



Universities, science and territory in the face of the new right: a warning from Argentina

The call for the fifth Federal University March, scheduled for 15 October, offers an opportunity to question the place of public universities and scientific systems in the political projects of the Latin American right and far right. In Argentina, the demand for compliance with the University Funding Law and for the restoration of salaries is part of a dispute over the conditions needed to sustain knowledge production and higher education. Javier Milei's government allows us to examine this dispute through a specific experience that can be considered alongside the Brazilian precedent under Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. The hypothesis guiding this reflection is that the combination of budget restrictions and challenges to the legitimacy of academic institutions may undermine public capacities that are essential to decisions about our countries' development. From a geographical perspective, we are interested in examining how these decisions change the possibilities of understanding territories, recognising their inequalities and developing responses to their transformations. Universities and scientific organisations contribute to this relationship through research and training activities that maintain connections with specific social problems. The training of technicians and specialists in our institutions ensures a perspective committed to defending sovereignty in its economic, political, scientific and technological, environmental, educational and cultural, food and territorial dimensions, among others. In this sense, the march provides an occasion to discuss the scope of current policies and their consequences for capacities accumulated over decades, whose continuity depends on funding and on the work of those who sustain them. Its regional relevance stems from the questions it raises about the future of public education and the autonomy of scientific production.

The scale of the deterioration in Argentina allows us to define the terms of this discussion more precisely. According to the Grupo Economía, Política y Ciencia, cumulative expenditure under the Science and Technology Function of the National Public Administration between January and August 2026 was 47.6 % below that of the same period in 2023, in real terms. For national universities, CONADU's Institute for Studies and Training (CONADU is Argentina's principal federation representing university lecturers and researchers) provides another measure of the cuts: between January and May 2026, national government transfers had fallen by 28.2 % in real terms compared with the same period in 2023. The deterioration also affects working conditions. In August, the EPC group estimated a loss of purchasing power of 40.3 % relative to November 2023 for CONICET researchers and support staff, while the decline for the benchmark university post, that of profesor adjunto with an exclusive full-time appointment and ten years of service, reached 25 %. CONADU demanded a salary increase of 33.4 % to

make up for the losses caused by the inflationary process initiated by the current government and by salary cuts. Nor does the budget outlook indicate a uniform recovery: the EPC group's analysis of the proposed 2027 budget estimates funding for universities at 21.2 % below the 2023 level. In September 2026, the CIN (National Interuniversity Council) requested 11 trillion Argentine pesos for the next fiscal year, an amount that, according to the council, exceeds the executive branch's proposal by 33 %. The available data, however, already indicate that financial uncertainty and declining salaries undermine the conditions for sustaining teams, planning research and conducting the academic year normally. This directly affects continuity in capacity building, which requires extended periods of time.

National universities play a central role in reproducing capacities. Their classrooms train professionals and researchers, while their institutes and laboratories sustain a substantial share of knowledge production, often in collaboration with CONICET and other public organisations. In March 2026, the CIN and the Argentine Network of Heads of Science and Technology Institutes warned of the risks that underfunding poses to established projects and teams. The IEC-CONADU report shows that, during the first five months of 2026, expenditure on university scholarships had fallen by 85.6 % in real terms compared with the same period in 2023, while the university infrastructure investment appropriation examined showed no expenditure at all. The territorial dimension deserves particular attention. The presence of universities in different provinces and in the metropolitan periphery of Buenos Aires brings educational opportunities closer to populations that would face greater difficulties in travelling and makes it possible to establish links with local institutions. The weakening of scholarships and infrastructure deepens inequalities where educational alternatives are more limited. As the IEC itself argues, guaranteeing the right to higher education requires attention to retention and graduation as well as opportunities for admission. From this perspective, tuition-free education requires material conditions that enable students to sustain their educational trajectories. Public universities constitute a social infrastructure of territories, whose capacity to act depends on resources and relationships built over time, and whose continuity requires policies that sustain both academic work and the right to study.

In Brazil, the deterioration of university funding preceded Bolsonaro's government. Constitutional Amendment 95, approved in 2016, established a ceiling on federal primary expenditure for twenty years; this was subsequently replaced by a new fiscal framework in 2023. During Bolsonaro's presidency (2019-2022), however, resource restrictions were combined with an explicit offensive against the legitimacy of public universities. In 2019, the Ministry of Education announced freezes affecting approximately 30 % of federal universities' discretionary resources, meaning appropriations intended, among other purposes, for services, maintenance and operations, rather than 30 % of those institutions' total budgets. The nationwide mobilisations of 15 and 30 May that year demonstrated the breadth of resistance among students, teaching staff and the scientific community. In 2022, the magazine *Pesquisa FAPESP* reported the freezing of approximately 1,794 million reais from the budget of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations. These episodes show how uncertainty about the actual availability of resources hinders the continuity of university projects, laboratories and services.

Pressure on institutions also affected their governance mechanisms. According to a survey released by the National Association of Heads of Federal Higher Education Institutions (Andifes), between 2019 and 2021 Bolsonaro selected candidates who had not won their academic communities' internal consultations in 18 out of 50 rector appointments. Although presidential appointment was provided for in Brazilian legislation, these decisions intensified conflicts over university autonomy and the representation of teaching staff, students and technical and administrative personnel. In research, the confrontation with the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) became particularly significant in connection with data monitoring Amazon deforestation, which make it possible to document environmental transformations and guide public enforcement. Ricardo Galvão's removal in 2019, after he defended the data challenged by Bolsonaro, shows how the dissemination of findings can conflict with government priorities and illustrates why the autonomy of scientific organisations also depends on their ability to release results that contradict the government's interests.

In Argentina, Milei's address in Davos in January 2025 included educational institutions among the spaces supposedly dominated by the "woke" left. Both cases allow us to examine the political dimension of the conflict through challenges to the authority of institutions when their knowledge or practices contradict the government's policy direction. The evidence from these episodes provides a basis for discussing pressures on scientific production while preserving the differences between national experiences. Institutional autonomy requires resources for research and conditions for communicating results, including those that make political authorities uncomfortable. Its weakening restricts the possibilities of participating in public debates on territorial uses and their social and environmental consequences.

Far-right governments have a major problem with truth, and even more so with scientific truth. They habitually deny scientific evidence through their opinions, claiming that truths impede the progress of capitalism. The problem takes on greater depth when material restrictions are combined with discourses that cast suspicion on institutions of knowledge. The comparison requires recognition of the differences and the antecedents of austerity policies, but it is relevant and necessary for identifying how budget pressure and public delegitimation can converge on institutional autonomy, affecting both research conditions and the possibilities of participating in debates on territorial uses and their consequences.

The territorial dimension of public universities is particularly important in the Brazilian case. The expansion of the federal network that began in 2003, the Programme to Support Restructuring and Expansion Plans for Federal Universities (Reuni), established in 2007, and the creation of universities and campuses in the country's interior extended the presence of federal higher education beyond state capitals and traditional metropolitan centres. This expansion improved access for students who had previously needed to move to other cities and strengthened research and university outreach activities connected with agrarian, urban, environmental and social problems in different regions. Its continuity, however, requires stable funding, student retention policies and working conditions for lecturers, researchers and technical staff. Budget restrictions therefore do not have territorially uniform consequences: they may be especially severe where federal institutions constitute one of the few public infrastructures for higher education and knowledge production. The Latin American implications of these processes must be situated within the context of an unequal distribution of scientific

capacities. According to El Estado de la Ciencia 2025, Brazil accounted for 62.5 % of Latin America and the Caribbean's investment in research and development in 2023, while Argentina and Mexico each accounted for around 10 %. This concentration helps explain the regional relevance of the transformations affecting our principal systems.

From a geographical perspective, we are interested in considering what happens to our societies' capacity to produce information about their own territories and use it in public decision-making. Research into urban and agrarian transformations or environmental change requires teams capable of maintaining observation series, conducting fieldwork, testing explanations and communicating findings. Interrupting these activities reduces the tools available to communities and local governments and increases their dependence on knowledge and technologies produced outside the region. This dependence is a risk that needs to be examined, whose intensity will vary according to the characteristics of each country and each research field. In this context, defending public universities and science means sustaining the conditions for broadening access to education and preserving the autonomy of knowledge, while discussing its priorities and its relationship with social needs. Such autonomy is a condition for critically assessing public policies and participating in the definition of development alternatives. Latin American cooperation can expand these possibilities through the exchange of knowledge and the construction of shared agendas grounded in our own capacities. The Argentine march of 15 October provides an opportunity to bring this discussion into the Latin American and Caribbean sphere. What is at stake is the possibility of preserving and developing our own capacities to understand the transformations of our territories and participate in the decisions that shape their future.

The weakening of universities and the scientific system erodes the conditions that enable the exercise of sovereignty, reducing the capacity to produce our own knowledge, assess technological alternatives and decide on territorial transformations.

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