“SOCIALIST IN FORM, NATIONAL IN CONTENT”:

THE REVIVAL OF THE NAŪRYZ HOLIDAY

IN KAZAKHSTAN IN LATE 1980S

by

Gulzada Xan

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Abstract

Gulzada Xan: "Socialist in Form, National in Content": The Revival of the Naūryz Holiday in Late 1980s Kazakhstan

Naūryz, the spring equinox holiday and one of the key events on Kazakhstan's cultural calendar, was absent from public life for more than sixty years. It was officially revived only in the spring of 1988. While the return of Naūryz has received increasing attention in the local media for the last five years, academic research on the topic remains limited. Existing scholarship on late Soviet Kazakhstan has mostly focused on political protests like *Jeltoqsan events*, environmental activism like the *Nevada-Semey* movement, and broader cultural reforms, leaving a gap in understanding how traditions like Naūryz were brought back into public life. This research studies the revival of Naūryz between 1988 and the early 1990s, arguing that the holiday was initially reimagined within the ideological framework of being "Socialist in Content, National in Form." Early celebrations praised *perestroika* and emphasized Soviet values, including collective labor, friendship of nations, and ecological awareness. However, over time local intellectuals began to shift the narrative toward national history and cultural heritage. As a result, by the early 1990s, Naūryz was increasingly framed as "National in Content, Soviet in Form," with greater emphasis on pre-Soviet traditions and Kazakh cultural identity. Using the archival documents, media materials, and literary sources, this study analyzes how Naūryz was framed, performed, and institutionalized through the lens of invented traditions and imagined communities.

Keywords: *Naūryz, Kazakhstan, revival, invented tradition, Soviet Union, national identity, cultural policy, late socialism.*

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To Naūryz, a holiday I tried to understand while nearly dropping out at least three times in the process. And to Muqaġalī Maqataev, who wrote a nostalgic poem about Naūryz that inspired me to look deeper and eventually become a *Naūryztanushy*.

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Introduction

In contemporary Kazakhstan, Naūryz[1], a spring equinox celebration with roots in Persian and Turkic traditions, is often taken for granted. Every spring, families gather, schools and government offices close, and the streets fill with concerts, exhibitions, and sporting events. Naūryz marks the renewal of nature, the arrival of a new year, and is typically associated with concepts of rebirth. Naūryz is celebrated across Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, and appears in various forms and spellings such as Novruz, Nowruz, Nevruz, Navruz, and Nooruz[2]. More than 50% of Kazakhstan's population were born after 1991 (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2025) and for them, Naūryz is simply something that has always existed. However, this assumption erases a key historical fact: Naūryz was not officially celebrated on a massive level in Soviet Kazakhstan until 1988, after a 62-year absence from the public calendar.

In recent years, this absence has become a topic of public discussion. Articles with titles like "How the Soviet Union Stole Naūryz from the Kazakhs"[3], "Who Stole Naūryz?"[4], and "How Naūryz Returned to Kazakhstan After 62 Years of Prohibition"[5] have appeared with increasing frequency, especially following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which sparked a new wave of decolonial and nationalist discourse in Kazakhstan. Within this context, Naūryz has become a potent symbol of national revival, reinterpreted as a cultural practice "stolen" by

1 All Kazakh words and names in this thesis are romanized using the BGN/PCGN romanization of Kazakh, unless otherwise indicated. This system is used for consistency and clarity.

2 The holiday has different names, but I will go with the version "Naūryz", the one which is used in the Kazakh language because my work is focused on Kazakhstan. I am clarifying it because I am using several sources that focus on Naūryz in Uzbekistan or Iran and they use different ways of writing and pronouncing it.

3 "Как Советский Союз украл у казахов Наурыз"

4 "Кто украл Наурыз?"

5 "Как Наурыз вернулся в Казахстан после 62 лет запрета"

Soviet authorities and heroically restored by Kazakh activists. But this version of events is itself a constructed narrative, one that simplifies the complex realities of Naūryz's late-Soviet revival.

This thesis investigates the revival of Naūryz in Kazakhstan between 1988 and 1990, asking how the holiday was reintroduced to the public, what institutional and cultural mechanisms shaped its return, and how it was presented in state and media discourse. At the same time, the word revival may not fully capture what happened in the late 1980s with Naūryz. After six decades of absence from the public calendar during which it was either ignored, quietly marked in private, or replaced with alternative Soviet holidays, the return of Naūryz was not just a matter of picking up where things left off. By the late Soviet period, most urban Kazakhs had little or no memory of how Naūryz was once celebrated, and younger generations knew it only by name, if at all. In this context, the holiday had to be reinvented. Rather than simply restoring an old tradition, Naūryz was reimagined to fit the political and cultural conditions of the time. Its reintroduction served multiple aims: it responded to growing local interest in national culture during perestroika, aligned with state goals of showcasing interethnic harmony, and allowed Kazakh intellectuals to promote cultural continuity within the constraints of Soviet ideology.

Research question and argument. Answering the question "How was Naūryz reintroduced and redefined in Late-Soviet Kazakhstan, after more than six decades of absence from public life?", I argue that the process of bringing back Naūryz between 1988 and the early 1990s can best be understood through the Soviet cultural formula of being "Socialist in Content and National in Form." Rather than framing the revival as a purely nationalist project or as a spontaneous return of suppressed traditions, I suggest it was a carefully managed process that worked within the ideological structures of the late Soviet state. Naūryz was not simply revived as it once existed, but reimagined in ways that aligned with key Soviet values: labor,

collectivism, interethnic harmony, and ecological awareness. Its national form seen in symbols like yurts, traditional sports, and folk costumes made it culturally legible, while its socialist content made it politically permissible.

Naūryz could be celebrated publicly and on a large scale only after it was given socialist meanings that aligned with Soviet values. Journalists, cultural organizers, and intellectuals defined it as a holiday of agrarian labor, a celebration of the friendship of nations, and even a platform for ecological awareness that emphasized its usefulness to the Soviet project. Over time, however, the balance shifted: by the early 1990s, Naūryz had become "national in content and Soviet in form." Kazakh intellectuals and media began actively working to nationalize the holiday. They published and republished works by early Soviet poets like Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly and Beyimbet Maylin, brought back pre-Soviet cultural references, and presented Naūryz as something that existed before Soviet rule. For them, it was a way to show that Kazakhs had their own holidays, their own culture, and their own way of marking the seasons long before the Soviet calendar. Writers such as Mukhtar Shakhanov described the holiday as a spiritual bridge to the past, emphasizing its ancestral significance and positioning it as a symbol of national identity.

Literature overview. To understand how the revival of Naūryz relates to what was happening in late Soviet Kazakhstan more broadly, I explore other scholarly work from that period. Many scholars have focused on political protest, environmental activism, or literary developments. Nari Shelekpayev, for example, examines the dynamics of power and resistance in his article "Rethinking Transfers of Power and Public Protest in Kazakhstan, 1959-1989", where he connects the 1959 Temirtau uprising with the 1986 Zheltoqsan protests to explore broader shifts in the political fabric of Soviet Kazakhstan. Edward Schatz, in "Notes on the Dog

That Didn't Bark," focuses on eco-internationalism and analyzes how environmental issues became a site of mobilization during perestroika. Adeeb Khalid's book *"Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present"* provides a comprehensive history of the region, covering the cultural policies and the work of the local intellectuals that will be discussed in the next chapters. Diana Kudaibergen, in her book *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature*, explores literary efforts to reimagine Kazakh identity in the late Soviet and early independence years. These works offer valuable insights into the big picture of ideological, political, and cultural shifts of the 1980s. Rather than positioning Naūryz as a "missing topic" in these papers, this thesis proposes that focusing on the revival of a single holiday can offer a different entry point into the same processes they describe. The return of Naūryz including its redefinition, public performance and media framing shows how official ideologies were negotiated, how cultural forms were remade to fit new contexts, and how national identity was expressed within Soviet reality. In this way, the Naūryz revival becomes a lens through which to view broader shifts in power, memory, and cultural policy during the *perestroika* era.

As it was mentioned before, there are not many studies on Naūryz's disappearance and return in Kazakhstan, but various scholars have approached related topics, including cultural revival, state-sponsored festivals, national identity, and media's role in shaping tradition.

In her book *The Spectacular State*, Laura Adams talks about the revival of Navro'z in Uzbekistan between 1991 and 2002. She argues that this cultural revival was not about rejecting Soviet heritage but instead built upon it. The Uzbek state retained Soviet forms of celebration, mass performances, rigid choreography, and centralized control but filled them with national symbols and content. For Adams, this was not a return to pre-colonial identity but a new form of cultural engineering. She writes that "the holiday's authenticity and meaning as tradition was

monopolised by cultural elites" (Adams 2010, 58), suggesting that power shaped not only the form but also the meanings of tradition. Her observations are especially relevant to Kazakhstan's own experience of reviving Naūryz under state control.

Together with Assel Rustemova, Laura Adams also analyzed Kazakhstan's Naūryz celebrations and compared them to those in Uzbekistan. Their paper explores Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, the ways in which states govern populations not just through laws but through everyday cultural practices. They argue that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan differ in how they "manage" their populations through holidays like Naūryz. For both countries, the holiday became a "particular regime of practices," shaped from above but performed by the public. Kazakhstan's version, they say, includes "more folk and popular culture symbols" (Adams and Rustemova 2009, 1257) and places emphasis on lifestyle rituals such as tusau-kesu and shashu-toi, unlike Uzbekistan's concerts, which focus on "ethnic heritage that aims to strengthen the population's identification" (Adams and Rustemova 2009, 1261). These differences are often explained by the contrasting political styles of Nazarbayev and Karimov and show how different styles of governance produce different kinds of tradition.

If Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova were working on what is the central part of the celebrations themselves, the role of media in constructing Naūryz has been studied most deeply by Margarethe Adams in her book *Steppe Dreams*. She claims how the Kazakhstani state used the media to present Naūryz as an "unbroken line," not as a newly revived or reinvented holiday, but as something that had always existed. "The media," she writes, "wants to present Naūryz as an unbroken line, not a revival of long-forgotten pre-Soviet traditions" (Adams 2020, 87). This was part of a larger nationalizing project in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. After the collapse of the USSR, the idea of the "Soviet people" disappeared, and citizens were pushed to rediscover their

national identity. In this context, festivals like Naūryz were reintroduced as national traditions even if they had not been celebrated for decades. The desire to show continuity, not rupture, shaped how Naūryz appeared in concerts, media, and textbooks.

This process of reshaping Naūryz can be seen as a form of traditionalization. Charles Briggs writes that cultural forms can be both traditionalized, by being linked to a distant or imagined past, and mediatized, by being adapted to current formats like television or Instagram (Briggs 2020). This is especially visible in Kazakhstan's Naūryz celebrations of the early 1990s. At that time, the Ministries of Information and Culture sponsored the publication of small books explaining how to celebrate Naūryz: what food to cook, what games to play, what songs to sing. These books didn't just preserve tradition, they invented it. By prescribing the "right" way to celebrate Naūryz, they created a national script for the holiday.

Theoretical lens. My thesis is grounded in the conceptual intersection of Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" and Eric Hobsbawm's "Invented traditions". Anderson's ideas help frame the revival of Naūryz as part of the broader process of imagining the Kazakh nation through ritual and cultural performance, while Hobsbawm's work provides a useful lens for understanding how the holiday's "return" was actually a intelligentsia-managed reinvention shaped by the political logic of late socialism. This research also draws on the work of Adeeb Khalid, especially his insights on how Soviet nationalities policy enabled Central Asian intellectuals to cultivate "national forms" within Soviet frameworks; Laura L. Adams, whose analysis of cultural reforms in Uzbekistan illuminates broader patterns of state-orchestrated tradition-making; and Margarethe Adams, whose recent ethnographic and historical study of Kazakhstani celebrations offers important insights into the Naūryz holiday's contemporary and Soviet-era meanings.

Methodology. This research uses a mixed-methods approach, combining archival research, media analysis, and literary content analysis to understand how Naūryz was reinvented in the late 1980s. A key component of this research involved working with archival documents at the Presidential Archive of Kazakhstan, specifically Fond 7 "President of the Kazakh SSR", Opis No. 2 of permanently stored files. These documents include official correspondence from 1990 between ministries, *ispolkom*s, executive elected collegial organs in the Soviet Union, and cultural activists regarding the organization of Naūryz celebrations. The analysis of these materials helped answer the following questions – "How did different government bodies and activists negotiate the return of Naūryz?" and "What role did regional administrations play in adapting celebrations to local contexts?" To understand how Naūryz was framed in Soviet media and how narratives shifted over time, I conducted media content analysis of five periodicals from February to May 1988 and 1989 at the National Library of Kazakhstan (Almaty): *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan, Lenīnshil zhas, Zhalyn, Madeniet zhane omir and Tselinogradskaya Pravda*. Initially, I focused on March, assuming that discussions about Naūryz would be concentrated around the holiday. However, after discovering that Mukhtar Shakhanov first publicly discussed Naūryz in February 1988, and that the first official celebrations took place only in late April 1988, I expanded the scope to include February-May. The media analysis involved qualitative and quantitative elements. Qualitative analysis focused on identifying narrative shifts in articles, editorials, and interviews. I examined how journalists, politicians, and readers framed Naūryz – whether as a cultural revival, a political act, or an ecological initiative.

To go further with the media analysis, I read and analyzed poetry and literary texts about Naūryz to understand how writers framed the holiday's cultural significance. My research process began with a search for well-known poems by Mukhtar Shakhanov and Muqaġalī

Maqataev, which served as an entry point into the literary representations of Naūryz. From there, I found lesser-known poems by Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly, Beyimbet Maylin, and other Kazakh writers in archival newspapers and cross-referenced them with digital sources to confirm authorship and publication details. I also compared Mukhtar Auezov's article on Naūryz published in *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* with the version included in his 16-volume collected works. These two versions differed in tone and emphasis, offering insight into how the portrayal of Naūryz shifted over time and across formats. In analyzing the poems and prose, I paid attention to the verbs and adjectives that conveyed nostalgia, pride, or subtle resistance. I also focused on recurring themes such as spring, nature, and renewal, and considered how they were used to highlight ideas of Kazakh identity within the Soviet context. By comparing pre-Soviet, Soviet-era, and late 1980s representations of Naūryz, I was able to observe how the meaning of the holiday evolved, especially as it was reinterpreted during the revival period.

To deepen the cultural and emotional context of the Naūryz revival, I aimed to supplement archival and media research with oral history. While written sources reveal how Naūryz was framed publicly, I hoped interviews would offer insight into how individuals personally interpreted and contributed to the holiday's reinvention. I conducted an interview with Kazakh singer Roza Rymbayeva, who spoke about transforming Muqaġalī Maqataev's poem into the now-iconic *"Naūryz Duman"* anthem. I also attempted to interview Mukhtar Shakhanov, one of the central figures in the revival, but due to his health condition, the conversation did not take place. To compensate, I analyzed his past interviews, speeches, and poetry, which still offered valuable insight into how he imagined Naūryz as a platform for cultural renewal.

While developing the methodological framework, I was influenced by Rebecca Kook's study of Israel's Independence Day, which demonstrated how public holidays could be analyzed

through media to understand shifts in collective memory. Although my sources and historical context are different, this approach offered valuable ideas for interpreting the data about the revival of Naūryz. By integrating archival records, media discourse analysis, and literary content analysis, this study provides a multi-dimensional perspective on Naūryz"s return. The quantitative tracking of media coverage complements the qualitative analysis of texts, allowing for a more detailed understanding of how different actors (the state, writers, activists, and the public) framed Naūryz between 1988 and 1990. This mixed-methods approach helps bridge the official narrative (archival sources and policy documents) with popular discourse (newspapers and poetry), highlighting the complex relationship between government-led revival efforts and grassroots cultural memory.

Thesis structure. This thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter traces the deep history of Naūryz from its Zoroastrian roots, explores how the holiday evolved across different regions, and examines its treatment during the early Soviet period. It discusses how Naūryz was described in the 1920s, what led to its disappearance from official calendars, and how it was remembered, quietly observed, or neglected over the six decades before its revival in 1988. The chapter also reviews existing scholarship on Soviet festivals, cultural policy, and heritage in Central Asia. The second chapter focuses on the early revival of the holiday, arguing that it was framed as "Socialist in Content, National in Form" since Naūryz was defined as a holiday of agrarian labor, environmental responsibility, and interethnic harmony. These ideas were not organically tied to the holiday but were necessary for its return to the public sphere. However, once Naūryz was allowed back into the calendar, Kazakh intellectuals and cultural organizers began to use it as a platform to reintroduce national ideas. They published articles, poems, and essays that linked Naūryz to pre-Soviet traditions, folk rituals, and the works of early Kazakh

thinkers. Gradually, the symbolic content of the holiday shifted. Although it was still celebrated in a Soviet format, the cultural meanings attached to it became more focused on Kazakh heritage. As a result, Naūryz by the early 1990s could be described as "National in Content, Socialist in Form" and that is going to be the focus of my third chapter.

Chapter 1. Sociohistorical Context

Deep History of Naūryz Holiday

The etymology of Naūryz refers to the ancient Persian language and from the Persian it is translated as a "new day". It is one of the oldest cultural festivals in the world. For the masses, it is known as the Persian New Year and people of today's territory of Central Asia started celebrating this festival since the dominant religion of the region was Zoroastrianism (Adams 2010, 51). Zoroastrians worshipped the Sun and celebrated Naūryz as a "sun's return after the long winter and arrival of the spring" (Adams 2020, 90). However, the holiday's exact temporal and spatial origins are disputed by scholars. Different myths and assumptions exist around the topic of the festival and one of them is about the celebration of Naūryz being closely connected to the cult of the Sun, Fire and Zarathustra who was the founder of the Zoroastrian religion. Shariati, the Iranian scholar, points out that Naūryz "is not an artificial social construct or a politically imposed celebration" (Shariati 1986, 235) and defines it as "the day of the rejoicing of the earth, heavens, and sun" (235). The article of the pre-Islamic history of Naūryz in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* claims that the Young Avesta describes six seasonal feasts through the year, all "consecrated on the model of Nowruz," culminating in a principal seventh feast at the spring equinox – clearly indicating Naūryz as the start of the new year. By about 480 BCE, Persian kings had even adjusted their calendar, aligning the month of Farvardin with the equinox

to ensure the new year fell in spring (Boyce 2016). In Persian mythology, the origins of Naūryz are linked to the legendary King Jamshid, who is said to have inaugurated the first New Year festival in spring (Rezakhani 2018). Historical evidence suggests that by the Achaemenid and especially Sasanian periods, Naūryz had become a major state festival marked by royal audiences, gift-giving, and public celebrations (Rezakhani 2018). While rooted in Zoroastrian culture, Naūryz functioned as both a religious and political ritual, reinforcing royal authority and the symbolic renewal of society, a pattern that shows how the festival's meaning evolved alongside changes in governance and ideology.

According to *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Naūryz celebrations originated in ancient Persia and gradually expanded beyond Iranian lands due to migration, trade, and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road (Boyce 2016). By the medieval period, it was widely observed across Central Asia, the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia. Islamic dynasties such as the Abbasids, Seljuks, and Timurids incorporated Naūryz into court rituals, helping to cement its status as a major spring festival. Despite the rise of Islam, Naūryz survived because it was associated with seasonal renewal rather than religious doctrine, making it a unifying tradition across diverse cultures.

Among Turkic nomads, Naūryz merged with pre-existing seasonal practices. For pastoralist societies, the arrival of spring marked the renewal of life after the hardships of winter, when herders moved from winter camps to fresh pastures. The idea of a spring new year already existed in the steppe, but the adoption of the Persian name "Nowruz" added new layers of meaning. Turkic traditions emphasized natural renewal, fertility, and communal feasting, and these elements became intertwined with the celebration of Naūryz. The holiday thus reflected a synthesis – the Persian concept of the "new day" was preserved, while the rituals such as games, hospitality, and songs rooted the holiday firmly within nomadic cultural life.

Across the regions Naūryz (or Nowruz, Novruz, Nooruz) has evolved in diverse ways, reflecting local histories, beliefs, and cultural practices. In Iran, it remains closely tied to Zoroastrian traditions, with fire rituals, the setting of the haft-sin table, and a 13-day celebration centered on nature's renewal (Sharei et al. 2021, 20–29). In Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, Naūryz combines fire-jumping with rich culinary traditions like baking *pakhlava* and decorating *khoncha* trays (Pashayev 2021, 16–19). Across Uzbekistan, communities gather around massive *kazans* of sumalak, a dish of wheat sprouts symbolizing abundance, cooking it together throughout the night and storytelling (Abdullaeva et al. 2021, 72–75). Each region shapes the holiday according to its cultural and historical circumstances, yet everywhere the same core symbols (fire, water, greenery and food) and people gather to celebrate the arrival of spring and the promise of renewal.

Figure 1. Celebration of Naūryz at Sheikhantaur, Tashkent (ca. 1880s). Photograph by F. Orden. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Saint Petersburg.

Figures 2 and 3. Carousel at the Naūryz Celebration in the Turkestan Region (ca. 1870s–1880s). Collection of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Saint Petersburg.

In Kazakhstan, Naūryz incorporated both older Turkic nomadic customs and the broader Persian-influenced rituals, but it also developed its own specific expressions over time. Among Kazakh communities, the preparation of *naūryz közhe* (a seven-ingredient soup) became central to the celebration, alongside national games like horse racing and traditional wrestling. Naūryz in Kazakhstan symbolizes not only the renewal of nature but also the celebration of the communal bonds and cultural memory. In the next subchapter, the focus will shift more closely to Kazakhstan itself, exploring how pre-Soviet and early Soviet Kazakh intellectuals interpreted and redefined Naūryz within the context of national identity and cultural preservation.

Pre-Soviet and Early Soviet Descriptions of Naūryz

Among Kazakhs, Naūryz was part of a larger worldview shaped by nature, oral traditions, and communal gatherings. The Kazakh writer and ethnographer Mäshhür Zhüsip Köpeev (1858-1931) offered some of the earliest written descriptions of how, when, and where Naūryz was celebrated among Kazakhs before the Soviet period. His writings reveal the settings in which individuals celebrated Naūryz "At the age of twenty-nine, I spent eight days at the *Naūryznama* festival held by Abdulla Khan in Bukhara"[6](Egemen Qazaqstan 2022). This shows that Naūryz was celebrated not just in Kazakh steppe but also in large Central Asian cities like Bukhara, and the celebration could last up to eight-ten days. Regarding the societal significance of the holiday, he wrote:

"In the time of Tole Bi of the Uysin tribe, the value of Naūryznama was higher than that of a feast or a regular celebration"[7](Egemen Qazaqstan 2022). Köpeev also described how the festival was celebrated and who partook in festivities: it was typically hosted by wealthy individuals, but each household participated in its own way. People welcomed snowfall on the

6 «Жиырма тоғыз жасымда Бұқари шәріпте Ғабдолла ханның Наурызнама тойының ішінде сегіз күн болдым»

7 «Үйсін Төле бидің заманында Наурызнаманың қадір құны астан, тойдан ілгері (жоғары) болған»

first day of the year as a sign of blessing and called it «ақша қар» (“fresh snow”). If it rained, they would say «нұр жауды» (“grace has fallen”). He also noted the importance of community roles: “The main beauty of Naūryznama came from the youth, it was organized by the wealthy, blessed by the village elders, and nourished by the white dastarkhan”[8](Egemen Qazaqstan 2022). Young people would set up *altybaqan* (six swing) and create a festive atmosphere. On the final eighth day, known as *toitarqatar* (farewell feast), competitions like wrestling and horse racing were held, and prizes were given. In one of his notes, Köpeev adds: “The eighth day was called mazar-sharif. Sugar was poured into the small lake near the grave of Khoja Bahauddin, and the crowd would drink the sweetened water together to mark the end of the festival[9]”(Egemen Qazaqstan 2022). These descriptions help us understand that in the pre-Soviet period, Naūryz was a deeply rooted seasonal and social tradition that involved specific rituals, collective memory, and local meanings. It had regional varieties and local customs, but it was part of the larger worldview that organized time, community life, and intergenerational exchange.

The next group of people who mention Naūryz in their works are the early 20th-century *Alash* Intellectuals who published Kazakh-language newspapers and magazines like *Qazaq, Aiqap, Enbekshi qazaq* etc. Members Ahmet Baitūrsynūly, Mirzhaqyp Dulatov, and Magzhan Zhumabaev played a key role in redefining Naūryz as part of Kazakh national identity. Their writings from the early 20th century reflect an effort to both preserve and reinterpret cultural traditions during a time of political and social change. They framed Naūryz not just as a seasonal or folk holiday, but as the true Kazakh New Year, something that belonged to the nation. Unfortunately, I was not able to read their works in the original due to the fact that I do not know

8 «Наурызнаманың негізгі көркі жастар, ұйымдастырушысы ауқатты адамдар, берекесі ауыл ақсақалдары, ырзығы ақ дастарқан болған»

9 «Дәл сегізінші күн мазаршәриф делінеді. Қожа Бәһуалдин әулиенің басындағы көлшікке қант төгіп, қант татыған суды жұрт жабыла ішіп, той тарқар болады»

the *tote zhazu,* arabic alphabet they used in the writings, therefore, I based my analysis on materials presented by Tattigul Kartaeva in the Abai.kz portal.

Ahmet Baitūrsynūly emphasized the social and cultural significance of Naūryz. He wrote:

> Naūryz is the New Year in Kazakh. In the past, every community celebrated it with feasts, cooking large pots of közhe, and visiting from house to house. The old and young, women and men – everyone rejoiced and reconnected. But now, it seems this tradition is being forgotten. People no longer even agree on what day or month Naūryz falls on…[10](Kartaeva 2021).

Mirzhaqyp Dulatov was even more explicit in presenting Naūryz as a national holiday: "Naūryz is the true holiday of the Kazakh nation. Many Eastern peoples celebrate it, but for us Kazakhs, the celebration is especially meaningful and fitting. Because on March 22, day and night become equal, winter ends, spring comes, and life gets better for us"[11] (Kartaeva 2021). What's important here is not just Dulatov's claim that Naūryz is a "national" holiday, but how he differentiates the Kazakh celebration from other Eastern observances. His phrasing "айрықша сыйымды, артықша дәлелді" (especially meaningful and fitting) emphasizes the cultural and environmental relevance of the holiday to the Kazakh context.

Magzhan Zhumabaev also tried to give Naūryz a scientific and cultural justification. He connected it with the natural rhythms of the earth and emphasized its secular, communal aspects:

> The Kazakh New Year is the day when day and night become equal – March 22. From the next day, the warm, bright days grow longer than the cold, dark nights. In this way,

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10 "Наурыз – қазақша жыл басы. Бұрынғы кезде һәр елде наурыз туғанда мейрам қылып бас асып, қазан-қазан көже істеп, ауылдан-ауылға, үйден-үйге жүріп, кәрі-жас, қатын-қалаш бәрі де мәз болып, көрісіп, араласып қалушы еді. Бұл кезде ол ғұрып қазақ арасында қалып бара жатқан секілді, құтты наурыздың қай айда, қай күні болуы хақында һәр түрлі сөйленеді…"

11 "Наурыз – қазақтың шын мағынасындағы ұлт мейрамы. Наурызды қазақтан басқа күншығыс жұрттарының көбі мейрам етеді. Бірақ бұлардың бәрін салыстырғанда Наурызды біздің қазақтың мейрамы етуі айрықша сыйымды, артықша дәлелді. Неге десеңіз, марттың ескіше 9-ында, жаңаша 22-сінде күн мен түн теңеледі, қыс өтіп, жаз жетіп, шаруа кенеледі"

> the Kazakh New Year fits into scientific understanding. Kazakhs call this day “Naūryz”. It is not named after a saint or a prophet. Therefore, Naūryz is not a religious holiday but a holiday of daily life[12](Kartaeva 2021).

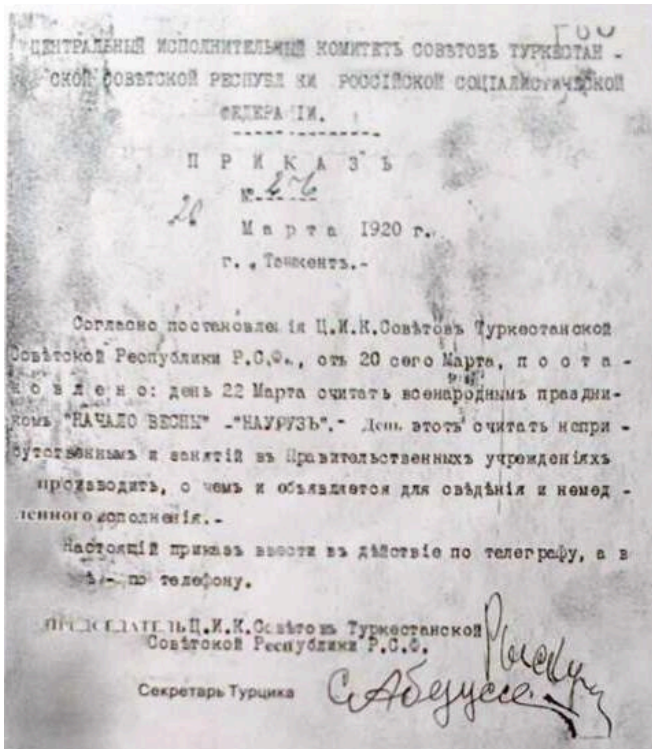
In these writings, we see a clear attempt to “modernize” Naūryz and to show that it is in line with nature, science, and Kazakh customs, and to separate it from any association with Islam or religious superstition. This framing would later become extremely important during the Soviet period, when religion was seen as backward or dangerous. The Alash leaders wanted to position Naūryz as a progressive, national tradition — one rooted in Kazakh life and worldview. They described how people cooked naūryz közhe, visited neighbors, and gave blessings. But most importantly, they worked to fix Naūryz on the calendar and to make it part of national identity. According to them, Naūryz was not just a rural folk custom. It was part of who Kazakhs were as a people. Their writings remind us that Naūryz was not static. It was already being discussed, debated, and redefined before the Soviet period. They provide a bridge between earlier practices and the revival that would come later.

The writings of Alash intellectuals reflect not only an effort to emphasize Naūryz as an essential part of Kazakh identity, but also a broader process of shaping collective memory. They described the holiday not just as a seasonal tradition, but as the true Kazakh New Year, rooted in agricultural cycles and everyday life. This framing involved a selective process of memory construction. As Benedict Anderson writes, “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common and have also forgotten many things” (Anderson 2006, 2000). By presenting Naūryz as a national, secular, and distinctly Kazakh celebration, Alash intellectuals were participating in the early stages of imagining the Kazakh nation, choosing certain narratives

12 Қазақ Жаңа жылы – жазғытұрғы күн мен түннің теңелген күні (22 март) болады. Жаңа жылдың ертеңіне жарық, жылы күн қараңғы суық түннен ұзара бастайды. Бұл реттен қазақ Жаңа жылы ғылым қойнына да басып кіріп қалады. Қазақ Жаңа жылын “Наурыз” дейді. Наурыз әулиенің, әнбиенің аты болмаса керек. Сондықтан қазақтың Наурызы – дін мейрамы емес, тұрмыс мейрамы…

and meanings to foreground, while omitting others. They were not inventing a new tradition, but highlighting specific interpretations of Naūryz that supported their political and cultural vision for Kazakh society.

While Baitūrsynūly, Dulatov, and Zhumabaev were writing about Naūryz as a meaningful part of Kazakh identity, Turar Ryskulov, the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was working on institutionalizing the holiday in the early Soviet state. On March 26, 1920 Ryskulov signed an official order "On the Celebration of Naūryz." This document encouraged workers and local authorities to organize Naūryz festivities, framing the holiday as a public event that could align with revolutionary ideals (Azattyq 2018).



ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫЙ ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ КОМИТЕТЪ СОВѢТОВЪ ТУРКЕСТАН-
СКОЙ СОВѢТСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ РОССІЙСКОЙ СОЦІАЛИСТИЧЕСКОЙ
ФЕДЕРАЦІИ.

П Р И К А З Ъ

№ 476

26 Марта 1920 г.

г. Ташкентъ.-

Согласно постановленія Ц.И.К.Совѣтовъ Туркестанской Совѣтской Республики Р.С.Ф.С., отъ 20 сего Марта, п о с т а н о в л е н о: день 22 Марта считать всенароднымъ праздникомъ "НАЧАЛО ВЕСНЫ" -"НАУРУЗЪ".- День этотъ считать непригоднымъ и занятій въ Правительственныхъ учрежденіяхъ производить, о чемъ и объявляется для свѣдѣнія и немедленнаго исполненія.-

Настоящій приказъ вывести въ дѣйствіе по телеграфу, а в [illegible] по телефону.

Председатель Ц.И.К.Совѣтовъ Туркестанской Совѣтской Республики Р.С.Ф.С.

Секретарь Турцика

Figure 4. Decree on the Naūryz Holiday Signed by Turar Rysqulov. Photo from Azattyq.

At that time, the Republic of Turkestan was a short-lived but ambitious project that allowed some room for local cultural expression within the Soviet framework. However, the

republic was dissolved just four years later in 1924, and the holiday quietly disappeared from official calendars. There is a strong assumption that Naūryz was banned in 1926. This belief comes from a widely circulated quote by poet and activist Mukhtar Shakhanov. In his poem "Naūryzga Oda," he writes that the holiday returned after sixty-two years which would mean it was last celebrated in 1926. Although no document that confirms the ban exists, the timeline makes sense. After the liquidation of the Turkestan Republic and the strengthening of anti-religious campaigns in the USSR, many traditional and seasonal holidays disappeared from state calendars and official discourse.

There are several possible reasons for why Naūryz was forgotten or sidelined. First, the Soviet administration may have considered Naūryz a religious holiday. Julie McBrien writes in the book *From Belonging to Belief* that the Soviet state promoted a specific idea of religion: in the eyes of the regime, if you were Uzbek, Kazakh, or Kyrgyz, then you were Muslim by default (McBrien 2017). This type of identification wasn't based on belief, but on belonging. Therefore, anything practiced by Muslim-identified populations including Naūryz could be considered religious. Laura Adams echoes this in her book *Spectacular State*, where she explains that the Soviet state treated Naūryz as an Islamic holiday simply because it was celebrated by groups who were seen as Muslims, even if the roots of the holiday were much older than Islam itself (Adams 2010, 51).

The Soviet Union's broader anti-religious policies also played a role. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the state actively suppressed public religious expression, and this extended to holidays. It is possible that officials did not distinguish between Naūryz and other religious celebrations like Kurban Bairam or Ramadan. Also, due to what historian Devin DeWeese calls

"light Islamization" in Central Asia, even secular customs could appear religious because Islam had blended with local cultural practices (DeWeese 1994) .

Another possible explanation is the sequence of the historical events – there was a famine in 1933-1934 and migration to China, Iran and other neighboring countries as a consequence of the famine, the massive repressions in 1937-1938 and the World War II in 1939-1945. There were a series of traumatic events happening in the steppe and people would not have time and energy to think about celebrations. Besides the historical events, there was a new Soviet calendar and a new system of commemorative dates including Revolution Day, New Year, May 1st, and later Victory Day. Probably, there was less space for local traditions like Naūryz. Over time, Soviet citizens began to associate spring with Labor Day rather than the equinox. A new system of time, ideology, and seasonal celebration was being introduced from above, and Naūryz did not fit easily into it.

The final reason might be the most simple – urbanization and the loss of rural customs. As people moved into cities after WWII and adopted new lifestyles, seasonal and agrarian holidays became less relevant. Naūryz may have quietly faded not because of a single ban, but because it no longer matched the values of Soviet modernity. This quiet erasure without official cancellation, but through cultural neglect is part of how the Soviet state controlled traditions. As Benedict Anderson notes, national memory depends not only on what is remembered, but also on what is forgotten. Naūryz was forgotten not only by document, but by design.

Not banned, but not celebrated: Naūryz between 1926 and 1988

While Naūryz was forgotten at the official level for decades, it was not the only seasonal holiday to disappear from the Soviet calendar. One of the clearest examples is *Maslenitsa* (Shrovetide), a Slavic spring festival known for its pancakes and farewell to winter. After the

1917 revolution, it was banned as a religious and folk tradition, only to be reinvented later as a secular event under the new name *"Proshchaniye s Russkoy Zimoy"* (Farewell to Russian Winter) (Vlasova 2016). This reinvention set a precedent for how Soviet authorities treated seasonal or traditional celebrations: instead of banning them outright, they were often renamed, reframed, and repurposed to fit Soviet ideology. One thing to highlight is how the former minister of the culture of KazSSR Özbäkälī Zhänibekov (1931–1998) was one of the organizers of Farewell to Russian Winter Festival in Torgay region of KazSSR. The 2023 biographical book *Özbäkälī zhane Madeniet Maidan* (Ozbekali and the Cultural Front) recalls an episode from 1973, when local authorities organized a celebration officially titled "Farewell to Russian Winter." When some locals, including Mukhtarkhan Manapuly, questioned the logic of celebrating the passing of Russian winter in Kazakh lands, Özbäkälī Zhänibekov reportedly responded: "Tomorrow, we will celebrate Naūryz. "*Zima*" is just a Russian name, but we'll give it a Kazakh essence. Twenty yurts have been brought from Amangeldi and Zhangeldin and set up. Mares are tethered at the lines. Tomorrow, you'll feast on *naūryz közhe*. We will bring the figures of Aldar Kose, Khoja Nasreddin, Zhirenshe Sheten, Karashash Ana, and Qydyr Ata to the square"[13](Kerimbai and Nabi 2023, 108). Although it's unclear whether this celebration in Torgay truly took place in 1973 or is a retroactive reconstruction based on post-1988 practices, the story still illustrates a key strategy of the late Soviet period – adapting traditional cultural elements to fit officially sanctioned formats. This strategy was not limited to Kazakhstan. Across Central Asia, Soviet authorities experimented with renamed or rebranded spring holidays. In Kyrgyzstan, the holiday was called "Vesna Ala-Too" (Spring of Ala-Too) and in Uzbekistan, it

13 Ертең "Наурызды" тойлаймыз. "Зима" деген аты ғана орысша. Затын қазақша етеміз. Амангелді мен Жангелдиннен 20 киіз үй әкеліп құрып қойдық. Биелер желіде байланып тұр. Ертең наурыз көжеге тоясың. Алдар көсе, Қожанасыр, Жиренше шешен, Қарашаш ана, Қыдыр атаның образдарын алаңға алып шығамыз.

was “Navbahor”. These titles were meant to maintain the seasonal celebratory spirit while removing any links to pre-Islamic or religious meanings associated with Naūryz.

Despite these renaming efforts, Naūryz was never completely forgotten. Soviet media occasionally hinted at its continued relevance both within and beyond Kazakhstan. In 1970, the Shevchenko-based newspaper *Ogni Mangyshlaka* published a short article about the celebration of Naūryz in Iraq “The people of the Iraqi Republic, Arabs and Kurds joyfully celebrated the traditional Kurdish holiday Nowruz… By republican decree, Nowruz was declared a national holiday of all Iraq”[14](Ogni Mangyshlaka 1970) The inclusion of this foreign example suggests that the idea of Naūryz remained present, even if it was not officially celebrated within Kazakhstan.

Народ Иракской Республики —арабы и курды —радостно встретил традиционный курдский праздник Ноуруз. Этот день в стране отмечается как начало весны.

Республиканским декретом Ноуруз провозглашен национальным праздником всего Ирака. Это—одно из проявлений соглашения об урегулировании курдской проблемы, положившего конец многолетней братоубийственной войне между арабами и курдами на севере страны.

На снимке: праздничная демонстрация в городе Сулеймании.

Фото А. Матюшина.

Фотохроника ТАСС

Figure 5. The Report from Ogni Mangyshlaka Newspaper Reporting on Naūryz Celebrations in Iraq (1970).

Oral history accounts and late-Soviet-era interviews also confirm that private celebrations of Naūryz persisted, especially in rural areas. *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* published interviews in 1989 with people who had personal memories of *Naūryz*. One such interview featured Aitiken

14 “Народ Иракской Республики – арабы и курды – радостно встретил традиционный курдский праздник Ноуруз... Республиканским декретом Ноуруз провозглашен национальным праздником всего Ирака.”

Aymanov, an 89-year-old man who was born in 1900 and lived through both the banning of the holiday and its quiet persistence. Aymanov recounted how villagers would still gather to cook naūryz közhe and celebrate in small groups, even though the public celebration had been banned: "In our time, there weren't many holidays filled with songs and celebrations. Even so, during the equinox, people would gather to share naūryz közhe, and the elders, along with the young men and women from nearby villages, would recall the ancient traditions as best as they could. Later, even this was forgotten"[15](Kayirbekov 1989, 2). Further reinforcing this idea, another *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* report from 1988 described a visit to a kolkhoz in the Zhambyl district. There, a woman named Kulimkhan explained how she continued to cook naūryz közhe in private for fear that her children would forget the tradition. She recalled how, in her youth, villagers would sing and play *dombyra* during these small-scale celebrations, demonstrating how these acts of remembrance kept the essence of Naūryz alive:

> So that the children don't forget, we still make it to this day. It's also called *tileu-közhe* (blessing soup). On the morning of Naūryz, the villagers would go and clear the nearby springs. During the meal, they would talk about the effects of winter and plans for spring and summer activities. After finishing the közhe, the elders would give blessings and wishes to the head of the household and the young people[16] (Alimzhanov 1988, 4).

These stories were not simply collected by chance. As the Naūryz revival gained momentum in the late 1980s, republic-level media began actively soliciting and publishing recollections like these as part of a broader Soviet tradition of documenting and curating folk memory. Interviews, oral histories, and ethnographic anecdotes became a key mechanism for

15 "Біздің тұсымызда ән-думанмен өтетін мерекелер аз болды ғой. Сондай шақтарда да, күн мен түннің теңелген уағында, наурыз көже ішісіп, ауыл-ауылдағы шал-шауқан, қыз-бозбала ежелгі дәстүрді шама-шарқынша еске алысып тұратын. Кейін бұл да ұмытылды."

16 Балалар ұмытып қалмасын деп күні бүгінге дейін жасап клееміз.Мұны тілеу-көже деп те айтады. Наурыз күні таңертең ауыл азаматтары барып, сол маңайдағы бұлақтардың көзін ашады екен. Дәм үстігде қыстың әсері, көктемгі, жазғы тірліктің жайы сөз болады, Көже ішіліп болғаннан кейін қарттар шаңырақ иесіне, жастарға бата-тілек айтады.

legitimizing the revival, offering a sense of continuity with the past, even when that past had been largely interrupted. In this sense, these reminiscences are not just spontaneous memories but also products of a deliberate cultural process: collecting, editing, and publishing people's stories to reinforce the idea of an unbroken tradition.

Finally, evidence of Naūryz's quiet presence can be found in the editorial practices of *Lenīnshil zhas*, one of Kazakhstan's most widely read youth newspapers. In 1989, the newspaper quoted a poem from the 1925 edition of *Qazaq* newspaper, stating: "Previously, on March 22 of each year even if it couldn't explicitly be called Naūryz Day special spring editions were prepared"[17] (Lenīnshil zhas 1989, 1). This quote suggested that Naūryz was subtly acknowledged, if not named directly, even in earlier Soviet years. Probably, the editors were referring to the period when Seidakhmet Berdikulov served as the chief editor of *Lenīnshil zhas*. In a memoir article from 2024, journalist Zhanat Yelshibek recalled:

> When Seidakhmet Berdikulov became editor… during one conversation, he quietly introduced an idea: "Comrades, we are not able to publish the Naūryz holiday in a loud, colorful way. This holiday is disappearing from people's memory. In the future, we must put it on the newspaper's pages." Soon after, a special creative commission was formed and a draft plan for the spring issue was made[18] (Tilegen 2024).

In 1971, the spring edition of *Lenīnshil zhas* was published. There was no mention of Naūryz itself, but the issue was called "Spring Edition" and included photos of children and adults in traditional Kazakh clothing, labeled as members of school *kruzhki* (activity clubs).

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17 "Бұдан бұрын да әр жылдың 22 марты күні (Наурыз күні деп айтуға мүмкіндік берілмесе де, арнайы көктем сандарын жасап келді"

18 "Сейдахмет Бердіқұлов редактор болып келді… Бірде әңгіме арасында жылт еткізіп, бір идеяның ұшын шығарды. "Жолдастар, біз осы Наурыз мерекесін айқайлатып, бояулатып шығара алмай жүрміз. Бұл мереке халықтың жадынан кетіп бара жатыр. Алдағы уақытта осыны газеттің бетіне шығаруымыз керек" деп қалды. Іле-шала арнайы шығармашылық комиссия құрылып, «Көктем нөмірінің» шикі жоспары жасалды."

Figure 6. Front Page of Lenīnshil zhas Newspaper, Special Spring Edition (March 25, 1971).


Көктем жастық

«ГҮЛДЕР» АНСАМБЛІНЕ

Гүлдер, осы сендер нәзіктік
шығарсындар,
Табиғаттан табылатын
Әлде бояусындар ма шынар
шындар,
Рауан таңда жағынатын,
Гүлдер үлбіреп тұрады,
Бал жиып ара қонғанша,
Таңның шықтары тұрады,
Гүл еріні тоңғанша.
Жоқ, достарым, гүл деген
қыздар әсем,
Аяқтары түп-түзу
жаратылыс.
Аяулымның алдында
қызармас ем,
Қызықпасам соларға,
Сен тыныш, дала тыныш
Сен гүлдерді әнші жігіт
дерсің,
Көзінде дірілі бар
үміт дерсің,
Сыбдырында айрықша бір
Гүлдер бейкүнә балғын
үні бар,
Жүз сезіммен
Жүз гүлдер басын иіп
тарағандай.
Көп отырдың,
Сен маған, мен өзіне қарай
алмай.

Төлеухан БИЯРОВ.

□ «Гүлдер» ансамблінің биішісі — Сәуле Бекенова

әншісі — Қапаш Құлышова.

Figure 7. Dancers in National Clothing at the Naūryz Celebration. Lenīnshil zhas, Special Spring Edition (March 25, 1971).

On March 22, 1985, another issue came out with green ink on the first and fourth pages – an unusual choice at the time. The headline read “Көктем келді кең байтақ Қазақстанға” (Spring has arrived in vast Kazakhstan), and the front page featured an illustration of a bird holding a tulip, a city skyline, and yurts. Next to it, the editors included Abai’s poem *Zhazgytury* (Spring). On the final page, a text titled *Naūryz Naqyshtary* (Naūryz Patterns) appeared. Again, there was no direct reference to Naūryz as a public celebration, but the hints were becoming more visible. It’s important to mention that in Soviet Kazakhstan, the Russian names of months were dominant, especially in the media. March was always referred to as “март,” not “Naūryz.”

КӨКТЕМ КЕЛДІ КЕҢ БАЙТАҚ

БАРЛЫҚ ЕЛДЕРДІҢ ПРОЛЕТАРЛАРЫ, БІРІГІҢДЕР!

Лениншіл жас

Газет 1921 жылғы 22 мартта бастап шығады

ҚАЗАҚСТАН ЛКСМ ОРТАЛЫҚ КОМИТЕТІНІҢ ОРГАНЫ

№ 58 (11095) ЖҰМА, 22 МАРТ 1985 ЖЫЛ. Бағасы 3 тиын.

ҚАЗАҚСТАНҒА!

ТӨЛҚОРА ТҰҒАН ТӨЛ ҮНІ

ЕСЕЛІ ДАЙЫНДЫҚ — ЕРТЕҢГЕ

БЕСЖЫЛДЫҚТЫҢ АСУЫНА ЖЕТТІ

«ЖАСТЫҚ» ЖАЛЫНДАП КЕЛЕДІ

КОМСОМОЛ ХРОНИКАСЫ

АБАЙ

ЖАЗҒЫТҰРЫ

Figure 8. Cover Page of Lenīnshil zhas Newspaper, Special Spring Edition (March 22, 1985).

ЛЕНИНШІЛ ЖАС

365 ТӘУЛІКТІҢ БІР КҮНІ

НАУРЫЗ НАҚЫШТАРЫ

БОЗАЛА ТАҢ

ЕКІНДІ

ҚАЛАДАҒЫ КӨКТЕМ

Figure 9. Page from Lenīnshil zhas Newspaper Showing the Words "Naūryz" and "March" Together.

Using Kazakh month names, or mentioning "*naūryz közhe*," was not just unusual, it was politically risky. Journalist Yertai Aigaliuly later recalled that Berdikulov received an official warning from the Central Committee simply for using the word *"naūryz közhe"* in an article: "We heard that Seidakhmet Berdikulov, who led the *Lenīnshil zhas* team for many years and is now a well-known writer-journalist, received a warning from the Central Committee just for mentioning the word *"naūryz közhe"* once in a spring issue article. We were stunned, but kept silent"[19](Tilegen 2024). This example shows how Soviet censorship operated not just through direct bans, but also by discouraging even subtle references to national traditions. Editors like Berdikulov navigated this environment carefully, trying to preserve cultural memory through symbolism, seasonal motifs, and coded language.

There is one interesting detail – on the cover page of the *Lenīnshil zhas* newspaper's Spring Edition for 1971 was a poem by Soviet-era Kazakh poet Muqaġalī Maqataev titled "Ei, menin qiyn otkelim". Whether he was inspired by the Spring Edition or not, in 1973, just two years later and fifteen years before Naūryz was officially celebrated in Soviet Kazakhstan, Makatayev wrote *"Naūryz ayi tuganda"*, a poem filled with longing and memory of Naūryz. This text would later become the basis for the well-known song *"Naūryz Duman"*, still performed during modern Naūryz celebrations. While the poem will be examined in depth in Chapter 3, especially in relation to how it prefigures the shift toward "National in Content," it is already worth noting here how Makatayev talks about Naūryz through nostalgic images of spring, community, and loss.

Наурыз айы туғанда, Той болушы еді бұл маңда.	When the month of Naūryz arrived, There used to be celebrations around here.

19 Ұзақ жылдар бойы «Лениншіл жас» коллективін басқарған, қазір белгілі жазушы-журналист Сейдахмет Бердіқұлов ағамыздың Көктем нөмірінде «наурыз көже» деген сөздің бір мақаланың ішінде атап кеткені үшін Орталық комитеттен ескерту алғанын естігінде ішімізден тынғанымыз бар."

Наурыз, наурыз, күн игі! Күні игі жердің - түрі игі. Бауыры жылып науат-қар, Бабымен ғана жібиді. Шашылып ырыс шанақтан, Шақырып бір үй бір үйді, Шаттанушы еді бір игі. Осынау игі кең жерге, Наурыз айы келгенде, Наурыз тойын бергенде, Көрмегендер де - арманда, Арманда - оны көрген де.	Naūryz comes, and skies grow bright, Good weather turns the earth to light. The snow, like sugar, warms and melts, Softening only with care and time. Blessings scattered from the bowl, One household calls upon the next, And joy would fill each generous soul. When Naūryz comes to this wide land, And celebrations bloom so grandly. Those who haven't seen it dream of it, And those who have seen it still long for it.

Chapter 2. Socialist in Content, National in Form

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kazakhstan experienced a renewed wave of decolonial discourse and national rethinking. Scholars such as Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022), Kassymbekova and Marat (2022), and Arystanbek and Schenk (2022) have shown how these events caused a broader reassessment of Kazakhstan's postcolonial identity, collective memory, and cultural narratives. The following shift also affected how the Naūryz holiday was portrayed in the media. Kazakhstani outlets began revisiting its history, emphasizing that Naūryz had not been widely celebrated until 1988. Headlines such as "How the Soviet Union Stole Naūryz from the Kazakhs", "Who Stole Naūryz?", and "How Naūryz Returned to Kazakhstan After 62 Years of Prohibition" presented the revival of the holiday as an act of resistance and national restoration. Journalists searched for "heroes" who defied the Soviet system and brought Naūryz back to the people. Even the book *Ozbekali and the Cultural Front* framed the return of Naūryz as the personal achievement of former Minister of Culture Özbäkälī Zhänibekov.

However, none of these narratives referenced any official Soviet documents banning Naūryz, nor did they examine how the holiday was reintroduced in the spring of 1988. My

research into periodicals from that time, including spring issues of *Lenīnshil zhas* and *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* from 1988 and 1989 suggests a different picture. The revival of Naūryz did not emerge in opposition to the Soviet system, but rather within it. It was framed using the ideological language of the late Soviet Union and aligned with official discourses of the time. Naūryz was reimagined as a holiday that celebrated collective labor, international friendship, and ecological awareness not explicitly as a national Kazakh holiday or as a Turkic New Year. This is why I argue that the early revival of Naūryz was socialist in content and national in form – its return was only possible once it had been reimagined to align with the language, values, and priorities of the late Soviet state.

In this chapter, I explore how the revival of Naūryz in the late 1980s followed the principle of being socialist in content and national in form. I analyze how Soviet media described the holiday, focusing on the rhetoric used in articles, interviews, and celebratory scripts. I also examine the role of key cultural figures such as Mukhtar Shakhanov through his 1988 interview and public letter as well as Zhänibekov's memoirs and writings about him. Finally, I consider the use of standardized Naūryz scripts, the role of organized sports, and the broader aesthetics of celebration. Together, these elements demonstrate how Naūryz was adapted to fit the ideological and performative needs of the late Soviet state while still evoking national forms and imagery.

One of the guiding principles of Soviet cultural policy was the idea that national forms were acceptable or even encouraged as long as they served socialist content. This formula, most famously articulated as "Socialist in Content, National in Form" allowed the state to accommodate ethnic and regional diversity while promoting a unified, ideologically acceptable message. "Content" here referred to the values and goals of the Soviet state: collectivism, labor, internationalism, progress, and loyalty to socialism. One of the articles from *Lenīnshil zhas* about

Naūryz celebrations in Almaty said, “Our rich culture, national in form and socialist in content, stands out for its diversity and advanced traditions. Naūryz is marked by a wide variety of national artistic expressions”[20](Bolatkhanov 1988, 4). This statement demonstrates how Naūryz was made ideologically safe for mass revival. It could be celebrated and even widely promoted as long as it was tied to socialist ideas such as the importance of labor, cultural development, international friendship, and collective values. It was not called a Kazakh national holiday, nor described as a religious or spiritual event. Instead, it was reframed to fit the state’s vision of progress and unity.

This ideological framework was not only present in official newspaper coverage, it also shaped how prominent figures in Kazakhstan began speaking about Naūryz. One of the earliest and most influential examples was Mukhtar Shakhanov’s 1988 interview, which marked the beginning of public discussions about reviving the holiday. Homing in on his discourse, he framed Naūryz to fit the late Soviet context. The question he was answering was “We would like to know your thoughts on tradition, ethics, and youth education in the current period of glasnost/perestroika”[21](Oralbayev and Kaiyrbekov 1988, 4). However, instead of addressing all three concepts, Shakhanov focuses almost entirely on traditions, leaving out ethics and youth education. He begins by emphasizing that “Each nation has its own unique and wonderful traditions”[22](4) and provides examples from other Soviet republics. He mentions a Georgian tradition in which the most valuable part of a bride’s dowry is the book *The Knight in the Tigers's Skin* and describes how he and his colleagues from the Writers' Union were deeply impressed by Estonia’s practice of preserving old boats as a sign of respect and gratitude.

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20 “Түрі ұлттық, мазмұны социалистік бай мәдениетіміз, озық дәстүрлеріміз сан алуандығымен де ерекшеленеді. Наурыздың ұлттық өнер нақыштары көп түрлі”

21 “Қазіргі қайта құру кезеңіндегі дәстүр, этика, сондай-ақ жастар тәрбиесі туралы ойларыңызды білгіміз келеді?

22 “Әр ұлттың өзіне тән жақсы, ғажайып дәстүрлері болады”

After highlighting these successful traditions in other republics, Shakhanov turns to Kazakhstan with a rhetorical question – "Had we no such good traditions?"[23](4) This is an interesting rhetorical move because instead of immediately talking about Naūryz's importance, he first establishes a broader Soviet context, positioning Kazakh traditions as part of a shared, Union-wide repertory of cultural practices. By first praising traditions from Georgia and Estonia, he frames his argument in a way that aligns with Soviet multiculturalism where each republic was encouraged to celebrate its own distinct but ultimately "Soviet" cultural identity. This makes his appeal for Naūryz's revival more persuasive to Soviet authorities, as he presents it not as a form of Kazakh nationalism, but as an effort to restore a valuable tradition within the greater Soviet brotherhood of nations.

This serves as a transition into his nostalgic description of Naūryz. He recalls "In the past, our village used to celebrate the Naūryz holiday. People would prepare for it as if getting ready for a real *toi* (festivity)"[24](4). His wording reminded me of Muqaġalī Maqataev's poem, which will be mentioned in the next chapter; both poets use the auxiliary verb "еді" to describe past traditions, listing the customs of their villages in a way that evokes deep nostalgia. Grammatically, the use of "еді" signals a definitive past, presenting Naūryz as something that was once an integral part of life but is now lost. This feeling of absence is reinforced by his use of "-етін", a verb construction that suggests habitual action something that "used to happen" regularly. Together, these forms frame Naūryz as a long-standing tradition that was disrupted, rather than something that naturally faded away. This linguistic framing is significant because it supports the argument that Naūryz must be revived, as it was not just a forgotten custom, but an essential part of life that was taken away. Shakhanov is not just remembering the past, but also

23 "Осындай жақсы дәстүрлер бізде жоқ па еді?"

24 "Бұрын біздің ауылда Наурыз мерекесі өтуші еді. Жұрт бұған нақ бір тойға дайындалатындай әзірленетін"

reshaping it by describing Naūryz as a big festival with serious preparations and reminding people how important it used to be. But at the same time, he is creating a version of history that fits the Naūryz revival movement of the late 1980s. His description is not just about memory as it was in Muqagali Makatayev's case because Shakhanov's words are also a way to convince people that Naūryz must return.

One notable detail is how Shakhanov describes traditional foods – "And the women would cook corn *közhe*, millet *közhe*, and wheat *közhe*"[25](4). Shakhanov does not call it *naūryz közhe*, which suggests that people originally made *közhe* with whatever ingredients they had at home, and only later was it formally associated with the holiday. This raises questions about how and when *naūryz közhe* became a distinct symbol of the celebration because Beyimbet Maylin whose poem about Naūryz we will discuss later also will mention *naūryz közhe*, call it *közhe et*, but he does not mention the idea of using seven specific ingredients, as is customary today. This suggests that, at the time, *naūryz közhe* may not have had a standardized ingredient list and was instead prepared with whatever was available, rather than the seven ingredients that define it today. This standardization took place after the revival of the holiday when thousands of books, articles, and brochures were published to explain Naūryz to the general public and provide guidance on how to celebrate it.

After the nostalgia, Shakhanov strengthens his argument by bringing up Azerbaijan, saying "In our brotherly Azerbaijan, this spring holiday is well established"[26](4). This shifts the conversation from personal memory to political strategy. By referencing another Soviet republic where Naūryz is officially celebrated, he indirectly questions why Kazakhstan has not done the same. While this is mainly a rhetorical move, it also raises the question of whether Shakhanov

25 "Ал қыз-келіншектер жүгері көже, тары көже, бидай көже пісіретін"

26 "Туысқан Әзірбайжанда осы көктем мерекесі жақсы жолға қойылған"

was hinting at a sense of cultural unity among Turkic-speaking Soviet republics. In the late Soviet period, as national identities became stronger, his reference to Azerbaijan could be seen as a reference to Pan-Turkic or Pan-Turanist ideas. It frames Naūryz as part of a shared Turkic heritage rather than just a Kazakh tradition. Whether intentional or not, this comparison places Kazakhstan's Naūryz revival in a broader regional context, rather than as an isolated event. He then calls on the local administration and party leadership to take part in reviving the holiday. At first, it may look like a bottom-up demand driven by public interest. But in reality, the revival of Naūryz was shaped by members of the cultural and political elite. Figures like Shakhanov, an established poet, member of the Writers' Union, and public intellectual used official platforms like *Lenīnshil zhas* to call for its return. His appeal wasn't grassroots activism; it was an elite initiative working within Soviet structures. The revival didn't grow from everyday people pushing from below, it was proposed, shaped, and promoted by those with institutional access and cultural authority.

The interview excerpt we discussed above shows how carefully Shakhanov frames his argument to different audiences. He starts with examples from other republics to show that national traditions can coexist within the Soviet system. Then, through personal memories, he makes Naūryz feel relatable to the average reader, bringing up nostalgia for a lost tradition. Finally, by discussing the experiences of different nations, he shows government officials that he is knowledgeable and well-informed, making his case for Naūryz's revival more persuasive. Shakhanov's approach aligns with what Eric Hobsbawm describes as the invention of tradition, the process of adapting or reshaping cultural practices to fit new political and social realities. While he presents Naūryz as an ancient and continuous tradition, he is also actively reconstructing its meaning within the late Soviet context. By framing it as both a local custom

and a Soviet-approved celebration of cultural diversity, Shakhanov makes Naūryz more acceptable to the authorities, ensuring its revival fits within the ideological boundaries of the time.

The same framing was used by writers like Syrbai Maulenov, Safuan Shaimerdenov, and Ulykbek Yesdauletov who supported Shakhanov's idea in *Lenīnshil zhas* for March 11, 1988. The writers described Naūryz as a holiday of labor, passed down through generations – "Mukhtar Shakhanov shows that Naūryz is a holiday that honors labor. He sees it as a celebration that could encourage conscious, purposeful work and bring people together through meaningful collective action"[27](Maulenov et al. 1988, 4) Their focus wasn't just on the cultural aspects but on emphasizing its fit with socialist values. For example, they highlighted tree planting as part of Naūryz, reinforcing the ecological and communal aspects of the holiday. The most interesting part of these definitions and framings is the following sentence where the writers say "It would be good if the just and refreshing winds of perestroika and democracy not only cleanse the dust that has settled on the engines of our society's economic management but also renew and rejuvenate our spiritual treasures"[28](4). We can see how people try to connect the wave of perestroika and say that it will refresh the traditions too. And it all makes me think that the Soviet revival of Naūryz fits into the framework presented by Eric Hobsbawm in the book *The Invention of Tradition*. Hobsbawm says that many traditions that seem ancient are, in fact, inventions that serve political needs (Hobsbawm 2010, 7). Even though the Naūryz holiday was reintroduced during perestroika, it wasn't merely a return to pre-Soviet traditions. Instead, it was reimagined to align with Soviet ideals of labor, productivity, and environmental stewardship,

27 "Мұхтар Шаханов Наурыздың еңбек мерекесі екенін аңғартып тұр. Наурыз мерекесі халықты саналы еңбекке жұмылдыратын, адамдарды бір бірімен қауымдастыратын өнегелі іске мұрындық болар еді".

28 "Қайта құру мен демократияның әділетті самал желі қоғамымыздың экономикалық басқару двигателіне қонған шаң-тозаңды тазартып қана қоймай, рухани қазынамызды да жаңартып, жасартып отырса дұрыс болады

themes central to Soviet identity. But for the Kazakh(stani) society it will be really hard to accept that Naūryz was reinvented because more than half of our population are people who are younger than 35 and for them Naūryz is something that always was there and they took it for granted. But there is another important thing to discuss and this point was presented by Margarethe Adams, in her book *Steppe Dreams* – Kazakhstani media framed Naūryz as a continuous tradition, presenting it as an unbroken line from the past. However, this narrative of continuity deliberately ignored the colonial and Soviet influences that shaped Naūryz's revival. By reimagining the holiday as something that had always existed, the Soviet authorities and Kazakh media sought to create a sense of cultural stability, even though the holiday had been suppressed for decades (Adams 2020, 99). This illusion of continuity erases the complex politics of revival in the late 1980s and obscures the reality that the version of Naūryz celebrated today was very much a product of its time – socialist in content, even if national in form.

Continuing the talks about *perestroika*, there is an article from *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* printed on April 26th in 1988 where journalists framed the revival of Naūryz as one of the many positive changes brought about by *perestroika*, democratization, and renewal processes. They wrote, "As a result of the patronage of the party and our government, a people's holiday began to be celebrated again"[29](Smailov et al 1988, 4). This shows how the Soviet state took credit for the revival, framing Naūryz as a holiday that fit into Soviet narratives of progress and renewal. An important point here is the use of the word "*zhalpyhalyqtyq*" (universal, people's), instead of "*ulttyq*" (national). This language reflected the idea that Naūryz wasn't just a Kazakh celebration; it was a holiday for all Soviet people, reinforcing the concept of "friendship of nations." At the beginning of the chapter I was quoting Khalid and saying that there was a bigger freedom to demonstrate the elements of national identity during perestroika, but I cannot deny

29 "Міне, партия мен үкіметіміздің қамқорлығының нәтижесінде жалпыхалықтық және бір мейрам қайтадан төрімізге қадам басты"

that the concept of "international upbringing" and "friendship of the nations" still remained strong.

Naūryz was framed as a holiday that brought together different nationalities, and media reports often highlighted how other ethnic groups participated in the celebrations. For instance, in 1989, *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* reported that Koreans in Almaty performed songs, danced, and shared their traditional food as part of the month-long Naūryz celebrations (Olzhayev 1989, 4). The journalist Olzhaev even expressed gratitude to the "Korean relatives"[30] for their contributions. This focus on international participation is consistent with Soviet narratives of multicultural unity, where Naūryz became a platform for showcasing how various ethnic groups could come together and celebrate their shared values within the framework of Soviet ideology.

Figure 10. Representatives of the Slavic Ethnicity at the Naūryz Celebration.

The scholars Laura Adams and Assel Rustemova wrote about mass spectacles of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in contemporary times and in particular, the celebrations of Naūryz. According to the authors, we still have the elements that refer to the idea of multiculturalism that took its start from the Soviet Union (Adams and Rustemova 2009, 1259). Even though Adams

30 Корей туысқандар

and Rustemova wrote about it almost 15 years ago and now things could change, I was a witness of a Naūryz concert in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in March 2024 and watched how girls in russian costumes were dancing traditional russian dance, while the *"Kalinka"* song was on and how Dungan girls were singing their folk songs. And there was the Japanese corner where people were learning to write characters. Maybe it is not the exact same thing that was happening in Kazakhstan in 1988-1989, but at least this case can be used as a prototype of what was happening.

As it can be noticed, by 1989, the media became much more active in shaping how Naūryz should be understood and celebrated. In 1988, there were only five articles about Naūryz across the republic editions such as *Lenīnshil zhas, Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan*, and *Zhalyn*. But in 1989, the number of publications increased significantly. Naūryz was now celebrated for almost a full month, from March 22 to April 23, and this was reflected in the media. Newspapers offered various formats: reports on regional celebrations, interviews with ethnographers about the history of the holiday, excerpts from Alash writers, game instructions (like how to play *Aqsuiek* or build an *Altybaqan*), and even digests of Mukhtar Auezov's writing on Naūryz. It wasn't just coverage, it was an education. This trend would continue, eventually producing entire booklets that compiled these materials. The Ministry of Culture published some of these books in the early 1990s with circulations of 15,000 copies or more.

Beyond newspapers, there were official scripts and celebration plans created by teachers, cultural workers, and youth centers. I found one such example from Kyrgyzstan: a 1992 celebration plan written by Kalbubu Kurmanova, a village schoolteacher in Naryn. Her script was published in national journals and re-used by others across the country. It's clear that these standardized scenarios were shared across regions, helping shape a unified way of celebrating

Naūryz. Something similar happened in Kazakhstan. I found a small 1990 booklet sponsored by the "Bilim" foundation, which included descriptions of the Naūryz rituals, lists of games, songs, and food. It wasn't just a general description, it was instructions. This intense level of didacticism reminded me of another moment in Soviet history – the anti-religious press of the 1920s. Back then, atheist publications like *Bezbozhnik*, Atheist, and *Soyuz Voinstvuyushchikh Bezbozhnikov* explained why people should stop believing in God. They were often state-funded and intended to reach a wide audience, offering ideological literacy. I don't mean to compare these two cases directly, but it's striking how similarly the Soviet and early post-Soviet states tried to "teach" people through media, this time not about atheism, but about how to celebrate Naūryz "properly." The idea was the same: create content, circulate it widely, and shape the worldview of a population. According to Charles Briggs, when traditions are transmitted through mass media, they are not merely preserved but reinterpreted to fit new ideological contexts. Soviet newspapers and cultural publications did not present Naūryz as a simple return to folk tradition; instead, they actively reconstructed it by attaching socialist meanings to familiar forms. In articles, celebration scenarios, and public speeches, Naūryz was redefined as a holiday of civic responsibility, ecological care, and collective labor. This process of mediatization turned Naūryz into a "useful" tradition, one that affirmed Soviet ideals while creating the illusion of cultural continuity.

Another way in which Naūryz was reframed to align with Soviet ideals was through ecology. Environmentalism, especially in the form of collective labor like tree planting and spring clean-ups, became a key tool for presenting Naūryz as a holiday compatible with socialist values. This ecological framing transformed Naūryz from a potentially nationalist or religious celebration into an opportunity for civic engagement, public service, and community unity. It

also fit neatly into the tradition of *subbotniks*, long used in the USSR to promote socialist labor ethics and communal responsibility. Articles published in newspapers such as *Lenīnshil zhas* and *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* during the spring of 1988 and 1989 emphasized these themes repeatedly, calling on readers to clean parks, revive natural springs, and plant trees in the name of the holiday. As such, the ecological message helped position Naūryz within the acceptable Soviet framework of "useful" holidays that not only entertained or commemorated but also mobilized citizens toward physical and moral renewal.

This ecological framing was most clearly demonstrated in a public letter written by Mukhtar Shakhanov on behalf of the Committee on the Problems of the Aral Sea, Balkhash, and the Ecology of Kazakhstan. In the letter, addressed to local ispolkoms, Shakhanov presents Naūryz not as a cultural or historical event, but as a civic campaign rooted in environmental activism. He writes:

> Since ancient times, during the days of Naūryz, people have cleaned forgotten springs and planted young trees. The Public Committee on the Problems of the Aral Sea, Balkhash, and the Ecology of Kazakhstan under the Writers' Union of the Republic, following this good tradition, calls on all residents of Kazakhstan every individual, every family member to plant and nurture one or two trees on the eve of the Naūryz holiday. This can be done in parks, squares, alleys, boulevards, along roads, near riverbanks and lakes, as well as in their own yards and household plots[31](Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Fond 7, Opis 2, Delo 1170).

31 "Издревле в дни Наурыза люди очищали забытые родники, сажали молодые деревца. Общественный комитет по проблемам Арала, Балхаша и экологии Казахстана при Союзе писателей республики, исходя из этой доброй традиции, призывает всех жителей Казахстана, каждого человека, каждого члена семьи накануне праздника Наурыз посадить и вырастить по одному-два деревца в парках, скверах, на аллеях, бульварах, вдоль дорог, в прибрежье рек, озер, на своих дворах и приусадебных участках"

Shakhanov's call to action asks every citizen to plant one or two trees on Naūryz not just in their own yards, but also in public parks, boulevards, and riversides. The language here is distinctly civic and collective, echoing the spirit of the Soviet subbotnik and casting environmental participation as a patriotic act. He uses a quote from the Russian poet Nekrasov "A worthy citizen cannot be indifferent to his homeland."[32] While the connection between this line and Naūryz is not immediately obvious, the reference reveals much about Shakhanov's strategic communication. Writing in Russian and addressing a Soviet administrative audience, Shakhanov likely chose Nekrasov, a politically safe figure to underscore the civic and patriotic duty associated with ecological labor. His choice stands in contrast to his Kazakh-language texts, where he cites national figures like Shakarim. This dual rhetorical strategy shows how Shakhanov, like many Soviet-era intellectuals, adapted his language and symbolism depending on context and audience, framing Naūryz in ways that would resonate with both local and central Soviet authorities.

Shakhanov's ecological letter can also be understood in the broader context of late Soviet environmental activism. As Edward Schatz explains in his article "The Dog That Didn't Bark", environmental movements in Kazakhstan during the late 1980s rarely took a strongly critical stance against Moscow. Instead, they used softer, less confrontational rhetoric. He writes: "Movement leaders, such as the Kazakh poet and founder of the Aral-Asia-Kazakhstan Committee, Mukhtar Shakhanov, couched their appeals in relatively uncritical terms, since the possibility of antagonizing Moscow carried real costs to the movement" (Schatz 2011, 145). This observation helps explain why Shakhanov's letter about Naūryz was written in Russian and framed the holiday through safe, Soviet-friendly ideas like tree planting, unity, and responsibility. By calling on citizens to participate in ecological actions, Shakhanov presented Naūryz not as a

32 "Не будет гражданин достойный, к отчизне холоден душой"

nationalist revival, but as a kind of *subbotnik*, a civic duty. This framing aligned with what scholars call "eco-internationalism," a late Soviet narrative that used environmental causes to promote international cooperation and socialist values. Seen this way, Shakhanov's ecological version of Naūryz wasn't a contradiction of his earlier nationalistic poem, but rather a strategic move to ensure the holiday's revival within the ideological limits of the Soviet Union.

This ecological vision of Naūryz was not unique to Shakhanov. Another key figure who participated in Naūryz's revival, Özbäkälī Zhänibekov, the Minister of Culture of the Kazakh SSR and a well-known public intellectual, also saw Naūryz as an opportunity to promote ecological responsibility and collective labor. In his memoirs, he recalls that during the late 1980s, Naūryz celebrations were used to organize large-scale *subbotniks*, community clean-up campaigns and tree planting initiatives. He writes "In all districts and villages, competitions were organized for street cleaning and tree planting. After the celebration, the regional leader would reward and give prizes to those who planted the most trees and kept their streets the cleanest. Thanks to this, Kazakhstan would be cleared of trash and shine like a mink's fur"[33](Zhänibekov 1997, 26). Just like Shakhanov, Zhänibekov framed Naūryz not only as a return to cultural traditions but also as a civic project grounded in the values of cleanliness, labor, and environmental care which were the ideas that were central to Soviet ideology.

We have already talked at length about the "socialist in content" aspect of the Naūryz revival from ecological messaging and *subbotniki* to themes of labor, people's friendship, and collective participation. Now, let us turn to the other side of the Soviet formula and discuss how Naūryz was made national in form. This part of the revival focused on the use of visual, performative, and symbolic elements drawn from Kazakh culture, including yurts, traditional

33 "Барлық аудан мен ауылдарда көше тазалап, тал егуден жарыс ұйымдастырылды. Мереке біткесін аймақ басшысы көп тал еккен, көшесін таза ұстаған тұрғындарды марапаттап, сыйлық беретін. Соның арқасында Қазақстан қоқыстан тазарып, күзеннің терісіндей жылтырап шыға келетін."

games, national dress, music, and cuisine which were presented in a structured, public format typical of Soviet-style celebrations.

One of the most visible aspects of Naūryz's national form was the use of traditional Kazakh games, many of which were formalized into full-time sports during the late Soviet period. Newspaper articles, official reports, and documentaries all emphasized competitions like *qazaq kuresi, baige, asyq atu,* and *togyzqumalaq*. These events were not only entertaining for crowds but also helped to locate Naūryz in Kazakh cultural heritage.

Yet, the prominence of sports raises a question – why did they take up so much space in the celebration? One explanation is that sports were chosen because they were accessible. Due to decades of Soviet reforms, 70 year long russification policies, and urbanization, not everyone in the Kazakh SSR could take part in musical performances like *aitys*, or play instruments like the *dombyra* or *qobyz*. Whereas sports created a space for those who wanted to participate through competition. They also kept people at the event longer, many would stay to see who won. This strategy helped create a festive atmosphere that felt collective and inclusive.

There is also a historical explanation for the connection between celebrations and competitions. In his 1832 ethnographic work *Description of the Kirghiz-Cossack, or Kirghiz-Kaisak Hordes and Steppes*, imperial officer Alexei Levshin described how Kazakhs marked every major celebration with games and contests. He wrote that "a successfully concluded wedding ends with feasting, horse races, and various games"[34](Levshin 1832, 106). Other passages describe physical challenges like retrieving coins with one's mouth from a kumys bowl, lifting objects from the ground while riding, or resisting being pulled from a saddle – all performed before spectators during holidays.

34 "счастливо оконченная свадьба заключается празднествами, пирами, скачками и разными играми"

Levshin also noted that archery, wrestling, and trick riding were central to Kazakh festivities: “The Kirgizs also enjoy wrestling and do so with skill, gripping each other by the belt”[35](Levshin 1832, 120) These descriptions show that festive games were not just a Soviet invention, they echoed older practices observed before colonization. By incorporating them into urban celebrations, Soviet Kazakh elites were not simply reviving ancient customs but adapting them to modern, urban spaces and Soviet ideals like physical fitness and collective participation. Thus, the prominence of sports in the Naūryz revival bridged multiple goals: they offered continuity with pre colonial cultural forms, fit Soviet ideological frameworks around labor and strength, and provided a practical means for engaging a broad audience in the celebration.

The third explanation is about how the sports also fit Soviet ideals. The Soviet Union always promoted physical strength and athleticism as part of building a productive society. Anthropologist Ulan Bigozhin in his paper *“Where is Our Honor?” Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media quotes* James Riordan and his study *Sport in Soviet Society* - “Almost from the moment it came into existence, the Soviet state had a high demand for disciplined and healthy citizens, hence the development of a system of regular participation in physical exercise”(Bigozhin 2019, 190). Physical strength was not just a personal trait, but a political ideal and Pat Simpson similarly claims that *fizkul'tura* was never just about health and explains how it was “fetishized by party and state” as a tool for shaping the *New Soviet Person*, combining physical strength with ideological devotion and collectivist spirit (Simpson 2004, 191). So showcasing national games was a way to say that Kazakhs, like all other Soviet peoples, had their own sport heritage. We also have already mentioned that in the city squares there were not only traditional kazakh games, but more urbanized or sovietized sport types like weightlifting

35 “Борьбу киргизы также довольно любят и борются с искусством, схватывая друг друга за пояса”

with dumbbells and armwrestling. It also meant that celebrating Naūryz through sport aligned with both national and socialist values.

According to the reportage from the *Lenīnshil zhas* and *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan*, in 1988 sport competitions were held in the Spartak stadium of Almaty. Newspapers wrote that the stadium was full: *"Lyq toly boldy"* (all the seats were occupied). That year, Serikbai Tileubayev, a master of sport from Zhanatas, came to Almaty to give lessons in *togyzqumalaq*. He organized master classes and left. There were likely other professionals invited to do the same.

In 1989, the sports segment expanded. Competitions took place at the Central Stadium from 11 AM to 7 PM and at the stadium of the Veterinary Institute from 2 PM to 7 PM. The celebration program devoted 5–6 hours to sport. There were also sporting events around the Demalys restaurant square.

Unlike today, when anyone can join Naūryz contests, athletes in 1988 and 1989 were carefully selected. They passed local qualifying rounds before performing in the citywide celebrations. *Lenīnshil zhas* journalist Yeleusiz Zhanpeis remembered: "Athletes who were to compete in the Naūryz tournaments were selected well in advance. In each district of the city, competitions were held in traditional national sports. There were also contests to select performers for the roles of folk literature characters like Khoja Nasreddin, Aldar Kose, and Tazsha Bala"[36](1989, 1).

His words reveal how tightly organized and curated the celebrations were. Competitions were not spontaneous or grassroots; they were pre-planned and filtered through an institutional structure. Even roles rooted in oral folklore like that of Aldar Kose were distributed through official contests. This tells us that what looked like a folk revival was actually a highly managed

36 "Наурыздың додасына түсетін спортшылар ерте бастан іріктелді. Қаланың әрбір жекеленген аудандарында ұлттық спорт түрлерінен жарыс ұйымдастырылырды. Сондай-ақ, ауыз әдебиет кейіпкерлері Қожанасыр, Алдар көсе, Тазша баланың рөлін ойнау үшін де жарыстар өтті"

cultural production. It also shows that national form was not simply about content (costumes, names, images) but also about who was allowed to participate, how they were chosen, and how they were staged. What looked like tradition was carefully filtered through layers of Soviet cultural planning.

Going back to sportsmen, they were even part of the ceremonial caravans. In 1989, 100 athletes–culturists took part in the festive Naūryz parade, called *Naūryz toiynyn saltanatty kosh-kerueni* (“The Festive Carvan of the Naūryz Celebration”).

But sports were not the only performance. The Writers’ Union helped shape the cultural program. Writers and organizers went back to Kazakh literary works to reconstruct the aesthetics of old toi and as events. Mukhtar Auezov’s novel Abai Zholy describes *“Bozhey asy,”* a grand feast where representatives from different tribes built yurts, laid out *dastarkhan*, played *dombyra*, and competed in sports. Many celebrations of 1988 and 1989 echoed this model. Even now many celebrations of 2024-2025 echoed this model.

НАУРЫЗ ТОЙЫНЫН САЛТАНАТТЫ «КӨШ-КЕРУЕНІ»

Figure 11. Program of the Naūryz Caravan (1989).

In Kyzylorda, the ispolkom's report noted: "In the regional centre on the central square reproduced a traditional Kazakh aul, it is more than 30 colourful yurts, where items of everyday culture were exhibited"(Presidential Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Fond 7, Opis 2, Delo 1170) These yurts had their own names "yurt of the hunter", "yurt of the bride", "yurt of Ybyray Zhakayev", "yurt of Syr Suyerleri" and many more. Each yurt represented a theme or identity. Tselinograd Oblast reported that 39,000 people participated in the theatrical performances. These included traditional characters like Asan Qaigy, Zhirenshe sheshen, Aldar Kose, and Tazsha bala, as well as symbolic rituals *"kelin tusiru"* (arrival of a new bride), *"betashar"* (bride unveiling), *"tusaukeser*" (baby's first steps), and "*shildekhana*" (celebration of a newborn). Whether these rituals reflected real practices or were reimagined for the stage is unclear.

To sum up, the national form of Naūryz was created through visible symbols like yurts, traditional sports, costumes, folk characters, and rituals. These elements were presented in a structured and carefully managed way, following the format of Soviet public holidays. But this was not a return to old, pre-Soviet traditions. What people saw in Almaty and other cities between 1988 and 1990 was shaped by decades of Soviet cultural policy. As historian Francine Hirsch explains, the USSR used "cultural technologies of rule" – tools like censuses, festivals, parades, and textbooks to shape and control national identities (Hirsch 2005, 13). The elements or symbols of Kazakhness shown during Naūryz were filtered through this Soviet system. In other words, the Soviet system created its own version of "Kazakhness" that looked traditional but was actually standardized and staged. This explains why yurts were built in city squares. Women wore national dresses and *kimesheks*, while men wore Soviet-style suits. These were signs of Kazakh culture, but they were adjusted to fit Soviet ideas of modernity. Hirsch also

writes that the Soviet Union believed in “state-sponsored evolutionism” - the idea that each nationality should go through certain historical stages, guided by the state (Hirsch 2005, 8). In this way of thinking, Naūryz could only return as a public holiday if it supported the goals of socialism. So the national form of Naūryz was not about reviving the past. It was about reworking tradition to match the Soviet system. That’s why we can’t understand the revival of Naūryz in 1988 without looking at the political and cultural structures of the USSR.

Figures 12-13. Where Soviet Modernity Met Traditions: Scene from the Naūryz Celebration in Shauildir, South Kazakhstan.

Chapter 3. National in Content, Socialist in Form

The previous chapter discussed how Naūryz began to be celebrated on a mass scale in the late 1980s, following the format of other Soviet holidays. But Naūryz was not like the others. Unlike holidays such as May 1st or November 7th that were carefully designed to promote Soviet achievements and ideological values, Naūryz did not highlight an important date in Soviet history or fully align with its ideology. The intelligentsia, organizers, and journalists worked hard to reframe Naūryz as a holiday of agrarian labor, a celebration of friendship among nations, and even a platform for ecological awareness. However, these efforts were superimposed on a holiday that had its own distinct cultural and historical roots. These ideas, though heavily promoted during the revival, were never fundamental to the way Naūryz was celebrated, as its true significance lay elsewhere. In reality, Kazakhs were simply happy to bring back their forgotten traditions. People from other nationalities living in Kazakhstan didn't pay much attention to Naūryz until March 22nd was made an official holiday and day off. Over time, the ideas of friendship, harmony, and labor that were added during the Soviet era slowly disappeared. Today, we rarely hear about those Soviet attempts to reshape Naūryz - they have almost completely faded away.

The revival of Naūryz happened during *perestroika* or/and *glasnost'*, a time when the Soviet Union was going through important political reforms. These reforms allowed more freedom for cultural expression and gave room for discussions about national identity. In the book *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*, Adeeb Khalid devotes a chapter to the idea "socialist in form, national in content". According to Khalid, there was always a room for nations and their own traits in the Soviet Union, but how big this room was and what subjects exactly could be discussed - depended on the administration. "Not all

aspects of heritage were worthy of celebration – feudal, religious, or other retrograde features of the past were to be condemned but each nation also had popular (hence progressive) elements that could be celebrated. What was progressive and what not was open to a surprisingly expansive debate"(Khalid 2021, 334). The author's point can be used in understanding and explaining the ban of Naūryz Holiday, since it was considered as a Persian Holiday (Persian=Muslim) and it was celebrated by a group of people (Central Asians) who were supposed to be Muslims. However, Khalid's point about progressive elements that could be celebrated is the thing that can explain the revival of Naūryz Holiday. The Kazakh intellectuals of late 1980s were able to prove the progressiveness of Naūryz to the government by defining it as a holiday of agrarian labor, holiday of the nations' friendship, holiday that leads to international upbringing, holiday that reminds of the nature and pushes people to go to subbotniks and the long list of framings that would make Naūryz holiday fit Soviet ideas. Talking about the role of intellectuals, Adeeb Khalid says "Yet within these constraints, Soviet Central Asian intellectuals had considerable scope for cultivating national culture and celebrating the nation," which perfectly describes how the poet Mukhtar Shakhanov, the former minister of the culture of the KazSSR Özbäkälī Zhanabilov and other members of the writers' union collaborated to make Naūryz great and Kazakh again.

In the book *Ozbekali and the Cultural Front*, Özbäkälī Zhänibekov, former minsiter of the culture of KazSSR is portrayed as a mastermind behind the initiative of Naūryz's revival, suggesting that it was his position as Minister of Culture that made Naūryz's return possible. The book presents a strategic approach to its revival – "The day Özbäkälī took the reins of power, he immediately used it to serve national interests. One of his key initiatives was the operation to revive Naūryz. For this, the proposal had to come from the grassroots, not from above. Özbäkälī

orchestrated a flood of discussions about Naūryz, putting forward statements on behalf of well-known figures”[37](Kerimbai and Nabi 2023, 235). The argument that Naūryz was revived through grassroots support is compelling, as we know that poet and activist Mukhtar Shakhanov raised the topic in the media, prompting newspapers to engage with readers who supported its revival. However, the book simplifies the process by presenting Ozbekali’s ministerial position as the main determinant of Naūryz’s return, overlooking the broader cultural and political context of the late Soviet period, when national sentiments were increasingly voiced across the USSR.

The book also addresses how the 1988 Naūryz celebrations differed from historical practices. It argues that, unlike in the pre-Soviet period, when Kazakhs lived within their own cultural framework, the Soviet-era population required a more performative approach to cultural events “A nomadic people lived within their own culture, so there was no need for a show-like format such as organizing exhibitions or wearing national costumes”[38](Kerimbai and Nabi 2023, 239). This observation is particularly insightful due to the fact that it shows that the whole idea of the exhibitions, fairs of national food and the show programs were not just something performative, as it was assumed by me in the previous chapter, but was a necessity, since by 1988, Kazakhs had become an urbanized, Sovietized society, disconnected from many aspects of their cultural heritage. The book acknowledges this, stating “But during the Soviet era, after becoming a sedentary people, they grew distant from their own culture. Many forgot it. Naūryz became the only opportunity to reconnect with their heritage”[39](Kerimbai and Nabi 2023, 239). This suggests that the inclusion of yurts, jewelry exhibitions, carpet displays, food fairs, and

37 “Билік тізгіні қолына тиген күні-ақ Өзбекәлі оны ұлт мүддесіне тиімді пайдаланды. Соның бірі – Наурызды қайтару операциясы. Ол үшін ұсыныс жоғарыдан емес, төменнен түсу керек. Өзбекәлі танымал тұлғалардың атынан Наурыз туралы әңгімені қарша боратты.”

38 “Көшпелі халық өз мәдениетінде өмір сүріп жатқасын көрме ұйымдастыру, ұлттық киім кию сияқты шоу форматы қажет болмады.”

39 “Ал СССР кезінде отырықшы халыққа айналған соң өз мәдениетінен алшақтады. Көбісі ұмытып қалды. Мәдениетпен тұтастау танысу мүмкіндігі наурызда ғана туды.”

sports competitions in modern Naūryz celebrations was primarily aimed at reintroducing cultural traditions to urban Kazakhs. In an earlier chapter, I discussed how incorporating traditional sports into Naūryz helped attract more participants while simultaneously reviving village-based games that had fallen into obscurity. Perhaps the broader purpose of the revived Naūryz was to reintroduce Kazakh identity and cultural heritage to those who had forgotten or never fully known it.

There are theories that suggest Özbäkälī Zhänibekov was the key figure behind the revival of Naūryz and that he worked closely with the Writers' Union to make it happen. In the previous chapters, I have already shown how the Writers' Union and Naūryz celebrations were deeply connected: the initial proposal came from Shakhanov, and the group that supported him publicly also included many members of the Writers' Union. The celebration scripts were written by poets and writers, and during the events, there were special corners where books by Kazakh authors were sold. But there is one more aspect that needs to be discussed: the role of poetry and literature in nationalizing Naūryz and making it part of Kazakh national identity. The sociologist Diana Kudaibergen, in her book *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature*, devotes a chapter to the *post-Jeltoqsan* period and describes how the literary community of the 1980s became the intellectual leaders of the nationalist movement, continuing the work of earlier writers like Yessenberlin and Auezov (Kudaibergenova 2017). Building on this idea, the next few paragraphs explore how Naūryz was framed within that literary-nationalist effort – through the poetry of Muqaġalī Maqataev and Mukhtar Shakhanov, and through the media's republication of works by early Soviet-era poets like Beyimbet Maylin and Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly, as well as writings by Mukhtar Auezov and interviews with ethnographers about the history of the holiday.

At the end of the first chapter, I briefly mentioned Muqaġalī Maqataev's poem *Naūryz-Duman*, written in 1973 and presented its translation. Since the poem appeared more than a decade before the official revival of the holiday, I was curious whether anyone had studied it in this context. There are no academic articles that analyze Makatayev's poem in this context, but the topic has been noted in journalism. In 2017, the periodical Jetisu (7-su.kz) published an article titled *Naūryzdy angsagan aqyn* (The Poet who Missed the Naūryz), written by Quanysh Tungatar, who is now the chief-editor of *Alatau arayi* newspaper. In his poems, Muqaġalī Maqataev switches between referring to Naūryz as a month and as a celebration. In lines like "Наурыз айы туғанда | Той болушы еді бұл маңда" (When the month of Naūryz arrived |There would be celebration in this place), he clearly uses "Наурыз" to mean the Kazakh name for March. This is notable on its own, as Tungatar points out, by the 1970s most writers used the Russian month names, and "Naūryz" as a time marker had nearly disappeared from Kazakh literary language. Yet Makatayev brings it back (Tungatar 2017). In other moments, he shifts from the calendar month to the festive moment itself, writing "Наурыз, наурыз күні игі, | Күні игі жердің түрі игі!" (Naūryz, a kind and blessed day | A day when even the land looks kind). This line no longer describes a date, it captures the atmosphere of the celebration, the joy and movement of the people. Later, he writes about Наурыз тойы (the Naūryz celebration), describing scenes of hospitality, nature waking up, and even mentioning his own birthday. He folds his personal story into a larger cultural moment, using the imagery of Naūryz to express a deep sense of nostalgia. These shifts in Makatayev's language, moving between references to the month and the celebration evoke a longing for something that had already begun to disappear. By the 1970s, Naūryz was no longer publicly marked, and few poets wrote about it. In this context,

Makatayev's verses feel like a personal attempt to hold onto fragments of the past, using poetry to remember a holiday that no longer had a place in the official calendar.

Tungatar also points out that Muqagali Makatayev was talking about the whole country in this poem, not just his village or Almaty – he uses the word *"bul manda"* to generalize the location without mentioning the name of the place, however, in the last verse of the poem he says *"ken zher"*, which shows that it is about the whole country because the word *ken* translated as grand or vast to english to describe the size of the kazakh lands and huge steppe (Tungatar 2017).

Another key element of the poem is the repeated use of the auxiliary verb "*edi*" (еді), which marks the past tense. This is important because it frames Naūryz not as a living tradition, but as something lost, something that used to happen but no longer does. The phrase "Той болушы еді бұл маңда" (There used to be celebrations around here) sets the tone for the entire poem, creating a sense of nostalgia and absence. Makatayev describes a communal rhythm of celebration: families visiting one another, hospitality being exchanged, and blessings shared. In lines like "Шақырып бір үй бір үйді, | Шаттанушы еді бір игі" (One household would invite another | and they would all rejoice together), the poem evokes not just an individual longing, but a memory of social cohesion and collective joy.

The idea of *arman* (dream, longing) plays a central role. In the line "Көрмегендер де арманда, | Арманда оны көрген де" (Those who never saw it dream of it, | and even those who did are still dreaming), the word operates on two levels. For those who never experienced Naūryz, it represents a lost cultural moment that lives only in imagination. For those who once celebrated it, арман expresses the pain of separation from a once-familiar joy. Through this double meaning, the poem blurs the line between memory and desire between the past that is mourned and the future that is hoped for. Written in 1973, when Naūryz was not publicly

celebrated, the poem captures the emotional weight of cultural silence. It reflects how the memory of Naūryz, even if fragmented or reconstructed, continued to carry meaning, if only as a dream shared across generations.

This sense of longing didn't disappear after Makatayev's death. In 1988, when Naūryz was officially revived, his words found new life in the form of the song *Naūryz Duman*. Kazakh-Soviet singer Roza Rymbayeva, working with composer Talgat Sarybayev, used lines from *Naūryz ayi tuganda* to create a song that is now inseparable from Naūryz celebrations in Kazakhstan. What's cool about "*Naūryz Duman"* is the contrast between lyrics and melody. When read as a poem, the words are deeply nostalgic, even mournful because Makatayev doesn't even know that Naūryz could return one day and simply remembers it without hope of revival. But when set to music, the same words become part of a joyful, energetic anthem, celebrating Naūryz as something alive. I interviewed Roza Rymbayeva in March 2025 and asked about the process of creating the song – "When we were told that Naūryz would be celebrated, I decided we needed a song that would demonstrate the mood of the festival. We had never celebrated it before and knew nothing about it. I found a poem by Makatayev and asked Talgat Sarybayev to compose the melody. This song is already almost 40 years old."[40] Her words highlight the uncertainty and unfamiliarity that surrounded the revival of Naūryz in 1988. Even someone as prominent as Rymbayeva admits that "we knew nothing about it." This shows how disconnected urban Soviet Kazakhs were from the holiday, and how the revival often relied on imagination and artistic intuition rather than inherited knowledge. In this context, Makatayev's nostalgic lines, originally written in mourning for a lost tradition were repurposed to fill an emotional and

40 "Когда нам сообщили, что будет праздноваться Наурыз, я решила, что нам нужна песня, которая будет передавать настроение праздника. Мы же не праздновали его никогда и ничего не знали. Я нашла стихотворение Макатаева и заказала мелодию у Талгата Сарыбаева. Этой песне уже 40 лет будет.

symbolic gap. The result is a song that transforms private longing into a shared celebration, helping to shape how Naūryz would be remembered and performed for a new generation.

If Makatayev's poem was written before the revival, there were also poems written after 1988 and one of the most important was by Mukhtar Shakhanov. In the second chapter, we looked at his letter and interview where he framed Naūryz as an ecological campaign and a holiday of international education. But his tone shifts in his poem *"Naūryzga Oda"* or *"Alpys Eki Zhyldan Son"* – not only does his language become more national in tone, but so do his ideas. Here, Shakhanov no longer presents Naūryz as just a tradition worth reviving, instead, he personifies it, speaking as if he has been separated from a beloved one for 62 years and has been longing for their reunion. I have put the diy-translation of the poem in the table, and will present the analysis in the next page.

Қанша ғасыр сән берген даламызға Өзгеше бір әні едің байтақ елдің, Сәлем, Наурыз! Сен біздің арамызға Алпыс екі жылдан соң қайта келдің.	For centuries, you graced our steppe with beauty, A special song of our vast land, Greetings, Naūryz! After sixty-two years, you have returned to us once again.
Сен ең көне жырысың санамыздың, Рухи шаттығымсың тасып толған. Сені тойлап, бабасы бабамыздың Әжемнің әжесіне ғашық болған.	You are the oldest song of our memory, A spiritual joy overflowing within us. Celebrating you, our grandfather's grandfather fell in love with our grandmother's grandmother.
Сен бүгін арнасысың дара күйдің, Сан пейілдің төрінен күлімдейсің. Сен менің ұлы бабам Фарабидің Кешігіп елге жеткен үніндейсің.	Today, you are the pure melody's stream, Smiling from the heart of boundless goodwill. You are like the long-delayed echo Of my great ancestor, Farabi.
Басыңды көтер, қане, күн қақтаған, Сен енді басқа айқайға бұрылмайсың. Тымырсық, тылсым жылдар тыңдатпаған Сен бізге Шәкәрімнің жырындайсың.	Lift your head, sun-scorched and bright, No longer will you turn to another's shout. Silenced by the heavy, hidden years, You return to us like Shakarim's poetry.
Ғасырды көктеп өтіп сұңқар сезім, Немерем тік көтеріп уақыт туын, Ғашығына арнаған іңкәр сөзін Өзіңнің тойыңда айтса - бақыттымын!	Soaring through centuries, a falcon's feeling, My grandchild raising high the banner of time, If they confess their love with heartfelt words At your toi—then I am truly happy!

In this poem, the poet makes Naūryz feel personal by connecting it to his family's history. He talks about how his ancestors celebrated it and even links it to a love story – how his great-grandmother fell in love during the holiday – "Сені тойлап, бабасы бабамыздың | Әжемнің әжесіне ғашық болған" (Celebrating you, our ancestors before us | Saw my grandmother's grandmother fall in love). This makes Naūryz more than just a tradition and positions it as something emotional, tied to love, family, and memories. At the end of the poem, Shakhanov imagines his grandchildren also celebrating Naūryz and falling in love, showing that the holiday is not just about the past but also about the future. By tracing Naūryz through multiple generations past (his ancestors), present (himself) and future (his imagined grandchildren) – Shakhanov is doing what Benedict Anderson describes in Imagined Communities: using history to create a continuous, timeless sense of national identity. Anderson argues that nationalism dissolves time, making past generations feel like contemporaries of the present (Anderson 2006). Shakhanov does exactly this by showing how his ancestors celebrated Naūryz in the same way that his grandchildren will, implying that the tradition has always been there and will always continue. In offering Naūryz as the setting where a new love story begins, he is not only celebrating the past but also imagining the future of the nation, reinforcing the idea that Naūryz is central to Kazakh identity.

The idea of continuity affects the way how the contemporary Kazakhstani media presents Naūryz as something continuous and never disrupted, and how contemporary kazakhstani citizens take Naūryz holiday for granted even though there was a 62 year gap in celebrations. This observation was discussed in the book *Steppe Dreams* of Margarethe Adams. She says that Kazakhstani media frame Naūryz as a continuous tradition, presenting it as an unbroken line from the past. However, this narrative of continuity deliberately ignored the colonial and Soviet

influences that shaped Naūryz's revival. By reimagining the holiday as something that had always existed, the Soviet authorities and Kazakh media sought to create a sense of cultural stability, even though the holiday had been suppressed for decades (Adams 2020, 99). This process of reimagination aligned the holiday with Soviet values while maintaining the illusion of an uninterrupted tradition.

Also, the poem has a strong message about national identity and the past attempts to erase Naūryz. The line "Тымырсық, тылсым жылдар тыңдатпаған | Сен бізге Шәкәрімнің жырындайсың" compares Naūryz to Shakarim's poetry, which was banned during the Soviet era. By calling those years silent and mysterious, the poet refers to the time when national traditions and important Kazakh figures were hidden or forbidden. This comparison is especially significant given the historical moment in which Shakhanov was writing – 1988 was not only the year of Naūryz's official revival but also the year Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly was rehabilitated. That year, his poetry collections were published by *Zhazushy* and *Zhalyn*, his songs were released by Öner, and his 130th anniversary was celebrated in Abai District. In the following decade, streets, schools, and a university in Semey were named after him. Just like Naūryz, Shakarim and his legacy were returning to the Kazakh people after decades of suppression. By drawing this parallel, Shakhanov connects the revival of Naūryz to a broader process of national and cultural restoration, reinforcing the idea that the late 1980s marked a turning point in reclaiming Kazakh identity.

In *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature*, Diana Kudaibergen describes Mukhtar Shakhanov as a "polemic figure" and one of the most visible actors in the Kazakh national-patriotic movement of the 1980s (Kudaibergenova 2017, 175). His active public presence, along with his literary work, positioned him as a key figure in the cultural revival of

that period. However, Kudaibergen's book also makes a broader point about literature itself. Relying on theorists like Terry Eagleton, who argued that "literary text produces ideology," and Berger, who claimed that literature helps shape national myths and identity boundaries, she shows how literary texts became tools for reimagining the nation. Referring to Bakhtin, she writes that literature can "transcend historical fact in an artistic way" and contribute to constructing a "national heroic past" (Kudaibergenova 2017, xxii). This helps explain why literature became such an important space for nationalizing Naūryz. By the late 1980s, literature had already proven itself as a format capable of subtly introducing national ideas and historical reimaginings. Yessenberlin's *Koshpendiler* trilogy offered readers a sweeping, accessible version of Kazakh history and was widely read across the USSR. Writers like Mukhtar Magauin emphasized oral traditions and pre-Russian heritage, while Olzhas Suleimenov's *Az i Ya* challenged dominant narratives by locating Turkic meanings in Slavic texts. These works laid the groundwork for a generation of readers to see themselves as part of a deeper cultural past, separate from the Soviet historical framework. Against this background, the use of poetry and literary references to frame Naūryz not as a Soviet holiday but as a reclaimed national tradition makes sense, it was a medium that had already been doing similar work.

This literary reimagining of Naūryz did not remain limited to books and poetry. The nationalization of the holiday extended into the media, where newspapers and journals began to republish historical texts as a way of reinforcing cultural continuity. Just as writers turned to the past to express national identity, journalists and editors used the voices of earlier Kazakh thinkers to frame Naūryz as a tradition that had endured despite its official absence. The media actively worked to reconnect the holiday to the past, by citing the works of early Soviet-era Kazakh intellectuals and even pre-Soviet figures to emphasize that Naūryz was deeply rooted in Kazakh

culture and history. By referencing Mukhtar Auezov, Beyimbet Maylin, and Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly, they framed Naūryz as a long-standing tradition that had been temporarily forgotten rather than erased.

In 1989, *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* republished Beyimbet Maylin's poem about Naūryz, but notably, it did not include his surname, possibly because he had not used it in the original publication. The newspaper featured his work alongside other materials on Naūryz, reinforcing the idea that the holiday was a long-standing tradition. Maylin's poem could be openly republished because he had been rehabilitated in 1957, and his legacy aligned with the Soviet narrative – he was known for writing about the lives of the poor and working-class people, making him a more acceptable figure. This selective approach becomes even clearer when looking at other early Soviet-era intellectuals who wrote about Naūryz. For example, Qazaq newspaper published articles and compositions on the holiday by figures like Ahmet Baitūrsynūly, but these were not reprinted in *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* in 1989. Unlike Maylin, Baitūrsynūly had only been rehabilitated in 1988, and his legacy was more politically sensitive. The same applies to Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly, whose works on Naūryz also remained absent from major Soviet newspapers at the time.

Maylin's poem appeared under the heading "Наурыздан Наурызға" (From Naūryz to Naūryz), which I see as an attempt to build a connection between the past and the present. Originally written in 1926, the poem centers on the struggles of poor people, portraying Naūryz not as a lavish celebration, but as a moment of hardship and resilience. At the beginning of the poem Maylin describes the transition from winter to summer and how people react to it. In the poem, Ulzhan speaks to her child:

Көк шөбі шығып желкілдеп, Ертең-ақ дүние күлімдер,	The green grass will sprout and sway, Tomorrow the world will smile,

Күлімдер дүние ойнарсың, Күрең тайың ат болып, Бәйгеге қоссаң келерсің, Жұрттан жеке тақ болып.	The world will smile and play, Your chestnut foal will grow into a horse, If you enter it into a race, it will return victorious, You will come in first, ahead of others.

These lines show how spring and summer were valued for their importance to livestock and hint at the tradition of *baige* (horse racing), tying Naūryz to the nomadic calendar. Later we see the lines “Наурызды тойлар не күй бар | Сойған жоқпыз соғымды” (How can we celebrate Naūryz | When we haven’t even feasted on winter’s bounty) that express the difficulty of celebrating Naūryz when basic necessities are lacking. The reference to соғым (winter’s preserved meat) suggests that even the most essential food supplies have run out, making the idea of a festive meal impossible. The poem continues this theme of scarcity with “Айтпақшы әже, наурызға | Астың ба, көже етіңді? | Асқандай болдым бірдеңе, Көк аттың салып шекесін” (By the way, grandma, for Naūryz, | Have you cooked your special soup yet? | I think I managed to make something, | By tossing in a bit of the old blue horse’s head). People rarely cook the head of the horse separately. Especially for *naūryz közhe*. Maylin’s characters do this because they do not have other types of meat. The imagery of making naūryz közhe with whatever scraps are available contrasts sharply with the modern, idealized image of Naūryz as a time of abundance and community feasting.

Maylin’s decision to focus on poverty rather than festivity aligns with his broader literary themes, which often depicted the harsh realities of rural Kazakh life. It also explains why his poem was more acceptable for republication in *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* in 1989. His portrayal of class struggle and economic hardship resonated with Soviet ideological narratives, making him a safer figure to include in the revival of Naūryz than other early Soviet-era Kazakh intellectuals.

On the same page of *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* for the March 1989 issue, a collection of Mukhtar Auezov's thoughts was published and it included the citations from his 20-volume collected works, specifically the 16th book. When comparing the excerpts in the newspaper to the full text, it becomes clear that certain parts were either omitted or reworded, reflecting how the Soviet press selectively presented historical narratives about Naūryz. One key passage that remained in the article states: "Naūryz is a professional holiday for people engaged in pastoral livestock farming"[41](Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan 1989, 3). Auezov does not elaborate on why he frames Naūryz specifically as a pastoralist holiday rather than a broader agrarian festival, despite the fact that sedentary agricultural societies such as Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Azerbaijanis also celebrated Naūryz. He also does not acknowledge the significance of seasonal change for farmers, for whom the arrival of spring was just as crucial as it was for nomadic herders.

Auezov further describes how people in the past welcomed the transition from winter to summer: "It is believed that when winter departs and the weather improves, the divine Tengri brings abundance and prosperity to the people"[42](1989, 3). When comparing what was published in *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* with the original sources, two notable points stand out.

Among the poems published in the newspaper was one by Shakarim Kudaiberdiuly, though his name was not mentioned – neither in *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* nor in the book where the poem originally appeared. This omission was likely because Shakarim was not rehabilitated until 1988, making his association with Naūryz potentially sensitive at the time. Shakarim's poem outlines the different roles people played during Naūryz the bay (wealthy man), elder women, young women, and boys and includes the lines: "Ұлыстың ұлы күнінде… | Құл құтылар құрықтан, | Күң құтылар сырықтан (On the great day of the nation… | The slave is freed from

41 "Наурыз – бақташылық кәсібімен айналысатын елдің кәсіптік мейрамы

42 "Қыс кетіп, күн шырайы түзелген кезде тәңірідей құдай ел тіршілігіне кеңшілік әкелді деп есептеледі

chains, | The servant is freed from the rod)". This suggests that Naūryz symbolized the liberation of slaves, a concept that is rarely emphasized in modern discussions of the holiday. In his full text, Auezov writes: "Naūryz was considered the most respected and greatest holiday among nomadic Turks"[43](Auezov 1985, 39). However, this statement was cut from the newspaper article, which reflects broader Soviet editorial practices. There are two likely reasons for this omission. First, Soviet authorities discouraged any framing of Naūryz as a distinctly Turkic holiday because, by the late 1980s, it was being promoted as a universal, internationalist celebration rather than an expression of Kazakh or Turkic nationalism. Second, Auezov's connection between Naūryz and Tengriism, referring to it as *"yeski din"* (the old religion) was also likely removed because Soviet ideology rejected religious associations with cultural traditions, whether they were pre-Islamic or Islamic. To reach these conclusions, I compared the 1989 *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* article with Auezov's full writings in his 20-volume collected works, as well as historical context on Soviet press censorship and ideological framing of Naūryz. By analyzing what was included and what was left out, we can see that the Soviet revival of Naūryz was not a straightforward return to tradition, but a carefully controlled process where certain historical elements were emphasized while others were erased or rewritten to align with ideological goals.

Additionally, the 20-volume collection of Auezov includes three of his early works: History of Kazakh Literature, *Zhetkinshek*, and *Noviy Aul*. The Noviy Aul textbook for Kazakh kids who want to learn Russian, first published in 1929 and republished in 1985, does not mention Naūryz. Instead, it focuses on other holidays such as March 8 (International Women's Day), March 19 (Day of the Paris Commune), and May 1 (Day of the Proletariat). The book emphasizes preparation for labor and collective participation, reflecting Soviet priorities. This

43 "Наурыз көшпелі түріктер арасында ең қадірлі, ең ұлы мейрам болып саналған"

contrast between Auezov's writings on Naūryz in History of Kazakh Literature and the complete absence of the holiday in *Noviy Aul* reveals how Soviet ideology influenced what holidays were promoted and which were sidelined.

By reintroducing voices like Auezov and Shakarim (even if partially and carefully), the media helped reconnect Naūryz to a specifically Kazakh literary and cultural lineage. The presence of these authors in official newspapers gave weight to the idea that Naūryz had deep roots in Kazakh history, and that its revival was not an invention, but a return. Even when names were omitted or texts were edited, their inclusion marked an important shift: Naūryz was no longer just a seasonal or socialist celebration, it was increasingly framed as a national tradition with historical continuity, literary value, and cultural depth. This process of republishing was one of the subtle but powerful tools used by Kazakh intellectuals and editors to make Naūryz feel authentically Kazakh again.

The last clearest example of the ideological shift from a Soviet to a national framing of Naūryz can be seen in the comparison between two informative booklets published before and after independence. In the National Library of Almaty, I found two Naūryz guides: the first published in 1990 during the Kazakh SSR, and the second in 1993, in independent Kazakhstan. The difference can be seen in the introductory pages. The 1990 booklet opens with the line "The socialist society is undergoing a period of perestroika, with revolutionary renewal in all aspects of life"[44](Omarov 1990, 3). Later, the text emphasizes the role of the Communist Party in reviving Naūryz – "The new leadership of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan decided to restore Naūryz, which had been abolished in the 1920s"[45](4). The celebration is framed within Soviet logic of internationalism, illustrated by a poem that calls different ethnic groups to unite:

44 "Социалистік қоғам қайта құру кезеңін бастан кешіріп, адамдар өмірінің бүкіл қыры революциялық жаңару үстінде"

45 "Қазақстан Компартиясы Орталық Комитетінің жаңа басшылығы 20-жылдарда жойылған 'Наурызды' қалпына келтіру қажет деп тапты"

Наурыз тойға жиналдың Қазақ, орыс, қырғызым, Өзбек, тәжік жұлдызым, Ұйғыр, татар, чечен де, Билеп жүр әні ұл-қызым	You have gathered for Naūryz, Kazakh, Russian, my Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, my stars, Uyghur, Tatar, even Chechen My sons and daughters dance to the song

The inclusion of various ethnic groups aligns with the ideal of Soviet people where national differences were acknowledged but subsumed under a shared socialist identity. The image of all these nations dancing together at the Naūryz celebration promotes the idea of collective celebration, not of a Kazakh holiday, but of a universal socialist spring festival. This portrayal transforms Naūryz from a specifically Kazakh or Turkic tradition into a multiethnic Soviet spectacle, in which the holiday functions as a tool for reinforcing unity, rather than cultural specificity. Lastly, the closing lines of the book reinforce this framing by describing Naūryz as part of the broader Soviet cultural education system: "Within the system of communist education for the working people…"[46] (Omarov 1990, 30).

In contrast, the 1993 booklet marks a decisive turn. Authored by Arasanbai Yestenov and published with the support of the Ministry of Media of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it contains no references to *perestroika*, socialism, or international solidarity. Instead, it opens with a critique of the performative, standardized format of post-1988 celebrations: "No matter which celebration you attend these days, it's always the same scene… Officials just divide the rituals between villages and seem pleased with themselves"[47](Yestenov 1993, 3). Yestenov criticizes the artificial mixing of unrelated traditions under the label of Naūryz "If we want to stop this confusion, let's celebrate Naūryz by its own name and essence"[48] (3).

46 "Еңбекшілер коммунистік тәрбие беру құралының комплексінде..."

47 "Қай мереке, қай тойға бармаңыз, қазіргі көретінің бір сурет, бір көрініс... Ол рәсімдерді әр ауылға бөліп берген басшылар мәз-мәйрам"

48 "Бірді бірге шатыстырып, былықтырмай өткізетін болсақ, Наурыз тойын өз атымен, өз затымен дұрыстап өткізейік"

The 62-page booklet includes not only festive scripts but also practical cultural content: recipes for naūryz közhe, explanations of rituals like gift-giving and love confessions, a list of national games, sections on the 7 treasures of kazakhs, 10 *ata*(generations), the Kazakh khanate, and the names of the years in kazakh. This shift from ideological to ethnographic and cultural framing illustrates how, by 1993, Naūryz was no longer treated as a Soviet holiday infused with political meaning, but as a national tradition embedded in Kazakh history, practice, and identity.

The transformation of Naūryz from a Soviet-era revival project to a deeply nationalized tradition took place within a remarkably short span of 3-5 years. Between 1988 and 1993, the holiday shifted from being framed as a socialist celebration of labor, unity, and ecology to a culturally rich and nationally meaningful event centered on Kazakh customs, symbols, and history. This shift is visible in poetry, media, public rituals, and even in official publications from the 1990 booklet that opened with references to the Communist Party and perestroika to the 1993 edition that rejected ideological language altogether in favor of traditional knowledge, rituals, and practices.

This evolution did not stop with independence. In 2001, Naūryz was officially recognized as a public holiday, and in 2005, a government decree extended the celebration to three days. Most recently, in 2024, the Kazakhstani government announced that Naūryz would be celebrated over ten days, from March 14 to 23, under the name *Naūryznama.* Each day now carries a different thematic focus – Day of the Dombyra, Day of National Dress, Day of Kindness, and others, highlighting the ongoing process of reimagining and institutionalizing the holiday. It is also crucial to note that the term Naūryznama is not a recent invention. It appeared in the writings of Kopeev, who described how he once celebrated Naūryz over ten days in Bukhara. Whether the modern revival of *Naūryznama* represents a genuine return to historical roots or a

selective reimagining of the past, it is difficult to say with certainty. What is clear, however, is that Naūryz is a living tradition that keeps changing. It continues to be reshaped by new political realities, public expectations, and shifting ideas about what it means to be Kazakh. What started as a careful and controlled return under Soviet rules has now become flexible. Today, Naūryz reflects Kazakhstan's ongoing search for how to celebrate its culture in its own way. This growing emphasis on locally grounded and culturally specific celebrations mirrors what Beyer and Finke describe as "practices of traditionalization," where tradition is not simply imposed from above but negotiated and reshaped by various actors (Beyer and Finke 2019). In this sense, Naūryz celebrations after the 1990s involved not just official narratives, but also a broader public engagement with national identity.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate how the Naūryz holiday was revived in Soviet Kazakhstan between 1988 and the early 1990s. Initially, the research was guided by several assumptions: that Naūryz had been officially banned for decades, that its return in 1988 was a result of nationalist resistance, and that the revival simply brought back an older, pre-Soviet tradition. However, closer examination of archival documents, periodicals, and literary texts revealed a more complex and layered story.

One of the first turning points in the research came with the realization that no official Soviet decree banning Naūryz could be found. Instead, the holiday disappeared gradually from the public sphere through ideological pressure and shifting cultural policies in the 1920s and 1930s. Its revival in the late 1980s was not a grassroots uprising or purely nationalist project, but a state- and elite-managed process shaped by the ideological framework of late socialism. Archival documents from ispolkoms, correspondence between ministries, and media content

from newspapers such as *Sotsialīstīk Qazaqstan* and *Lenīnshil zhas* suggest that the 1988 revival was carefully curated to fit the logic of "socialist in content and national in form." The holiday was reframed around values of labor, international friendship, environmental awareness, and collective joy—values compatible with the late Soviet political vision.

The methodology of this project combined archival research, media discourse analysis, and literary content analysis. Early on, the research involved working with documents from the Presidential Archive of Kazakhstan and conducting media content analysis of five key newspapers from the spring of 1988 and 1989. These sources helped reconstruct how Naūryz was presented, framed, and gradually transformed in the public sphere. Literary texts—including poems by Muqaġalī Maqataev and Mukhtar Shakhanov—allowed me to trace how individual authors used metaphor, memory, and cultural imagery to imagine Naūryz as part of a broader project of Kazakh cultural revival.

Among the **major findings** was the recognition that Naūryz's return was not simply a return to the past, but a process of reinvention shaped by Soviet structures. For example, what looked like a "traditional" celebration yurts on public squares, performances of folk rituals, and national sports was actually a carefully staged spectacle following the logic of Soviet public culture. Drawing on Francine Hirsch's concept of "cultural technologies of rule," the thesis shows how Naūryz was used as a tool to display an approved version of Kazakh national identity. Over time, especially by 1993, the ideological framing shifted: socialist values faded, and national traditions became central. Manuals and booklets about Naūryz published in the early 1990s stopped mentioning collectivism or party leadership, and instead emphasized family rituals, folk games, and Kazakh historical memory. This process is described in the thesis as a shift toward "national in content, Soviet in form."

Limitations. That said, this project inevitably faces some broader limitations. While it focuses on the late-Soviet revival of Naūryz, the line between revival and reinvention is not always clear. As theorists like Hobsbawm have noted, "traditions" often gain legitimacy by appealing to older origins which may themselves be constructed. This creates a challenge in identifying where authentic memory ends and new cultural meanings begin. This thesis does not aim to resolve that question definitively, but rather to show how the Naūryz of 1988–1990 was framed and negotiated through a mix of older references and new interpretations. Other limitations of this thesis include the short time frame under consideration (1988–1993), limited oral history access (due to the inability to interview Mukhtar Shakhanov), and the focus on Kazakhstan without broader regional comparisons. Although one interview with Roza Rymbayeva helped contextualize the cultural impact of Naūryz-themed music, further interviews could have enriched the discussion. In addition, while the thesis explores poetry, journalism, and archival sources, it does not fully cover grassroots reception or family-level practices of Naūryz across regions.

Further research. In the future this project could expand in several directions. A more comparative study might explore how Naūryz was revived or reinvented across other Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. It could also track how the meanings of Naūryz have changed in the decades since independence, particularly with the 2001 and 2024 state decisions to extend the holiday and label it as "Naūryznama," with themed days like the Day of National Dress or Day of Kindness. Another fruitful avenue would be to study the Naūryz Holiday's Persian roots and how it became turkic or did it become turkic holiday in the first place.

Concluding everything that was mentioned before, this research shows that Naūryz is not a static tradition but a dynamic, living practice one that continues to be reinvented and repurposed to match the needs of each political era. Its revival in the late 1980s reflects the entanglement of national identity and Soviet ideology, offering insight not only into how holidays are revived, but how culture itself is made.

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