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Disciplining knowledge: the emergence of an ideological–punitive regime in global higher education

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that a new ideological–punitive regime is reshaping higher education governance by combining market instruments with increasingly coercive, identity-driven State interventions. It asks how a new ideological–punitive regime is reshaping higher education governance beyond neoliberal market logics, and through which convergent and divergent mechanisms this occurs across national systems. It draws on a qualitative comparative analysis of eight cases—Argentina, Brazil, Hungary, India, Israel, Poland, Spain/Madrid, and the United States—based on official policy documents, Scholars at Risk reports, and verifiable high-quality journalistic sources. Drawing on theories of hegemony, agenda control, and State power, it develops a framework explaining how coercive, organisational, and symbolic mechanisms recalibrate the balance between consent and coercion within universities. These mechanisms weaken collegial governance, erode peer review, and generate chilling effects that reconfigure academic work, institutional autonomy, and international collaboration. The findings show that contemporary interventions exceed the logic of neoliberal market governance, forming a hybrid order—neoliberalism-plus—in which metrics and competition persist but become subordinated to identity agendas and tests of cultural orthodoxy. By clarifying how punitive repertoires operate and circulate across contexts, the article contributes to scholarship on institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and the political economy of knowledge. It concludes by outlining strategies to strengthen organisational resilience and safeguard universities as critical, democratic, and globally connected public institutions.

Resumen

Este artículo sostiene que un nuevo régimen ideológico-punitivo está reconfigurando el gobierno de la educación superior mediante la combinación de instrumentos de mercado con intervenciones estatales cada vez más coercitivas e impulsadas por agendas identitarias. Se pregunta cómo este nuevo régimen ideológico-punitivo está transformando el gobierno de la educación superior más allá de las lógicas de mercado neoliberales, y a través de qué mecanismos convergentes y divergentes ocurre esto en distintos sistemas nacionales. El análisis se apoya en una comparación cualitativa de ocho

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casos —Argentina, Brasil, Hungría, India, Israel, Polonia, España/Madrid y Estados Unidos— a partir de documentos oficiales, informes de Scholars at Risk y fuentes periodísticas verificables de alta calidad. A partir de las teorías de la hegemonía, control de la agendas, asi como de Estado y poder, el artículo desarrolla un marco explicativo sobre cómo los mecanismos coercitivos, organizacionales y simbólicos redefinen el equilibrio entre el consenso y la coerción al interior de las universidades. Estos mecanismos debilitan el gobierno colegiado, erosionan la evaluación por pares y generan efectos inhibidores que reconfiguran el trabajo académico, la autonomía institucional y la colaboración internacional. Los hallazgos muestran que las intervenciones contemporáneas exceden la lógica del gobierno de mercado neoliberal, configurando un orden híbrido —neoliberalismo-plus— en el que las métricas y la competencia persisten, pero quedan subordinadas a agendas identitarias y pruebas de ortodoxia cultural. Al clarificar cómo los repertorios punitivos operan y circulan entre contextos, el artículo contribuye a la literatura especializada sobre autonomía institucional, libertad académica y economía política del conocimiento. Concluye esbozando estrategias para fortalecer la resiliencia organizacional y salvaguardar las universidades como instituciones públicas críticas, democráticas y conectadas globalmente.

1. Introduction

Over the last four decades, public universities have been reorganised by an economising regime that fused internal quasi-markets, human-capital reasoning and metric-driven governance with the techniques of New Public Management. This configuration privileged competitive funding, indicator-based evaluation and accountability scripts that displaced collegial deliberation with compliance audits and reporting, while rankings and bibliometrics consolidated English as a global lingua franca and entrenched a 'super-league' of research universities that set symbolic and material benchmarks for the rest (Marginson 2026; Marginson and Ordorika 2011; Rhoades 1998; Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

Building on this trajectory, the paper argues that we have entered a new ideological–punitive phase in which market instruments persist but are subsumed by identity-driven campaigns and State coercion—financial sanctions, regulatory bottlenecks and cultural loyalty tests—geared to disciplining the production of knowledge (Marginson 2026; Scholars at Risk 2025).

The analysis rests on a comparative empirical mapping conducted through systematic searches of public, verifiable sources—official government documents and communiqués, reports from Scholars at Risk, peer-reviewed scholarship and high-standard press coverage—focusing on conservative and far-right interventions in higher education between 2019 and 2026. Case selection followed three inclusion criteria: (a) the presence of measures or proposals with fiscal, regulatory, security or symbolic effects on universities; (b) high-level programmatic statements by heads of government, State or regional authorities conditioning funding, regulation, curriculum or reputation; and (c) source traceability with at least minimal cross-reference.

Priority was given to Scholars at Risk reports and official documents. Limitations include the evolving nature of political dynamics, editorial deadlines and the necessarily selective scope of a global comparison. The resulting corpus centres on eight contexts—United States, Brazil, Spain/Madrid, Argentina, Hungary, Poland, India and Israel—where convergent repertoires of intervention emerge: selective defunding, governance re-engineering, curricular surveillance, criminalisation of protest and reputational stigmatisation that recast universities as 'ideological,' 'anti-national' or 'captured' spaces.

This article is guided by two interrelated research questions: (1) How is a new ideological–punitive regime reshaping higher education governance beyond neoliberal market mechanisms? (2) Which coercive, organisational, and symbolic instruments recur across national systems, and how do their intensity and form vary across contexts?

The objectives are threefold: first, to conceptualise the ideological–punitive regime as a distinct configuration situated within—but not reducible to—neoliberal governance; second, to identify a transnational repertoire of policy instruments through a comparative analysis of eight cases; and third, to assess the implications of this regime for institutional autonomy, academic work, and international knowledge circulation.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on theories of hegemony, agenda control, and State power. Section 3 situates the emergence of the ideological–punitive turn historically, with particular attention to neoliberal modernisation and the genealogy of culture-war politics. Section 4 presents the comparative cases and develops a typology of intervention mechanisms. Section 5 interprets these findings in terms of political economy and global knowledge hierarchies. The conclusion discusses the limits and possibilities of institutional agency under conditions of heightened coercion.

Conceptually, the article introduces the notion of an ideological–punitive regime—understood as a hybrid order in which market mechanisms persist but are subordinated to identity-driven State coercion.

2. Theory: coercion and hegemony as alternate state strategies

Research on university governance has typically moved between organizational frames –bureaucratic, collegial, political, and the 'garbage can' models of organisational choice, alongside related symbolic and broader social–historical approaches. Each carries distinct assumptions about power, conflict, and change, and each, on its own, is insufficient to explain how states shape universities (Baldridge 1971; Cohen and March 1974; Hardy 1990; Ordorika 2003).

Universities are not merely technical organizations, but State institutions embedded in historically specific struggles. Understanding change demands attention to (a) the instrumental role of elites and bureaucracies; (b) agenda control through decisions and non-decisions; and (c) the cultural construction of dominant identities that naturalize specific governance arrangements (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Lukes 1974; Ordorika 2003).

Hegemony is rule through intellectual–moral leadership: dominant groups secure consent by shaping meanings, identities, and the 'common sense' of an institution (Gramsci 1971; Ordorika 2003). In universities, dominant actors select and institutionalize a 'tradition' and a compelling institutional 'sagas' that stabilize loyalty to a given order (Clark 1972; Williams 1977). As Lukes (1974, 20–29) emphasises, power operates not only through observable decisions but through the structuring of agendas and the normalisation of exclusions—a distinction central to understanding contemporary State interventions in universities.

Coercion refers to the direct imposition of will via fiscal conditionality, legal–regulatory redesign, or security measures. It tends to escalate when hegemonic consent thins or when counter-projects gain traction (Ordorika 2003; Poulantzas 1978). Under coercion, instrumental power and agenda control remain central. Interventions, however, are commonly pre-legitimated with narratives of neutrality, merit, efficiency, or security that justify restricting fields, re–engineering governance, or curtailing protest (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Lukes 1974; Ordorika 2003).

2.1. Situating the new 'ideological-coercive' mode

The contemporary regime described in this article—variously labelled ideological-punitive[1] or neoliberalism-plus—does not abandon hegemony; it instrumentalizes it (Marginson 2026; Ordorika 2003). Discourses of excellence, neutrality, and national identity remain, but they serve increasingly to authorize earlier and more routine use of coercive levers such as funding conditionality, accreditation bottlenecks, curricular policing, and securitization of dissent (Marginson 2026; Scholars at Risk 2025).

Hence, today's shift is best understood as a recalibration toward 'more coercion with persistent (thinner) hegemony'— a hybrid in which ideological narratives provide cover while institutional tools discipline knowledge production and international cooperation (Ordorika 2003; Marginson 2026).

2.2. Disciplined leaders' 'self-determining' behaviors

Mechanisms that translate State strategies into predictable leadership conduct include: (a) executive-centered statutes and governing boards that centralize appointments and make rectors/deans dependent on elite confidence; (b) agenda gatekeeping via procedural filters (urgency frames, admissibility rules) that truncate deliberation; and (c) cultural scripting that moralizes managerial compliance through myths of de-politicization and excellence (Clark 1972; Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Ordorika 2003).

These mechanisms elicit anticipatory compliance and self-censorship—leaders 'choose' strategies that align with hegemonic expectations because statutes, incentives, and reputational economies make other choices costly (Lukes 1974; Ordorika 2003).

2.3. Propositions for the comparative analysis

The dynamics of hegemony and coercion do not operate as abstract principles but crystallise in concrete patterns that condition how universities experience pressure, negotiate constraints, and respond to State strategies. Taken together, the three dimensions of power—instrumental, agenda-setting, and cultural—generate observable regularities in the ways governance structures shape autonomy, peer review, and leadership practices across systems. These propositions serve as analytical anchors for interpreting the cross-national repertoires described in Section 4, providing a conceptual through-line between the hegemonic model and the contemporary ideological-coercive regime (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Clark 1972; Lukes 1974; Ordorika 2003).

i Hegemony and coercion co–evolve: when consent thins, coercive tools expand, yet ideological narratives are retained and repurposed to normalize intervention (Ordorika 2003; Poulantzas 1978).
ii Agenda control is the hinge: who sets the agenda—and what is excluded—predicts trajectories of autonomy, peer review, and knowledge pluralism (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Lukes 1974).
iii Leadership is governed by design: appointment architectures and executive-heavy statutes reliably yield self-disciplining behaviours among university leaders, even in formally autonomous settings (Clark 1972; Ordorika 2003).

These propositions inform the comparative analysis by identifying observable indicators: fiscal conditionality and accreditation redesign (instrumental power), procedural gatekeeping and governance engineering (agenda control), and narrative stigmatisation of institutions or disciplines (hegemonic power). The cases examined differ not in the presence of these mechanisms, but in their configuration, intensity, and degree of institutionalisation.

3. Methodology and case selection

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design aimed at identifying recurrent and divergent policy repertoires shaping higher education governance. The analysis is based on systematic examination of publicly available and verifiable sources, including official government documents and legislative records, reports by Scholars at Risk, and high–standard journalistic coverage from internationally recognised media outlets. These sources were triangulated to ensure accuracy and traceability.

Eight cases were selected—Argentina, Brazil, Hungary, India, Israel, Poland, Spain (Community of Madrid), and the United States—because they exhibit distinct yet comparable repertoires of ideological–punitive intervention, including selective defunding, governance re-engineering, curricular surveillance, criminalisation of protest, and reputational stigmatisation. The selection is not intended to be exhaustive, but analytically representative of transnational strategies currently reshaping higher education.

The inclusion of Madrid reflects its substantial regulatory, fiscal, and discursive authority over public universities within Spain, making it a meaningful sub-national case for analysing state-level ideological intervention in higher education.

The analysis is limited by the evolving nature of political contexts and by asymmetries in data availability across countries. While journalistic and NGO sources have limitations, their use is justified by the public and verifiable character of the interventions analysed and by their systematic triangulation with official documents.

In preparing this manuscript, I made limited and fully accountable use of generative-AI tools in line with the expectations set by the Taylor & Francis AI Policy. DeepL (Version 26.1.33715377) was employed to generate initial translations of selected material from Spanish into English; translation was carefully reviewed against the original text and manually edited to ensure accuracy, nuance, and disciplinary precision. Microsoft Copilot (M365 Copilot, GPT-5–based) was used to assist with stylistic refinement, including improvements to clarity, coherence, and paragraph structure. All AI-assisted outputs were thoroughly checked, revised, and incorporated by the author, who retains full responsibility for the manuscript's accuracy, integrity, and originality.

4. Historical context: from markets to punitive sanctions

Between 1980 and 2020, a regime of commodification of university life took hold, reconfiguring institutional priorities, incentives, and language. In terms of policy, it combined market governance with new public management (NPM): competitive funding, indicator-based evaluation, programme contracts, and accountability mechanisms that shifted academic deliberation towards evaluation processes and report generation. On campuses, internal quasi-markets expanded to compete for positions, incentives, and resources; business control techniques were imported; and the idea took hold that university legitimacy derives from efficiency and measurable impact.

This pattern translated into three policy axes. First, funding and governance: allocation of resources based on performance, competition for competitive funds, expansion of extra-budgetary income, and management aligned with quantified objectives. Second, the commodification of knowledge: the notion of 'human capital' and the promotion of innovation as a lever for growth placed research and professional training in the realm of private returns; the literature referred to these trajectories of commercialisation and university-market integration as academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Third, evaluative standardisation: the culture of rankings and bibliometrics encouraged 'publish or perish', homogenised notions of quality, and shifted peer review towards compliance audits. These three axes reinforced each other and produced a governance practice in which measurement and competition replaced deliberation and professional judgement (Ordorika 2007).

Global dynamics reinforced this drift through rankings[2] that standardised criteria—with English as *the lingua* franca—and crystallised a 'super league' of research universities that set symbolic and material benchmarks for the rest (Marginson and Ordorika 2011; Ordorika and Lloyd 2015).

The impacts were profound and uneven. Competition for scarce resources favoured areas with greater fundraising capacity and relegated socially crucial functions—basic research, social sciences, arts and humanities, outreach. In academic work, managerialism added layers of control, multiplied administrative burdens and eroded substantive autonomy; precariousness and segmentation strained collegial life and shifted risks to sectors with less bargaining power (Rhoades 1998; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). On the epistemic level, the emphasis on metrics and immediate relevance skewed agendas toward the short term and lines with quantifiable visibility, with effects on intellectual diversity and non–market-oriented research. In the geopolitics of knowledge, rankings and mobility consolidated centre-periphery hierarchies (Marginson and Ordorika 2011).

These impacts were unevenly distributed across regions, and nowhere more distinctively than in Latin America, where neoliberal modernisation collided with an institutional tradition that differed markedly from the Anglo-Saxon model: the university as a building institution (Ordorika 2013; Ordorika and Pusser 2007), grounded in autonomy, co-government, academic freedom, and a historical commitment to social relevance (Brunner 2007). From this perspective, higher education is not only a space for competition for resources or indicators, but also a field of political dispute where the meaning of the institution, its public mission, and its link with society are defined (Ordorika 2001; Ordorika and LLoyd 2014). University modernisation in the region followed a dual trajectory: on the one hand, commercialisation, advanced private expansion, competitive financing, evaluative standardisation; on the other, ideological repertoires emerged, conditioning resources, rules, and reputation to cultural and political alignments. Globalisation imposed a normative hegemony centred on the US model and on ranking measurements (ARWU, THE, QS), weakening local roots and reorienting agendas towards fields with greater international visibility (Ordorika 2006, 2018). This trajectory—marked by commodification, standardisation pressure, and persistent institutional stratification—left public universities in the region in a particularly vulnerable position when the ideological–punitive turn intensified in recent years.

Yet the ideological contestation of universities did not emerge suddenly in the 2020s. Its genealogy can be traced to the late 1980s in the United States, when a series of disputes over curricula, freedom of expression, and access left a lasting mark on the relationship between academia, politics, and culture. Hunter (1991) popularised the term ‘culture wars’ as a struggle for the moral definition of the public sphere between ‘orthodox’ and ‘progressive’ views, and the label gained programmatic force with Pat Buchanan’s (1992) proclamation of a ‘cultural war for the soul of America,’ establishing the university as the privileged arena of dispute.

The conflict surrounding the ‘Western Culture’ requirement at Stanford crystallised the curricular stakes: student demonstrations in 1987 prompted its replacement with Cultures, Ideas & Values, integrating minority authorship and gender perspectives. Conservatives denounced this as politicisation and relativism (Bloom 1987; D’Souza, 1991; Stanford Libraries, 1987/1988). Progressive scholars, by contrast, embraced the reform as an overdue opening of the canon toward marginalized voices and a recognition of education as inherently political (Giroux 1992; hooks 1994). Affirmative action in university admissions—most notably at the University of California in 1995—became a further flashpoint (Pusser 2004).

Three axes normalised the interference of public authorities and external actors in the governance of knowledge and standardised practices that reappear today: (i) displacement of peer review by ideological criteria; (ii) use of codes and regulations to control discourse and behaviour; (iii) re-stratification of access and funding through thresholds and merit rules (Ordorika 2001). In sum, the ‘culture wars’ inaugurated a mode of governing through cultural struggle—a direct precursor of today’s ideological–punitive regime, in which the battle over meaning becomes the privileged mechanism for ordering, constraining, and disciplining academic life.

5. The new ideological battles

The ideological-punitive phase facing universities today constitutes a transnational synchrony in which conservative and far-right governments, national-identity coalitions and anti-intellectual movements deploy converging repertoires to reorder the production of knowledge. Comparable patterns emerge, such as selective defunding, regulatory restrictiveness, institutional engineering, stigmatisation campaigns and cultural battles aimed at disciplining areas, academic bodies and agendas considered ‘deviant’ or ‘anti-national’ (Scholars at Risk 2025).

This climate combines late neoliberal policies—austerity, managerialism, evaluation—with an identitarian shift that redefines the university as an enemy cultural bastion (Marginson 2026; Scholars at Risk 2025).

5.1. Comparative repertoires of intervention: United States, Brazil, Spain, Argentina, Hungary, Poland, India, and Israel

The cases referred to here share common features: punitive use of funding and regulation; narratives that stigmatise universities and their actors; reforms of governance and control, displacement of collegiality and peer review; and symbolic battles that legitimise political control of content and structures (Scholars at Risk 2025).

In addition to fiscal and regulatory instruments, the offensive incorporates statements that present universities as cultural enemies or 'captured' spaces. Donald Trump, for example, has stated that universities are 'dominated by Marxist maniacs and lunatics', characterizing student protesters as 'radicals', 'savages' and 'jihadists' indoctrinated by faculty 'communists and terrorists' (The Guardian). Along the same lines, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, governor of the Comunidad de Madrid in Spain said, 'the entire left has colonized the public Complutense University of Madrid' (Telemadrid). Statements like these by right wing and ultra leaders and politicians operate as symbolic configurations that legitimise State intervention.

5.1.1. United States: from the austerity script to ideological coercion

In 2025, the White House described elite universities as 'hotbeds of hate' to justify cuts, the withdrawal of federal funds and, later, the deportation of students and academics critical of the government. The now Vice President Vance had pointed out in 2021 that 'universities are the enemy,' that 'professors are the enemy,' and that 'we have to attack the universities in this country honestly and aggressively' (Shepherd, 2025).

Legislative hearings, media campaigns, and threats to make funding conditional on cultural loyalty have reoriented the relationship between the state and elite public and private universities. Project 2025 summarises the shift from efficiency adjustments to doctrinal engineering: recentralisation of the executive branch, elimination of the Department of Education, privatisation of loans, and rewriting of accreditation and Title IX[3] s as ideological bottlenecks (The New Yorker, 2025). This induces regulatory uncertainty, erodes planning, cools collaborations, and discourages sensitive areas; professional associations and academic networks attempt to shield peer review and internationalisation (The Harvard Crimson, 2025; Scholars at Risk 2025). The hegemonic drift seeks to establish a national identity narrative that subordinates peer review to tests of orthodoxy (The New Yorker, 2025).

The US case shows how a system historically organised by markets and litigation is now shifting towards explicit use of ideological coercion. Compared to other countries, the US is inaugurating a pattern where neoliberal austerity merges with identity levers to redefine access, curriculum and assessment. In the U.S. case, these mechanisms increasingly target elite private as well as public universities through federal regulatory, accreditation, and security-based levers. Alongside federal action, state--level legislation has been equally consequential, as discussed below, with dozens of states introducing bills restricting curriculum, DEI offices, and faculty speech.

5.1.2. Brazil: austerity, 'Future-se' and the offensive against the humanities

In 2019, Bolsonaro claimed that public universities were a 'nest of dangerous reds', associating them with alleged left-wing ideological infiltration. He turned the idea of eradicating 'cultural Marxism' and 'gender ideology' from universities into a political banner, justifying interventions and cuts to the education sector (Agencia EFE, 2019; CNN Chile, 2019).

Successive cuts were combined with the devaluation of the humanities. 'Future-se' proposed privatising the management of heritage, research and innovation, perceived as a Trojan horse against autonomy. There was deterioration of facilities, discontinuity of scholarships and mass mobilisations (HISTEDBR/UNICAMP, 2019–2020; Inside Higher Ed, 2019–2020).

Brazil reveals how structural austerity serves as a platform for direct ideological interventions against critical areas. Unlike the United States—where the dispute is channelled more through regulations and federal funding—the Brazilian case combined massive cuts with a culturalist discourse that seeks to reshape the system from its symbolic foundations.

5.1.3. Spain (Community of Madrid): rhetoric of suspicion and the 70/30 rule

In 2024 the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, accused public higher education institutions of being centres of ideological indoctrination (El País). In September 2025, she demanded that universities 'not be used for ideological warfare,' stating, 'we will not allow educational institutions to be exploited for social engineering or ideological warfare' (El Periódico de España).

Public delegitimization of universities coexists with a funding rule that requires them to generate commercial income, redefining the social contract by privatising risks and reinforcing competitive exposure. Madrid's public universities denounced the unsustainability of this scheme, while data on equality and diversity refute the political caricature (Fundación CYD 2024). This pattern converges with the cases of Brazil and the US in the use of narratives of 'indoctrination' to justify reforms that weaken university autonomy.

5.1.4. Argentina: shock austerity and the crisis in science and technology

President Milei has argued that ' … public universities are places of indoctrination—socialist indoctrination' (RT online) and in October 2024 he criticised the proposal to increase taxes to finance public universities. In this context, he stated, 'let's not give space to the fucking leftists … who say that extraordinary profits are wrong,' adding 'I'm not going to give more resources for three or four criminals in the universities to keep' (El Federal online).

The 2024 budget freeze at 2023 values, with triple-digit inflation, caused emergencies and a massive protest in 2024. The presidential veto of the financing law and the defunding of science and technology accelerated the exodus of researchers (Nature 2024–2025; Buenos Aires Times, 2024–2025; EFE/France 24, 2024–2025).

The Argentine experience shows how shock austerity can operate as a punitive mechanism in contexts of high inflation and institutional fragility. Its convergence with the cases of Brazil and Hungary lies in the use of defunding as an instrument of discipline and as a vehicle for redefining the social contract of the public university.

5.1.5. Hungary: structural engineering and institutionalisation of control

President Orbán publicly described universities and the Academy of Sciences as 'a threat to his proudly illiberal ideology' (Verfassungsblog, 2025), thus justifying State intervention.

The 'Lex CEU' forced the relocation of the Central European University and, between 2019 and 2021, ~70% of the system was transferred to foundations with government-appointed boards, consolidating a long-term and largely irreversible capture. The European Commission and the CJEU declared the law incompatible with EU law; the EU suspended Hungarian universities' access to Erasmus + and Horizon due to conflicts of interest (BIRN/Balkan Insight, 2023; Eur-Lex, 2020; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2021).

Hungary represents the most complete version of structural capture through irreversible reforms directed by the executive branch. Compared to other countries, the Hungarian case summarises the transition from discursive intervention to institutional re–engineering, showing the extreme end of the global punitive repertoire.

5.1.6. Poland: moralisation of the curriculum and war on the social sciences.

Between 2015 and 2023, initiatives to refocus history/patriotism and hostility towards gender and diversity studies were combined with supervisory reforms that expanded executive control and ideological review of plans (Notes from Poland, 2020). The curricular shift in citizenship (HiT 2022) and its counterpart after 2023 illustrate how the dispute over the curriculum operates as a proxy for broader struggles over democracy and rights (Elerian, Yemini, and Jasikowska 2025).

The Polish case exemplifies the moralisation of the curriculum as a form of sustained ideological control over time. Unlike Hungary, where the capture is structural, Poland was dominated by a cultural offensive focused on content and citizenship, converging with India and partially with Spain in the dispute over the national narrative. The Tusk government (from 2023) has sought to reverse some of these policies, though with uneven results.

5.1.7. India: ethno-nationalism and civilisational rewriting

Under the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Hindutva project, there are restrictions on student protest (Jawaharlal Nehru University and South Asian University), administrative pressure and a rewriting of the curriculum that displaces the Mughal sultanate period and other content (AHA, 2024; Frontline, 2025; Scholars at Risk 2024; TIME, 2023). The combination of reforms and institutional surveillance creates an ecosystem that is hostile to autonomy and criticism (The Hindu Centre, 2025).

India presents a model in which rewriting and political surveillance merge to reorganise the university according to a national-religious project. Its dynamics are parallel to those of Poland in the curriculum dispute and Hungary in State recentralisation, highlighting the globalisation of the punitive repertoire.

5.1.8. Israel: securitisation of dissent

The processing and approval of amendments to the Student Rights Law to prohibit ‘incitement to terrorism’ in student activity, as well as new internal regulations restricting expression and protest, introduce a paradigm of security and control that poses risks to academic freedom (ACRI, 2026; Knesset Press Office, 2025). The emphasis on national security is reordering funding and disciplinary priorities towards strategic areas, leaving the humanities and social sciences vulnerable.

The securitisation of dissent in Israel exposes a pattern where the logic of national security redefines the limits of academic freedom. Although based on different grounds, this drift resembles the US shift and the Indian model in using categories of risk and threat to restrict protest, expression and cooperation.

5.2. Typology of mechanisms

A review of the situation in various countries allows us to identify common discourses, actions, and policies in the process of punitive ideology. The repertoires employed can be grouped into three types of instruments: hard, soft, and symbolic.

i Hard (coercive-material) instruments include fiscal-regulatory levers (funding conditionality, accreditation changes and targeted audits), control of dissent (criminalisation of protest, speech policing and new categories of criminalisation) and thematic disciplining (prohibition of critical areas, curriculum surveillance and programme closures).

ii Soft instruments (organisational and governmental) seek institutional reconfiguration through the capture of boards, intervention in rectorates, and the weakening of collegial life and peer evaluation. They also propose the structural capture of systems and institutions with irreversible reforms (e.g. foundationalisation) that consolidate long-term dependencies.

iii Symbolic instruments (cultural and discursive) promote the re-engineering of the curriculum’s identity, by proposing the rewriting of the past and national epics. They also involve narrative stigmatisation through frameworks that label universities as ‘elitist’, ‘ideological’ or ‘unpatriotic’ to legitimise intervention.

In all cases, there is a programmatic anti-intellectualism that distrusts expertise, subjugates knowledge to identity criteria, and revalue the 'ordinary citizen' over supposed cosmopolitan elites. It is consolidated as (i) a discursive device that frames universities as 'woke' trenches; (ii) a technology of government that legitimises intervention in academic peers and plans; and (iii) a mechanism for purging critical disciplines (Aikens 2024; Frontiers in Political Science 2025).

Anti-woke laws are spreading as regulatory policies: they prohibit content, empower authorities to review syllabuses, and sanction teachers/students, often under 'neutrality' clauses that enable censorship. Their spread from the US to Central Europe and other contexts reveals punitive mimicry (Aikens 2024; Scholars at Risk 2025).

The cultural offensive functions as an identitarian reaction to academic globalisation and diversity. 'Nationalist sovereignty'[4] displaces the student-consumer; private returns are no longer optimised, and the aim is to align the university with a civilising project. The following can be observed: (a) renationalisation of knowledge and suspicion of international cooperation; (b) remoralization of the curriculum with national/religious epics; and (c) State recentralisation (Marginson 2026; Scholars at Risk 2025).

Table 1 summarises the comparative intensity and configuration of ideological–punitive instruments across the eight cases, illustrating both convergent repertoires and significant variation in degree, sequencing, and institutionalisation.

Table 1. Comparative intensity and configuration of ideological–punitive instruments.[a]

Case	Fiscal / funding conditionality	Governance capture / re-engineering	Curricular policing	Control of protest and expression	Symbolic stigmatisation
United States (2021–2026, Trump)	High (selective defunding, funding threats tied to cultural criteria)	Medium (accreditation and federal leverage; judicial mediation)	High (anti-DEI laws, syllabus review, Title IX redefinition)	Medium–High (criminalisation, surveillance, deportation threats)	Very high (universities framed as 'enemies,' 'woke,' or anti-national)
Brazil (2019–2022, Bolsonaro)	High (austerity and targeted cuts)	Medium (executive pressure, weakened collegiality)	Medium (delegitimation of humanities, ideological scrutiny)	Medium (policing of protest, intimidation)	High (cultural Marxism, anti-intellectualism rhetoric)
Argentina (2024–2026, Milei)	Very high (shock austerity under high inflation)	Low–Medium (limited structural reforms, but severe material pressure)	Low	Low–Medium	High (delegitimation of public universities as ideological)
Hungary (2010–2026, Orbán)	High	Very high (structural capture through foundations)	Medium	Medium	High (illiberal framing of academic institutions)
Poland (2015–2023, PiS government)	Medium	Medium	High (moralisation and politicisation of curriculum)	Low–Medium	Medium–High
India (2014–2026, BJP/ Modi)	Medium	Medium–High (administrative pressure, surveillance)	High (civilisational and national rewriting)	High (restrictions on protest and dissent)	High
Israel (2023–2026)	Medium	Medium	Low–Medium	High (securitisation of dissent)	Medium
Spain/Madrid (2019–2026, Díaz Ayuso)	Medium (funding rules and commercial income requirements)	Medium	Low–Medium	Low	High (rhetoric of ideological colonisation)

[a] Categories 'low,' 'medium,' and 'high' indicate relative intensity and institutionalisation rather than precise measurement and are based on triangulated qualitative assessment across sources.

6. Political economy of confrontation

Building on the comparative patterns synthesised in Table 1, this section examines how ideological–punitive instruments restructure the political economy of higher education across systems. The mapping of cases is interpreted considering the shift from the pre-eminence of markets to an 'ideological-punitive regime'. This article uses the characterisation of an ideological-punitive regime to designate the set of fiscal; regulatory; security oriented; and symbolic policies, aimed at disciplining academic life and conditioning the production of knowledge. The notion of structural capture corresponds to the set of institutional reforms with a persistent effect that consolidate dependencies and restrict substantive autonomy (see 5.2, soft instruments).

6.1. From market governance to ideological–punitive control

The ideological-punitive stage does not break with neoliberalism. It reformulates it as neoliberalism-plus (Marginson 2026), combining market instruments with fiscal, regulatory, and symbolic coercion to discipline knowledge. In the transition from neoliberalism to neoliberalism-plus, metrics, competitions and quasi-markets persist, but they are subsumed by identity agendas and a tougher State that demands proof of loyalty and uses ideological bottlenecks in accreditation and funding.

Economic mechanisms such as fiscal levers (selective cuts and conditional budgets), regulatory levers (reforms that displace peer review), as well as symbolic and reputational levers (stigmatisation that raises the costs of cooperation and has paralysing effects) are used to force conformity.

The transition toward the ideological-punitive stage generates structural, distributive, and geopolitical transformations in the political economy of knowledge. Structurally, mounting constraints on inquiry reflect what Farida Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education, characterizes as a 'broader pattern of coercive assault on academic freedom and institutional autonomy … from book and subject bans to discriminatory censorship laws and punitive measures against universities' (OHCHR 2025). These pressures diminish the system's capacity for long-term scientific planning, contributing to a 'decline in academic freedom … in major science-producing countries' (Danell 2025).

6.2. Differential impacts across systems and fields

In terms of distribution, targeted interventions deepen inequalities within and across fields of knowledge. The Council of Europe warns that political authorities increasingly employ 'undue restrictions on institutional autonomy, the undermining of academic self-governance, [and] the inappropriate use of public funding as a means of political pressure' (Council of Europe 2025), disproportionately affecting fields already vulnerable to governmental ideologies—typically the arts, humanities, and critical social sciences. This erosion of internal protections coincides with ongoing 'serious restrictions on academic freedom of expression' and politically motivated restructuring of programs in sensitive areas (Council of Europe 2025).

Geopolitically, the ideological-punitive shift destabilizes the infrastructures on which global science depends. A major study on international collaboration notes that although cross-border networks continue to grow, 'the direct effect of academic freedom on the evolution of international research collaboration has significantly declined in the past decade,' replaced by patterns of biased partnerships between similarly repressive or similarly free systems (Whetsell, Sidorova, and Yang 2025). This trend aligns with broader global developments described by Danell (2025), who documents 'a significant shift … with the rise of emerging economies,' accompanied by an erosion of academic freedom shaping global scientific priorities.

In this environment, ideological coercion becomes not a marginal pathology but a central organizing principle of the regime. As the AAUP reports, US states have introduced 'at least ninety-nine bills representing direct political interference in higher education … restricting academic freedom by limiting teaching about race, gender, and sexuality' (AAUP 2024). These measures produce what

Shaheed describes as a pervasive 'chilling effect' on educators and institutions, where dissent is met with 'criminalisation, deportations, surveillance and disproportionate disciplinary actions' (OHCHR 2025).

Over time, such pressures weaken the institutional density needed to sustain robust scientific ecosystems. The Brookings Institution describes the moment starkly: 'We are witnessing an unprecedented effort … to target, intimidate, investigate, censor, control, and freeze funding to higher education institutions,' mirroring strategies used in autocratic systems worldwide (Rippberger, Riedl, and Katz 2025). As universities are reoriented toward identity-driven State agendas, their ability to support frontier research, maintain international partnerships, and preserve intellectual autonomy is compromised. In effect, the ideological-punitive regime not only disciplines ideas but fundamentally restructures academic markets, shifts epistemic hierarchies, and reshapes the material conditions under which knowledge is produced.

6.3. Implications for global knowledge hierarchies

The ideological-punitive regime has consequences that extend beyond immediate fiscal or regulatory pressures. Its effects intersect with deeper linguistic, epistemic, and geopolitical hierarchies that already structure the global academic field, intensifying longstanding asymmetries and reshaping the material and symbolic conditions under which knowledge is produced.

The punitive turn is superimposed on entrenched linguistic and epistemic hierarchies that privilege English as the dominant medium of global scholarly communication. For practitioners and policy actors, 'language barriers continue to impede the global compilation and application of scientific knowledge' (Amano, González-Varo, and Sutherland 2016). A global scientific English facilitates coordination but also reproduces asymmetries that emerging systems must confront (Montgomery 2013). Under these conditions, autonomy becomes less a formal principle than a function of material, organizational, and symbolic protections—all weakened by the punitive shift. The Council of Europe notes, in several countries political actors are introducing 'undue restrictions on institutional autonomy' and 'inappropriate use of public funding as a means of political pressure' (Council of Europe, 2025).

These epistemic pressures unfold within a broader structure of global stratification that long predates the current punitive moment. Globalization in higher education is marked by 'worldwide inequality and the McDonaldization of the university' (Altbach 2004, 3). While institutions in the Global North consolidate advantages through historically accumulated resources, stable funding, and dense research infrastructures, many systems in the Global South face structural constraints that limit their ability to participate fully in global knowledge production. The result is a stratified global field in which core universities attract talent and recognition, while peripheral institutions face increasing obstacles to sustaining research agendas, retaining scholars, and securing international partnerships.

Global rankings and 'excellence frameworks' convert heterogeneous scholarly activity into comparable indicators, thereby reshaping institutional behaviour. Rankings are now 'a significant factor shaping reputation' and choices across the sector (Hazelkorn 2015). Within this configuration, excellence functions as an influential symbolic regime. As Readings notes, 'excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless, or … non-referential,' which is why it so effectively 'ties together' disparate activities on a single evaluative scale (Readings 1996). In punitive climates, evaluative regimes privilege audit-friendly outputs—citations, grant income, reputational surveys—while marginalizing fields whose contributions resist quantification, especially the humanities, arts, and critical social sciences. The shift from peer-driven epistemic judgment to performance auditing narrows the space for autonomous agenda-setting.

The ideological-punitive regime deepens these asymmetries by amplifying existing vulnerabilities in already fragile systems. Punitive interventions—selective defunding, reputational attacks, and regulatory disruption—disproportionately impact institutions that already lack buffers of financial stability, diversified income, or strong autonomy protections.

Across Latin America, recent pressures on higher education must be understood within the region's distinctive conception of university autonomy. Research shows that autonomy has historically functioned as institutional protection from State encroachment, which increases vulnerability when political agendas shift or austerity intensifies (Bernasconi 2024).

Argentina represents the most acute case: researchers warned that 'with six more months like this, there will be nothing left', and 68 Nobel laureates cautioned that the system was approaching a 'dangerous precipice' (De Ambrosio and Koop 2024). Brazil saw a 'frontal attack on Brazilian universities' under Bolsonaro, with academic freedom 'seriously threatened' (Green, 2019), alongside massive student protests responding to 30% federal cuts (UNE, 2019). Colombia's reductions in scientific investment led analysts to warn the country is 'risking its future' (Abadía 2025). Mexico has experienced years of funding reductions and tensions between legal autonomy and strong State steering. In Chile, the absence of constitutional protection for university autonomy heightens vulnerability to State regulatory reforms (Alarcón, Brunner, and Labraña 2025). In Central America universities suffer structural constraints such as chronic underfunding, weak regulatory capacity, and uneven accreditation systems (Griffin and Gall 2019).

Taken together, these developments reveal how the ideological-punitive regime reshapes not only the governance of universities but also the global architecture of knowledge. International bodies report a broad 'coercive assault on academic freedom and institutional autonomy'—including book and subject bans, discriminatory censorship laws, and punitive measures against universities, students, and faculty— generating a documented pattern of self-censorship and institutional withdrawal (OHCHR 2025). At the same time, the direct effect of academic freedom on the evolution of cross-border collaboration has significantly declined, with collaboration increasingly sorting among countries with similar levels of repression or freedom (Whetsell, Sidorova, and Yang 2025). Strengthening the commons of knowledge thus requires addressing both punitive modalities and structural inequalities. As the Council of Europe warns, 'protecting academic freedom is a shared responsibility, essential to preserving democratic resilience' (Council of Europe 2025).

7. Policy strategies for countering ideological–punitive regimes

Institutional agency under ideological–punitive regimes is necessarily uneven and constrained. While some universities retain limited room for manoeuvre—through reputational capital, legal protections, or international alliances—others operate under near-total conditions of coercion. Agency thus takes defensive and strategic forms rather than expressions of full autonomy.

Moving from analysis to the discussion of alternatives therefore requires outlining responses that not only mitigate the immediate effects of the punitive–ideological regime but also strengthen the institutional foundations to face future waves of political, fiscal, or symbolic pressure. In this sense, a coordinated set of regulatory, organisational, epistemic and transnational mechanisms is necessary in order to regain room for manoeuvre, diversifying sources of legitimacy and ensuring that the university can continue to fulfil its critical and state-building function.

The premise underlying these proposals is that re–politicising the institution—restoring its public mission as a common good and state-building function—is a programme of action to strengthen legitimacy, autonomy and the common goods of knowledge. This involves reinstating the political dimension of the university as a public institution whose legitimacy is based on deliberation, autonomy and the production of knowledge oriented towards the common good (Ordorika 2018).

Faced with the logic of economisation that, for decades, shifted the definition of institutional priorities towards metrics, incentives and managerial rationalities, re–politicisation implies recognising that every form of university governance expresses a normative project regarding what knowledge is considered valuable and how the relationship between the university, the State and society is articulated.

In the context of an ideological-punitive regime, where cuts, regulatory reforms and stigmatisation campaigns are presented under the guise of administrative or moral neutrality, university politicisation allows these interventions to be denaturalised and placed in the arena of the dispute over control of knowledge and its public orientation. This requires reactivating collegial practices, strengthening deliberative mechanisms and consolidating autonomy as a material and organisational exercise, not just as a legal principle.

It also implies recovering the university's capacity to publicly justify its mission, articulating its contribution to social, scientific and democratic development. In a climate of suspicion and programmatic anti-intellectualism, rebuilding public legitimacy requires showing the university as a producer of common goods — scientific infrastructure, professional training, critical research, social services — and not as an isolated enclave or ideological elite. In this context repoliticzation implies a concious effort to broaden universities′ social constituencies (Slaughter 1990).

In short, re–politicising the institution means rebuilding its institutional capacity to chart its own course in an environment marked by punitive pressures, redefining the university as a strategic actor in the democratic State and not as a passive subject of external reforms.

8. Conclusion

After decades of economisation, public universities operate under a punitive ideological regime that combines financial sanctions, regulatory levers and cultural battles to discipline knowledge. Comparative evidence documents the transition from market supremacy to an order that subordinates autonomy, international cooperation and the common goods of science to identity definitions, generating static and dynamic costs. Defending the university requires shielding funding, strengthening global cooperation, and reorienting evaluation processes.

The current phase is sustained by a previous hegemonic framework activated by fiscal, regulatory, and symbolic repertoires; it configures a neoliberalism-plus in which markets and metrics are subsumed by a tougher and more selective State. Defending the university requires material, political, and epistemic conditions—not just declarations—and coalitions that protect peer review, talent mobility, and open science. The confrontation is structural and demands responses to strengthen institutional resilience and agency, recovering the mission of the university as a common good, a space for democratic deliberation and a component of state-building.

The evidence gathered here shows that the ideological-punitive regime is neither temporary nor an anomaly, but rather the most recent phase of a long-term process that combines the persistence of market mechanisms with new forms of political, cultural and symbolic coercion. Public universities thus face a double challenge: resisting attempts at disciplining that seek to subordinate the production of knowledge to identity-based or utilitarian criteria, while at the same time rebuilding the material and epistemic foundations that underpin their public mission. The agenda outlined in these pages constitutes a set of tools to strengthen this capacity for action, from regulatory and financial safeguards to practices of international cooperation and epistemic plurality.

Among the most consequential — and underutilised — responses available to universities is structured cooperation with one another, both within and across national borders. Where individual institutions face punitive pressure in isolation, networks of universities can redistribute risk, share legal and epistemic resources, and sustain the circulation of scholars and ideas that coercive regimes seek to interrupt.

Regional frameworks have demonstrated significant potential. In Latin America, traditions of inter-university solidarity rooted in the Córdoba Reform provide a basis for coordinated responses to austerity and political interference, while in Europe, bodies such as the European University Association and cross-border research consortia have mobilised in defence of institutional autonomy under pressure from illiberal governments. Such cooperation is not merely logistical — it is political, in that it reasserts the university's embeddedness in a community of knowledge that no single State can fully control. Strengthening these alliances, formalising mutual support mechanisms, and defending open-science infrastructures against nationalist closure are therefore not supplementary measures but core components of any sustained strategy of institutional resilience.

The comparative analysis demonstrates a shared transnational repertoire of ideological–punitive intervention, while also revealing marked variation in intensity, sequencing, and institutionalisation. These differences matter: they shape not only national trajectories of autonomy and governance, but also the uneven capacity of universities to sustain critical knowledge and international collaboration.

However, rather than a list of policies, this agenda should be understood as a framework for regaining the initiative at a historic turning point. Universities cannot limit themselves to reacting in a fragmented manner or operating under the illusion that technical adjustments will suffice to cope with an increasingly restrictive environment. The defence of public universities—and with them, the common goods of knowledge—requires a sustained strategy that reaffirms their place as critical, deliberative and state-building institutions. Only in this way can their capacity to contribute to more open, democratic societies capable of facing the challenges that define the twenty-first century be preserved.

Notes

1. The phase in which fiscal, regulatory, and symbolic mechanisms are articulated to discipline knowledge constitute an ideological-punitive regime. This dynamic partially coincides with what Marginson (2026) described as neoliberalism-plus, although in several contemporary contexts coercion is deployed from identity or national-civilisational matrices that exceed strictly neoliberal logic. It is also possible to use the characterisation of punitive neoliberalism, but this loses the idea that the punitive is not always neoliberal, that its ideological matrix can be anti-globalist, national-religious or anti-scientific. Some cases, such as Hungary, India and Israel, break with the classic neoliberal canon.
2. Rankings such as Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds Limited (QS) establish hierarchies and standardize criteria; their use as measurements and benchmarks distorts peer review and impoverishes the diversity of institutional missions (Marginson and Ordorika 2011; Ordorika and Lloyd 2015).
3. Title IX is a US federal civil rights law, part of the 1972 Education Amendments, which prohibits discrimination based on sex in any educational institution that receives federal funds. According to the U.S. Department of Education Title IX has been a primary regulatory lever in the current administration's intervention in university governance.
4. Marginson (2026) raises the dichotomy of "nationalist sovereignty" vs. "student-consumer" in reference to the shift of the organising principle from individual demand to identity-based and geopolitical definitions of the public interest (Marginson 2026).

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