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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between the US government and international relief and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations during the Balkan conflicts from 1991 to 1999. As these organizations have become preferred tools in the American government's response to disasters and crises, questions have grown about the donor-partner relationship and the extent of governmental influence on international NGO (INGO) programs. Our study seeks to identify factors that shape INGO behavior and, more specifically, account for US government constraints on INGOs' scope of action in during the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo. Under what conditions, we ask, did INGOs have opportunities to act autonomously to pursue their goals? In examining INGO behavior in the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, our study builds upon previous work on the relationship between INGOs and the US military and NATO, and on the literature on INGO relations with American donor agencies.

We begin by defining the concept of bounded altruism and how it relates to INGO opportunities and constraints. Based on the research on the political economy of donor-NGO interactions, we identify and describe two factors that shape INGO behavior: first, supply and demand—what services INGOs can provide and what donor agencies demand—and, second, competition between NGOs which, while altruistic, need to maintain financial solvency through grant winning. Drawing upon comparative research focused on differences in donor agencies and aid policies across countries, we add a third factor, which we call the regulatory environment. Regulatory environment highlights the bureaucratic entity in charge of the government's relationship with NGOs; more specifically it focuses on the different organizational cultures and priorities embodied in each of the sub-divisions of USAID. We then apply this analytical framework to the cases of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, demonstrating how shifts from the conflict to post-conflict phase affect these three explanatory factors.

We conclude that structural factors are at work in shaping INGOs' abilities to act autonomously. The first factor is the degree of competition between INGOs. In both Bosnia and Kosovo, during the conflict phase, competition was low and operational autonomy was at its height. An

increased concentration of INGOs after 1995 in Bosnia and 1999 in Kosovo resulted in reduced autonomy, as INGOs faced stiffer competition for funding and the US government had wider latitude in deciding which INGOs to fund. The second factor shaping INGO behavior concerns the supply and demand of INGO goods and services. The two cases reveal that when INGOs supplied information and logistical capacity for which there was high US government demand, they possessed greater operational autonomy. Indeed, the US government decision to forego a robust response in Bosnia gave INGOs a kind of “action monopoly,” which may have increased their value to US policy makers and decreased the likelihood that they would impose constraints on INGOs. This demand plummeted during the respective post-conflict reconstruction phases as the US government brought its own assets to bear, leaving INGOs with many fewer opportunities for autonomous action.

The third factor, what we call the regulatory environment also played a key role in shaping the relationship between INGOs and the US government. Indeed, as this study suggests, organizational cultures and mandates within USAID crucially affected how donors supervised their grantees. When OFDA was in charge of this relationship, INGOs had considerably more latitude in defining and implementing programs and priorities. When the regional bureau took over, INGOs operated under greater regulatory constraints. Thus, the ability of INGOs to act autonomously, that is altruistically, in Bosnia and Kosovo was bounded by inter-INGO competition, the changing supply and demand for INGO goods and services, and the regulatory environment.