

THE DOCTOR IN BULGARIA AS AN INTELLECTUAL FIGURE DURING THE NATIONAL RENAISSANCE AND TODAY

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Abstract: The figure of the intellectual in European history has taken on different meanings over the years and has been involved in society in various ways. In the 19th century, the intellectual was someone with a strong public voice—an educated person who spoke on behalf of those who could not, and whose civil rights he was duty-bound to defend. The 20th century was dubbed by the French historian Michel Winock “the century of the intellectuals,” when they began to actively engage in the daily discourse on various issues and their numbers grew. Today, in the age of the digital revolution, we are already asking: do intellectuals and doctors in this role even exist, and are they necessary?

Purpose: To define the doctor as an intellectual through their participation in various public spheres, important during the Renaissance but also today.

Methodology: An original and anonymous survey was conducted among physicians and medical residents (n = 507). The study examined the manifestations of the physician as an intellectual and his connection to Renaissance ideals. To achieve this objective, the following methods were used: the documentary method (study of archives and documents); the sociological method (survey); and the mathematical-statistical method (frequency analysis of quantitative and qualitative variables, variance analysis, correlation analysis, graphical analysis, etc.)

Results: Based on the survey we conducted, we found that factors related to the social role and responsibility of doctors received the highest approval ratings. The survey results show that, according to the vast majority of respondents, doctors are part of the intellectual elite primarily because of the social significance of their profession. We have examined which ideals of the Renaissance-era doctors are also causes for the modern doctor. Among the provided response options, the highest support was given to “a better-organized hospital system” (73.2%) and “better public health” (69.4%) received the highest support, which underscores that modern respondents perceive the doctor’s mission not only as an individual endeavor but also as a social responsibility for healthcare infrastructure and prevention. These two elements form the solid foundation of high-quality modern healthcare.

Conclusions: Today, a doctor is an intellectual if they fulfill more than one public role, much like their predecessors from the Renaissance, choosing not to remain silent.

Keywords: *the medical profession, intellectual figure, Renaissance, modernity*

1. INTRODUCTION

During the Renaissance, physicians played public roles in various fields. They were teachers, scholars, school principals, printers, scientists, naturalists, poets, playwrights, historians, diplomats, reformers, and revolutionaries. They were among the first Bulgarians educated at universities [7]. They were dedicated to the national cause, which placed them at the center of many historical events. Doctors during the Renaissance possessed several key traits that made them intellectuals. They stood at the beginning of a difficult path along which the Bulgarian educated class had to be reestablished after a painfully long hiatus. The Bulgarian historian Nikolay Genchev calls it a broken line of elite creativity, which would deprive Bulgaria of “an intellectual elite capable of generating new ideas and guiding the spiritual life of society” [3]. Their involvement in more than one field is logical given the shortage of educated people and the still-emerging division of professions and their organization into separate guilds.

The figure of the intellectual in European history has taken on different meanings over the years and has been involved in society in various ways. In the 19th century, the intellectual was someone with a strong public voice—an educated person who spoke on behalf of those who could not, and whose civil rights he was duty-bound to defend. The 20th century was dubbed by the French historian Michel Winock “the century of the intellectuals,” when they began to actively engage more and more in the daily discourse on various issues and their numbers grew. Today, in

the age of the digital revolution, we are already asking: do intellectuals and doctors in this role even exist, and are they necessary?

There are many authors in the discourse on intellectuals. Sociologists, historians, and philosophers have written about them. In this study, we highlight the ideals of Renaissance-era doctors, as manifested through their roles as intellectuals, and connect them to the contemporary presence of their colleagues. During the Renaissance, they were participants in the creation of the Bulgarian modern space. Today, they are subject to critical scrutiny and mistrust on the part of society. Who are those who lead public discourse today in what the German thinker Jürgen Habermas calls a “transformed public sphere” [4]?

Today, the medical profession is evolving by placing greater emphasis on the increasingly specialized refinement of knowledge and skills within individual specialties. Due to the dynamic labor market, where there is an abundance of specialists but a shortage of good working conditions, doctors devote a great deal of time to building and advancing their professional careers. Furthermore, the changing media landscape makes it easier for them to become public figures who do not necessarily possess the qualities of an intellectual as defined by the notions that took shape with the advent of modernity in the 19th century. For example, social media, which provide civil society with “its own, more or less autonomous, spheres of publicity” [4].

2. PURPOSE

The GOAL of this study is to formulate a definition of the doctor as an intellectual through his participation in various public spheres, important during the Renaissance, but also today.

3. METHODOLOGY

An original and anonymous survey was conducted among physicians and medical residents. Our questionnaire consists of 25 questions designed to identify the professional and public roles of the physician, their membership in society’s intellectual elite, and a comparison of their ideals and causes with those of their Renaissance-era counterparts. The study is based on a statistical sample, representatively formed according to the defined units and characteristics of the observation. The sample includes physicians (n=385) from Sofia, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sliven, Burgas, Varna, and Shumen, as well as medical students from MU – Sofia, MU – Plovdiv, and the Faculty of Medicine at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (n=122). A total of 507 questionnaires were collected. (n = 507).

Documentary, comparative, sociological, and mathematical-statistical methods were used.

- 1) Documentary method – part of the qualitative analysis. The documentary evidence forming the basis of the literature review dates from several periods: the Renaissance period, with two main categories: memoirs and testimonies of contemporaries and periodicals; contemporary literary sources: monographs, scientific publications, interviews in specialized periodicals; archival documents: letters, testimonies, photographs, reports, etc., from the personal archives of the physicians under study.
- 2) Comparative method – part of qualitative analysis: the use of this method emerged as a logical tool in compiling the discussion of the results obtained from the survey and in drafting the conclusion. It compares two historical dimensions—the past as modern/Renaissance and the present as contemporary/current—using data from the survey.
- 3) Sociological method – use of a survey involving physicians and medical students as stakeholders with regard to the tasks and hypotheses at hand. The information gathered in this way becomes meaningful within the professional community itself and is therefore of paramount importance for the fulfillment of the last three of the set tasks.
- 4) Mathematical and statistical methods: these include frequency analysis of quantitative and qualitative variables, alternative analysis, variational analysis, correlation analysis, nonparametric analysis, and graphical analysis.

4. RESULTS

The true intellectual elite possesses the ability to think independently, to create value in various fields, and to prioritize the common good over their own interests. This makes them a key factor in the development and maturity of any society. Intellectuals are agents of change. They are the first to recognize a state of crisis in a society and help clarify the necessary steps for sociocultural transformation. In addition to being mediators of knowledge, they have a duty to remain independent of political influences and material interests.

The variety of arguments offered by respondents regarding the reasons and circumstances that make doctors part of society’s intellectual elite allows for the following analysis.

As can be seen from the table (Table 1), the factors that receive the highest approval are those related to the social role and responsibility of the physician: The social significance of the profession—the survey results show that, according to the vast majority of respondents, doctors are part of the intellectual elite primarily because of the social significance of their profession. This is the dominant response (448 responses, or 88%). The medical profession is traditionally perceived as a highly prestigious calling due to the responsibility it bears for human life, the length of training, and the challenging practice environment. During the Bulgarian Renaissance, it was not only of public importance but also absolutely essential. Raina Gavrilova describes the emergence of “educated” doctors as “the first real step in the fight against the dominance of disease” [2]. In the newspaper “Zname,” issue 18 from 1878, Hristo Botev notes the need for educated physicians.

Table 1. What makes doctors part of society’s intellectual elite today?

	<i>n</i>	%
The profession’s social significance	448	88.36%
Public contacts	161	31.76%
Holding leadership positions	97	19.13%
Participation in political life	38	7.50%
Distance from political life	86	16.96%
His participation in initiatives outside his profession	180	35.50%
His open civic stance on socially significant issues	259	51.08%
Doctors are not part of society’s intellectual elite	24	4.73%
Other	7	1.38%

Source: Results of a questionnaire for a dissertation titled “Doctors, Culture, and Society in Modern Bulgaria,” which was conducted between April and September 2025 via Google Forms, with 507 doctors and medical students participating

Regarding the argument for taking a public stance on socially significant issues, 259 people (51%) believe that doctors should be active and outspoken in their role as mediators in filtering and accurately interpreting the daily media and other forms of political misinformation surrounding topics worthy of attention. This deepens the connection between them and the rest of society. This role corresponds to Karl Mannheim’s definition of the intelligentsia as a social group “whose special task is to interpret the world for society” [5]. In a discussion organized by the “Criticism and Humanism” publishing house, using Jürgen Habermas as an example, on the topic “Should the Intellectual Be Public?”, one of the participants, Prof. Alexander Kiossev, noted that the intellectual is the one who speaks the truth in the face of authority on behalf of others. In this sense, doctors who defend a civic stance and actively and courageously participate in public debates do so because they are aware that they can be of use to a wide range of people who cannot be heard [8].

Although they received less support, the following responses were still cited as significant by a considerable number of respondents:

- Public engagement: 161 responses (31.8%).
- Holding leadership positions: 97 responses (19.1%).
- Distance from political life: 86 responses (17%). It is interesting to note that distance from politics is valued more highly than participation in it, which was cited by only 38 people (7.5%).

It is clear that the medical community views doctors’ non-involvement in politics favorably. In today’s unstable climate, politicians are associated with mistrust and disappointment. During the Renaissance, however, doctors were expected to defend the national interest through their political positions, and this was an important element of their engagement for the benefit of society. Similarly, today, the modern intellectual and their participation in politics can be viewed positively if their goal is the public good. In the book „Professor’s Square“, in the discussion on “Hierarchy” among the four professors—Tsotcho Boyadzhiev, Kalin Yanakiev, Vladimir Gradev, and Georgi Kapriev, the latter recalls the “bonum commune,” which medieval thinkers, building on Aristotle, accepted as a fundamental political category” [1]. It is not uncommon for the intellectual and the politician to be viewed dichotomously. In “The Scholar and the Politician,” Max Weber discusses the futility of politicians and intellectuals doing the same thing and the meaning of their activities when guided by the same values [9].

The second question relevant to this topic aims to highlight the connection between the ideals championed by Renaissance-era physicians—by identifying them as causes also embraced by modern physicians—and asks:

“Which of the listed ideals championed by Renaissance-era physicians are also causes for modern physicians?”. Among the provided response options, the highest support was given to “a better-organized hospital system” (371 responses, 73.2%) and “better public health hygiene” (n=352, 69.4%), which underscores that modern respondents perceive the physician’s mission not only as an individual endeavor but also as a social responsibility toward healthcare infrastructure and prevention. These two elements form the solid foundation of high-quality modern healthcare.

A significant proportion of the responses cited the ideal of better education (n=327 responses, 64.5%), reflecting the understanding that the medical profession requires constant intellectual engagement and a contribution to the overall educational level of society—an idea with deep roots in the Bulgarian National Revival. At this specific historical moment, it is “the mystical flight toward the light of the new era by a people kept in darkness for centuries” [6]. The goal is to prepare educated people who will become the foundation of a modern state and represent a nation united around its common culture. Today, these efforts are important for the quality of training future doctors, but also for directing society’s attention to the values of education as a whole.

Next comes the formation of civil society (n=142, 28%) and the creation of associations and cultural organizations (n=123, 24.3%), which demonstrates an awareness of the social role of doctors as leaders and drivers of social unity. It is precisely in this role that they are what Prof. Kalin Yanakiev defines as “the elite [10]:

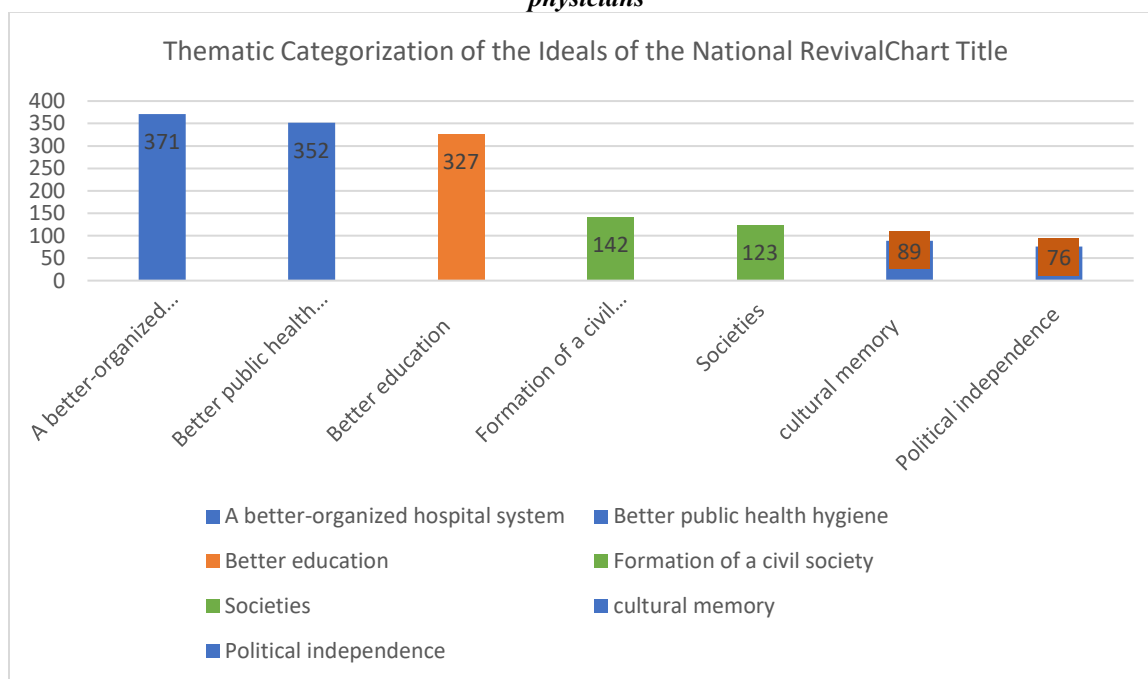
In the true sense of the term, the social elite can actually be described as those prominent figures in the humanities and politics, those great contributors who make society and the state strong—but certainly not those whom the state has made such through their official positions within its “apparatus.”

Lower, yet still significant, is the support for preserving cultural memory (n=89, 17.6%) and political independence or engagement (n=76, 15%). In both cases, the doctor must maintain their expertise.

Only 43 respondents (8.5%) stated that none of these ideals are relevant today, which underscores the enduring continuity between Renaissance values and contemporary medical ethics. The “other” response (2 individuals, 0.4%) is statistically insignificant.

In summary, the analysis shows that the modern physician continues to be perceived as a public leader in the traditions of the Renaissance—an advocate for education, health, and social progress, with an emphasis on organizational effectiveness and the nation’s health culture.

Fig. 1. Results of responses to the question regarding common causes between Renaissance and contemporary physicians



Source: Results of a questionnaire for a dissertation titled “Doctors, Culture, and Society in Modern Bulgaria,” which was conducted between April and September 2025 via Google Forms, with 507 doctors and medical students participating

Today's physician should not be a replica of the Renaissance physician. Historical time flows differently; there are different parameters for the occurrence of cultural and scientific events, but the causes driving the development of the profession and the intellectual elite converge on a common horizon. A horizon in which the priorities are quality education, quality scientific writing, a better-organized hospital and institutional system, care for the population's health culture, and responsible civic behavior. There is a shared mission to unite the individual elements of a common future. There is a shared understanding of the importance of knowledge, prepared to shift the scale of the profession's influence beyond its own boundaries, working to shape its own public image.

5. CONCLUSION

Doctors during the National Revival, though a minority, were the driving force and the reason behind the emergence of the modern Bulgarian public sphere. There is a connection between the ideals of the Renaissance and their recognition and application today by the contemporary physician in his capacity as an intellectual fulfilling multiple social roles in education, the organization of the hospital system, the care for public health, and the formation of civil society. This shows that although there are differences in the spiritual, social, and political conditions of the two periods, the tools for constructing the cultural layers of society are the same and are the responsibility of the intellectual elite.

A doctor can be an intellectual if they are involved in the three-tiered framework of "doctors-society-culture" within its problem areas, such as politics and the media, institutional weaknesses in the healthcare system, and a crisis of trust, which may be part of a crisis in fulfilling additional public roles. Renaissance culture is present today as a semantic split in the biographies of individual figures, viewed as a foundational and unchanging element of cultural self-esteem and a motivating example of intellectual conduct responsible to the public good.

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