Elena Shestopal,

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Political Perception Studies

Paper presented to the ECPR General conference, Glasgow,
(September 2-6 , 2014)

Elena Shestopal, PhD, professor
Lomonosov Moscow State university,
Department of Political science
Head of the Chair of Sociology and Psychology of Politics
e-mail address: shestop0505@rambler.ru

1. Introduction

In contemporary political systems when politics becomes more and more mediated, citizens often base their electoral choice on incomplete and even biased information, that they are unable to check personally. Individual in this situation has to orient oneself in a political world with the help of images from Media that become political markers that fill the missing elements of individual's political picture of the world. These virtual images replace real political objects. Study of these images are among the most important aims of political psychology.

The studies of political perception are focused on the analysis of images of different political objects in public mentality: i.e. images of authorities and political leaders, especially candidates in electoral campaigns, images of political institutions (legislative, executive and judicial branches of power), the state in general, images of political parties and countries.

One of the main difficulties of such studies is caused by virtualization of politics that leads to the breakaway of political images from real interests of people and makes images rather unstable and irrational. Hence there is a necessity to reveal *unconscious components* of political perceptions along with settled opinions of people about politicians, power, state, etc.

Standard quantitative methods, polls in particular, that are widely used in electoral studies do not permit to catch this level of perception. To receive a reliable and relevant picture of citizens' **perception of power and authorities** one needs more sophisticated psychological methods, like open-ended questions in surveys, projective tests and in-depth interviews.

For a study of **political leaders' perception** we used a different methods: in-depth interviews with presentation of a white-and-black photo

of politician as a stimulus material. Unconscious level of perception was revealed with a method of fixed associations. In this paper we will discuss only qualitative methods that are we have used in the studies of authorities' perception.

2. Some Theoretical Presumptions

To choose methods relevant to the object and aims of the study one should first of all try to define **political perception** as an object of the study[1].

If perception is a process of reflection of parties, state, leaders etc. in public mentality, than **images** are it's main elements or "bricks" that constitute this process. In psychological literature one can find the definition of image as a generalized picture of the world that is formed as a result of processing of information, that goes through the senses[2].

Political image as any other image, is on one hand – reflection of some real characteristics of the object of perceptions, i.e. political power, leader's personality, peculiarities of political party, state, etc. One can call them *objective components*. They to a big extent define the contents of the image. On the other hand the image is a projection of expectations of the subject of perception. Political image reflects people's needs, motives, emotions, cognitions, concepts, stereotypes values and demands of public to authorities. These components of the image can be called *subjective*. Political images change with the changes of mass consciousness. Besides this images will change according such characteristics of the subject of perception as gender, age, education etc. Changes of images in time will

---

[1] Wood, Jonathan. Asymmetric Partisan Biases in Perceptions of Political Parties// The 65th Annual National Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association. – Chicago, Illinois. – 2007. – P.5. Fiske, Susan, Neuberg, Steven N. A continuum of impression formation, from category-based to individuating processes: Influences of information and motivation on attention and interpretation// Advances in experimental social psychology/ Ed. by M.P. Zanna. – New York: Academic Press, 1990. – Vol. 23. – P. 1-74.
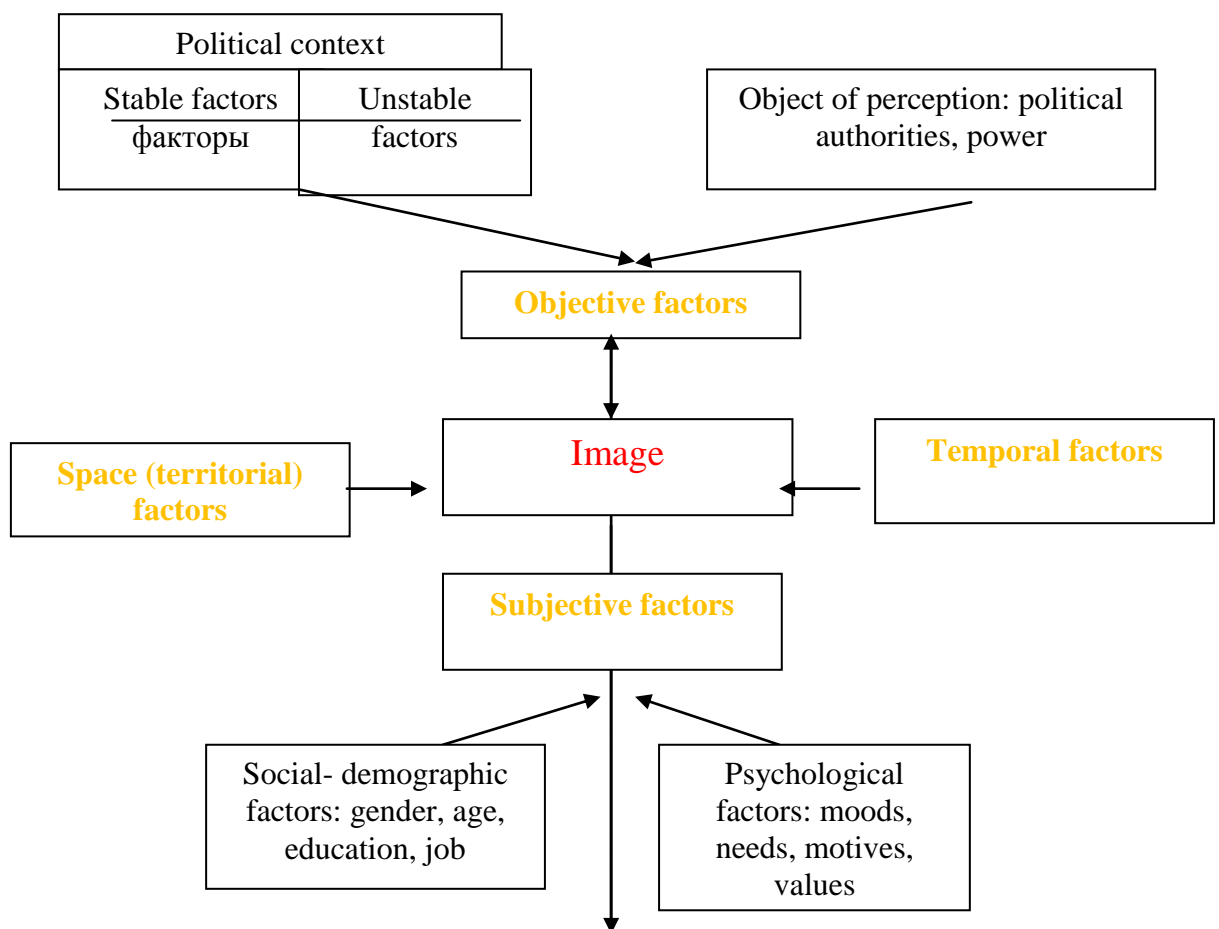
[2] Granberg, Donald, Kasmer, Jeff, Nanneman, Tim. An Empirical Examination of Two Theories of Political Perception// Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1988. – P. 29-46; Kristensen, Niels Norgaard. Perceptions of Power and Democracy: Analytical and Methodological Dilemmas of the Construction of Images// Qualitative Studies. – 2010. – Vol. 1, No. 1. – P. 21-27.

be determined by *temporal factors* as differences in regional perceptions can be called *space factors*. The influence of Media on perceptions of leaders, state etc are very substantial in contemporary politics so we find it important to take *communicative factors* into account too. So the aim of the political perception student is double: it is necessary to describe political images (dependant variables) and to interpret them , revealin the weight of each factor from the system (independent variables) .See scheme 1[3].

3. From Theory to Methodology. Methodological Positions, General to Different Objects of Political Perception

Though each object of perception has its' own specificity,   one can find some general features in the structure of all political images. (See picture 1)

Picture1. Factors, that determine political images

```
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│        Political context        │
├────────────────┬────────────────┤          ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Stable factors │    Unstable    │          │ Object of perception:    │
│    факторы     │    factors     │          │ political authorities,   │
│                │                │          │ power                    │
└────────────────┴────────────────┘          └──────────────────────────┘
                         ↘                        ↙
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Objective factors  │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                              ↕
┌──────────────────┐    ┌─────────────┐    ┌──────────────────┐
│ Space (territorial) →  │   Image     │  ← │ Temporal factors │
│     factors       │    └─────────────┘    └──────────────────┘
└──────────────────┘           │
                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │  Subjective factors │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                         ↗           ↖
┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Social- demographic  │      │ Psychological        │
│ factors: gender, age,│      │ factors: moods,      │
│ education, job       │      │ needs, motives,      │
│                      │      │ values               │
└──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
```

---

[3] Helen Shestopal. "Political Perception: Psychological Mechanisms and Political Implications in Russia" // *Politics, Culture,Socialization* N 1-2, 2012 pp. 115-131.

The first issue, common to all the images, is their compositon that includes both *rational* and *unconscious* levels. **Rational components** of image reflect those characteristics of the object of perception in the mind of a perceiving person which he/she is aware of and is able to describe. For instance if we ask someone about politics this person is able to describe what he or she likes or dislikes about it and is able to say why. If we talk about authorities, citizens are able quite rationally explain their claims to them or name their grounds for trust. The same is true for the other images (images of parties, state, organizations, branches of power etc).

On the rational level of perception one can find the **cognitive mechanisms** mainly.

Emotions predominate in an **unconscious** level. They are hardly realized by individual who rarely can explain his attitudes to the party, leader, country or power even to himself not to mention explanations that he gives to other people. While respondent tries to rationalize this explanation is not always trustworthy.

As our studies in 1990-2010s have shown, in the circumstances of political instability it is hard for citizens to produce stable, rational attitudes towards politics. That is why, they follow their emotions. Hence one of the main aims of political perception studies is to find such methodological instruments that permit us to reveal unconscious elements of images and give them an adequate interpretation. This does not mean underestimation of rational elements, but unconscious elements of image work faster and are close to political decision to be made by individual.

Second, one can single out in the image such elements as **attractiveness, strength and activity,** or more precisely, scales of attractiveness-nonattractiveness, strength-weakness and activity-passivity.

We based on an Ch.Osgood's model which includes these three scales **(attractiveness, strength and activity)** into a personality structure. We assumed that not only in politicians' images but also in images of nonpersonalized political objects such as power, party or a state these parameters of image can be used for analysis.

No matter how **attractive** is an image it should be evaluated also from the point of view of two other psychological qualities: i.e. **strength** and **activity**. Presence of strength by all means supports attraction. Evaluating all the answers of respondents by these two scales, we acquire a supplementary instrument of analysis that helps us to exclude some definitely attractive qualities of a politician(for instance, competence) that costs not very much without strength.

The same is true about **activity** that relates to execution of power credentials. Parameters of **strength** and **activity** as a rule are realized by respondents, but they also are present on an unconscious level.

Third, political images include visual and verbal structural elements that should be analyzed separately. An image is primarily connected with a visual perception. Visual perception was always important but in contemporary politics with Internet and TV as dominating forms of communication, people mainly deal with visual images.

We can note that visual components by their nature are unconscious. That is why their analysis demand special methods among which we prefer projective tests, methods of unfinished sentences and revealing of need that stay behind images.
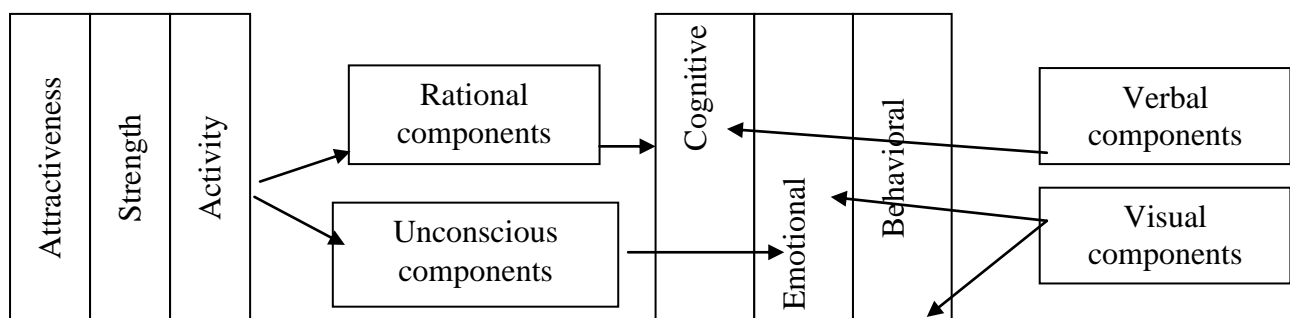
Fourth, psychologists often in their attitudes' analysis single out **cognitive, emotional and behavioral** elements. The same can be done with an image. The most complicated task is to analyze emotional

components of political image. In our studies of politicians' images we used method of associations in a study of a country's image we used a projective test and cartography.

Though formation of political image in citizens' consciousness is not based on a complete and clear information of a rational character, they nevertheless obtain some psychologically accurate instruments that permit them to make if not totally rational but at least emotionally acceptable political choice.

The structure of political image can be presented in a following way(see picture 2)

Picture 2. Structure of political image

Methodology of political perception study demands division of the study on operations or stages:

-collection of data,

-their processing and

-interpretation of results.

The data, obtained on the first stage of data collection then undergo coding and scaling. Then they are processed quantitatively with a help of a standard package of statistic information SPSS. But along with quantitative procedures our methodology demands qualitative analysis of respondents' answers which describe some political objects. These answers is an invaluable source of information about emotional components of images for their further interpretation.

Interpretation is the most complicated part of the study as for each object of political perception one has to build up a particular explanatory model.

Above we discussed those characteristics of perception that are similar to all political objects. But in our studies we have come to the conclusion that each of the objects, i.e. authorities, state, parliament, leaders and the country have so important differences in their nature and functioning that their analysis demands specific instruments and approaches. Below we will discuss in some details methodology of the study of authorities' images.

4. Methodology and methods in the studies of authorities' images

Methods of data collection. Methodology that we have used for this purpose included *surveys* with a number of open-ended questions, **in-depth interviews** and **projective test " Picture of authorities"**

All these methods were directed to reveal not only rational but also unconscious components of authorities' image. Qualitative methods with the elements of quantitative ones predominated in our study, Scaling technique as well as coding were used to work with answers on open-ended questions as statistic analysis was used in processing of quantitative data.

Our first concern was a study of **emotional** components of images, i.e. *emotional sign* in people's relation towards authorities distinguishing relation to ideal and real authorities, authorities of present time and past times. This sign was fixed as plus, minus and neutral. We assumed that sign of relations to authorities in a time of person's youth should be more positive than in present as people often idealize their past. This hypothesis

was confirmed only   partially. Reality   appeared to be much more complicated that we could imagine in the beginning of the study.

The second important component of image of authorities was its' **cognitive lavel,** that we operationalized via such indicators as

- Interest to authorities,
- Independence or triviality of judgments on authorities,
- The level of cognitive complexity/simplicity,
- The extent of clarity/vagueness of images,
- Presence/absence of a subject of power

In the literature one can find data that prove psychological correlation between citizens' political activity and   a level of interest to politics[4]. And on the contrary: political absenteeism and cynicism are accompanied by a total absence of political interest as politics lays out of individual's field of view. Civic maturity in it's turn presupposes an ability of individual to make independent judgments about authorities and make decisions during elections, that is free from stereotypes.

Cognitive complexity/simplicity – is an important element of political perception. People with a salient cognitive complexity make more mature evaluations of authorities. This quality is connected with a level of authoritarianism of personality. Cognitive simplicity is a feature of individuals with a black-and-white, closed mentality, rigid psychic that mould their political evaluations.

 As our studies have shown, the presence or absence of a subject of power is an important indicator. We have often found that people perceive power as an anonymous force without   a "face". Power is regarded as some lifeless object that causes anxiety, fear and other negative emotions.

---

[4] Kavanagh D. Political Science and Political Behaviour.L.,1983,p.183.

Another case when power is associated with parties, institutions, state or particular persons. We believe that it is important to understand **whom** or what do people keep in mind while the say about power or authorities. Another task is corresponding with this issue: to define the borders of power: where the power ends and opposition starts, what are the psychological limits of power's credentials? [5]

And finally a **behavioral aspect** of images of authorities that could be found in readiness to support authorities, to participate in state management, in different forms of political activity.

Questions about this readiness were included in a questionnaire of the survey and in a topic-guide of an in-depth interview. One can get a lot of important data by comparing the images of authorities of passive and active citizens, of those who is eager to participate in politics only in a role of a voter and those who goes for a strike or become a candidate.

n our study we have used a lot of open-ended questions to find out whom of the politicians people trust and sympathize, who is most influential and whom they are going to vote for (respondents were asked to give names without a hint in a form of a list of names for choice). Analysis of the answers on such questions permits us to see authorities' image in a personified form. We were interested to find out weather power is associated with public politicians or contains more "shadow" elements, that produces an image of a marionette - power which is manipulated by some unknown and dangerous figure.

As images of authorities consist of both: rational and unconscious elements, our methodology includes instruments for analysis of both sides of the image. Data on **rational components** were collected with a help of

---

[5] Our studies have shown that Russian citizens include not only the representatives of legislative and executive powers (ignoring judicial one) into the concept of authorities. They hardly differ power and opposition. For them - power - is everyone "on the top".

closed-ended questions of the questionnaire and in-depth interviews. **Unconscious elements** were studied mainly by qualitative methods or qualitative/quantitative methods: open-ended questions of a questionnaire and projective tests.

Survey was a basis of a **quantitative part of the study**. Its' main aim was to collect information about the current citizens' conceptions of political system, leaders, democracy, political identification, level of authoritarianism and other issues, important for this study. The main line of the study was revealing of respondents' conceptions of real and ideal power, politicians that symbolizes this power, their trust and sympathy to authorities and desire to subordinate to them, motives that respondents attribute to politicians and other issues.

Processing of the data aimed to reach the following goals:

1.   To find out weather there are differences between the answers of respondents:

- in time series.
- gender
- age
- education

2.   To single out the blocs of variables in which groups of respondents are big enough to be of some interest for a further analysis.

3.   To pick out several kea variables along with socio-demographic that divide the sample into several groups and to verify he differences in answers of respondents in these groups

Open-ended questions that were widely used in the questionnaire permitted to find more broad and impartial information on political preferences of respondents. Answers on such questions were processed with a help of scaling technique. Each answer was given a particular meaning according the coding list that then was put down into a data base.

Coding was fulfilled   according to a scheme that was worked out for this study on a preliminary stage.

Processing   of respondents' answers was made in order to find out such parameters of images of authorities as

- **emotional sign,**
- **presence of a subject of power,**
- **clarity/ vagueness,**
- **cognitive complexity/simplicity,**
- **need that stands behind particular images.**

The quantitative data were processed by SPSS package. Questions that contained names of politicians to whom respondents trust, sympathize and findthem influential, were analyzed qualitatively without coding as the number of such names was small enough. At the same time mkin such a list had a sense as opposite to   rating   method in sociology (when respondents are asked to evaluate the level of influence of politician from a list of some hundred names, preliminary selected by experts) we did not give respondents any hint. The list was completed exceptionally of the names that respondents remembered by their owns. A small number of names in this list shows that political world in the mentality of citizens is not overpopulated.

A qualitative part of the study   included **in-depth interview, projective test and analysis of open-ended question.**

Interview had a semy-strucktured character. i.e. the order of questions was determined by interviewer, but all the respondents answered the same list of questions of the guide. The interviews were not processed quantitatively. It had a completely qualitative character.

Another qualitative method was a projective test "Psychological picture of authorities". This method is widely used in other fields of

psychology[6], but in political psychology until now practically it was not used. Meanwhile with a help of this method one can obtain a rich set of data concerning a visual form of images of authorities that is especially desirable for such a study. In our research we paid special attention to

- Conceptual characteristics of power and authorities and people's attitude to them,
- Symbolic objects in the picture,
- Cognitive, emotional and behavioral particularities of perception,
- Parameters of strength, activity and attractiveness of the image as well as
- the general script of the picture.

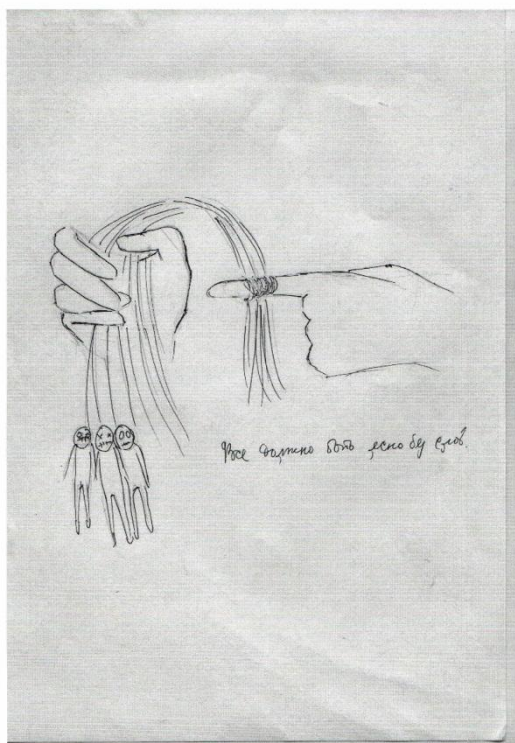**Data collection.** The procedure of data collection included a projective test" Picture of authorities".

We have prepared an instruction for respondent to draw authorities of his country freely putting it on a sheet of paper size A4. The sample was balanced by gender, age and education.

Interpretation of results of the test "Picture of authorities" (study of 2014 in comparison with previous studies).

Strength was evaluated by a parameter of sharpness of forms as well as by expert assement. On pictures of 2013 strong power was found in 60% of images in 2014 in became even stronger (68%) one can also see that strength of authorities' image goes along with its' passiveness, that means that authorities potentially have power but do not use it. We also have pictures, where authorities use their strength against people (see picture 3.)

---

[6] Мельникова О.Т.Качественные методы в решении практических социально-психологических задач//Введение в практическую соци альную психологию.М.1996; Фаломеева Т.Цехоня О. Проективные методы в исследовании потребительского поведения.//Вестник МГУ. Сер.14, Психология, 1996; Фаломеева ТВ..,Бартенева О.М. Опыт применения проективной методики «Психологический рисунок» в исследовании социальных объектов//Вестник Московского Университета,сер. 14, Психология,N2, 2000.

Picture 3.Authorities use their strength against people

In 2014 there were 40% of pictures where authorities had an active character. But only 3% described this power in a positive way. In other cases authorities are actively robbing the budget of the country, using corruptive schemes and actively exploit people. We also have found cases with strong, active but uncontrollable power(Picture.4).

Picture 4. Strong, active but uncontrollable power

2.Symbols in respondents' pictures

In pictures of 2010 dollar was the mostly repeated symbol (16%). (picture5)
In this case dollar could be interpreted as money in general as it played a substantial role in Russian economy of that period. In recent pictures dollar appears much more rare (6%). It means that Russian dependence from dollar declined at least in people's minds.
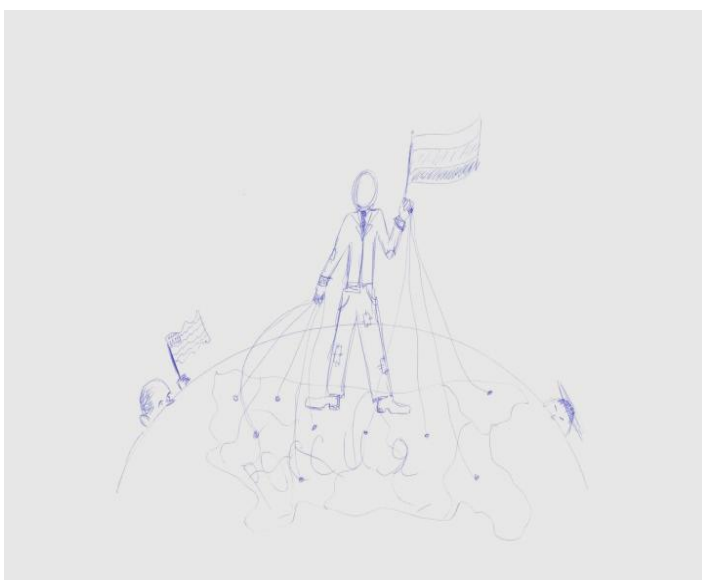
Picure 5

Picture 6

The second most popular symbol is a crown (picture 6). For some part of respondents power has a sacred character that shows the archetypes of monarchic statehood. But these archetypes are gradually declining: if in the pictures of 2013 the crown appeared in11% of tests, in 2014 – only in 6%.

Quite often we can see the state symbols: the double eagle, Russian banner (picture 7).

In 2013-2014 much more rarely than before one could find such symbols as weapons (a sward or an automatic gun

(5%), a tree (4%) the sun (3%).

3. Cognitive, emotional behavioral elements of the image.

One can judge of a **cognitive level** of an image by density of the filling of paper, by level of thoroughness of an image that could be interpreted as an indicator of interest to power, number of details in the picture, repeatedness of structures of a picture, cognitive complexity, stereotypy or uniqueness of representation. Uniqueness of the plot is important for analysis of cognitive complexity. In a cognitive level we also looked for parameters of strength and activity. In the study of 2014 authorities appeared to be stronger (up to 68%). Active authorities one can find in 40% of pictures.

Emotional level

We pay attention to **attractiveness** of a picture while making conclusions about emotional level of an image**.**
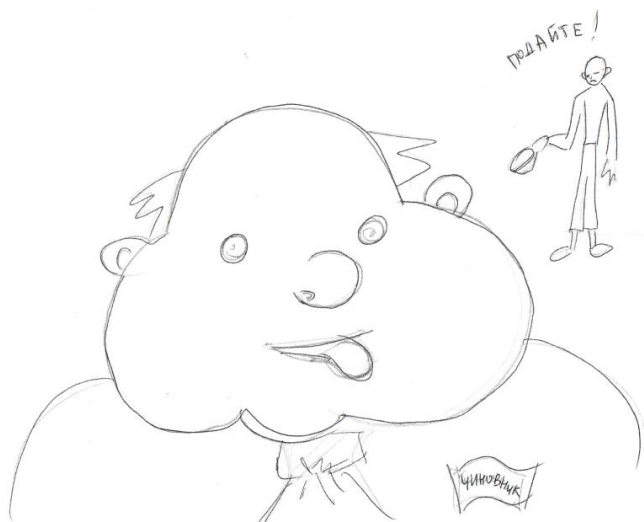
Emotional background of the majority of tests shows the feeling of one's helplessness in the face of authorities, offence from them and alienation from them. Quite often we can find an image of aggressive authorities (picture 8).

Рис. 9. People ask something, authorities are deaf to their demands

Behavioral level

In majority o tests population is not depicted at all. Those with population in

them could be divided into three scripts according to the role people play in them:

1. People asks something from authorities and they either reject their demands or ignore them (piture9).

   2. People are located below authorities and are crashed by their weight or are chained in the shackles.

   3. People are represented by a big number of men that are meditating apathetically.

   So we can conclude that some part of respondents   divide themselves from authorities on an unconscious level, another part has a passive position.

   In the end we can suggest that it is important not only to analyze rational and unconscious levels separately but also to compare them between themselves. In case of coincidence of the main parameters of strength, activity and attractiveness on both levels we can conclude that the image is coherent. If not, than this contradiction   leads to distrust of individual to authority, anxiety, fear. Study of an unconscious level of political perception gives us a supplementary instrument for a more accurate forecast of political development.