The mood in a society, whether it is in general optimistic or depressive, varies from one nation to another, and from one time to another. It is obvious that the character of the population's disposition is a significant factor in a society's social, economic and political life. The question about the "American malaise" and the American spirit was an important issue in the debates between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan during the presidential election campaign of 1980. However, it is a moot question what is better for the survival and progress of a society generally discontent with the current state of affairs, or, rather, satisfied with their life, despite some negative developments. A famous pessimism of the "fin de siecle" was rampant throughout the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires at the end of the nineteenth century, which was somewhat responsible for the collapse of these empires. To think of it in another way, was not the famous American optimism one of the greatest causes of American progress over the past two centuries?

The national mood is of special importance when a society is in a state of turmoil. What else can help the nation to cope with the problems which it faces—a critical spirit, the negative assessment of current life, or to make all efforts to adjust to the current situation and try to rationalize developments as being "normal"?

In this article, I shall try to discuss this issue, analyzing developments in post-Communist Russia at the time of the last presidential election in the summer of 1996. By this period, most Russians clearly gravitated toward the acceptance of their society's state of affairs as "normal," despite all the "objective indicators" of many pathological developments.

Russians chose another strategy than, for instance, the French, who now consider their society, with a huge permanent unemployment rate and curtailment of social benefits, as being chronically ill. As with the sick individual who can choose from two strategies—ignore their illness and consider his/her health as "normal," or to be alert each minute, carefully studying each signal, each symptom stemming from their body—it is not easy to say which strategy is better for a society or for the individual. It depends on a myriad of factors.
If Hoover, not Roosevelt, were elected in 1932 . . .

Each historical parallel hobbles about in the light of scrutiny. Indeed, a comparison between Herbert John Hoover, the thirty-first American president, and the first Russian president, Boris Nikolaevich El'tsin, is, of course, quite risky. However, such a comparison can put current events into an interesting historical perspective. Indeed, the decline of production and standard of living during the Russian President's first term was quite comparable with what occurred during the American Great Depression. If we take the national income as a leading indicator, the Russian economy in 1996 was in an even worse state than the American economy in 1932 in comparison with the situation before the crisis.

Now suppose that Hoover, and not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was elected as the next president of the United States. In Russia, something like this did indeed happen. Despite the decline of the economy, standard of living, sciences, health services, and education, El'tsin still found a strong popular mandate to continue to rule his country for the next four years. It is not easy to find in the history of democratic countries another similar case where the leader of the regime, with such a nefarious economic record, was re-elected by the masses in a free election to the supreme position of the country. The explanation for this unprecedented development lies in the psychological adjustment of most Russians to the new society with all its flaws.

Before moving to an analysis of Russian perceptions of their society, let us briefly analyze how many Russians came to find normality in their current life, even if practices in Russia today jar with the norms advanced by all three ideologies now circulating throughout Russia—the liberal capitalist, Communist and nationalist ideals.

The Split in Russian Society On the Eve of the Election

Indeed, it was the consensus among Russian sociologists prior to the election that the Russian electorate were divided into three almost equal groups which differ from each other not only in their social status (the first group is mostly made up of the Russian "bourgeois" and those who directly serve it, while the third is composed of mostly unskilled workers, peasants and pensioners), but in their attitudes toward the new post-Communist reality.

The "first third" strongly supported the current regime. The "second third" endorsed the anti-Communist revolution of August 1991, accepting the ensuing societal changes as being mostly irreversible. At the same time, however, the "second third" were critical of many aspects of the actual situation in the country. The "third third" rejected many things which happened after 1985, and particularly 1991, demanding radical changes in do-