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**Conclusions and Recommendations of the Special
Commission on the Practical Operation of the
Apostille Convention (6-9 November 2012)**

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APOSTILLE

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**CONCLUSIONS ET RECOMMANDATIONS DE LA COMMISSION SPÉCIALE SUR LE
FONCTIONNEMENT PRATIQUE DE LA CONVENTION APOSTILLE**

(6 au 9 novembre 2012)

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on the Practical Operation of the Apostille Convention
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A Special Commission met in The Hague from 6 to 9 November 2012 to review the practical operation of the *Hague Convention of 5 October 1961 Abolishing the Requirement of Legalisation for Foreign Public Documents* (Apostille Convention or the Convention). The practical operation of the Convention was previously reviewed by the Special Commission in 2003 and 2009 in conjunction with other Hague Conventions, and this was the first time that it had met to dedicate itself entirely to the Apostille Convention. The Special Commission (SC) was attended by 162 participants from 75 States and international organisations.¹ Participants comprised experts from 45 Members of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, experts from States Parties to the Convention, observers from non-Contracting States actively exploring the possibility of joining the Convention and interested international organisations, as well as members and consultants of the Permanent Bureau. The SC unanimously approved the following Conclusions and Recommendations.

Evaluating and taking stock of the Apostille Convention

Status of the Apostille Convention

1. The SC notes with great satisfaction that the Convention currently has 104 Contracting States, comprising a majority of the world's States, making it the most widely ratified / acceded to of all of the Conventions adopted under the auspices of the Hague Conference on Private International Law. With many millions of Apostilles issued and accepted annually, the Convention is the most widely used Hague Convention. The SC reiterates the Convention's effectiveness and the absence of any major obstacles to its practical operation.
2. The SC welcomes the nine States that have joined the Convention since its last meeting in 2009. The SC continues to recommend that States Parties to the Convention promote it to other States. Member States of the Hague Conference which are not already Party to the Convention are also invited to actively consider becoming Party. Because the Apostille Convention facilitates the circulation of public documents necessary for the completion of intercountry adoptions, States Parties to the 1993 Hague Intercountry Adoption Convention that have not already done so are invited to join the Apostille Convention as well.
3. The SC also acknowledges remarkable progress in the implementation of the electronic Apostille Program (e-APP) since 2009, thereby enhancing the effective and secure operation of the Convention. Over 150 Competent Authorities from 15 Contracting States around the world have presently implemented at least one component of the e-APP.

Apostille as a tool to facilitate international trade and investment

4. The SC notes with great satisfaction that other international organisations, including the World Bank and the International Chamber of Commerce, recognise the importance and

¹ These included the following Members of the Hague Conference on Private International Law: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China (People's Republic of), Costa Rica, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ecuador, the European Union, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, India, Israel, Japan, Korea (Republic of), Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States of America, Uruguay and Venezuela; the following non-Member Contracting States to the Convention: Azerbaijan, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Moldova, Republic of, Mongolia, Namibia and Oman; the following interested States: Algeria, Bahrain, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cuba, Guatemala, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Viet Nam, Zambia; and the following interested international organisations: Australian and New Zealand College of Notaries (ANZCN), European Patent Office (EPO), International Criminal Police Organization (ICPO-INTERPOL), International Commission on Civil Status, International Union of Judicial Officers, United Kingdom and Ireland Notarial Forum (UKINF), World Bank.

efficacy of the Convention in the promotion and development of international trade and investment, and urge States that have not done so to join the Convention.

Implementation of the Conclusions & Recommendations (C&R) of the 2009 meeting

5. The SC welcomes the completed draft of the *Handbook on the Practical Operation of the Apostille Convention* prepared by the Permanent Bureau with the valuable assistance of an Experts Group to assist Competent Authorities in performing their functions under the Convention. The SC also notes that the Handbook project led to the development and publication of two additional works directed at specific audiences – *The ABCs of Apostilles* aimed at the general public and a *Brief Implementation Guide* for relevant authorities of States considering accession to the Convention.
6. In further reviewing the C&R of the 2009 meeting, the SC notes:
 - a. that the C&R of the 2009 meeting provided clear guidance on topics for consideration and action to be taken by Contracting States and the Permanent Bureau in support of continuing improvements to the implementation and operation of the Convention;
 - b. that the Permanent Bureau has completed all of the tasks assigned to it by the 2009 meeting, including the implementation of an automated e-mail system to alert States when new instruments of accession are deposited and when dates of entry into force are added to the status table on the Hague Conference website;
 - c. the practical utility of the information requested by the C&R of the 2009 meeting and provided by Contracting States.
7. The SC notes that some States that had objected to the accessions of others have withdrawn those objections since the 2009 meeting and continues to encourage objecting States to assess whether the conditions for withdrawing the objections are met.

The "Apostille Section" of the Hague Conference website

8. The SC welcomes the redesign of, and inclusion of additional information on, the "Apostille Section", which continues to be a most useful resource, and notes that this specialised section is the most visited page of the Hague Conference website. The SC notes the importance of the States Parties providing the Permanent Bureau with regular updates of information concerning their Competent Authorities.

Regional developments

9. The SC is informed that the European Union is considering the possibility of abolishing authentication requirements for public documents between its Member States. The SC is also informed that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is currently exploring ways to simplify the authentication requirements for public documents (legalisation), whether by accession to the Convention or by the development of a regional agreement modelled on the Convention. Through one of its Member States, ASEAN has asked the Permanent Bureau for technical assistance with regard to this matter.
10. The SC notes the significant impact of the Convention in Latin America, where several regional integration processes, such as MERCOSUR and Associate States, and the Central American Integration System (SICA), are working towards the use of the Convention as the sole tool to facilitate the circulation of public documents at both regional and global levels. In that regard, the SC notes with satisfaction the entry into force of the Convention in four Latin American States since 2009, the upcoming entry into force for another, and the ongoing efforts of the remaining non-Contracting States in the region towards possible accession. Several of these States highlight the value of the support provided by the Permanent Bureau and its Regional Office in Latin America, which facilitates their analysis and the implementation of the Convention.

11. The SC looks forward to the official opening of the Asia Pacific Regional Office of The Hague Conference on Private International Law in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China and encourages that Office and the Regional Office in Latin America to offer support in their respective regions to assist Contracting States in implementing the Convention and non-Contracting States in becoming Parties to the Convention.

Applicability of the Convention

The notion of "public documents"

12. The SC reiterates and confirms C&R Nos 72 to 75 of the 2009 meeting:

"The SC notes that it is for the law of the State of origin to determine the public nature of a document. Keeping in mind the purpose of the Convention, the SC suggests that States Parties give a broad interpretation to the category of public documents. The SC recalls the statement in the Explanatory Report that "[a]ll the Delegates were in agreement that legalisation should be abolished for all documents other than documents signed by persons in their private capacity (*sous seing privé*)."
Finally, the SC also recalls that the list of public documents identified in Article 1 is not exhaustive."

"The SC notes that the domestic law of one State provides that simple photocopies of administrative documents are public documents for the purposes of the Convention if certain legal conditions are met."

"As regards certified copies, the SC notes that States Parties have different approaches in addressing the following situations:

- (i) Where the certified copy is issued by the same authority that issued the original document, some States regard the certified copy as a duplicate original and others treat it as a certified copy. In the first instance, the Apostille relates to the authenticity of the original document, in the second instance, the Apostille relates to the authenticity of the certificate.
- (ii) Where the certified copy is issued by a third party (such as a notary), most States regard the certificate as the public document to be apostilled; some States, however, do allow for an Apostille to be issued for the copied document itself.

These differences do not seem to cause problems in practice."

"The SC notes that it is also for the law of the State of origin to determine who has the authority to issue public documents. The SC notes that translations and medical documents fall within the scope of the Convention if their execution by persons authorised by law makes them public documents."

13. The SC recalls the limited effect of an Apostille, which is to authenticate the origin of the underlying public document and not its content.
14. The State of destination may not refuse to give effect to an Apostille on the sole ground that it does not regard the underlying document as public in nature. However, while it is for the law of the State of origin to determine the public nature of a document, it is for the law of State of destination to determine the admissibility and probative value of the document in that State.

Excluded documents

15. The SC reconfirms that the exceptions in Article 1(3) *a*) and *b*) are to be interpreted narrowly. In this connection, the SC notes that some States issue Apostilles for documents such as import / export licenses, health certificates and certificates of origin. While recognising that this raises the question about the scope of the Convention and not the public nature of the document, the SC encourages States to accept, to the extent possible, Apostilles issued for these documents even if that State would not itself issue Apostilles for such documents.

Extradition requests

16. Recognising that the Convention may apply to extradition requests, the SC recommends that the Permanent Bureau continue its dialogue with INTERPOL and other law enforcement agencies to explore possible synergies between the application of the Apostille Convention, including the e-APP, and the secure and swift transmission and execution of extradition requests.

Documents executed by international organisations

17. The SC notes that the authentication of documents issued by international organisations continues to raise practical difficulties and is informed of particular issues of concern regarding documents issued by the European Patent Organisation and the European Union. The SC recommends that the Permanent Bureau continue to study the questions raised as they relate to the possible application of the Apostille Convention to these documents, and to suggest solutions. These could include the possibility of developing a Protocol to the Convention, designed to enable international organisations to issue Apostilles for their documents.

Operation of the Convention*Decentralisation of the services offered by Competent Authorities*

18. The SC recognises the efforts of Contracting States to facilitate access to Apostille services to the public. In that regard the SC welcomes and encourages efforts designed to decentralise the provision of Apostille services. Such efforts have been shown to increase efficiency in the provision of services while reducing the burden on the public.

"One-step" process

19. The SC reaffirms C&R No 79 of the 2009 meeting:

"The SC invites States Parties to inform the Permanent Bureau about their procedures for issuing Apostilles, in particular whether or not intermediate certifications are needed before Apostilles would be issued (one-step vs multiple-step process). Recalling the purpose of the Convention to simplify the process of authentication, the SC invites States Parties to consider removing any unnecessary obstacles to the issuance of Apostilles while maintaining the integrity of authentications."

Multilingual Model Apostilles

20. The SC welcomes the development of multilingual Model Apostilles by the Permanent Bureau and encourages their use by Competent Authorities. The SC also encourages Contracting States to incorporate their own language(s) into multilingual Model Apostilles and to share them with the Permanent Bureau.

Filling in the 10 numbered standard informational items

21. The SC emphasises the importance of completing the 10 numbered standard informational items in every Apostille. No item should be left blank. Where an item is not applicable this should be indicated by writing "not applicable" or "n/a".

Law governing the signing of Apostilles

22. Recognising the variety of means used in signing Apostilles, both paper and electronic, the SC affirms the principle that the validity of the signature is determined by the law applicable to the Competent Authority issuing the Apostille.

Additional text

23. The SC notes the usefulness of additional text outside the area of the 10 numbered standard informational items of the Apostille. However, additional text should not interfere with the integrity of those 10 standard items (e.g., in an Apostille with a closed

frame, additional text should not be located within that frame). The SC recognises that many States have successfully employed such text in order to emphasise the limited effect of an Apostille, or to direct bearers of the Apostille to the Competent Authority's e-Register. While the Permanent Bureau, at the request of the SC, has drafted and published sample text to this effect, the SC recognises that States are free to employ text as necessary to provide clarifications regarding the Apostilles they issue (e.g., where an Apostille is affixed to a certified copy, text to indicate whether the Apostille relates to the signature on the certificate or the underlying copy). States are encouraged to share with the Permanent Bureau any additional text they intend to use.

Tamper-evident methods of attaching Apostilles

24. The SC recalls and reaffirms C&R No 91 of the 2009 meeting noting the variety of means for affixing Apostilles and encourages the use of tamper-evident methods.

Obligation to establish and maintain a Register

25. The SC recalls that Article 7 of the Convention requires each Competent Authority to establish and maintain a Register of Apostilles containing the information required by that Article. The SC recognises the utility of maintaining an e-Register that is accessible online in order to facilitate recipients' ability to verify the issuance of Apostilles.

Obligation to prevent legalisation where the Convention applies

26. The SC reaffirms that requiring legalisation instead of an Apostille and requiring legalisation of an Apostille are contrary to Articles 3 and 5 of the Convention, and reminds States Parties of their obligation under Article 9 to take all necessary steps to prevent the performance of legalisations by their diplomatic or consular agents in cases where the Convention provides for exemption.

Requests for confirmation of issuance procedures

27. The SC notes with concern reports from Competent Authorities that have received requests emanating from other Contracting States, or from their diplomatic or consular posts, to confirm issuance procedures or provide specimen signatures. The SC strongly recommends that Competent Authorities refuse to comply with such requests and notify the Permanent Bureau if they receive them. The Permanent Bureau has developed and published standard replies that Competent Authorities may use when formulating their responses.

The electronic Apostille Program (e-APP)

28. The SC recognises the value of the e-APP as a tool to further enhance the secure and effective operation of the Apostille Convention and notes with satisfaction the continued implementation of the e-APP and the expanding use of e-Apostilles and e-Registers. The SC applauds the efforts of a number of States actively engaged in implementing one or both components of the e-APP and strongly encourages other Contracting States that have not yet done so to actively consider implementation. The SC encourages further exchanges of information among States about the implementation of the e-APP, in particular at the 8th International Forum on the e-APP scheduled for 2013 in Montevideo. The SC thanks the Government of Uruguay for its generous offer to host the next in this series of important events.

Endorsement of the Apostille Handbook

29. The SC endorses the *Handbook on the Practical Operation of the Apostille Convention* (Apostille Handbook) and invites the Permanent Bureau to finalise the text, taking into account the issues addressed during the meeting.

Next meeting of the Special Commission

30. The SC recommends to the Council on General Affairs and Policy of the Conference that the next meeting of this SC be held within the next three to five years, depending on the overall work programme of Conference and the Permanent Bureau. In light of the very positive experience of the present meeting, the SC also recommends that the next meeting again be dedicated exclusively to the practical operation of the Apostille Convention and not be paired with the analysis of the practical operation of another Hague Convention.