

To put a stop to the killing, these two men spend their entire day talking

Syria, Ukraine, Libya – There are 38 wars in the world. Then there is the “Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue” (HD) in Geneva. As soon as shots are fired anywhere, its employees try to bring the warring parties back to the table. Jana Simon accompanied two of them.

By [Jana Simon](#)

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The American David Gorman, 47, mediates in Ukraine. © Alina Rudya

Cookies are good, whiskey is sometimes even better. There needs to be something to relax the interlocutors, to raise their spirits when negotiations start. Sugar or alcohol. Almost everyone can agree on that.

On a very hot day at the end of June 2016, David Gorman entered the Civil Protection Agency in Kiev carrying several plastic bags full of cookies. Everything in the agency is brown: chairs, tables, and walls. The projector dimly lights the wall. “Ecological risks in the Donbass region”, it says. On one side of the table, there are men from the Civil Protection and from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, and on the other, men from the Norwegian, Swedish and British embassies are waiting. They have not yet met, but soon they are supposed to fight side by side. In the middle is David Gorman, offering cookies and making initial connections. The men smile and sit down. Gorman is 47 years old and more than 1.90 metres tall; when seated, he bends his back, trying to

appear smaller. He does not want to tower over those around him. The way he is perceived can be decisive for the direction of the talks. Is he too loud or too quiet? Too reserved or too resolute? Not only must he keep an eye on the person opposite him, but also constantly monitor himself. In Asia, his handshake must not be too tight, whereas in the Middle East, it cannot seem too weak. What is respected in one country may upset people in another.

It is Gorman's job to be in between. He does not take sides and he is not in cahoots with anyone. He is a peace broker and has been working in the war zones and regions of crises of this world for 25 years: Israel, Palestine, Bosnia, Liberia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Libya and, for three years now, Ukraine and Russia. Gorman comes over when two conflicting parties no longer speak with each other. When governments, rebel groups and militia want to make discrete contact with their enemies. "We talk to everyone, even to the bad guys", Gorman says.

Whenever a conflict appears unsolvable and official diplomacy fails, David Gorman and his colleagues get on a plane. Gorman works for the Swiss Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), an independent, non-profit organisation of freelance peace brokers with its head office in a villa by Lake Geneva. It is the largest organisation of its kind; today, it has 140 mediators who, for 20 years already, have been striving to prevent or end crises and wars. They currently mediate in 25 countries. They are mostly commissioned by governments, the United Nations or the European Union, which, together with foundations and private sponsors, provide most of the organisation's funding. Some of the missions are so top secret that not even the names of the countries may be made public. The mediators work behind the scenes, and any public statement at the wrong time can have devastating effects. Discretion is the DNA of their trade.

That is why they do not usually speak about their work. *Die ZEIT*, however, had the opportunity to accompany two of them, the American David Gorman and the Frenchman Romain Grandjean, for almost one year. Gorman is HD's Regional Director for Eurasia, including Ukraine, and Grandjean is Regional Director for the Near East and North Africa, including Libya.

Ukraine and Libya, two conflicts which, the longer they last, the more they appear to complicated, brutal and hopeless.

What can private peace brokers do in a world with currently 38 armed conflicts? What can they accomplish that governments, the UN or the EU cannot? And how do they remain independent?

Conflicts of the world



1.) MEXICO - <i>drug war</i>	16.) SOUTH SUDAN - <i>civil war</i>
2.) EL SALVADOR - <i>gang war</i>	17.) KENYA - <i>Al-Shabaab militia</i>
3.) COLUMBIA - <i>rebel groups</i>	18.) SOMALIA
4.) BRASIL - <i>drug war</i>	19.) SUDAN - <i>Darfur conflict</i>
5.) UKRAINE - <i>Donbass conflict</i>	20.) YEMEN - <i>civil war</i>
6.) TURKEY <i>Kurdish conflict</i>	21.) SAUDI ARABIA - <i>Houthi rebels</i>
7.) SYRIA <i>civil war, IS</i>	22.) IRAK - <i>IS</i>
8.) EGYPT <i>Islamist groups / conflict on the Sinai peninsula</i>	23.) AFGHANISTAN - <i>Taliban</i>
9.) LIBYA <i>civil war</i>	24.) PAKISTAN - <i>Kashmir conflict</i>
10.) NIGER	25.) INDIA - <i>Kashmir conflict, Maoist revolt</i>
11.) NIGERIA	26.) MYANMAR - <i>rebel groups</i>
12.) CAMEROON <i>Boko Haram</i>	27.) PHILIPPINES - <i>drug war, Moro conflict</i>
13.) CHAD	
14.) CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC <i>civil war</i>	
15.) DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC KONGO <i>civil war</i>	

Source: Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research - © ZEIT-Graphic

The conference room in Kiev is small and the heat seeps in from the outside. David Gorman tells the story of how he travelled to Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The Donets Basin is one of the world's largest coal fields and it is the centre of Ukrainian heavy industry. It has split away from Ukraine

and has now become part of the “Donetsk People’s Republic”, which is controlled by pro-Russian separatists. Gorman travels between Donetsk and Kiev, delivering messages from one side to the other. At the moment, talks concern a possible ecological catastrophe in the separatist area. The soil might have been polluted by bomb strikes and as a result, the region might run out of drinking water. Therefore, scientists from Kiev urgently need to contact the local water provider, Voda Donbassa, but the experts from both sides are no longer allowed to speak to each other directly. They fear being accused of “illegal contact” with the enemy.

That is why, today, Gorman is bringing the Ukrainian scientists and Western diplomats together. Those from the West are supposed to intercede on the scientists’ behalf and raise awareness of the issue. “We must prevent an ecological crisis. That is our goal”, Gorman says at the beginning.

The projector in the conference room shows pictures of destroyed bridges and water pipes in Eastern Ukraine. Ewgen Yakovlev, an elderly gentleman from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, stands up. He presents the list of potential horrors for the Donets Basin: missiles that hit deposits of materials such as chlorine, lead or quicksilver; coal mines being flooded uncontrollably, bringing toxic mine water to the surface.

Yakovlev fears that all of this has already happened. The entire region may become uninhabitable. “But”, he says, “we do not have any data on what the situation is really like”.

The diplomats are quiet; they look as if they were hearing this for the first time. Yakovlev concludes: “I would like to remind you of Chernobyl and Fukushima, two local ecological catastrophes that affected the whole world. A third catastrophe of that sort might be taking place in Donbass. Environmental disasters do not respect national borders.”

"You need to take pleasure in the small victories"

David Gorman has been listening and taking notes. To listen to the point of exhaustion, to show interest, to give people the feeling of being heard – those are the main characteristics of a peace broker. At the end, he summarizes the next steps: With the help of the Western diplomats, an expert from Voda Donbassa will be invited to Kiev and a joint working group will be set up in order to take water samples in the endangered areas. “In order to convince politicians, we will need facts”, Gorman says.

He hopes that concerns about the environment will bring the enemy parties closer together, since the threat affects both sides. And if they manage to agree on the drinking water, it might also be possible to agree on borderlines and ceasefires. It could be a small step towards reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine.

After the meeting, Gorman stands in front of the Civil Protection Agency with one of his Ukrainian staff members. “What can we do to advance this?” Gorman asks. His employee remains quiet. “You have the numbers of the Voda Donbassa guys, call them!”

David Gorman grew up with conflicts. He is from an Irish-Catholic district in Boston on the American East coast. When he was a child, the crisis in Northern Ireland was omnipresent; his

brother had a tattoo of the underground organisation IRA. The conflict in the Middle East, the abduction of 52 American diplomats in Tehran in 1979, the question “Why do they hate us so much?” also troubled Gorman. He says that he was already obsessed with finding the answer to this question as a teenager.

After his studies, he trained as a mediator in Washington and went on his first mission to Israel at the age of 24. Ever since, crisis has been his home.

Today, Gorman lives on Cyprus with his Bosnian wife and their three children. He flies away on Mondays and returns on Fridays. On the weekends, he repairs the washing machine or patches bicycle tubes. Normal family life. His wife also works for an NGO; she takes care of abused children. They never speak about their work at home. “Too much reality”, Gorman says. When they watch a movie together, it’s science fiction or comedy. “I live a schizophrenic life”, he says.

Cyprus is a compromise, too. It is the only place between Europe and Asia the two employers of the Gorman’s could agree on. The family returned from the Philippines in 2012 after nine years of living there. Gorman had helped to negotiate a peace treaty between the government and the rebel group “Moro Islamic Liberation Front”.

Gorman flew to Kiev right after the start of the protests on the Maidan, the square of independence, in late 2013. Back then, hundreds of thousands were demonstrating against the Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich who had neglected an association agreement with the EU and had thus stopped rapprochement with the West. Gorman had made contacts in the country via a colleague. “We started by talking to the old Yanukovich people, then we spoke to the interim people and finally to the rebels.” Pro-Russian eastern Ukraine split away. Gorman strove to open up dialogue, but it became more and more difficult. “Russia does not want to speak about borders, and Ukraine does not want the international sanctions against Russia to be relaxed.” He now mediates in different projects between Russia and the Ukraine, between Ukraine and Eastern Ukraine, between Ukraine, Russia and the West.

Sometimes, Gorman works for years until he achieves something. He has stopped getting frustrated. “You need to take pleasure in small victories”, he says in the car in Kiev on the way to the next meeting. During every break in the conversation, he looks at his mobile. His life is an endless series of travel, meetings, talks – not only with the parties to a conflict, but also with embassies, foreign ministries, and foundations. The right network is crucial. “I don’t like that about my job”, Gorman says. “Sometimes, you have to use people. When they no longer have a say, they’re of no use to you anymore. You will lose them, even if you like them, because you just don’t have time for them anymore.”

In the afternoon, Gorman has arranged to meet Ostap Kryvdyk in a restaurant. He is a consultant to the Ukrainian speaker of the Parliament, one of the most influential men in the country. Kryvdyk is 36, he is wearing jeans and used to be a journalist. His family history reflects the historic complexity of the conflict and the relentlessness with which it is fought.

Kryvdyk is from Lviv in Western Ukraine. His grandfather was a Catholic priest who spent years in a Soviet prison camp in Siberia. He secretly heard confessions in Kryvdyk’s home until

socialism collapsed. “I have always felt occupied by the Russians”, Kryvdyk says. Every sign of a renewed Russian dominance feels like a personal threat to him. Kryvdyk turns to Gorman: “Do they feel the sanctions in Moscow?” Kryvdyk doesn’t travel to Russia, but Gorman is there often. “I don’t feel them.” He replies.

Gorman flies to the Russian capital that same evening; he will be back in Kiev two days later. The next meeting for the negotiation of the water catastrophe is scheduled soon. Gorman hopes that a representative of Voda Donbassa from Eastern Ukraine will be there, too.

"They either trust you or kill you"

A few weeks earlier, in the middle of June 2016, Gorman’s colleague, Romain Grandjean, stands in a bar in the harbour of the Norwegian capital Oslo shortly before midnight. Grandjean is 41, he looks tired with grey shadows under his eyes. He has just arrived from HD’s head office in Geneva. He lives in France, right over the Swiss border, with his family. It is not too easy to accompany him in his work. It is complicated for journalists to travel to Libya; there are visa issues, and talks are delayed or cancelled for security reasons. That is why we are starting in Oslo. Every year, HD organises an informal conference for peace brokers, politicians and diplomats together with the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, in order to discuss the state of the world. This year, they expect five foreign ministers and John Kerry, the former American Secretary of State, will make a speech.

Grandjean started working for HD ten years ago. Before that, he worked for an NGO that carries out political analyses of conflicts and wars all over the world, and as an election observer in Mexico, Lebanon and Belarus. Eventually, he no longer wanted to just observe the problems as a bystander; he wanted to try and solve them, too. He has mediated for HD in the Central African Republic, and later also in Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt. He now works in Libya. There are missions he cannot speak about with anyone. “It is quite a burden sometimes”, he says. “Many people think I am a spy.”

This topic seems to be an eternal refrain for Grandjean and Gorman. “In the Middle East, people often believe in the great global conspiracy. Hardly anyone there can imagine that I work for an independent organisation”, Grandjean says. Mediators who seem to switch sides effortlessly and maintain contact with all parties to a conflict are difficult to classify. They are suspicious. What is so fatal about this suspicion is that the more you ignore it, the more the others will believe it.

Grandjean is walking through Oslo on his way back to the hotel. It is striking that he often answers questions with another question. He calls this “building a relationship”. It isn’t until he knows a bit about another person that he can assess them and finally negotiate with them. Grandjean and Gorman don’t speak much about themselves; they try to put themselves in the place of the people they are talking to, they leave them space and keep themselves in the background. They are the kind of people others like to be around because they show an interest and pay attention without judging. “I care about the person, not about what they represent”, says Grandjean. Maybe the job of a mediator is also a sort of attitude towards life.

Romain Grandjean quotes the American author Ambrose Bierce: “Diplomacy is the patriotic art of lying for one’s country.” Grandjean thinks it is a great advantage that he doesn’t promote the

interests of a country, and therefore doesn't have to lie. "We have no political agenda." That is why Grandjean does not accept funding from the USA or France for his work in the Middle East and in northern Africa, as he believes that both countries are too deeply involved in those conflicts.

The mediators decide by themselves with whom they speak, when, how and about what, and they represent their own opinion. "Some sponsors understand this better than others", Grandjean says. The German Foreign Ministry also finances HD projects, including some in Libya. German diplomats have recently been increasingly co-operating with private peace brokers. "They do a great job", says Rüdiger König, former German ambassador in Afghanistan and now department head in the foreign office. Independent mediators, he says, are able to speak to people who couldn't meet with government representatives for security reasons or political considerations.

Men like Grandjean and Gorman are often tasked with dealing with the dirtiest actors of global society. They even speak to those no one else speaks to – the IS, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda. "They will either trust you or kill you", Grandjean says.

He compares himself and his colleagues to acrobats performing in a circus, just without a net to catch them if they fall, as is the case of Grandjean's staff member, Hesham Gaafar, in Egypt, for example. He was arrested in October 2015. He has been in solitary confinement for six months without charge. So far, Grandjean has not managed to free him. "I think of him every day", he says.

The next morning, the international conference starts in a golf hotel near Oslo. Approximately 150 peace brokers, diplomats and politicians are having discussions in pastel-coloured rooms. David Gorman has also flown in from Kiev. They speak about Syria, Libya, Burundi, Yemen, Afghanistan, Colombia, Ukraine. There is something surreal about the scene. Golfers are strolling rolling hills outside, and inside, crisis is the agenda of the day. All mediators have failed in Syria so far, the situation is deteriorating in Ukraine, the state of Libya is falling apart.

The truly important talks take place during the breaks. On the terrace, Gorman is talking to the Ukrainian foreign minister. Grandjean has disappeared for a confidential consultation.

After lunch, he joins the group on Libya. During the Arab Spring in 2011, a revolution against the dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi erupted there. After his fall from power, the country disintegrated into groups fighting each other. The Islamic Fajr Libya militia drove the newly elected members of parliament and the government out of the capital Tripoli to the East. The country split away into an eastern and a western part. With the help of the United Nations, a peace treaty was concluded in 2015, but the internationally acknowledged "Government of National Accord" is still not accepted by all members on either side, especially by the Eastern parliament. As a result, there are now de facto three governments - East, West and Accord - as well as different militia and the "Islamic State", all of them fighting for power in Libya. Many people in the East of the country reject talks with the United Nations. Romain Grandjean will soon return to Libya.

Three months later, on a morning in September 2016, David Gorman is standing in a windowless conference room in the President Hotel in Kiev. Evgen Yakovlev from the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences is present, as well as the Western diplomats and, for the first time, a man from the

other side, from the separatist area: Viktor Savodovski, manager of the investment and development unit at the water provider Voda Donbassa in Eastern Ukraine.

"I believe dialogue can actually change things"

The experts from the enemy regions briefly greet each other. Savodovski immediately takes a seat between the people from Civil Protection, as if there was no other place for him. Sitting so closely together, the men on one side of the table now form a common block of experts. A good sign.

David Gorman reports that their initiative has been very positively welcomed everywhere. His colleague set up a list with places the experts from both parts of the country are going to visit in the coming weeks in order to take water and soil samples.

Viktor Savodovski says they should also talk about how they could rebuild what has already been destroyed. Evgen Yakovlev nods next to him. The experts agree on almost everything and they have already come one step further than all the others at the table: reconstruction. The meeting feels like a small peace process. It seems like Gorman's hope could come true and their initiative could actually be a signal for a successful co-operation of the two parties. A signal that, despite the conflict, it is possible to at least agree on factual issues such as clean water. "We need the samples and results as soon as possible", Gorman concludes at the end of the meeting.

In November 2016, Romain Grandjean came to Berlin. He had a meeting in the Foreign Office. He hardly slept the previous nights; first he travelled to Libya, then to Zurich. The situation in Tripoli was extremely tense. For safety reasons, Grandjean could only move around in a car during the day and had to stay in the hotel at night. The peace treaty still hasn't been implemented, the Government of National Accord has not been accepted. One of the people he spoke to was abducted shortly after Grandjean left. In Zurich, Grandjean had to meet one of the few private donors of HD. They wish to remain anonymous.

The longer you accompany Grandjean and Gorman, the more out of breath they appear. All those travels, meetings and talks create a feeling of enduring restlessness. A life determined by others, rushed about by world events. What is it that drives them? This question becomes ever more pressing. Grandjean summarizes his job in two words: frustration and patience. But it never gets boring. "I believe dialogue can actually change things." David Gorman shares this view: "You can actually achieve something and become part of something big." What could make more sense than establishing peace? In the past six years, HD was involved in 35 agreements. It is a kind of work that is hardly ever really finished because it always seems so meaningful. Any break could be disastrous.

Not until September is it finally possible to accompany Romain Grandjean to North Africa. After months of waiting, there is a meeting in Tunisia. A delegation from Zintan, an important city in Western Libya close to the Algerian border, will travel to Tunis. They want to move closer to the international community; HD is supposed to establish the contact.

On a chilly morning, Grandjean meets with eight of his employees: a woman from Slovakia, a Frenchman, a Moroccan, a Tunisian, a Sudanese, a Brit and two women from Libya. Grandjean

tries to come up with a choreography for the meeting. On the first day, the mediators will have discussions with the Libyan delegation; discussions with representatives of the United Nations, the European Union and several aid organisations will follow on the second day.

Grandjean always tries to plan everything ahead in great detail. Who will be there? Who won't be there? Who will be pulling the strings in the background? If the mediators don't know who is in the room, it will be more difficult for them to react to unexpected events. Three of them had been to Zintan before in summer. They met some members of the delegation and know what they accept and what not; they know the key words that might help them in the negotiations. And yet, it can all turn out entirely different in the end.

The hotel in which the meeting starts the next morning is located in a district in Tunis that was built by Saudi investors. Alcohol may not be served here. Ten men from Zintan are sitting around a square table with six mediators. Grandjean opens the talks in Arabic and continues in English: "We are proud to have you here. This meeting serves to get to know you better. We have good contacts with Western governments, but we are independent. We would like to prepare tomorrow's meeting with you and listen to you."

A very brief round of introduction follows: the mayor, a representative of the council of elders, a representative of the local economy, one from the youth, a former Libyan minister of defence in the interim government after Gaddafi's fall, and two men with military background. Then there is silence. Grandjean's colleagues remember their visit in the summer. The Libyans hardly react, they do not smile and seem to be waiting. Gorman's cookies would be good now. There are only bottles of water on the table, but nothing to open them with. No one dares to ask for it within the next two hours.

The scene calls to mind a story Grandjean had told the night before. He was once supposed to mediate between the government and rebel groups in the Central African Republic, and he was very nervous. During the initial meeting, he sat next to the president's consultant who was carrying a suitcase. Grandjean feared that it contained money to bribe the rebels. He did not want to be witness to bribery. The consultant put the suitcase in the middle, opened it with a click, took out a bottle of whiskey and a few glasses, filled them up and offered them to the rebels. "It broke the ice", Grandjean said.

In Tunis, one of the Libyans finally breaks the silence and turns to Grandjean: "You said you were independent. But who pays you?" Grandjean knows this question well. It is about the independence of the mediators, about whether the Zintans can trust them. He replies: "Countries such as Norway and Switzerland, as well as Germany and the EU."

"We don't have a functioning central government, but weapons everywhere"

Now that this has been clarified, the mayor of Zintan begins to talk. Currently, there are 10,000 migrants living in Zintan and 20,000 displaced persons from Tripoli, he says. But they don't have any homes for the refugees, no medicine and no psychological care. "Those are simple things for the international community that would help many thousands of people." They would also like the international organisations to come back to their regions. Grandjean interjects and says that it is currently difficult for these organisations to work in Libya. They categorize the country as a no-go area.

During the break, hotel employees open the water bottles. This seems to raise the spirits in the room. The delegation from Zintan announces that they have reopened an important oil pipeline the day before to show their goodwill. The city controls two oil fields and two pipelines run through the region. Grandjean asks whether Zintan currently receives financial support from the government. "Which government?" the mayor replies sarcastically. "We have many." Everyone laughs.

The mayor goes into more detail. At the end of the Gaddafi era, advocates and opponents of the dictator fought each other in the city. In 2014, brigades from Zintan marched to Tripoli, took over the international airport, but were then driven back out by militias from Misrata. "We want the war to end", the mayor says. "We must start a new chapter and take the path of reconciliation. We want to have a united Libya." Grandjean takes notes.

At the end, he summarizes: The Zintans had good news for the meeting with the representatives of the international community the following day. He advises them to point out that an investment in Zintan is an investment in peace. The city might be an important partner in the process of national reconciliation. Grandjean knows the keywords the West likes. The Libyans are confident.

After the meeting, Romain Grandjean smokes a cigarette in front of the hotel. His Tunisian colleague brings the car, Grandjean and his British employee get in. Inside the car, *It's a Man's Man's Man's World* by James Brown is playing. The men sing along loudly. A moment of freedom, far from the carefully chosen words and sensitively formulated courtesies. "We could draw up a plan for Libya", the Brit suggests. The mediators decide to gather a few ideas over the Christmas holidays. A brief moment of euphoria. It is abruptly interrupted by the alarm on Grandjean's mobile. The next meeting with a representative of the EU is on the agenda.

Later that day, Grandjean joins the delegation from Zintan for dinner. The Libyans are in a good mood, they film the food with their smartphones and send the pictures back home. Again, Grandjean asks a lot and listens. When someone talks too long or too intensively, he makes a quick "hm, hm, hm!". That is the only sign indicating that it is becoming too much for him.

On one of the evenings in Tunis, a baby tooth of his seven year old son falls out of Grandjean's wallet. It is a brief, sad moment. Like David Gorman, Grandjean tries to keep the two worlds apart. He doesn't talk about his job with his family and friends. "I want to have a space that is not about wars and conflicts."

A new morning, a new, larger hotel. It is cold, it is raining, and Grandjean wanders through the building. It is the only time he shows the hint of a bad mood. In the conference room, he opens the curtains abruptly. One after the other, the men from Zintan and the representatives of the UN, the EU and the aid organisations arrive. Those from the West, at first, remain among themselves, and so do those from Libya; only the mediators speak to everyone.

Later, at the table, the mayor of Zintan makes a statement, as Grandjean had suggested. “We want to end the armed conflicts in our country. We have achieved this in our region. Our goal is a state for all Libyans. We reach out our hands to them for reconciliation.” He highlights that Zintan wants to play an important role in a future Libya. He asks for help for the hospital, help for the refugees from the war and invites the international community to the city.

The mayor named the keywords. But the Westerners seem a little distracted, some of them are looking at their mobiles. Grandjean asks around: “Can the international community imagine not seeing all of Libya in the red colour of danger, but in shades such as orange or yellow?”

The Western diplomats take up Grandjean’s metaphor of colours; however, orange is not enough for them. They would only start to consider sending employees to Libya once the entire country was assessed green, like a streetlight. They remind everyone that the USA lost their ambassador in an attack in the city of Benghazi in 2012.

“But it can take a long time to achieve stability for the entire country”, the mayor replies. Zintan is already secure. The Westerners insist on implementation of the peace treaty at last and a functioning government of national accord.

Reality in December 2016 looks different. “We don’t have a functioning central government, but weapons everywhere”, the mayor says.

At least now, during the breaks, Libyans and Westerners stand together and talk. It is slowly getting dark outside. Finally, Grandjean calls the meeting to an end: “We will not solve the Libyan problem here, but we have received a more up-to-date picture of the situation. There are regions that are safe and in which we can invest. Not every area is red. Maybe together we can consider the possibility of drawing a rainbow map of Libya.”

The meeting was no breakthrough, but no one had expected that, either. The diplomats have learned news from inside Libya and made some useful contacts. The Libyans feel they have been heard and were able to invite the diplomats to their city.

On the following day, the Zintan military council sends a message on social media: “We encourage the efforts of dialogue and peaceful coexistence. There is no other alternative to dialogue, which will result in the development of institutions of a united country. We do not support any military activities that will lead the western part of Libya to bloodshed and disorder.” It is a success for Romain Grandjean and his team. A group in Libya publicly renounces violence and makes a small step towards reconciliation.

When it comes to Trump, he grows unusually quiet

On the last night in Tunis, Grandjean and his colleagues go out. They could celebrate and relax now, but they keep on analysing the Libyan chaos. Names, events, places mix up together and create the impression of further urgency. Like a drug addiction you can't shake off.

Two days before Christmas, David Gorman is waiting in front of the breakfast room of his hotel in Kiev. He arrived from Moscow at midnight and has forgotten his room number. "Please tell me", he asks the receptionist. The next meeting about the threat of an ecological crisis is on the agenda; this time, the first results of the water samples will be presented. Gorman orders scrambled eggs. Is his job addictive? He stops briefly. "It makes you believe that you can actually change something." And that is tempting. "But actually, it is more a game of chance." Should you dare to take another step, to play for high stakes or should you rather not? What will follow is either victory or defeat. "What drives you is when you feel that people around you change their minds."

In a perfect world, Gorman would succeed in bringing Russia and Ukraine to one table. Both sides suffer from the economic sanctions. Now, at the end of the year, Gorman is disillusioned more often than not. He has just asked his interlocutors in Moscow: "Where do our discussions lead us? When will we see any progress?" He says there were many reasons why no progress was made. It requires political will and the right timing. At the moment, everyone is just waiting. Donald Trump has been elected, but he is not yet in office. He won with the slogan "*America first*". Who knows if he cares about Ukraine and what his actual stance toward Russia will be?

Trump is a topic that makes Gorman unusually quiet. That is also because of his parents. Gorman's father is a retired business man, his mother a graphic designer. During the primaries, they supported the democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, but in the end, they voted for Trump. Gorman's parents voted for the candidate that represents everything their son rejects: confrontation, isolation, noise. "We have stopped talking about this", Gorman says. The mediator has fallen silent in his own family.

The scheduled meeting on the water crisis in the Donets Basin had to be postponed several times because warrants against the men from Voda Donbassa were issued. The company was accused of being a terror organisation. In this heated political climate, even a water supplier can appear as a threat. But now, Viktor Savodovski has finally managed to come to Kiev. It is becoming more and more difficult for him to move across the frontlines. "In Donetsk, they think we are a company from Western Ukraine", Savodovski says. In Kiev, Voda Donbassa is considered to be a company from the separatist area.

At the beginning of the meeting, David Gorman points out that at least they succeeded in re-establishing contact between the experts from Western and Eastern Ukraine. Ewgen Yakovlev from the Kiev Academy of Sciences presents the first results of the water analysis. In the government-controlled region, 30 out of 34 samples were polluted; in the separatist area, it was 24 out of 26. In some areas, people were drilling holes themselves in order to get access to drinking water. "We need to find a system through which we can inform the population about where they can find clean drinking water." Yakovlev puts his right hand on his chest. "That is what I want to achieve with all my heart!"

Gorman wants to ask a question, but Yakovlev won't be interrupted. In the Donets Basin, polluted water is killing more people than the military, he says. Eighty percent of the diseases in the region are related to inferior water quality. "We need regular water controls", Savodovski adds. The experts of both sides agree, they finish each other's sentences and relate to each other's statements.

"Can we send our report to the Ministry for Occupied Areas?" Gorman asks. He wants to raise the initiative to a higher level, to produce a larger effect. The scientists hesitate. They fear that their topic, water, will be even more politicized. The results from the samples are only preliminary, they say. What they need is indisputable facts. "When will we have the final results?" Gorman asks. The answer is: probably at the end of January.

Gorman wants to travel to Washington in the New Year. He tries to find something positive in Trump's victory. Trump, he says, didn't have a clear position, he didn't care about history. This could be a new beginning. "I also used to believe that we Americans were better than others, that our system worked better", Gorman says. "This belief is so deeply anchored in you, it actually makes you believe you have to help others to become like us."

It took David Gorman a while to lose this conviction. Today, in all the talks with the mediators, it is always also about the crisis of the West. About how we need to see ourselves. The old role model is weakened and has morally discredited itself in many ways. But who can offer direction now?

The next morning, Gorman flies home. This year, he has been travelling 42 out of 52 weeks. Now he has 14 days off and has booked a ski lodge in Bulgaria. Gorman fears he might get bored.

Romain Grandjean is also off for Christmas. He meets with his team in a café in Paris on a Wednesday in January in order to discuss new ideas for Libya. Six men crowding around a low table, drinking espresso. "The peace treaty the UN negotiated to end the civil war doesn't work", Grandjean says. "The division of the country is intensifying." A dangerous situation. Grandjean and his colleagues do not have a quick solution for the Libyan dilemma. They come up with ideas for daily survival. They propose strengthening the councils of cities and tribes and to support the core elements of the country that are still functioning: the central bank and the national oil company. This would at least prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

Currently, the powerful General Khalifa Haftar, who controls the eastern part of the country, is mobilizing his forces. Shortly before the meeting of the mediators in Paris, the General was received on board of a Russian aircraft carrier. In November, he had already travelled to Moscow for talks about the "fight against terror" against the IS, according to reports.

The small peace process was successful

Romain Grandjean and his colleagues discuss the possibility of including the Russians in dialogue. “We do not only see them as an irrational player”, one of them says. The Russians have very good contacts; maybe they could be part of the solution?

Something has changed in this meeting in January. It is a lot about Russia, and only a little about the USA. Trump’s team and his attitude towards the conflict in Libya are mostly unknown. The Russians almost seem more predictable. The powers of the world are shifting – it’s just that no one really knows where to.

What Romain Grandjean feared becomes reality two months later, in March: violence escalates in Libya. Brigades from Benghazi take important oil harbours along the coast. The Libyan parliament in the East, which is in alliance with General Haftar, revokes the peace treaty. Later, General Haftar takes the oil harbours back. Romain Grandjean is visiting Berlin, he has meetings in the Foreign Ministry again.

What does he think about the situation in Libya after almost one year of work? The Government of National Accord still hasn’t united the country, it is still split up into the East and the West, he says. However, some regions such as Zintan have managed to stay out of the conflict, and some functioning state institutions remain. “I am still hopeful”, he says. There is another crisis, which he considers a personal defeat: his colleague, Hesham Gaafar, is still imprisoned in Egypt. It has been a year and a half now, still without charges. “I don’t like conflicts”, Grandjean says.

At the end of May, David Gorman is struggling in Kiev with the shake-up of the political world order. In January, the heaviest combats between government troops and separatists in a long time took place in the eastern Ukrainian industrial city of Avdijivka, despite a ceasefire. It seems as if both sides wanted to test the reactions from Moscow and Washington. Because of alleged agreements with Russia during the election campaign, investigations against the US President are underway. Trump’s victory has stirred up old fears in Ukraine.

Gorman had actually come to Kiev to finally present the end results of the examination on water pollution. He takes a seat at the very end of the table in the conference room of the Hilton Hotel. The room is crowded, representatives from several Western embassies and the EU have come, as well as Savodovski and Yakovlev, the scientists. “We are a little late with the results, but now we have a report of one hundred pages. We hope it will be taken seriously in order to mitigate an ecological disaster”, Gorman says. Gorman’s Ukrainian colleague shows a PowerPoint presentation. Artillery fire destroyed water pipes and chemical factories; heavy metal contaminated the water. Experts measured high levels of nitrates, iron, magnesium, cobalt, chrome, zinc and nickel in the water. In the conflict region, there are currently almost no clean water sources left. This affects 6.5 million people. Without a lasting ceasefire, the region might become uninhabitable.

The Western diplomats, however, believe that a stable ceasefire is currently not realistic. Instead, safety zones for the areas that are most affected must be arranged. Gorman takes notes. After two hours, he summarizes: “I wish I could say something to change everything. But I have six ideas:

demilitarized zones, monitoring of risk areas, closing of endangered coal mines, new drill holes, lobbying for our topic at government level and inclusion of the public.” This is the system of the mediator: Let others speak, capture positive points, leave negative points out, use key words. Almost all the expert’s assumptions and fears from last June have come true. Now they know for certain. But what good is it?

Maybe this: after the talks, Ewgen Yakovlev from Western Ukraine and Viktor Savodovski from Eastern Ukraine are standing at the buffet together, joking around. The small peace process has succeeded; the experts are re-united.

In the afternoon, David Gorman has meetings with Ukrainian delegates on the agenda. He walks across the Maidan, passes by the photos commemorating the victims. When he thinks about what he has achieved, two things come to mind: He created a channel via which the parties of the conflict can keep in contact, although they don’t speak to each other directly. And at least now the risk of an ecological crisis in the Donets Basin is on the political agenda.

Over the course of these months, David Gorman and Romain Grandjean were not able to solve the two conflicts and they couldn’t establish peace. They were not able to save the world, but maybe made it a little better. Gorman will travel to Moscow with the results from the water samples. Grandjean will leave for Libya again in order to speak to militias in the East.

Gorman is standing on the Maidan, still surging with adrenaline from his last meeting and yet already thinking about the next. Suddenly, he says that sometimes, at night, when he feels as though he could burst from listening to so much, he imagines what it would be like to be a gardener, for example. But just for one moment.

Research: When the author first contacted the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) in March 2016, the peace brokers refused any kind of interview because most of their missions are secret. They then offered a telephone interview and, one month later, a visit to the head office in Geneva. Further initial talks followed, until the author was allowed to accompany the two protagonists for the first time in June 2016.