

# [***In Argentina, the government's austerity plan hits universities and provokes student protests***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BW0-S0S1-DYMD-649X-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina — Argentina's libertarian [*President Javier Milei*](https://apnews.com/article/javier-milei-profile-argentina-election-82488d49cca5aee10d4b911bde530922) has tried to dismiss the worsening budget crisis at public universities as ***politics*** as usual, a contest with his leftist political rivals who hold sway over liberal campuses.

It does not feel that way to many of the students at the elite University of Buenos Aires, where halls went dark, elevators froze and air conditioning stopped working in some buildings last week. Professors taught 200-person lectures without microphones or projectors because the public university — among the best in Latin America — couldn't cover its electricity bill.

“This is an unthinkable crisis,” said Valeria Añón, a 50-year-old literature professor protesting Milei's austerity measures in downtown Buenos Aires with thousands of others on Tuesday. “I feel so sad for my students and for myself."

In his drive to reach zero deficit, Milei is [*slashing spending across Argentina*](https://apnews.com/article/milei-economy-union-protests-strike-jobs-state-argentina-6b9b41603dcc2b9cbcf23e5654bd4e30) — shuttering ministries, defunding cultural centers, laying off state workers and cutting subsidies. On Monday he had something to show for it, announcing Argentina’s first quarterly fiscal surplus since 2008.

“We are making possible the impossible even with the majority of ***politics***, unions, the media and most economic actors against us,” he said in a televised address.

Crowds of university students and professors walked out of class Tuesday in a massive display of defiance, joining thousands of demonstrators streaming into the city center. Some privately financed schools closed in solidarity. Protests also gripped other cities in Argentina. “The university will defend itself!” students shouted.

“We are trying to show the government it cannot take away our right to education,” said Santiago Ciraolo, a 32-year-old student in social communication protesting Tuesday. “Everything is at stake here.”

In a sign of the larger ideological battle at play, members of trade unions and left-wing parties also filled the streets. Describing universities as bastions of socialism where professors indoctrinate their students, Milei has accused his political enemies of fomenting discontent. “The cognitive dissonance that brainwashing generates in public education is tremendous,” he said.

Since last July, when the fiscal year began, the 200-year-old University of Buenos Aires, or UBA, has received just 8.9% of its total budget from the state as [*annual inflation*](https://apnews.com/article/argentina-inflation-december-annual-milei-economic-measures-68f27bf0473590fabb5b6c1aff80579f) now hovers near 290%. The university says that's barely enough to keep lights on and provide basic services in teaching hospitals that have already cut capacity.

Declaring a financial emergency, UBA warned last week that without a rescue plan, the school would shut down in the coming months, stranding 380,000 students mid-degree. It's a shock for Argentines who consider a free and quality university education a national birthright. UBA has a proud intellectual tradition, having produced five Nobel Prize winners and 17 presidents.

“I've been given access to a future, to opportunities through this university that otherwise my family and many others at our income level could never afford,” said Alex Vargas, a 24-year-old economics student. “When you step back, you see how important this is for our society.”

President Milei came to power last December, inheriting an economy in shambles after years of chronic overspending and suffocating international debt. Brandishing a chainsaw during his campaign to symbolize slashing the budget, he repeats a simple catchphrase to compatriots reeling budget cuts and the peso’s 50% devaluation: “There is no money.”

Overall, Argentina puts about 4.6% of its gross domestic product into education. Critics of the university system say the budget cuts also are an attempt to raise efficiency and increase fiscal transparency. Some want foreign students to start paying dues. Public universities are free not only for Argentines but also for international pupils, drawing legions of students from across Latin America, Spain and further afield.

“Where I'm from, high-quality education is unfortunately a privilege, not a basic right," said Sofia Hernandez, a 21-year-old from Bogota, Colombia studying medicine at UBA. “In Argentina there is a model that I wish more countries could have.”

The government said late Monday it was sending some $24.5 million to public universities and another $12 million to keep medical centers operating. “The discussion is closed and settled,” presidential spokesperson Manuel Adorni said Tuesday.

University authorities disagreed, saying the promised transfer — which they still have not received — covers just a fraction of what they need. For UBA, that means a 61% annual budget cut, when accounting for inflation.

It also won't help the income of teachers who have seen their salary decline in value more than 35% in the past four months, said Matías Ruiz, UBA's treasury secretary. Staff salaries can be as low as $150 a month. Many teachers juggle multiple jobs just to scrape by, and they wonder if they'll get any salary all next month.

“This has a major impact on our research, on the projects and academic activities we're able to do,” said Ines Aldao, a 44-year-old literature professor at UBA. “We've had funding and salary freezes under previous right-wing governments but these cuts are three times worse.”

The angry laborers, professors and students snaking through the capital's streets just hours after Milei declared economic victory from his presidential palace put the government's precarious balancing act on vivid, split-screen display Tuesday.

“We are building a new era of prosperity in Argentina,” Milei said in his national address. Boasting that Argentina had posted a quarterly fiscal surplus of 0.2% of gross domestic product, the president promised the public that the pain would pay off.

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