



STATISM AND THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN EARLY REPUBLICAN TÜRKİYE: EMPOWERMENT AND CONSTRAINT

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Abstract:

This article examines the cooperative movement in Early Republican Türkiye (1923–1938) within the intersecting institutional and discursive frameworks of statism. It argues that while the state promoted cooperatives as instruments of rural empowerment, national economic consolidation, and social solidarity, their autonomy was limited by mechanisms such as ministerial approval, state-supervised finance, and rigorous inspection. Although both the number and membership of cooperatives grew rapidly during the 1930s, this growth unfolded under strict administrative and fiscal oversight. The analysis reveals that statism operated through a dual logic: it enabled cooperative expansion via incentives, such as tax exemptions, access to credit, and organizational support, while simultaneously restricting grassroots autonomy through hierarchical control. This duality contributes to debates on state-led development by illustrating how institutional design shapes not only macroeconomic outcomes but also collective organization. It also advances the historiography of cooperatives by clarifying the relationship between the legal frameworks and long-term self-organization.

Keywords:

Early Republican Türkiye, Statism, Cooperatives, Statist Development

1. Introduction

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, the Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923, faced a lack of industrial capacity, limited capital accumulation, and a fragile agrarian structure (Boratav, 1989). In this context, economic sovereignty was regarded as the foundation of political independence, and the İzmir Economic Congress (İzmir İktisat Kongresi) of 1923 explicitly articulated economic self-sufficiency as the cornerstone of national development. The congress clearly demonstrated that political independence would only acquire meaning through economic autonomy (Boratav, 1989, p. 31). In this process, the approach that sought to define the role of the state in the economy while establishing a balance with private enterprise formed the intellectual foundation of the Republic's subsequent economic policies (Kuruç, 1988, p. 20).

This founding turning point represented a strategic reorientation in economic governance, where state intervention was framed not merely as a necessity but also as a developmental imperative. The İzmir Economic Congress foreshadowed a state-led approach that was neither capitalist nor socialist, reconciling national independence with modernization (Lewis, 1961, p. 407). Statism (devletçilik), in this context, emerged as a “third way” adapted to the conditions of late-developing societies. At the ideological level, statism linked national independence to strong state leadership in the economy; at the practical level, it aimed to compensate for the absence of a domestic entrepreneurial class (Evans, 1995; Rapley, 2007). Within this synthesis, the state was repositioned not simply as a market regulator but as the primary agent of national development.

Building upon this context, this article examines how the statist framework influenced not only macro-sectoral policies and state enterprises but also the structuring of social organization. Accordingly, cooperatives, unlike their European grassroots counterparts, were conceived from the outset in Early Republican Türkiye as state-supported and state-supervised entities (Vardağlı, 2023). Such a design simultaneously produced a discourse of empowerment

and practices of oversight: while promising protection against usury, fair prices, and bargaining power, cooperatives were subjected to ministerial approval, financial oversight, and inspection regimes (Tezel, 1986; Thornburg, 1949). This dual design entrenched empowerment and oversight as interdependent dimensions of state-led modernization. The central research question of this article is how, and to what extent, statist policies shaped cooperative development in Early Republican Türkiye—and what this reveals about the tensions between state control and grassroots self-organization. The central argument advanced here is that although cooperatives grew rapidly in number and membership during the 1930s, their autonomy was systematically limited by legal and financial mechanisms. Therefore, statism produced a dual outcome: fostering cooperative growth while restricting organizational independence. This structural ambivalence—expansion without autonomy—illuminates the governance trade-offs inherent in statist development.

The article makes two interrelated contributions. First, it advances existing scholarship on theories of statism by examining how institutional design extended beyond industrial and financial domains to structure civic-economic organization. Second, and relatedly, it contributes to the historiography of cooperatives by highlighting the relationship between legal and administrative architecture and long-term capacities for self-organization, thereby shifting the focus from descriptive chronology to a theoretically grounded institutional analysis. Taken together, these contributions underscore how statism functioned not merely as an economic doctrine but as a mode of governance, embedding cooperatives within a broader project of state-led modernization.

Methodologically, this article employs a historical-institutionalist approach to investigate how the statist framework shaped the cooperative movement in Early Republican Türkiye. It draws upon a comprehensive body of primary sources—including legal texts, parliamentary debates (Grand National Assembly of Türkiye-TBMM), contemporary press coverage, and administrative reports spanning 1923 to 1938—alongside secondary literature in economic history, political economy, and cooperative studies. Legal frameworks are treated as foundational documents that reveal both the intentions of the state and the mechanisms through which cooperatives were embedded within the statist project. Parliamentary proceedings are examined to uncover how policymakers discursively linked supervision with empowerment, while press materials help trace the public dissemination of these ideas and their alignment with the broader ideology of statism. Administrative reports, in turn, provide empirical data on the expansion of cooperatives, membership, and credit flows. By triangulating these sources, the analysis maps the institutional design that simultaneously promoted cooperative growth and constrained organizational autonomy, offering a multidimensional understanding of how empowerment and oversight coexisted as complementary pillars of the early Republican cooperative system.

To this end, the article is structured into five main sections. Following the introduction, which situates the article within the literature on state-led development and outlines the research question, Section two traces the historical evolution of cooperatives from nineteenth-century Europe to the late Ottoman Empire, providing the comparative and institutional background of the Turkish case. Section three develops the theoretical framework of statism, conceptualizing it as a “third way” between socialism and liberalism and examining its adaptation in early Republican Türkiye. Section four offers the core empirical analysis, exploring the legal and institutional construction of cooperatives between 1923 and 1938 through parliamentary debates, official regulations, and press discourse, and demonstrating how empowerment and oversight were jointly produced in practice. The conclusion situates the findings within broader debates on statism, cooperative history, and late development, highlighting the enduring tension between short-term empowerment and long-term dependency under state tutelage. Taken together, these sections advance the central argument that statism in early Republican Türkiye generated both institutional capacity and constraint, embedding a structural duality—empowerment through supervision—at the heart of collective enterprise.

2. Background: The Historical Evolution of Cooperatives

In broad historical perspective, cooperativism emerged in nineteenth-century Europe as a strategic response to the socioeconomic disruptions brought about by industrial capitalism (Fairbairn, 1994, pp. 14–17). The Rochdale Pioneers, founded in 1844 in northern England, codified and diffused core principles such as voluntary membership, democratic governance, and equitable surplus distribution—principles that later underpinned the formation of the International Cooperative Alliance (Fairbairn, 1994, p. 9). In Germany, Friedrich Raiffeisen and Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch pioneered rural and urban credit cooperatives that enabled small producers and artisans to pool resources

and build federated structures externally audited legal mandates (Guinnane, 2001, p. 33). In Scandinavia, dairy and agricultural cooperatives proliferated, fostering robust local solidarity and laying the groundwork for federated models that combined operational efficiency with grassroot-level participation (Henriques and Sharp, 2014, pp. 197–224).

As cooperative forms spread beyond Europe in the early twentieth century, they adapted to diverse political and colonial contexts. In India, the Cooperative Credit Societies Act of 1904 formalized rural cooperatives, but administrative dependence and elite dominance curtailed their autonomy (Attwood and Baviskar, 1995). In Mexico, cooperatives expanded under President Lázaro Cárdenas as part of agrarian reform, yet they became instruments of state power (Arias, 2010). Similarly, in Brazil, cooperatives were embedded within corporatist labor structures under Getúlio Vargas, aligning them closely with state policy. Japan presents a distinctive trajectory: agricultural cooperatives operated under close state supervision yet retained local initiative and later became vital institutions of post-war reconstruction (JICA, 2019; George Mulgan, 2000). Across these diverse experiences, cooperative organization was seldom autonomous; rather, it was shaped by state agendas and embedded within prevailing political logics (Evans, 1995). This comparative pattern—variation in outcomes amid persistent state involvement—provides the analytical backdrop for the Turkish case.

Analytically, the field of cooperative studies has long revolved around three functional domains. The first comprises production cooperatives, particularly in agriculture and small-scale industry, where members pool resources for joint production and marketing. The second consists of service cooperatives—including credit, consumer, and housing associations—that address market constraints on access to finance and goods. The third involves social cooperatives, which extend cooperation to education, welfare, and solidarity. This functional evolution demonstrates the adaptability of the cooperative form to changing economic and institutional environments (Putnam, 1993; Hechter, 1987; Wright, 2010).

Turning to the late Ottoman/Turkish period, cooperative initiatives began as modest experiments designed primarily to address the chronic problem of rural indebtedness and the scarcity of agricultural credit. The earliest examples, the Provincial Agricultural Credit Funds (*Memleket Sandıkları*, 1863) and later the Public Benefit Funds (*Menafi Sandıkları*, 1880s), were state-backed credit institutions that provided limited financial relief to small farmers but remained firmly under bureaucratic control. Rather than cultivating collective self-management, these initiatives entrenched a paternalistic pattern in which the state defined both the scope and the oversight of economic association (Özcan, 2007). The establishment of Ziraat Bank (*Ziraat Bankası*) in 1888 further institutionalized this logic: while it expanded access to credit, it did so through centralized administration, prioritizing oversight over participation (Bicentürk, 1975). Even the 1913 Law on the Improvement of Agriculture (*Islah-ı Ziraat Kanunu*), which legally sanctioned the formation of agricultural unions, could not alter this trajectory. The disruptions of the First World War, coupled with the fragility of agrarian structures, hindered implementation and stifled local initiative (Kepenek and Yentürk, 2003). By the early twentieth century, cooperative practice in the Ottoman Empire thus remained embryonic, defined by weak legal foundations, limited grassroots mobilization, and a deeply ingrained tradition of administrative tutelage (Avcioğlu, 1987). These early experiences did more than reveal the limits of collective organization; they normalized supervision as a structural condition of cooperation, setting a precedent that would profoundly shape later republican designs.

The proclamation of the Republic in 1923 marked both a political rupture and an institutional reorientation in the organization of economic life. Building on the Ottoman legacy of state-centered intervention, the new regime reimagined cooperatives as instruments of economic sovereignty and national modernization rather than as autonomous civic associations (Kuruç, 1988, p. 282). This vision was first articulated at the İzmir Economic Congress, where delegates framed cooperativism as the cornerstone of rural mobilization, productive efficiency, and independence from foreign markets (İnan, 2020, p. 11). In contrast to the European cooperative tradition that had grown from below, the Turkish model was conceived from above—as an extension of public policy and a vehicle for the broader project of statist development (Vardağlı, 2023, p. 263). Through this statist framework, the state positioned itself not only as the guardian but also as the architect of collective organization, providing legal recognition and financial resources while retaining supervisory authority. This institutional logic—empowerment through tutelage—defined the cooperative movement of the 1920s and 1930s and would continue to shape its long-term evolution in the Turkish political economy (Soydemir and Erçek, 2020, p. 51).

3. Theoretical Approaches to Statism: A Review of Literature

Statism, in its broadest sense, refers to the principle that the state should play a central, directive, and coordinating role in economic life (Rapley, 2007, p. 3). Rather than a fixed ideology, statism encompasses a spectrum of practices ranging from regulatory intervention to state ownership of productive assets, depending on the historical and political context (Evans, 1995, pp. 8–9). In the literature on late development, statism is commonly understood as a pragmatic “third way” between laissez-faire capitalism and socialism—intended to address the structural weaknesses of newly formed or economically fragile states (Johnson, 1982, pp. 305–306). This conceptual flexibility has allowed statism to serve both as a developmental strategy and as a legitimizing framework for state authority across a range of national settings.

Within comparative political economy, an influential interpretation emerges from the East Asian “developmental state” paradigm. This literature highlights how late-industrializing countries such as Japan and South Korea built strong bureaucratic capacity to coordinate markets, channel credit, and prioritize strategic industries, thereby accelerating industrialization (Wade, 2004, preface p. xiii; Amsden, 1989, p. 13). At its core, the developmental state illustrates that the state can act as a developmental agent by deliberately shaping institutional and economic structures to overcome latecomer disadvantages. In this sense, statism is not merely about ownership but about institutional design—developing state capacity to regulate markets and promote long-term industrial upgrading (Evans, 1995, pp. 8–9). Thus, the developmental-state model reframes statism as a strategic architecture of institutional capacity rather than a fixed ideological stance.

By contrast, Latin American scholarship—particularly the dependency approach—interprets statism primarily in terms of limitations rather than opportunities. Studies in this tradition argue that peripheral economies remain structurally subordinated to the global capitalist system, such that state intervention can inadvertently reinforce dependency instead of overcoming it (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979, pp. 14–16). In this account, statism is seen as a defensive mechanism aimed at insulating national economies from external shocks but ultimately constrained by asymmetrical global power relations. Taken together, these contrasting perspectives demonstrate that statism is not a uniform doctrine but a contested strategy, whose effectiveness depends on broader institutional and geopolitical conditions.

In the Turkish context, statism was articulated as a “third way” distinct from both socialism and liberal capitalism, formulated in response to the specific economic and political conditions of the early Republic (Tezel, 1986, pp. 174–175; Boratav, 1989, pp. 81–82). Influenced by the Ottoman legacy of structural weakness, the international effects of the Great Depression, and the Kemalist program of modernization, statism functioned as both an economic strategy and a guiding principle of state-building (Kuruç, 1988, pp. 22–23). The state assumed a leading role in industrialization, investment, and agricultural regulation, compensating for the absence of a mature domestic bourgeoisie. In this framework, policy design and institutional growth advanced together, as administrative expansion was justified by the perceived requirements of national development.

The ideological dimension of Turkish statism linked economic sovereignty closely to political independence. The idea that genuine autonomy required economic self-sufficiency positioned statism as a central component of Kemalist modernization, combining planning with the broader objective of constructing a new national order (Zürcher, 2004, p. 199; Heper, 1985, pp. 33–34). This approach also extended into the social sphere by encouraging collective forms of organization that could integrate citizens into the developmental process. Cooperatives played a prominent role in this context, serving as state-supported mechanisms intended to enhance production, improve coordination, and promote civic participation under official guidance (Özcan, 2007, pp. 68–69).

Within this framework, the cooperative movement reflected a combination of support and control. State backing provided access to finance, legal recognition, and organizational resources, which facilitated the rapid growth of cooperatives in the 1930s. However, this support was accompanied by administrative oversight, as cooperatives were incorporated into a centralized bureaucratic structure under ministerial supervision (Soydemir and Erçek, 2020, pp. 153–155). The resulting configuration illustrates a broader pattern observed in other statist settings: policies designed to promote collective organization also tended to limit local autonomy through regulatory control (Wade, 2004, preface p. xix). This article thus argues that the Turkish model shows how statism can build institutional capacity—enabling rapid organizational expansion—while simultaneously curbing independent initiative through oversight and regulation. Such a configuration challenges binary readings of state-led development, revealing a more complex

interplay between empowerment and constraint, in which collective organization emerges not against the state but under its tutelage.

4. Cooperative Policy and Practice in the Early Turkish Republic (1923–1938)

4.1. Constructing the Legal Framework for Cooperatives in Early Republican Türkiye

The proclamation of the Republic in 1923 marked not only a political break from the Ottoman past but also the beginning of a new phase in the legal and institutional organization of the Turkish economy. Within this broader project of modernization, a key objective was the creation of a coherent framework for cooperative organization, seen as a mechanism to support rural development and empower small producers. The government regarded cooperatives as an instrument through which economic participation could be expanded while also serving the national goal of productivity.

The Izmir Economic Congress of 1923 represented the intellectual and ideological starting point of this process. As the first comprehensive economic forum of the Republic, the Congress articulated cooperative organization as a cornerstone of economic self-sufficiency and national reconstruction. Delegates representing a wide range of occupational groups emphasized that cooperatives could provide farmers with access to affordable credit, modern tools, and reliable marketing channels. In this way, the Congress framed cooperatives within a developmental and nationalist discourse that linked economic independence to collective organization. Its resolutions established a conceptual foundation for subsequent legislation and institutional design, placing cooperatives firmly within the agenda of state-led modernization (Boratav, 1989, p. 43).

Translating this political vision into administrative reality, the government soon issued the Regulation on Producer and Marketing Cooperatives (Üretici ve Pazarlama Kooperatifleri Nizamnamesi). The regulation outlined the procedures for establishing cooperatives and set provisional rules on membership, governance, and operational principles. Yet, as a ministerial regulation rather than a parliamentary law, it did not confer legal personality on cooperatives and therefore lacked binding force. Its main purpose was procedural—to create an initial administrative framework until comprehensive legislation could be enacted (Özcan, 2007, p. 56). While it enhanced the bureaucratic visibility of cooperatives, it also highlighted the continued absence of autonomous legal status, leaving their institutional position uncertain.

A more durable legal structure was introduced with Law on Agricultural Associations (Ziraat Cemiyetleri Kanunu, No. 498), published on 21 May 1924 in the Official Gazette (Resmî Gazete) No. 68. This law granted collective agricultural organizations legal personality for the first time and formally recognized them as legitimate economic entities. It defined their main functions as promoting agricultural production, supplying inputs, and organizing product marketing. At the same time, Article 4 placed them under the direct authority of the Ministry of Agriculture (Ziraat Vekâleti), requiring ministerial approval for their establishment and internal regulations (Tezel, 1986, pp. 121–123). Through this arrangement, the state simultaneously institutionalized recognition and control, legitimizing collective action while embedding administrative oversight within its structure.

The Turkish Commercial Code (Türk Ticaret Kanunu, No. 865), enacted on 29 June 1926 and published in the Official Gazette No. 366, further consolidated the legal foundations of the cooperative sector. Within the framework of commercial law, cooperatives were defined as a distinct form of enterprise alongside joint-stock and limited liability companies. The Code set out detailed rules concerning establishment, capital requirements, member responsibilities, and liquidation procedures (Tezel, 1986, p. 130). By incorporating cooperatives into the Commercial Code, the state elevated them to the status of recognized economic actors but also subjected them to the regulatory logic of the market. This balance between recognition and oversight reflected the statist orientation of early Republican economic policy, where liberal mechanisms and administrative control coexisted (Örmecioglu, 2019, p. 53).

Together, the 1923 Regulation, the 1924 Agricultural Associations Law, and the 1926 Turkish Commercial Code established the constitutional basis of cooperative organization in the early Republic. These legislative measures clarified the legal status of cooperatives, defined their internal governance and financial responsibilities, and codified the supervisory authority of the state. In doing so, they created an institutional model that combined organizational standardization with hierarchical control. Cooperatives were therefore envisioned not as autonomous grassroots associations but as instruments of the state's developmental agenda, designed to extend modernization policies into the social and economic fabric of rural life.

The Great Depression of 1929 exposed the structural fragility of the early Republican cooperative framework, most notably in the field of rural finance. The steep decline in agricultural prices, the contraction of credit markets, and the rapid increase in rural indebtedness revealed the vulnerability of small producers and the limitations of existing support mechanisms. In response, the government adopted a more interventionist approach, seeking to reorganize rural credit and to consolidate state control over agricultural finance.

The Law on Agricultural Credit Cooperatives (*Ziraî Kredi Kooperatifleri Kanunu*, No. 1470), enacted on 18 June 1929 and published in the Official Gazette No. 1203, established the first comprehensive legal framework for credit cooperatives (Özcan, 2007, p. 63). The legislation formally recognized cooperatives as legitimate financial institutions and provided them with access to Ziraat Bank resources. In return, however, it subjected them to strict administrative supervision, requiring compliance with regulations designed to align cooperative activities with national economic policy. In practice, the cooperative model thus became a mechanism through which the state extended credit and exercised bureaucratic oversight in the countryside.

The 1929 law introduced detailed provisions governing the formation and membership of agricultural credit cooperatives. Such organizations could be established only in settlements with at least one hundred households, and participation was limited to agricultural producers, thereby excluding merchants and non-farmers. Members were subject to unlimited liability, a clause intended to foster financial discipline and personal commitment among participants. Ziraat Bank assumed a central coordinating function, preparing cooperative statutes, supervising financial operations, and approving the decisions of general assemblies. Parliamentary debates of the period reveal a consistent conviction that ministerial oversight was indispensable for ensuring institutional reliability and preventing local mismanagement (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929, pp. 12–14). Through these mechanisms, the state positioned itself as both guarantor and regulator of cooperative activity.

Empirical evidence indicates the tangible effects of these arrangements. The number of agricultural credit cooperatives rose from 191 in 1930 to 668 in 1935, while membership expanded from 4,319 to 63,936 over the same period (Boratav, 1989, p. 43). The particularly rapid growth observed between 1931 and 1932 coincided with intensified government promotion and the extension of official credit facilities. This expansion, however, unfolded within a framework of strict bureaucratic supervision, illustrating how administrative centralization could stimulate organizational growth while constraining autonomy. The resulting pattern of growth through control encapsulated the defining logic of cooperative development in interwar Türkiye—a process in which state intervention functioned simultaneously as a source of vitality and limitation.

Despite this expansion, financial strain soon became evident. The decline in agricultural prices and widespread defaults among smallholders revealed structural weaknesses in the cooperative credit system. To address these problems, the government enacted the Law on the Postponement of Farmers' Agricultural Debts (*Çiftçilerin Ziraî Borçlarının Ertelenmesine Kanunu*, No. 2814) on 15 June 1933, published in the Official Gazette No. 2426. Acknowledging the “extraordinary decline in agricultural product values,” the law authorized debt postponements and restructuring, including those contracted through cooperatives (Official Gazette, 1933). It extended repayment terms and reduced interest rates, providing temporary relief while maintaining state supervision over financial arrangements (Boratav, 1989, p. 62).

Between 1929 and 1933, the cooperative sector became firmly integrated into the Republic's legal and administrative system. The 1929 and 1933 laws established the foundations of a model of supervised cooperation, aligning economic solidarity with bureaucratic control. This framework promoted institutional expansion but within limits set by state oversight. By the mid-1930s, cooperatives in Türkiye had evolved into hybrid organizations, which were legally autonomous in form yet functionally embedded within the mechanisms of state-directed development.

4.2. Discursive and Institutional Foundations of Cooperative Policy

4.2.1. Rhetoric of Empowerment

In the early Republic, cooperativism was legitimized not merely as an economic institution but as a language through which the new regime articulated its vision of justice, productivity, and citizenship. It promised the peasantry both relief from exploitative intermediaries and access to the full value of their labor, linking material advancement with civic responsibility. Already in 1923, deputies observed that “there is no obstacle for the people to form associations and companies to defend their own interests” (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1923), positioning cooperativism as a legitimate form of collective economic organization.

By 1924, this reformist language had become central to parliamentary debate. During discussions on the Law on Agricultural Associations, deputies argued that there was “no other means for agricultural progress and the liberation of peasants from rapacious middlemen” than cooperative organization (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, pp. 53–54). The law’s preamble reinforced this view, asserting that only cooperatives could ensure stable access to inputs and markets “in a satisfactory manner” (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, pp. 53). In this framing, cooperatives appeared as both vehicles of distributive justice and instruments of rational economic coordination. The president of Türkiye, Atatürk’s 1925 opening speech, which urged that cooperatives be “strengthened” to ensure rural prosperity, formalized this synthesis by identifying them as key components of republican development (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 1, 1925, p. 7).

The Great Depression of 1929 reoriented this narrative toward the problem of rural credit. Law No. 1470 on Agricultural Credit Cooperatives (1929) was introduced as a practical solution to indebtedness, described in parliamentary debate as “the only instrument capable of protecting small producers from the domination of moneylenders” (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929, p. 12). In this context, cooperativism came to represent both economic protection and disciplined participation—a dual logic of empowerment and control that would define the interwar Turkish developmental state.

As this dual logic took shape, its legitimization extended beyond the sphere of policymaking into the public domain. The press played a pivotal role in disseminating and popularizing this vision. *Cumhuriyet* (3 January 1930, p. 1) celebrated the cooperative as an institution “rising through the direct activity of its members,” emphasizing self-reliance and participation, while *Vakit* newspaper (18 August 1930, p. 6) stressed the necessity of increasing Ziraat Bank’s capital for the success of cooperativism nationwide. This coupling of active citizenship and public finance portrayed the cooperative as both a civic practice and an instrument of state-supported development. The fusion of these dimensions, which were self-activity and state mediation, consolidated the cooperative as the key interface between society and the administrative apparatus of the Republic.

By the early 1930s, claims of justice were increasingly expressed through the language of quantification. *Cumhuriyet* (2 July 1931, p. 4) reported that fifty credit cooperatives in İzmir had distributed “two million liras” to peasants, translating the moral promise of empowerment into measurable economic gain. Later reports described cooperative lending as “the accumulation of national capital” (*Cumhuriyet*, 19 October 1931, p. 6) and praised the movement as “a fundamental instrument in the country’s economic development” (*Cumhuriyet*, 16 January 1932, p. 1). Through such representations, cooperativism was recast as both a vehicle of individual improvement and a pillar of national economic construction. The discourse even permeated civic pedagogy: a 1932 article declared that “at schools, children will, by joining hands, establish cooperative organizations” (*Cumhuriyet*, 31 July 1932, p. 1). Economic empowerment thus extended into a pedagogical domain, transforming cooperativism into a moral and educational project of republican citizenship.

By 1935, the populist rhetoric of emancipation had been rearticulated within a dialectic of development and order. In parliamentary discussions of the Law on Agricultural Sales Cooperatives (No. 2834, 1935), deputies reiterated that cooperatives were the only mechanism capable of freeing producers from “profit-seeking middlemen” and ensuring that goods were sold “at their true value” (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935, p. 6). Yet, in a notable shift, Atatürk now stressed that cooperatives could serve the nation only when pursued within law and order (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935). This rhetorical recalibration signaled the consolidation of a disciplined developmentalism in which empowerment operated through legality and institutional coordination. Contemporary newspapers amplified this theme: *Ulus* (8 October 1935, p. 1) reported that the new law linked credit cooperatives to regional unions, while subsequent issues (27 November and 1 December 1935, p. 5) detailed the role of Ziraat Bank in drafting statutes and explanatory guidelines. The language of emancipation was thus reformulated as a language of harmony—cooperation within the boundaries of state-defined order.

Between 1936 and 1938, cooperativism acquired an even broader political significance, becoming entwined with the Republic’s claim to economic legitimacy. Cooperatives were reframed not merely as market instruments but as tools of political integration, bridging the state and the rural citizenry. Reports from the Aegean region described cooperatives distributing seed and credit, sustaining the empowerment narrative through concrete local examples. As Vardağlı (2022, p. 562) observes, cooperatives had by this time evolved into channels of communication and legitimacy between the state and society, symbolizing both participation and control.

Taken together, the cooperative discourse, which initially framed in the mid-1920s around liberation from usurers and the recuperation of the “true value of labor”, expanded during the 1930s to encompass themes of national capital accumulation, cost reduction, and institutional order. By the decade’s end, cooperativism had been reconstituted as an inseparable component of the Republic’s economic ontology. Yet, the rhetoric of empowerment, expressed through promises of fair prices, affordable credit, and civic solidarity, was always entwined with the bureaucratic machinery of supervision: Ziraat Bank oversight, union hierarchies, and regulatory codification. In the early Republican imagination, the language of justice and the logic of control were not oppositional but mutually constitutive. The cooperative emerged as both the moral vocabulary and administrative technology of a state seeking to construct a disciplined yet participatory economic order.

4.2.2. Statist Oversight and Institutional Design

At the institutional level, the early Republican project of cooperativism combined the language of empowerment with the practice of administrative guardianship. From the outset, the state sought to promote collective organization while maintaining mechanisms of fiscal and bureaucratic discipline. Legally, this dual orientation took form through two parallel movements. The first introduced a set of positive incentives designed to facilitate cooperative formation and operation—granting legal personality, exemptions from taxes and fees, access to credit, and permission to form unions and federations. The second established a framework of supervision that encompassed ministerial and banking approvals, model statutes, explanatory notes, budgetary oversight, and regular inspection. Between 1924 and 1938, these two trajectories—facilitation and control—evolved together, giving rise to what might be termed a system of empowerment under supervision (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929; Official Gazette, 1935; TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937; TBMM Tutanaklar, 5, 1938).

One of the earliest and most systematic legal foundations, the Law on Agricultural Associations (1924), explicitly aimed to protect peasants’ economic interests “through associations in the cooperative form” while simultaneously placing these associations under ministerial hierarchy (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, p. 947). Parliamentary rhetoric declaring that “it is the duty of the government to encourage the peasant with economic organizations” defined cooperativism less as a spontaneous civic initiative than as an instrument of public policy (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, p. 948). From the outset, therefore, encouragement and guardianship—recognition and supervision—were conceived as inseparable dimensions of the same framework. State tutelage was not an afterthought but a constitutive principle of early Republican cooperative design.

This dual logic was formalized through the Agricultural Credit Cooperatives Law (No. 1470, 1929), which placed cooperative formation and operations under the supervision of Ziraat Bank (Official Gazette, 18 June 1929, No. 1203; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929). Parliamentary debates framed oversight as indispensable for protecting small producers from moneylenders, but always “within order and discipline”. Budgetary allocations to Ziraat Bank were discussed in tandem with cooperative-company relations under commercial law, situating cooperatives at the intersection of private law—membership, liability, internal governance—and public supervision through ministerial and banking control (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929, pp. 233–235). This hybrid legal identity, autonomous in form yet dependent in operation, became the defining feature of the Turkish cooperative system.

The 1929 framework also introduced mechanisms that disciplined cooperative membership and governance. Membership was limited to producers, anchoring cooperatives in a peasant–producer social base, while a minimum of one hundred households was required for establishment to ensure economic and administrative viability. Unlimited liability institutionalized collective financial responsibility, linking solidarity with fiscal discipline. Internal governance operated through a model-statute regime prepared by Ziraat Bank and approved by the Council of Ministers, institutionalizing self-management under administrative tutelage (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929). Collectively, these provisions created a framework inclusive in rhetoric yet bounded by bureaucratic constraint. Public discourse in the early 1930s mirrored this design: newspapers praised member initiative while simultaneously stressing the pedagogical importance of “cooperative education” and moral discipline (Milliyet, 23 September 1930, p. 2; Cumhuriyet, 3 January 1930, p. 1). Civic activation and administrative scripting thus advanced together—the same discourse that idealized participation also legitimized supervision.

A decisive transformation occurred in the mid-1930s with the twin laws of 1935—the Law on Agricultural Sales Cooperatives and Unions (No. 2834) and the revised Law on Agricultural Credit Cooperatives (No. 2836). Together, these measures expanded both facilitation and control. On one side, they offered generous incentives—exemptions from taxes, duties, and fees, and the extension of industrial-promotion privileges to processing and marketing

cooperatives. On the other, they strengthened guardianship by centralizing the administrative structure, introducing regional-union linkages, and granting Ziraat Bank authority over proposals and approvals (Ulus, 8 October 1935, p. 1; Official Gazette, 2 November 1935, No. 3146; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 23, 1935). The 1935 legislative package thus consolidated a state-led corporative order in which legal empowerment and administrative subordination coexisted as complementary logics. Procedural standardization became the main vehicle of control. Newspapers announced that Ziraat Bank would issue circulars and explanatory notes to ensure uniform operations (Ulus, 27 November 1935, p. 5). Parliamentary committees justified this as a safeguard to prevent the abuse of exemptions, codifying incentives, and oversight as paired instruments of governance (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 23, 1935).

The guardianship principle was further entrenched through a quasi-public legal status. Law No. 2834 stipulated that cooperative official would bear criminal liability “as civil servants” in cases of misconduct, drawing cooperative personnel into the disciplinary regime of public administration. Ministerial ratification became mandatory for certain general assembly decisions, and meeting minutes had to be submitted within fixed deadlines—formalizing bureaucratic surveillance as routine procedure (Official Gazette, 2 November 1935, No. 3146; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935). After 1935, fiscal oversight intensified. The 1937 Budget Law required that all appropriations for cooperative activities be used under the supervision of the government, institutionalizing financial control over cooperative funds (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937). The press echoed this tightening: Ulus (15 October 1937, p. 4) reported that “cooperative activities will be inspected by the Ministry of Agriculture,” while later issues (12 February 1938, p. 3; 30 October 1938, p. 2) announced audits by Finance officials and the strengthening of “control systems to prevent abuses.” Oversight thus permeated both law and everyday practice, embedding supervision into the cooperative economy.

Within this financial-administrative coordination, Ziraat Bank functioned as the central regulatory node. Parliamentary debates consistently linked interest policy, credit allocation, and collection procedures to public authority, reaffirming that cooperative credit could function only through the discipline of state banking where private capital was limited (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937; TBMM Tutanaklar, 5, 1938). Financial discipline—through interest and collection policies—and administrative guardianship—through approvals, inspections, and circulars—together formed the operational logic of early Republican cooperative governance. The rule of regional-union linkage introduced in 1935 operated on two levels: it aggregated local cooperatives into larger marketing units to stabilize prices and enhance bargaining power, while simultaneously enabling standardized supervision through hierarchical integration (Ulus, 8 October 1935, p. 1; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935). The dual principle of incentive and hierarchy thus aligned market scale with administrative reach, combining commercial rationality with regulatory control.

A further dimension of this architecture concerned enforcement and guarantees. Parliamentary provisions on “credit institutions and cooperative companies” authorized pledges and enforcement measures to secure receivables, while press reports occasionally revealed the coercive dimension of this arrangement—such as the sale of members’ property for unpaid debts (Cumhuriyet, 2 July 1931, p. 4). The state regarded such enforcement capacity as indispensable for maintaining the integrity of the cooperative credit cycle (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937; TBMM Tutanaklar, 5, 1938). Importantly, the same logic extended beyond agriculture. Urban examples reflected the identical nexus of public interest, administrative supervision, and financial discipline: civil-servant housing cooperatives supported by government policy (Hakimiyet-i Milliye, 2 February 1930, p. 7) and municipal consumer cooperatives designed to reduce urban living costs (Milliyet, 1 June 1932, p. 1). These cases demonstrate the transferability of the guardianship-incentive balance across sectors.

Taken together, between 1924 and 1938 the cooperative system evolved through three interlocking layers. Incentives included legal personality, tax and fee exemptions, industrial-promotion privileges, the right to form unions and federations, and access to public credit (Official Gazette, 1935; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935). Oversight instruments encompassed Ziraat Bank supervision, model-statute and instruction chains, ministerial approvals, regional-union hierarchies, quasi-public liability, budgetary oversight, and inspector audits (Official Gazette, 1929; Official Gazette, 1935; TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937; Ulus, 15 October 1937; 12 February 1938; 30 October 1938). Enforcement mechanisms covered pledges, collection procedures, and the regulation of credit guarantees (TBMM Tutanak Dergisi, 1937; TBMM Tutanaklar, 5, 1938). The result was a quasi-public cooperative order—neither fully private nor fully state-owned—embedded in a framework of administrative rationality and fiscal discipline. Within

this structure, the promise of empowerment—access to credit, fair pricing, and collective bargaining—derived its legitimacy from the discourse and instruments of order. Empowerment, in the early Republican imagination, was to be achieved not against the state but through its tutelage.

4.2.3. Legislative Debates and the Bureaucratic Defense of Oversight

In the early Republican period, legislative debates on cooperativism were not merely procedural exchanges over statutory design but discursive arenas in which the state's vision of economic and social organization was articulated and negotiated. Close readings of parliamentary minutes reveal that, across successive laws, deputies consistently invoked the rhetoric of empowering the peasantry and freeing them from exploitative intermediaries, even as they simultaneously insisted that cooperatives could exist only under rigorous state supervision. Calls for autonomy were either dismissed as impractical or subordinated to the imperative of administrative oversight. Empowerment and constraint emerged not as opposing paradigms but as mutually reinforcing logics within the Republican political economy.

The debates surrounding the Law on Agricultural Associations (1924) provide the earliest explicit articulation of this dual framework. From the parliamentary rostrum, deputies proclaimed that the new law would “save the peasant from the clutches of rapacious middlemen” and ensure that producers received the rightful value of their labor, portraying cooperativities as both a social reform and a guarantee of the Republic's economic sovereignty (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, p. 53). Yet in the same sessions, speakers underscored that such protection could only be realized through ministerial oversight and fiscal inspection (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924, p. 54). Legislative discourse thus married the promise of empowerment to an administrative demand for supervision: the cooperative was imagined as the institutional embodiment of empowerment achieved through control.

This dynamic deepened during the debates on the Agricultural Credit Cooperatives Law (No. 1470, 1929), drafted in the midst of the Great Depression. Deputies largely agreed that cooperatives were indispensable for shielding small producers from usurers and stabilizing rural credit (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929). Yet when provisions establishing Ziraat Bank's supervisory authority were discussed, a minority voiced concern that the Bank's extensive powers risked transforming cooperatives into mere appendages of its bureaucracy rather than self-governing associations (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929, p. 14). The prevailing response, however, cast such oversight as “natural and essential,” asserting that without the Bank's discipline the peasantry could not safeguard its own interests (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 10, 1929, p. 14). The rhetoric of “saving the peasant” thus intertwined with a paternalistic logic of constraint as empowerment—a manifestation of paternal modernism that justified supervision as a moral and administrative necessity for the very viability of cooperative organization.

By the mid-1930s, this conception had hardened into legislative orthodoxy. The twin laws of 1935—the Agricultural Sales Cooperatives and Unions Law (No. 2834) and the Agricultural Credit Cooperatives Law (No. 2836)—transformed oversight from a pragmatic safeguard into the constitutive principle of cooperative governance. In parliamentary debate, the notion of autonomy was effectively bracketed out, while supervision was presented as the indispensable condition for the cooperative's legal and economic existence (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935, p. 6; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 23, 1935). Law No. 2834 granted substantial privileges, including exemptions from taxes and fees, but simultaneously imposed a quasi-public status on cooperative officials, holding them criminally liable “as civil servants” (Official Gazette, 1935, No. 3146). Law No. 2836 further required that general-assembly resolutions conform to ministerially approved model statutes, subjecting internal governance to a regime of ratification and validation (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935, p.8). Autonomy was thus preserved only nominally—empowerment contained within the expanding architecture of constraint.

Taken together, these legislative debates reveal how the statist development model was discursively legitimated within the parliamentary sphere. The oscillation between “liberating the peasant from exploitation” and “protecting the peasant from his own mistakes” encoded a paternal variant of empowerment through constraint, redefining freedom as discipline. Temporally, this evolution is striking while in 1924 state supervision was justified as a contingent requirement for proper functioning, by 1935 it had been elevated to the foundational condition of cooperative existence (TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 8, 1924; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 15, 1935; TBMM Zabıt Ceridesi, 23, 1935; Official Gazette, 1935). The trajectory from conditional oversight to constitutive governance thus delineated the limits within which cooperative self-rule could be meaningfully articulated. In the early Republican imagination, empowerment and constraint were not opposites but the twin instruments of a statist developmental project.

4.2.4. Press Discourse and the Legitimation of Public Opinion

During the first fifteen years of the Republic, cooperativism was legitimized and debated not only within the parliamentary arena but also through the columns of the period's leading newspapers. The press functioned as a medium that translated the government's economic vision into popular discourse, presenting cooperatives through a twofold perspective: as instruments of peasant emancipation and as embodiments of state authority. In doing so, newspapers did not simply inform public opinion—they produced it, investing cooperativism with ideological legitimacy as both an economic institution and a moral pillar of the Republican order.

In early Republican newspapers, cooperativism was most commonly framed as a vehicle of liberation for the peasantry. *Cumhuriyet* defined cooperatives as “the secure path of the peasant,” depicting them as a symbol of collective empowerment and moral unity (*Cumhuriyet*, 3 January 1930, p. 1). Similarly, *Milliyet* underscored the necessity of education for cooperative success, calling for the establishment of courses to remedy “ignorance in cooperatives” (*Milliyet*, 23 September 1930, p. 2). Such commentaries conveyed a shared message: individual peasants could not prosper in the market on their own; only through collective organization could they secure the true value of their labor. The figure of the cooperative thus crystallized as both an ethical community and a pragmatic strategy for survival in a modernizing economy.

This rhetoric was tightly aligned with the populist developmental policy of the early Republic. *Hakimiyet-i Milliye* (2 February 1930, p. 7) reported that the “Ankara Civil Servants’ Cooperative Company will continue its activities with the support of the government,” illustrating how even non-agrarian cooperative ventures were framed as state-supported contributions to the collective good. Through such depictions, the press served as a bridge between parliamentary promises to “rescue the peasant from usurers” and popular perceptions of state benevolence. State-led economic policy was thus moralized as a discourse of solidarity, blending bureaucratic initiative with civic virtue.

The press also extended the cooperative paradigm beyond the agricultural sphere. *Milliyet* (1 June 1932, p. 1) announced the formation of municipal cooperatives “to make life cheaper,” while *Ulus* (5 March 1937, p. 4) reported that the government would “take new measures to reduce the cost of living.” Likewise, *Cumhuriyet* (16 January 1932, p. 1) described cooperatives as “a fundamental instrument in the country’s economic development.” Through these framings, cooperativism was portrayed as serving not only producers but also consumers—integrating rural and urban interests in the name of the public good. This broadened the cooperative’s symbolic constituency, embedding it within the wider project of social modernization.

Equally striking was the normalization of state supervision as both natural and necessary. *Ulus* (27 November 1935, p. 5) reported that “the regulations concerning cooperatives will be prepared by Ziraat Bank,” presenting bureaucratic oversight as a technical safeguard rather than a political constraint. Two years later, the same newspaper announced that “the activities of cooperatives will be inspected by the Ministry of Agriculture” (*Ulus*, 15 October 1937, p. 4), reinforcing the idea that supervision ensured efficiency and moral order. Other papers conveyed the coercive aspects of regulation within a rhetoric of protection: *Cumhuriyet* (20 August 1930, p. 2) noted that “the property of cooperative members who failed to pay their debts will be sold by gendarmerie enforcement,” while *Ulus* (12 February 1938, p. 3) reported that “the accounts of cooperatives will be examined by inspectors of the Ministry of Finance.” In this narrative, coercion was recoded as discipline, and enforcement as the benevolent expression of state guardianship.

By the mid-1930s, the press indicates that cooperativism had been transformed from a mere economic institution into an ideological foundation of the Republic. *Cumhuriyet* (29 October 1936, p. 1) declared that “cooperatives are the basis of the national economy,” and two years later reaffirmed that they formed “the economic foundation of the republican regime” (*Cumhuriyet*, 29 October 1938, p. 1). Similarly, *Ulus* (30 October 1938, p. 2) announced that “the control system has been strengthened to prevent abuses,” equating supervision with the maintenance of republican order. The cooperative thus became a symbolic space where productivity, morality, and discipline converged.

A close reading of this press discourse reveals a dual narrative structure: one of empowerment, promising liberation from usury, social uplift, and national development—and another of tutelage, emphasizing oversight, supervision, and bureaucratic control. Newspapers functioned as instruments of translation between state ideology and social consciousness. By framing state authority as the natural guarantor of public welfare, the press rendered statist modernization intelligible as popular common sense. Cooperativism thereby emerged as an institution that simultaneously empowered citizens and reaffirmed administrative authority—embodying the synthesis of populist rhetoric and bureaucratic order.

In this sense, the press operated not merely as a conduit of state policy but as a pedagogical apparatus that normalized the equivalence between public interest and administrative oversight. Through the constant repetition of this equivalence, the press legitimized cooperativism as a quasi-public enterprise, which was a site where the ideals of collective empowerment and state supervision were not contradictory but mutually constitutive within the moral economy of the Republic.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how cooperatives in Early Republican Türkiye (1923–1938) were conceived and institutionalized within the framework of statism, revealing how the discourses of empowerment and the mechanisms of constraint were historically co-constructed. The findings demonstrate that cooperatives expanded rapidly through legal personality, fiscal privileges, and numerical growth, yet their autonomy was systematically circumscribed by ministerial approval, model statutes, inspection regimes, and the supervisory role of state financial institutions. Statism thus performed a dual role: enabling collective organization while simultaneously disciplining it, incorporating cooperatives into the national development project as quasi-public entities rather than autonomous associations.

At the theoretical level, the analysis contributes to the literature on statism in two respects. First, it demonstrates that statist intervention shaped not only macroeconomic outcomes—industrialization, credit allocation, and price stability—but also the legal and administrative architecture of socio-economic organizations. Second, it shows that the discourse of empowerment was inseparable from its institutional embodiment: fiscal exemptions, federated structures, and access to public credit were introduced in tandem with systems of approval, supervision, and collection. This dual structure constrained local initiative and self-management while simultaneously safeguarding economies of scale and bargaining power as national objectives.

The research identified two major turning points: the 1929 Depression, which redefined cooperativism as protection from usury, and the 1935 legislative package which centralized credit and marketing functions under state oversight. The hierarchical integration through unions and the subordination of general-assembly decisions to administrative approval bound cooperatives more tightly to the economic-administrative logic of the regime. Parliamentary debates and press discourse—especially in *Cumhuriyet*, *Ulus*, and *Milliyet*—illustrate how this transformation was legitimized rhetorically: the motifs of “rescue from usury” and “the true value of labor” that dominated the 1920s were, by the mid-1930s, reframed through the language of “order and discipline in development.” By the decade’s end, cooperatives were extolled as “the foundation of the national economy” and “the economic pillar of the republican regime”. Thus, popular promises and administrative constraints converged within a single discursive frame, with linguistic transformation reinforcing institutional consolidation.

Focusing on the formative period of 1923–1938, this study demonstrates that cooperatives were shaped by a statist institutional architecture whose dual legacy endured beyond the founding era. Future research could examine how wartime conditions and the transition to multi-party politics altered this framework, or how regional variation shaped cooperative autonomy through local archives and union records. Such inquiries would illuminate the long-term durability and limits of quasi-public governance.

More broadly, the Early Republican experience reveals the enduring tension between state support and grassroots initiative. Short-term empowerment—manifested through access to credit, economies of scale, and bargaining capacity—coexisted with long-term constraints of bureaucratic supervision and legal dependence. The Turkish case therefore serves as a historical laboratory for observing both the formation of collective economic organization and the boundaries of state–society relations. In this sense, it offers a concrete example of how the instruments of encouragement and discipline jointly constituted the architecture of statist modernity, balancing empowerment and constraint within a single developmental vision.

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