being. The company decided last year not to stock Pride Month products at every U.S. store.

Poland wants the EU focused on security. Its border with Belarus highlights the challenges



By LORNE COOK Associated Press

POLOWCE, Poland (AP) — Poland's six-month presidency of the European Union is firmly focused on security. As Europe's biggest land war in decades rages, fewer places highlight the challenges and contradictions of defending the bloc and its values more starkly than the border with Belarus.

Some 13,000 border guards and soldiers protect around 400 kilometers (250 miles) of border. It's become a buffer zone since Belarus' ally, Russia, invaded neighboring Ukraine three years ago. Similar fortifications farther north line Poland's frontier with the Russian region of Kaliningrad.

Poland is Ukraine's top logistical backer. Most of the Western-supplied arms, ammunition and equipment helping to keep Ukraine's armed forces afloat transit through. Russia, meanwhile, uses Belarus as a staging ground for its invasion.

At the border near the town of Połowce, a 5.5-meter (18-foot) steel barrier strung with razor wire and topped by security cameras separates once-friendly communities that war has turned into wary rivals. Drones, helicopters and armored vehicles keep watch.

The border crossing is closed. Around 40 border guards and troops could be seen on Jan. 16, when the Polish EU presidency invited 60 reporters from international media to witness the security effort.

The road was strewn with layers of concrete obstacles and concertina wire likely to dissuade an advancing army. Border guards peered into Belarus.

It's needed, the government in Warsaw says, because Russia and Belarus are waging a particular kind of hybrid warfare: helping groups of migrants — mostly from Africa or the Middle East — to break through the border to provoke and destabilize Poland and the rest of Europe.

“We have tightened our visa policy, and above all we have decided to suspend the right to asylum wherever we are dealing with mass border crossings organized by Belarus and Russia,” Prime Minister Donald Tusk told reporters on Friday.

When migrants are equated with danger

Almost 30,000 attempted border crossings were spotted last year. Most are young men, often from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. Polish authorities say they arrive in Belarus on tourist or student visas and are helped across for a fee ranging from \$8,000 to \$12,000.

Poland says they're assisted by the Belarus security services and other “organizers.” They're mostly Ukrainians, perhaps fallen on hard times since fleeing the war. They can earn \$500 for each person they help, border officials say.

Border guards claim to be routinely attacked. One guard was killed last year and several injured.

They say that migrants shoot slingshots, throw small explosives or rocks, or use pepper spray on guards. More than 400 incidents were recorded last year in this section of the border, with 307 people hospitalized.

The deputy commander of the Podlaski border guard division, Col. Andrzej Stasiulewicz, said the migrants are hard to discourage. “Warning shots don't work, so force is needed,” he said. Reporters were shown video and photos purported to show migrants assailing the border.

Stasiulewicz said their actions are “very unpredictable, and very precise and coordinated.”

Medical aid group Doctors Without Borders paints a different picture. The charity says it's treated more than 400 people since November 2022, “many of them stranded for weeks in uninhabitable forests and exposed to violent practices at the border.”

People suffered from exhaustion, hypothermia, dehydration and mental health issues. Last year, it

noted “a sharp increase in people carrying the scars of physical assaults, including bruises and dog bites.”

It's almost impossible to independently verify such reports. The area is off limits. NGOs and media must apply for a permit to enter. EU and international agencies that work with migrants are not invited either, although migrants are provided with their contact details should they want to complain.

“Turnbacks” not “pushbacks,” Poland insists

Stasiulewicz said those who force their way in “are sent back to Belarus, which is in line with our legal framework.”

The Norwegian Refugee Council, a migrant aid charity, has another take. It said that nearly 9,000 “violent pushbacks ” have been reported by NGOs in what it describes as “Europe's death zone” since 2021.

Pushbacks – depriving someone who may be in fear for their safety of their right to apply for asylum – are illegal under international law.

Polish Undersecretary of State Maciej Duszczyk rejects the pushback allegations. He prefers “turnbacks.” The rationale is that migrants are obliged to apply for asylum in good faith at open border points, not force their way in.

The nearest place they can do that is in Terespol, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Połowce.

Halting asylum in the name of security

As far as the Polish authorities are concerned, their methods are working. The number of people arriving in Połowce has dropped significantly. Around 670 people applied for asylum there last year, and none to mid-January. The Office for Foreigners was empty when reporters visited.

To keep numbers down, the government intends to suspend asylum applications in times of crisis.

A draft law winding its way through parliament would see the border shut for 60 days if Warsaw suspects that migrants are being “weaponized” — should they approach the border in large groups, try to intimidate Polish officers or damage border infrastructure.

“If anyone uses violence against the border guards, we close the border,” Duszczyk said.

Doctors Without Borders says this could have “dramatic consequences.” It's urged Poland “to drastically change course of action” and do all it can to protect migrants and refugees.

But EU leaders signed off on Poland's actions at a summit last month. Countries on Europe's eastern flank received a greenlight to suspend the right to protection when they believe that Belarus and Russia are “ weaponizing” migrants.

When security and migration get political

Ultimately, security and migration policies are highly politicized. Tusk has been in power for more than a year but his party's candidate in a presidential election in May faces a strong challenge from a nationalist opponent.

The EU shifted further right in June after elections to the European Parliament, with nationalists and populists shaking Europe's foundations, particularly in major powers France and Germany. Tusk

believes that tough migration policy can win back voters.

“If we do not want to hand over these matters to radicals, extremists, populists, we must find the right answers so that no one in the world doubts that democratic states are able to effectively defend themselves against illegal migration,” he said on Friday.

He described the “tough protection” of borders as a “sacred duty.” Poland's borders also make up the 27-nation EU's external frontier. For Tusk, his country's security is Europe's security. It's a similar argument made by Hungary's staunchly nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orbán.

Associated Press writers Monika Scislowska and Vanessa Gera in Warsaw contributed to this report.

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