Chapter 6

The Elder Brother in Russia

The starting-point for this chapter is the curious fact that a concept of hierarchical ranking or seniority has been prominent in most of the more than thousand years of the history of the Russian state. In the early period of Kievan Rus’, it manifested itself in a combination of ranking of princes belonging to the ruling house and a corresponding ranking of provincial capitals assigned to various princes. As the Kievan empire was gradually transformed into a loose confederation of semi-independent principalities, the hierarchical order within the Kievan ruling house underwent a metamorphosis by which a quasi-contractual relationship between “elder” and “younger” brothers became the dominant idea. This arrangement lost its relevance when the grand princes of Moscow acquired supreme power and exclusive sovereignty in the entire Russian land. Then the concept of hierarchical ranking returned within the organization of the Muscovy state through the institution of mestnichestvo, the attribution of offices according to the social position of the prospective incumbent and his family. This system lasted until 1682, and in 1722 Peter the Great introduced his Table of Ranks which assigned all military, civilian and court personnel to one of 14 ranks. In an amended form, the Table of Ranks survived until the October Revolution. In Stalin’s time, the ‘elder brother’ metaphor enjoyed a certain popularity in Soviet political discourse; during the last decades of Soviet power, the political hierarchy among Soviet leaders became more and more formalized, to such an extent that an individual’s status could be precisely determined by considering the office occupied by him.

1. The House of Rurik

From the Kievan grand prince Vladimir (†1016), and until the death of tsar Fedor Ivanovich, the insignificant son of Ivan the Terrible, in 1598, all the rulers of Russia and its component principalities had belonged to the house of Rurik. For a while, leading Soviet historians denied the Scandinavian roots of Rurik.¹ This politically motivated position is not supported by anybody any longer. It is equally undeniable that Rurik was

¹ B.D. Grekov, in his best-known work, Kievskaia Rus’, Moskva, 1953, 452-453, is not entirely clear, but seems to deny Rurik’s Scandinavian credentials in a collective work published in the same year: B.D. Grekov (ed.), Ocherki istorii SSSR, period feodalizma IX-XV vv., Vol.1, Moskva, 1953, 76-77 (the chapter in question was written by Grekov himself). S.V. Iushkov is quite outspoken in Obshchestvenno-politicheskii stroi i pravo kievskogo gosudarstva, Moskva, 1949, 67.
not just a Viking adventurer but could claim royal rank on account of his ancestry. According to the annals (the Primary Chronicle, also called Nestor Chronicle or Tale of Bygone Years), Rurik (Hrörekr) arrived in Russia in 862. His relatives and descendants (the Kievan princes Oleg or Helgi, Igor or Ingvar and his wife Olga or Helga, and Sviatoslav) waged war with and subdued other Slavic tribes populating European Russia. During this period, the Scandinavian element in the ruling house and its attendants was slowly being absorbed by its Slavic surroundings. Whether princely succession among the descendants of Rurik had its origin in Scandinavian or in local Russian tradition is difficult to answer. In any case, the two systems were probably very similar. The evidence from the Primary Chronicle and other sources is quite clear and reveals the operation of several interlocking principles.

The first principle, self-evident within the setting of the times, is that only male members of the house of Rurik were eligible to succeed. The second principle discernible, at least during the first centuries after Rurik, was that the house prevailed over its individual members; or more explicitly, that rulership belonged to the house, rather than to any individual member. The third principle, closely connected to the previous one, was seniority: within the ruling house seniority determined the sequence of succession.

The question may also be approached differently, as has been done by several prominent Russian historians in the past: as a way to solve the tension between seniority within the family (starshinstvo) and the claim to receive one’s father’s heritage or patrimony (otchina). 

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2 Cf. E.V. Pchelov, Genealogiia drevnerusskikh kniazei, IXXXI v., Moskva, 2001, ch.1; in his section on the possibility of Rurik’s Slavic origins, Pchelov does not even discuss the opinions of Grekov and Ishkov.

3 This question was first asked by E. Shchepkin in his paper “Poriadok prestolonaslediiia u drevnenorvezhskikh konungov”, in Sbornik statei, posviaschennykh V.O. Kliuchevskomu, Moskva, 1909, 164-216.

4 The formidable Olga, who ruled from 945-964, served as a regent for her son Sviatoslav, who assumed the reign when he reached manhood. Generally, the principle typically belongs to patriarchal societies; women may occasionally be in the supreme ruling position, but then as mothers, wives or widows of men who are for some reason unable to rule (being too young, absent, incapacitated, deceased).