

THE ACTIVITY OF VICTOR SLĂVESCU - ECHOES FROM HIS EPOCH

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Abstract

This year we celebrate 130 years since the birth of Victor Slăvescu, one of the most prominent Romanian economists. His various activity took place over a period of time marked by a succession of exceptional events: two world wars, the Great Union of 1918, the interwar period and the beginning of communism. It was an epoch characterized by profound transformations of the economic, political and social system. We take a look at his publishing activity, his career, the recognition he gained from his peers and the general public. In this paper we use mainly archive sources to uncover some long-forgotten perspectives on the life and work of Victor Slăvescu.

Keywords: economic thinking; Romanian economist; Minister of Finance

JEL Classification: B20; B30; B31

1. Introduction

As Victor Slăvescu himself noted, the appreciation of a person's activity in the socio-economic field must take into account "the political circumstances in which he lived, thought and manifested, as well as the decisive factors that may have exerted certain effects on both man

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and on its work” (Slăvescu, 1941). His most intense activity overlapped with a succession of exceptional events: two world wars, the Great Union of the Romanian historical provinces in 1918, the interwar period and the beginning of communism. It was an era characterized by profound transformations of the economic, political and social system.

In a period marked by instability, Victor Slăvescu supported "Romanian economic nationalism" and dedicated monographs to important economists of the nineteenth century (Ștefănescu, coordinator, 1978). Slăvescu left his mark on the national credit system, worked for the national bank of Romania, was minister of finance, university professor and member of the Romanian Academy. However, his activity was less recognized by contemporaries, but later volumes and monographs were dedicated to him.

We document the activity of Victor Slăvescu and reflections of other important personalities of the era in which he lived using a research methodology based on exploring archive sources to uncover some long-forgotten perspectives on his life and work. Although based mainly on bibliographic exploration, the methodology used for this study also consisted in identifying the main trends reflected in the documents of the time, in reflecting the personality of the famous economist in his work, enriching the study with examples structured in several distinct stages. The publishing activity, his career, the recognition Victor Slăvescu gained from his peers and the general public is highlighted by presenting some relevant elements structured in main historical periods and key fields.

2. Professional activity in the interwar period

Anticipating somewhat subsequent developments, in an interview in 1931, Victor Slăvescu stated that "If I ever had the task of dealing with state finances I would start with significant tax cuts, because I am deeply convinced that small rates always give abundant income and by no means large rates. But once the rates were reduced, I would pay so much attention to taxation that I would almost eradicate - I do not say completely - tax evasion" (Românul, 1931).

In a review of one of his important works (History of the National Bank of Romania 1880-1924) it is said that "any honest contribution to the unbridled field of Romanian financial science is welcome, but especially those of Mr. Victor Slăvescu, for that it always represents

the fruit of laborious and objective researches of a deep connoisseur of Romanian finances” (Adevărul, 1925).

Practical experience and academic training allowed the Minister of Finance Victor Slăvescu to prepare the "Law of May 8, 1934", a law considered necessary for banking control, which later underwent changes to incorporate changes in the system. However, the way in which it was conceived was appreciated by the specialists of the time: "for that epoch and for the necessities that were imposed then ... it was of a real use" (Constantinescu, 1943). The realization of the draft state budget during his time as Minister of Finance was an important challenge, in a difficult context. His intransigent attitude was noted in that context: "... to the colleagues who want to move him from the attitude he has set, he answers: with me this is what it is possible; if you want otherwise, get another finance minister" (Scrutător, 1934).

In an interview given towards the end of 1930, Victor Slăvescu concluded about the world economic crisis: "I think we are going through an epoch-making period. I think now we will have to get rid of all the mistakes that have been made. I believe that this crisis will end one era of human life to open another. Which?" (Adevărul, 1930).

A liberal economist, faithful to his deep convictions, Victor Slăvescu resigned as head of the Ministry of Finance in February 1935, disappointed by the policy changes and the mentality of his employees and collaborators. Gheorghe Tătărescu, prime minister at the time, described him as "too much of a teacher, too much of an orthodox" (Isărescu, coordinator, 2001). The attempts of Victor Slăvescu, the "methodical and calm professor", to reform the system are appreciated in the newspapers of those times, where his calm and abilities are mentioned in relation to the request to the financial administrations to centralize taxpayers who do not pay their contributions to the state: "Mr. Slăvescu, a considered and thoughtful man, did not decide on such a measure, which we continue to describe as revolutionary, under the impression of a moment of upset. He stayed, he calculated well, he considered the effects and consequences, the inconveniences and dangers and then he made the decision" (Batzaria, 1935). In fact, his calmness, but also his ability to be objective are recognized by Iorga (1939) in his memoirs about the period 1931-1932: "calm objective presentation, to the budget, of Slăvescu", "calm exposition of the liberal Slăvescu", and the "objective exposition" about the history of the National Bank is appreciated by Gheață (1929) ten years earlier.

His native qualities reflected in the professional activity are also highlighted in related, negotiation activities. In this sense, Ion I. Nistor thanks "my colleague Victor Slăvescu, who, with his efforts and his sense of conciliation, contributed" to the settlement of a long conflict between the Romanian Academy and the Elias Foundation (Romanian Academy, 1946, p.16).

3. Victor Slăvescu, the historian of Romanian finance

From a very young age, Victor Slăvescu managed to stand out through his writings. In a 1911 review it was noted that "From the Waves of Life", scaled by Mr. Victor I. Slăvescu is a reasonable documentation of the whirlwind of class struggles (Românul, 1911).

Around the age of 45, Victor Slăvescu was already considered by the great economists of the time "the historian of Romanian finance" (Madgearu, 1936). In 1937 was published a work that synthesizes and classifies the publishing activity of Victor Slăvescu, depending on the appearance in volumes or in the form of articles, considering the discipline where the works could be classified ("currency, credit, exchange and bank", "enterprises", "transports", "national economy", "various"), all occupying "a prominent place in the Romanian economic literature", being characterized by "clear method of exposition", "clarity of style, with real literary features" and "defending the ideology of economic nationalism" (Pașcu, 1937).

His publications on the life and work of Romanian economists in the nineteenth century were well received and appreciated. Budu (1939), in his intervention on the work "The life and work of Petre Mavrogheni" concludes that "this work is not only a safe guide for researchers and the general public, but also a model of the genre in Romanian economic science." Drossu (1947), writing about Victor Slăvescu's work "The life and work of the economist Alex. D. Moruzi 1815-1878", appreciates that the author "besides the university courses, still finds time to let himself be stolen by the charm of the old Romanian manuscripts" and succeeds "with the same preparation with which he knew how to flourish the Industrial Credit or to replace the cumbersome and expensive over-tax" to finalize a monograph considered "the best and most complete work on this typical representative of our liberal economic school".

The opening of a new path for that period - the history of Romanian economic thought, is appreciated and encouraged. The

great economist Costin Murgescu (1943) considered that Victor Slăvescu "opened a chapter in the evolution of our economic thinking, which no one can close today", his texts being characterized by a "serene objectivity" and accompanied by the presentation of people "put in the light and ambiance of the age." According to the quoted article, Victor Slăvescu, through his hard work, managed to "lift the fog from some of the most interesting figures of our few economic thinking: Ion Ghica, Dionisie Pop Marțian, N. Șuțu, Petre Mavrogheni and B. P. Hașdeu".

4. Victor Slăvescu's influence on the credit system

His focus on the monetary field and the history of Romanian finances, as well as the experience gained over time, including as a director at Banca Românească and the National Industrial Credit Society, have left their mark on Victor Slăvescu's contributions to the development of credit organization theory in Romania and the cooperative movement. In this sense, Murgescu states that "Victor Slăvescu defines (...) his conception regarding the role of the great Romanian finance in solving the vital problems of the national economy after which he elaborates the first, most complete and most important monograph of our credit system" (Murgescu, 1994, p 58).

The activity carried out at the National Industrial Credit Society is recognized by personalities from the Romanian industry: "the increase of the credits granted ..., started under the leadership of Mr. Victor Slăvescu, ..., must be continued, if we want our riches to be valued and with the help of national capital" (Constantinescu, 1939).

In "Romania's Credit Organization", a book published in Bucharest in 1922, he addresses the problem of modernizing the credit system in Romania by transforming the old usurious credit system. As a good organizer, it defines the program and pathways for post-war reconstruction, and sets out 15 guiding principles that should define the functioning of a credit institution and whose interpretation remains equally current. In this sense, it was recommended to avoid transforming the credit institution into a party instrument; its objective must be the financing of enterprises, and its activity must always be conducted on the basis of the principle of prudence and balance (Isărescu, 2001).

5. Victor Slăvescu's connection with the Romanian Academy

The year 1939 was a special one for Victor Slăvescu, who was appointed a full member of the Romanian Academy at the proposal of Alexandru C. Cuza; in 1936 he had become a corresponding member at the proposal of Dimitrie Gusti. The regulations of the Romanian Academy provided at that time the existence of a limited number of academics, and only a few years before the number of full members increased from 12 to 15, which made it possible to accept Victor Slăvescu, without him having a predecessor (Rugină, 1980). The installation of communism led to the dissolution of the Romanian Academy on June 9, 1948 and the establishment of the Academy of the Romanian People's Republic; a consequence of this fact was the withdrawal of the title of academician for 19 personalities, including Victor Slăvescu (Nistor, 2003). After the 1989 Revolution, on January 5, 1990, the old Romanian Academy was restored to its rights, and on February 2, 1990, after more than half a century, the 19 members were restored to their titles.

A tribute that has a special note can be found in the greeting addressed by Barbu Solacolu (1937) on the occasion of the election of Victor Slăvescu as president of the General Union of Industrialists in Romania: "In the country where lawyers, engineers and doctors - and this without any shadow of envy - they had the step in the command functions of the State and of the public life in general - you are Mr. President, the first career economist, who has succeeded". Victor Slăvescu's response to Solacolu's praises includes a key element, which is worth noting: "Of the many aspects under which you presented me and among the many lines of characterization with which you presented me, I would like you to remember only one, the one that is most dear to me, the one in which I would like to stay until the end, only one: that of an economist. No other quality is dearer to me than being an economist. And if I was able to record certain stages - ascending and stopping, maybe even descending - in my career, I did these stages only as an economist. I could give up everything: the political career, which you talked about, and which is very unsympathetic to me, and the career of a minister, which is indifferent to me. I could never give up that of an economist, because no human satisfaction can surpass that which the library and objective, quiet scientific research studies give you". Slăvescu's conclusion is clear: "Gentlemen, I tell you

that wherever I want to be and no matter how long I live, I want to be and remain an economist!"

The activity carried out by Victor Slăvescu at the Romanian Academy is appreciated by his colleagues. For example, in the meeting of May 31, 1938, the academician Alexandru Lapedatu, the president of the Romanian Academy at that time, and the academician Ion I. Nistor thank him for the effort made to build the budget of the Academy on new bases and the proposals to modernize the accounting service (Romanian Academy, 1939). The accounting system of the Romanian Academy continued to change, and at the meeting of May 19, 1943, at the recommendation of Victor Slăvescu and Gheorghe Ionescu-Șișești, agricultural accounting was approved (Romanian Academy, 1943).

6. The period after 1944

When he became a member of the Board of Directors of the National Bank of Romania in 1945, Ion Lapedatu, the bank's governor at the time, greeted him with a speech in which he acknowledged both his training and economic experience and "a workforce few equaled" (Isărescu, coordinator, 2001).

After 1944, with the turn of an important page in the history of Romania, Victor Slăvescu's activity is reflected in the press of the time from another perspective. In an article meant to highlight the importance of nationalizing banks, published in the main communist newspaper of the time, Victor Slăvescu was placed among the Romanians "who served the interests of German financial capital" (Năvodaru, 1944).

Professor Anghel Rugină recalls the discretion and dignity that marked Victor Slăvescu's personality, especially during the socialist regime established after 1944: during the socialist regime "he was unable to publish anything because of his intransigent position" but he continued his research activity. He refrained "from expressing any public opinion about the new changes in the country, which of course was not to his liking after having lost everything" (Rugină, 1980, p.229).

Throughout his career, Victor Slăvescu was accompanied by his wife Valentina, the daughter of Liberal Senator Mihai Orleanu. Especially after 1944, she supported him in his scientific work with remarkable devotion. In this sense, Rugină (1980) remarks: "Without doubt she will remain in Romanian history as an outstanding example

of unselfishness and complete devotion to family and the work of her husband."

7. Posthume recognition

The life and works of Victor Slăvescu are not an uncharted territory. He was prolific in writing; his career was extremely complex and all these efforts led to a significant amount of works dedicated to his activity.

Years later, in a volume dedicated to the economic history of Romania between 1859-1938, the economist Victor Axenciuc (1999), honorary member of the Romanian Academy, places Victor Slăvescu among the "specialists of the time", "outstanding personalities" of his time, together with Virgil Madgearu, Mitiță Constantinescu, Ion N. Angelescu, Constantin I. Băicoianu or Gheorghe Tașcă.

The institutions that had him as a member or manager continue to pay a tribute to his memory in various ways:

- The Romanian Academy named one of its research institutions after him ("Victor Slăvescu" Center for Financial and Monetary Research) and also one of its prestigious yearly prizes. It also published a reference book regarding his life and work (Văcărel, 2003).
- The National Bank of Romania published an important work dedicated to Slăvescu (Isărescu, 2001) and also keeps an impressive number of his works in the institution's library.
- The Bucharest University of Economic Studies named one of its important buildings (housing the Faculty of Business Administration) and a reading room after the celebrated economist.

8. Conclusions

This paper contributes to the economic literature by bringing back to present some relevant evidence reflected in the literature and periodicals of the time in which Victor Slăvescu lived, in a synthetic manner that highlights the relevant elements structured in periods and key fields. The role and impact of his work in economic and academic

life is a remarkable one, even if sometimes criticized. His entire activity must be viewed and appreciated taking into account the very special times in which he lived and worked: World War I followed by the Great Union of the Romanian principalities, the interwar period, World War II and the beginning of communism. Certainly, Victor Slăvescu remains in the memory of the times as a good professional, a good economist and an appreciated teacher.

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Key dates in the life of Victor Slăvescu

- Born on May 23 / June 5, 1891 in Rucăr, Muscel county – died on September 24, 1977 in Bucharest
 - 1911: begins higher education in France, at Paris University
 - 1915: assistant accountant at Banca Românească
 - 1915: joins the National Liberal Party
 - 1916, August: volunteer officer (World War I)
 - 1923: he marries Valentina Orleanu, the daughter of the deputy Mihail Orleanu and receives the mansion and the estate from Cotești
 - 1923 - 1933: director of the National Industrial Credit Society (known as Industrial Credit)
 - 1925: associate professor at the Academy of Higher Commercial and Industrial Studies in Bucharest (he completed all teaching degrees until he became a professor - 1931; in 1947 he was removed from education)
 - 1927: is elected deputy for the first time
 - 1933, November 14 -1934, January 5: Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Finance
 - 1934, January 5 - 1935 February 1: Minister of Finance
 - 1934: Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor
 - 1936 is elected president of the General Union of Romanian Industrialists (UGIR)
 - 1936, May 23: corresponding member of the Romanian Academy
 - 1937: becomes vice-president of the Superior Banking Council and of the Economic Council
 - 1939, May 20: full member of the Romanian Academy
 - 1939, February 1 – 1940, July 4: Minister of the Army's endowment in six successive governments
 - 1944, January-October: rector at the Academy of Higher Commercial and Industrial Studies in Bucharest
 - 1945-1946: National Bank of Romania, member of the Board of Directors
 - 1947: forcefully removed from teaching
 - 1950, June – 1955, October: imprisoned in Sighet prison
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