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**Federal Office of Justice FOJ**

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# **International Judicial Assistance in Civil Matters**

## **Guidelines**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AFMP	Agreement between Switzerland on the one hand, and the European Community and its member states on the other relating to the free movement of persons of 21 June 1999 (SR 0.142.112.681)
Art.	Article(s)
CPC	Civil Procedure Code of 19 December 2008 (SR 272)
FDJP	Federal Department of Justice and Police
FADP	Federal Act on Data Protection of 25 September 2020 (SR 235.1)
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
FLMA	Federal Act on the Free Movement of Lawyers of 23 June 2000 (Lawyers Act; SR 935.61)
FOJ	Federal Office of Justice
LugC	Convention on jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of decisions in civil and commercial matters of 30 October 2007 (Lugano Convention)
PILA	Federal Act on Private International Law of 18 December 1987 (SR 291)
RSJ	Revue suisse de jurisprudence: Swiss Law Review
SCC	Swiss Criminal Code of 21 December 1937 (SR 311.0)
SJ	La semaine judiciaire
SR	Compilation of Swiss Legislation
VCLT	Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 23 May 1969
VPB/JAAC	Verwaltungspraxis der Bundesbehörden / Jurisprudence des autorités administratives de la Confédération

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## FOREWORD - DISCLAIMER

These Guidelines are intended for practitioners (central authorities, judges, lawyers, diplomatic and consular agents) confronted with questions on international judicial assistance in civil matters. Above all, they provide practical advice and information. However, in addition to this advice, the Section for Private International Law Unit of the Federal Office of Justice FOJ feels it would be useful to give its opinion on certain frequently asked questions which are controversial and which have not yet been ruled on by a court. In such cases, the FOJ is unable to provide any guarantee as to the outcome of the proceedings should such matters arise during litigation brought before a court.

In addition to these Guidelines, we would also recommend you consult the Guide on Judicial Assistance ([www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch)). This guide is updated on a regular basis. It gives practical recommendations with regard to the procedures to follow for Swiss requests abroad on a country-by-country basis (To which authority should the request be addressed? How many copies? In which languages? How long does it take for the request to be executed? etc.).

Finally, the FOJ has put together information which can be downloaded from the Internet on the locally competent Swiss authority to contact in a given case ([www.elorge.admin.ch](http://www.elorge.admin.ch)).

## I. GENERAL REMARKS

### A. The Concept of International Judicial Assistance in Civil Matters

International judicial assistance in civil matters forms part of the law on international civil procedure, which, besides the issue of assistance, deals with questions relating to the international competence of the courts as well as those relating to the recognition and execution of judgements.

The object of international judicial assistance is the provision of support to the authorities or courts of a requesting state by the state to which the request is made, by carrying out procedural or other official acts and communicating the results to the authorities or courts of the requesting state, so that these can be used in specific proceedings.

Judicial assistance in the normal sense includes the service of judicial and extra-judicial documents as well as the obtaining of evidence.<sup>1</sup> These Guidelines deal with this category of assistance. Judicial assistance in the broader sense includes other official measures in relation to foreign proceedings, such as international judicial assistance (see e.g. Convention of 25 October 1980 on International Access to Justice [SR 0.274.133] and European Agreement of 27 January 1977 on the Transmission of Applications for Legal Aid [SR 0.274.137]), the enforcement of decisions (see e.g. the Convention of 2 October 1973 on the Recognition and Enforcement of Decisions

<sup>1</sup> Such as local inspections, taking statements from witnesses and parties, production of documents, providing expert opinions, etc.

relating to Maintenance Obligations [SR 0.211.213.02], the Convention of 20 June 1956 on the Recovery Abroad of Maintenance [SR 0.274.15]), assistance in connection with the abduction of children (c.f. Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction [SR 0.211.230.02] ; European Convention of 20 May 1980 on Recognition and Enforcement of Decisions concerning Custody of Children and on Restoration of Custody of Children [SR 0.211.230.01]) and in connection with the application of the law (c.f. European Convention of 7 June 1968 on Information on Foreign Law [SR 0.274.161]).

## **B. Assistance and Sovereignty**

In terms of Article 271 paragraph 1 SCC, it is an offence for anyone to carry out “activities on behalf of a foreign state on Swiss territory without lawful authority, where such activities are the responsibility of a public authority or public official” as well as for anyone to carry out “such activities for a foreign party or organisation” or to encourage such activities. This provision strikes against acts that violate Swiss territorial sovereignty and which as a consequence cannot be carried out without the permission of the Swiss authorities. According to Article 299 paragraph 1 SCC it is an offence for anyone to violate “the territorial sovereignty of a foreign state, in particular by conducting official activities without authorisation on foreign territory.” These provisions express the general principle of international law according to which the sovereignty of any state extends only to its national frontiers; accordingly, the authorities of a state cannot, in principle, exercise their public powers outside their territory.

According to the Swiss view – as well as that of numerous other states – the service of judicial or extra-judicial documents as well as the obtaining of evidence for court proceedings constitute the exercise of public powers (on the subject of service see Federal Supreme Court Decision 124 V 47 [50]). Accordingly, these procedures cannot simply be undertaken from beyond the frontiers of the state concerned without authorisation. The authority in question must therefore resort to the mechanisms of assistance, otherwise it will violate the sovereignty of the state in which it is carrying out these acts.

Based on these principles, as of 1 January 2026, Article 11 IPRG provides the following in a new paragraph 1: ‘Sovereign acts performed in Switzerland in the context of foreign civil proceedings, in particular the service of judicial and extrajudicial documents and the taking of evidence, must be carried out by means of judicial assistance.’ Paragraphs 2 and 3 provide for restrictions in this regard, which will be discussed further down.

## **C. Legal Basis and Applicable Law**

### **1. Hague Conventions**

The multilateral conventions in the field of international judicial assistance in civil cases are as follows:

- The Hague Convention relating to civil procedure of 1 March 1954 (1954 Hague Convention; SR 0.274.12);
- The Hague Convention of 15 November 1965 on the Service Abroad of Judicial and Extrajudicial Documents in Civil or Commercial Matters (Hague Service Convention; SR 0.274.131)<sup>2</sup>; and

- The Hague Convention of 18 March 1970 on the Taking of Evidence Abroad in Civil or Commercial Matters (Hague Evidence Convention; SR 0.274.132).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, there is the Hague Convention of 17 July 1905 on Civil Procedure (SR 0.274.11), which has, however, become practically irrelevant alongside the aforementioned conventions.

## 2. Bilateral Agreements

There are also a number of bilateral agreements between Switzerland and certain states that authorise direct contact between *judicial authorities* or which serve to complement the aforementioned Hague Conventions. Switzerland has entered into such agreements with:

- Germany (SR 0.274.181.361),
- Austria (SR 0.274.181.631; with Austria, not only is direct contact between authorities permitted, but also contact between the authority and the addressee of the proceedings),
- Belgium (SR 0.274.181.721),
- France (SR 0.274.183.491),
- Italy (SR 0.274.184.542),
- Luxembourg (SR 0.274.185.181),
- Greece (SR 0.274.183.721),
- Monaco (SR 0.274.185.671),
- Pakistan (SR 0.274.186.231),
- Poland (SR 0.274.186.491),
- Turkey (SR 0.274.187.631),
- Hungary (SR 0.274.184.181),
- the Czech Republic (SR 0.274.187.411),
- Slovakia (SR 0.274.187.411),
- Estonia (SR 0.274.721).

Although there is no such agreement with Liechtenstein, direct contact between authorities has become customary.

## 3. Absence of an agreement

Where there is no international agreement, Switzerland applies as an autonomous right the 1954 Hague Convention to the foreign requests that it receives (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA).

Where there is no agreement and unless there is an established practice to the contrary, Swiss requests to other countries must follow diplomatic channels (see 2.2, p. 19).

## 4. Applicable Law

Judicial assistance in civil matters, which is an area of public international law, falls under federal jurisdiction (Art. 54 para. 1, 122 para. 1 and 166 para. 2 of the Swiss Constitution). There is however only one brief provision at a federal level in

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<sup>2</sup> The application of Hague Service and Evidence Conventions is explained in the Hhandbooks of the Hague Conference, available via [www.hcch.net](http://www.hcch.net).

Article 11 to 11c Since acts of judicial assistance in Switzerland are carried out in accordance with Swiss law (see Article 11a, para. 1 PILA), they should be referred to when service is effected and evidence obtained.

## 5. Principle of Reciprocity

Under Article 21 paragraph 1 VCLT, a state that has not established a reservation in respect of a Convention may take advantage of a reservation established by another state in its relations with that state. Article 21 VCLT reflects the principle of reciprocity in public international law. The legal effect of a reservation is that it modifies for the reserving party in its relations with other parties the provisions of the treaty to which the reservation relates to the extent of the reservation. The reservation also modifies those provisions to the same extent for these other parties in their relations with the reserving State. Thus, in matters of judicial assistance, the Swiss authorities must refrain from conducting proceedings abroad that are not authorised on Swiss territory, due to the reservations made by Switzerland in respect of the aforementioned Hague Conventions. This applies in particular to reservations relating to the methods by which requests are transmitted (see i), p. 17 and 2.2, p. 19). Be that as it may, states may renounce to invoke the principle of reciprocity (see ii), p. 18). It is important to note here that, in an unpublished judgement (5P.225/1996), the Swiss Federal Supreme Court indicated in an *obiter dictum* that direct service by post to a state that was party to Hague Service Convention and which had not made a reservation in this regard was admissible. In this decision, however, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court failed to mention Article 21 VCLT. It also failed to indicate if the recipient state had waived its right to invoke the principle of reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

## D. Civil or Commercial Matter

The aforementioned Hague conventions all apply to “civil and commercial matters”. This concept should be defined in the same manner regardless which of the three Hague Conventions applies (see HCCH Service Handbook, para. 137 with reference to a ruling by the Zurich High Court).

This concept is not defined in the conventions and is the object of some controversy. The Hague Conference points out that the expression “civil or commercial matter” has to be interpreted autonomously, without exclusive reference to the law of the requesting state or the requested state, and without the joint application of the laws of both states. The Hague Conference also notes that the term is to be interpreted in a broad matter, with focus on the substantive nature of the cause (see HCCH Service Handbook para. 137; see also Art. 31 para. 1 VCLT). It sees broad support among the contracting states that bankruptcy law, insurance law, and employment law can also fall within the concept of a “civil or commercial matter” (Handbook, para. 158; for Switzerland see Federal Supreme Court Decision 94 III 37 and 96 III 65, in which the Federal Supreme Court accepted that this concept also included the proceedings in relation to debts and bankruptcy when the claims are of a civil nature, as well as Federal Insurance Court Decision 1966, 67-73, in which the Swiss Federal Insurance Court stated that it was important to grant assistance in the same manner in the matters relating to social insurance as in civil matters).

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<sup>3</sup> See also 5A 128/2010 and 5F.6/2010

The FOJ has come around to this point of view and is thus of the opinion that the concept of the “civil or commercial matter” should be understood in the broader sense and need not necessarily correspond to the concept used at a domestic level. It is, however, difficult to give a precise definition of what could be a “civil or commercial” matter in terms of the Hague Conventions. To take a negative approach, it can be said that the Hague Conventions envisage neither a criminal law matter nor a tax matter. Moreover, the fact that in the requesting state the case is designated to be “civil” is of no relevance. Finally, when the case relates to litigation between a public authority and a private individual, where the public authority is acting in the exercise of public powers, the case cannot be considered to have a “civil or commercial” nature. The same applies, in general, when an authority brings civil proceedings against an individual in order to safeguard public interests.<sup>4</sup> In litigation where the plaintiff is a private individual and the defendant is the state, in designating an action as “civil or commercial” account may be taken of the fact that it is a case in which the plaintiff is asserting *i*) a *right* (the state does not have a discretionary power) *ii*) of a *pecuniary nature*, even if under national Swiss law this right relates to an administrative matter (in this sense, Federal Insurance Court Decision 1966, 67-73; see also ruling by the Federal Insurance Court K 18/04 of 18 July 2006).

However, a large number of cases in civil matters – in the traditional sense of the term (family law, law of succession, company law, law of contract, intellectual property law, etc.) – are not necessarily pecuniary in their nature, but nevertheless come within the scope of application of the Hague Conventions. In such cases, when service is effected, the fact that the requesting authority is an administrative authority (e.g. a guardianship authority) is of no significance.

The FOJ is also of the opinion that in cases in which a state court participates in arbitration proceedings (see Articles 184 and 185 PILA), the broad concept of “civil or commercial matters” covered within the meaning of the Hague Conventions on judicial assistance shall apply to the court proceedings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> E.g.: the procedures introduced by the American administrative authorities, such as the Anti-Trust Division of the Justice Department.

<sup>5</sup> The Hague Conference has expressed a similar view. See HCCH Service Handbook, para. 131 f.

## II. SERVICE OF DOCUMENTS

### A. The Concept of Service

Most procedural laws provide that in order to allow proceedings to begin the communications to the parties must be served on them or notified to them in order to have legal effect. Service is the transmission of documents by an official method: at the request of a foreign authority, the authorities of a state pass on the documents to the addressee in return for a simple receipt or by means of a special certificate that proves that service has been effected. In the Swiss view, this constitutes an official act (see B, p. 10).

Countries with common law legal systems deal with service in a fundamentally different way. According to their law, it is the responsibility of the parties to inform their opponents by serving them with the important documents in the case. Thus, there is not necessarily an official act involved. This completely divergent system can be the source of some conflict. When seeking solutions, this different approach will be taken into account.

### B. Documents that must be served by means of Judicial Assistance

Article 11 paragraph 1 PILA as well as the Hague Conventions are directed as much at “judicial documents” as at “extrajudicial documents”.<sup>6</sup> A “judicial document” is understood as “*any document that relates to contentious or non-contentious proceedings or the arrest of the assets of a debtor*” (CAPATINA, *L'entraide judiciaire internationale en matière civile and commerciale*, Recueil des Cours 1983 [179], p. 347). “Extra-judicial documents” include “*documents intended to produce effects beyond any procedure that is ongoing in a court of law*” (CAPATINA, *op. cit.*, p. 348). Extra-judicial documents must, however, emanate from an authority or a judicial officer. Notaries are regarded as judicial officials inasmuch as they undertake a public duty in this particular case.

In general, any judicial or extra-judicial document must be communicated by means of judicial assistance. Indeed, on the one hand, assistance provides a better guarantee that the rights of the addressee will be respected, particularly the right to be heard<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand, from the point of view of public international law, the service of such documents on Swiss territory without passing through the judicial assistance channel constitutes a violation of territorial sovereignty. However, it is accepted that when the document in question has no legal effect or is not liable to have any legal effects on the addressee, the judicial assistance channels need not necessarily be followed. The new Article 11 paragraph 1 PILA has not affected this practice.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Art. 11 para. 1 PILA refers to the Hague Service Convention. The term ‘service of judicial and extra-judicial documents’ must therefore be interpreted in accordance with the Hague Convention. See Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 1.

<sup>7</sup> The fact, for instance, to ask from the requesting State to furnish translations aims to guaranty the right to be heard of the addressee.

<sup>8</sup> The new Art. 11 para. 1 PILA was intended to codify the existing law. See Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 1.

## C. Competent Authorities

### 1. Hague Service Convention

#### 1.1 Forwarding authority

Article 3 of the Hague Service Convention provides that the authority or judicial officer competent under the law of the state in which the documents originate should forward his request to the Central Authority of the state addressed. It is thus the law of the requesting state that primarily determines the competent authority for forwarding the requests for foreign assistance. It is, however, important to note that it has been accepted that lawyers, to the extent that their law permits them to serve documents, must be regarded as *judicial officers* and hence as persons authorised to approach the Central Authority of the state addressed. Private individuals, however, (for example the parties) are not, in themselves, authorised to approach the Central Authority directly, even if, under their law, they are entitled to serve documents (HCCH Explanatory Report, p. 368; the competent authorities in each country can be found on the website of the Hague Conference on International Private Law).

The competent Swiss authorities forward their requests abroad via the Central Authority of the requested State.<sup>9</sup> However, they address their requests to the competent authority or court in the place where the relevant proceedings are taking place (e.g.: “to the competent civil court ...”). As previously mentioned, Switzerland has concluded bilateral agreements with certain countries that permit direct contact between authorities (see 2, p. 11). For additional information, please consult the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

#### 1.2 Receiving Authority

Article 2 of Hague Service Convention provides for the designation of central authorities that are responsible for receiving requests for assistance. Article 18 paragraph 3 of the Hague Service Convention permits states to designate more than one Central Authority.

In Switzerland, the receipt of requests from foreign states and the processing of these is a cantonal responsibility.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, there are [26 cantonal Central Authorities](#). These authorities ensure, on the one hand, that the requests conform to the formal requirements of Hague Service Convention or any other provisions that must be taken into consideration, and, on the other hand, that judicial assistance does not clearly appear to be excluded for any other reason. If there is no reason to do otherwise, they take the action required. If a request does not satisfy the requirements of the Service Convention, the Central Authority informs the requesting authority without delay (Art. 4 of the Service Convention).

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<sup>9</sup> JU, NE, SZ (for all requesting authorities, apart from courts) and ZH require that outgoing requests be transmitted via the central cantonal authority. This authority transmits them to the Central Authority of the state addressed. The new Art. 11 para. 4 IPRG has not changed the existing allocation of competences (Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 4).

<sup>10</sup> The competence of the FOJ provided for in Art. 11 para. 4 IPRG is subject to any deviating provisions of federal law. (see Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 4).

Since it can prove very difficult for the requesting state to know which of the 26 central cantonal authorities has jurisdiction, the FOJ is also designated to be a Central Authority to which requests may be addressed irrespective of where they may have to be executed. The jurisdiction of the FOJ is secondary. It does not subject the requests to any examination before passing them on to the competent cantonal authorities, but it consults with the Cantons and provides any coordination that may be necessary. Please note that the FOJ has created a database listing all the competent authorities in Switzerland (<http://www.elorge.admin.ch>).

For Swiss requests addressed to foreign states, see the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

## **2. 1954 Hague Convention**

The 1954 Hague Convention does not provide for the designation of central authorities. Under Article 1 paragraph 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention, requests for assistance must follow “consular” channels. This means that foreign authorities – this can be a lawyer if, under the law of the requesting state, he is entitled to serve documents – send the documents to be served to the consulate, embassy or other representation of its country in Switzerland. This representation addresses a request to the FOJ, which in turn passes it on to the competent cantonal authority (see Art. 11 para. 4 PILA; Art. 7d para. 4 of the Ordinance of 17.11.1999 on the Organisation of the FDJP [SR 172.213.1]).

Requests from Swiss authorities must also pass through the FOJ (see Art. 11 para. 4 PILA). The FOJ passes these on to the relevant Swiss representation in the receiving state, which in turn passes the requests on to the authority designated by the receiving state (Art. 1 para. 1 1954 Hague Convention; see Guide on Judicial Assistance).

In relation to incoming or outgoing requests for assistance, the FOJ confines itself to examining whether these comply with the formal requirements of the applicable international conventions and ensuring that international judicial assistance does not appear to be excluded for any other reason.

## **3. Absence of an agreement**

Where there is no international agreement, Switzerland applies the 1954 Hague Convention to foreign requests (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA; 3, p. 11). Reference is therefore made to the comments made in 2, p. 16.

Apart from Article 11 paragraph 4 of the IPRG (FOJ as intermediary), Swiss requests abroad are governed by the law of the requested state. In the absence of contrary provisions or practices, such requests must follow diplomatic channels (see 2.2, p. 19). For a description of the procedure applicable in each country, reference is made to the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

## D. Channels of Transmission

### 1. Hague Service Convention

#### 1.1 Ordinary Channel (Arts. 2 to 7 Hague Service Convention)

As already indicated, under Article 2 of the Hague Service Convention, each contracting state must designate a Central Authority that has the task of receiving and dealing with requests for service from another contracting state. The Hague Service Convention only requires the creation of a Central Authority for the purpose of *receiving* requests for service. Thus a request that is being sent is not required to pass through the forwarding country's own Central Authority.<sup>11</sup> The authority designated as competent according to the law of the requesting state (see 1.1, p. 15) addresses its request to the Central Authority of the requested state.

#### 1.2 Alternative Channels (Arts. 8 to 10 Hague Service Convention)

##### i) *Reservations and declarations made by Switzerland*

In addition to the ordinary channel, the Hague Service Convention, in its Articles 8 to 10, provides for alternative channels for effecting service.

Switzerland has, however, made reservations to Articles 8 and 10.

Thus in relation to Article 8 of the Hague Service Convention, Switzerland permits service of documents through consular or diplomatic agents only with regard to persons who are nationals of the originating state (see VPB/JAAC 1968-1969 [34/15], p. 34).<sup>12</sup> If that is not the case, the ordinary channel has to be followed. Consular and diplomatic agents are not permitted in any case to resort to coercive measures in order to effect service.

With regard to Article 10 of the Hague Service Convention, Switzerland declares its opposition to *direct service abroad by postal channels* as provided for in letters a), b) and c) of that Article. Nevertheless, it sometimes happens that documents are sent directly from abroad to parties resident in Switzerland. This occurs primarily from countries with common law legal systems, in which the service of documents is the responsibility of the parties and not of the authorities. In other words, and contrary to the Swiss view, such a procedure is not necessarily considered an official act in those countries. The recipient of documents served in this way can notify the matter to the FDFA. If Swiss sovereignty is violated, the FDFA will instruct the relevant Swiss Embassy to intervene with the originating authorities and explain that this method of service is punishable under Article 271 SCC.<sup>13,14</sup> *It should, however, be noted that the inadmissibility of direct service by mail in Switzerland does not automatically invalidate the service of the document as part of the foreign proceedings. It may, however, have repercussions*

<sup>11</sup> For Switzerland, see footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> However, if the addressee of the document is a national of both the requesting state and the state receiving the request, service by consular or diplomatic agents is not permitted. It remains possible if the addressee is a national of the requesting state and a third state.

<sup>13</sup> See I.B, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> However, only an intentional act is unlawful, and it is practically impossible to prove that an act was intentional.

*with regard to whether the judgment will be recognised.*<sup>15</sup> At any rate, the FDFA regularly gives notice that errors in the service of documents can under Swiss law result in the non-execution of foreign civil judgments (see 3, p. 25). Occasionally, service is effected again by means of judicial assistance.

Finally, Article 9 of the Hague Service Convention provides for the use of consular channels, that is, the ordinary channel stipulated in Article 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention (see 2.1, p. 18). With regard to this, Switzerland has also designated the cantonal central authorities as recipient authorities for requests from abroad.

## ii) *Consequences of the Principle of Reciprocity*

In application of the *principle of reciprocity*, the Swiss reservations may be invoked by the recipient state in relation to requests for service coming from Switzerland, even if the recipient state has not made the same reservations (see 5, p. 12). Thus, the Swiss authorities may not use the transmission channels in respect of which Switzerland has stipulated reservations. Recipient states may, however, waive their right to invoke the principle of reciprocity. The Guide on Judicial Assistance mentions several options open to the Swiss authorities (as the FOJ's primary recommendation or as an alternative channel of transmission), depending on the state in question, to use channels that Switzerland has objected to but which may be nonetheless used when the requested state has refused to invoke the principle of reciprocity. For example, according to the FOJ's primary recommendation, in relations between Switzerland and *Ireland, Canada* and *India* it is permitted for requests for service coming from Swiss authorities to be sent via the FOJ to the competent Swiss representation. The Swiss representation serves the documents on the addressees by registered mail with acknowledgement of receipt. In matters between Switzerland and the *United States of America*, the cantonal central authorities can address their request to the competent Swiss representation, which in turn serves the documents directly on the addressee (see Federal Supreme Court Decision 4A\_118/2022; for the requirements in relation to form, see 1.1, p. 20).

## 2. 1954 Hague Convention

### 2.1 Ordinary Channel (Arts. 1 to 4)

The 1954 Hague Convention provides for the service of documents via the consular channel (Art. 1).

This means that the competent foreign authorities address their requests to the consulate, embassy or any other representation of their country in Switzerland. This representation forwards the request to the FOJ, which, in turn, forwards it to the relevant cantonal authority.

Requests from a Swiss authority are addressed to the FOJ, which forwards them to the competent Swiss representation in the receiving state, which, in turn, sends them on to the authority designated by the recipient state (Art. 1 para. 1 1954 Hague Convention).

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<sup>15</sup> See also II.F.3, p. 23

## 2.2 Alternative Channels (Art. 1 paras. 3 and 6 1954 Hague Convention)

First of all, the states that are parties to the 1954 Hague Convention may declare that they wish to use the diplomatic channel instead of the consular channel (Art. 1 para. 3). In such a case, requests from Switzerland must be addressed to the FOJ, which forwards them to the Swiss representation in the receiving state, which, in turn, forwards the request to the foreign affairs department of the receiving state. The latter sends the request on to the competent local authority.

Moreover, Article 6 of the 1954 Hague Convention permits direct service by mail to an addressee resident abroad, or via the competent judicial or public officials of the recipient country, or, alternatively, through diplomatic or consular agents. *Although Switzerland has not made any specific reservation in relation to this, it does not permit service by mail on its own territory.* However, Switzerland permits service by diplomatic or consular agents as provided for in the Hague Service Convention, that is to say, if the addressee is a national of the state of origin of the documents (see VPB/JAAC 1968-1969 [34/15], p. 34 and footnote n°12 above). The consular or diplomatic agents are not permitted to make any use of coercive measures.

Just as is the case under the Hague Service Convention, the *principle of reciprocity* applies under the 1954 Hague Convention. Thus the Swiss authorities may not use channels for service abroad that are not permitted in Switzerland (see 5, p. 12).

## 3. **Absence of an agreement**

Where there is no international agreement, Switzerland applies the provisions of the 1954 Hague Conventions to requests received from abroad (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA; 3, p. 11). Switzerland also accepts the service of documents by consular or diplomatic agents on the requesting country's own nationals. Finally, Switzerland does not accept direct service from abroad by mail.

Apart from Article 11 paragraph 4 of the IPRG (FOJ as intermediary), Swiss requests abroad are governed by the law of the requested state. In the absence of contrary provisions or practices, for example in favour of consular channels, such requests must follow diplomatic channels (see 2.2, p. 19). Direct service by mail is permitted only if the recipient state accepts this form of service. For a description of the procedure applicable to each country, please see the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

## 4. **Other Transmission Channels**

All Hague Conventions authorise states to enter into bilateral agreements that provide more favourable conditions. As a result, direct correspondence between requesting and recipient authorities or courts in certain countries remains possible (see 2, p. 11).

Diplomatic channels can always be used (see 2.2, p. 19), even where a convention provides for a quicker means of service. Where the Hague Service Convention applies, its Article 9 paragraph 2 provides for a special rule in this regard.

## E. Requirements for the Request

### 1. Hague Service Convention

#### 1.1 Form

Article 3 of the Hague Service Convention provides for the use by contracting states of a [model form](#) ([www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare > Zivilrecht) for requesting the service of judicial or extra-judicial documents. The text printed on the form must include a version in either English or French (Art. 7 para. 1 Hague Service Convention).<sup>16</sup> It consists of three parts, the request for service, a certificate containing the details of execution, and a summary of the document being served. The blanks corresponding to the printed text are completed either in the language of the state receiving the request, or in English or French (Art. 7 para. 2 Hague Service Convention). Some states require, in our opinion wrongfully, that the printed text and/or the responses be written in their language (Guide on Judicial Assistance).

The model form and the documents to be served are to be sent in duplicate (Art. 3 para. 2 Hague Service Convention). The authentication of the documents or any similar formality is not required (Art. 3 para. 1 Hague Service Convention). Regarding the necessity to join the translation of the exhibits, see 1.2.

When the alternative channels of service provided for in Articles 8 and 10 Hague Service Convention are used (see 1.2), the model forms do not need to be used, and no translation is required. It should, however, be noted that if the addressee is unable to understand the nature and significance of the documents served, this may pose problems should the judgment be recognised abroad (violation of the right to be heard)<sup>17</sup> and this may remain a problem even where the receiving state permits the use of the alternative channels for service. Accordingly, it is recommended that the Hague Service Convention forms are used for the alternative channels as well (at least the section “Summary of the document to be served” of the model form [pp. 3 and 4]) or that a translation of the documents in the language of the recipient state is enclosed, in order to ensure that the addressee is informed of the nature of the documents served. The Hague Conference on Private International Law adopted a recommendation to this effect in 2003 and 2009 ([see points 65 - 68; point 31](#)). The FOJ recommends that [the form](#) ([www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare > Zustellungsgesuch gemäss Haager Übereinkommen (HZUe65)) be completed in the language of the requested state.

#### 1.2 Execution and Languages

The Swiss authorities effect the service of documents requested by a foreign state, on the first occasion and in the absence of any special requests by the requesting state, by “informal delivery” to the addressee. Simple delivery is covered by Article 5 paragraph 2 of the Hague Service Convention. The translation of the documents to be served is not necessary for this mode of service; service is effected, as a general rule,

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<sup>16</sup> Under article 7 the Hague Service Convention, the additional printing of the text in one or more official languages of the requesting state (state of origin) is permitted.

<sup>17</sup> However, the judgment will not have to be recognised abroad in each Swiss procedure.

by registered mail or by judicial act.<sup>18</sup> This form of service is, however, permitted only if the addressee accepts service (Art. 5 para. 2 Hague Service Convention). If the addressee refuses to accept service by simple delivery, the Central Authority or the competent cantonal court will make a note of this on the certificate and will notify the requesting state that formal service has to be effected. For formal service, however, the Swiss authorities require the translation of the documents into German, French, or Italian, depending on the region in question, before attempting to service the document again (see the Swiss reservation to Art. 5 para. 3 of the Hague Service Convention). In order to guarantee the right of the addressee as provided by Article 5 paragraph 2 of the Hague Service Convention to refuse service by simple delivery and to require a translation, it is advisable to inform the addressee in an appropriate manner. The FOJ has thus recommended the cantonal authorities to inform addressees of their rights at the moment of service and to fix, where appropriate, a short period within which to exercise such rights. For example, if service is effected by mail, an accompanying letter or a notice on the envelope could inform addressees of their rights and the way in which they should be exercised. Simple service by the procedure used for court documents is not sufficient to allow addressees to exercise rights.

With regard to Swiss requests to other countries, it is recommended to consult the Guide on Judicial Assistance to find the requirements specified by the recipient country. Certain countries require the immediate translation of the documents to be served and will therefore not proceed in the first instance with service by simple delivery.

The requesting authority can demand that service be made formally from the beginning either according to one of the forms prescribed by the law of the receiving state (Art. 5 para. 1 let. a Hague Service Convention), or according to a special form prescribed by the law of the requesting state (Art. 5 para. 1 let. b Hague Service Convention). In the latter case, the demand will only be met if the required form is compatible with the law of the receiving state. If a request is made for formal service or if this form of service proves to be necessary due to the refusal of the addressee to accept service, the requesting state may have to pay the resultant costs (Art. 12 para. 2 Hague Service Convention; see 1.5, p. 23).

It is important to note that the effects of the impossibility or refusal of service are not governed by the Hague Service Convention. It is not easy to answer the question as to which law – that of the requested state or that of the requesting state – service is to be considered to be legally valid. The Swiss Federal Supreme Court has attempted to answer this question (SJ 2000 I, p. 89 et seq.). In the view of the FOJ it is generally the law of the requested state that should apply, unless the law of the requesting state imposes particular requirements to be met. In the latter case, in the view of the FOJ, it will be up to the requesting authority to request a special form of service (Art. 5 para. 1 let. b Hague Service Convention).

With regard to a foreign request for service in Switzerland, the authority effecting service must complete *the relevant certificate in every case, even if it is not enclosed with the request*.

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<sup>18</sup> Delivery of a “judicial document” is regulated in the general terms and conditions of the Swiss Post Office and its information brochure. Article 138 CPC on the form in which judicial documents are served states in paragraph 1: “The summons, rulings and decisions are served by registered mail or by other means against confirmation of receipt”.

### 1.3 Protection given to addressees, sanctions

Articles 15 and 16 of the Hague Service Convention provide for a mechanism intended to protect the defendant who has not received a served document.<sup>19</sup> The aim of Article 15 is therefore to ensure rights of defence (HCCH Explanatory [Report](#), p. 377).

Article 15 of the Hague Service Convention deals with the service of a summons or equivalent document in accordance with the provisions of the Convention when the defendant fails to appear.

Article 15 therefore provides in its first paragraph that when a summons or equivalent document has to be transmitted abroad for the purpose of service, under the provisions of the Hague Service Convention and the defendant fails to appear, the court is required to *defer judgment* until it is established that *the document was either served in accordance with the methods prescribed by the internal law of the state addressed* (Art. 15 para. 1 let. a Hague Service Convention), *or the document was actually delivered to the defendant or to his residence by another method provided for by the Hague Service Convention* (Art. 15 para. 1 let. b). The first possibility envisages cases where service has been effected in accordance with Article 5 paragraph 1 let. a of the Hague Service Convention. The second possibility is aimed at cases of transmission in accordance with Article 5 paragraph 1 let. b of the Hague Service Convention as well as cases where alternative channels of transmission (see 1.2, p. 17) are used. In this second case, it is not sufficient that the alternative channels of transmission or a method of transmission peculiar to the requesting state (Art. 5 para. 1 let. b Hague Service Convention) was used, it is also necessary for *service to be effected on the defendant in person or at least at his residence* ([HCCH Explanatory Report](#), op. cit., p. 377). With regard to alternative channels of transmission, the reservations made by contracting states in relation to certain methods of transmission should be taken into account. In addition, the court may only defer judgement, whatever the situation, if service has been effected in sufficient time for the defendant to be able to defend himself.

Article 15 paragraph 2 of the Hague Service Convention qualifies the protection given by the first paragraph to the extent that it allows contracting states to declare that their courts may give judgment irrespective of paragraph 1, subject to the conditions, however, that *i)* the document has been transmitted by one of the methods provided for by Hague Service Convention *ii)* that a period of not less than six months has elapsed and *iii)* that no certificate has been obtained despite every reasonable effort being made by the competent authorities. Switzerland has not made any declaration in terms of Article 15 paragraph 2 of the Hague Service Convention. This option is, however, open to any Swiss court through the application of the principle of reciprocity (see 5, p. 12) when service should have taken place in a state which has made such a declaration.

If, however, a judgment has been given against a defendant who has not been able to appear, the defendant may, under Article 16 of the Hague Service Convention, request the court to relieve him of the effects of failing to appeal against the judgment within the given time. Article 16 does not, however, apply to judgments relating to the status or capacity of persons (Art. 16 para. 4 Hague Service Convention).

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<sup>19</sup> With reference to Art. 15 of the Hague Service Convention see also Art. 26 para. 3 LugC.

#### 1.4 Grounds for refusing service

If the Central Authority concludes that the provisions of the Hague Service Convention have not been complied with, Article 4 of the Convention mandates that the Central Authority promptly inform the applicant.

Furthermore, service may be refused if the document does not relate to a civil or commercial matter (Art. 1 para. 1 Hague Service Convention; see D, p. 12), if a particular form is required that is contrary to the law of the state addressed (Art. 5 para. 1 let. b), or if the execution of service is such that it would infringe upon the sovereignty or security of the state addressed (Art. 13 para. 1). The term “sovereignty” must be interpreted restrictively. It cannot be understood as being equivalent to public policy. In this sense, Article 13 paragraph 2 of the Hague Service Convention indicates that the execution of a request may not be refused solely on the ground that the law of the state addressed claims exclusive jurisdiction over the subject matter of the action or does not permit the action upon which the application is based. In other words, these grounds are not considered relevant to the sovereignty of the state addressed.

#### 1.5 Costs

In principle, no charges may be made for services relating to the service of documents relating to judicial assistance (Art. 12 para. 1 Hague Service Convention). There is, however, an exception for cases requiring the involvement of a judicial officer or the use of a particular method of service (Art. 12 para. 2 let. a and b Hague Service Convention). Moreover, bilateral agreements may provide different rules (see 2, p. 11).

## 2. **1954 Hague Convention**

The 1954 Hague Convention served as the basis for the Hague Service Convention of 1965. The requirements and conditions applicable to the service of documents under the Hague Service Convention were largely restated and differ from those contained in the 1954 Hague Convention only in a few points. Only these differences are considered below.

### 2.1 Form

Requests for service based on the 1954 Hague Convention need not be transmitted in a standardised form.

Under Article 1 paragraph 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention, the consul’s request must indicate the authority issuing or forwarding the document, the names and capacities of the parties, and the address of the addressee. In addition, the nature of the document in question must be mentioned, i.e. it should state the subject matter of the action and describe in detail the documents to be served (e.g.: legal claim, response to the claim, judgment on the evidence; Art. 1 para. 1 1954 Hague Convention). The request shall be in the language of the requested authority. A receipt should always be attached to the request. If service must be effected in a special form (e.g. according to the law of the requesting state), it is advisable to request this expressly and to justify the request (Art. 3 1954 Hague Convention).

## 2.2 Execution and language

Here too, service can be effected either by simple delivery (Art. 3 1954 Hague Convention together with Art. 2 1954 Hague Convention; without translation; see 1.2, p. 20), subject to refusal by the addressee, or by formal service (with certified<sup>20</sup> translation; in Switzerland either in German, French or Italian, depending on the place of execution of the request, see Federal Supreme Court Decision 103 III 69). With regard to simple delivery, it should be borne in mind that the FOJ is of the opinion that it is advisable to inform the addressee of his right to refuse service if the documents have not been translated (see 1.2, p. 20). The court is not obliged to complete the certificate; a receipt signed by the addressee is sufficient.

## 2.3 Protection for the addressee

In contrast to the Hague Service Convention, the 1954 Hague Convention does not provide any mechanism for the protection of the rights of the defendant.

## 2.4 Costs

The execution of the request for service may not give rise to the right to the reimbursement of costs, unless service is made forcibly or if a special form is required (Art. 7 para. 2 Hague Service Convention). Moreover, bilateral agreements may provide different rules (see 2, p. 11).

# 3. **Absence of an agreement**

Where there is no international agreement, Switzerland applies the provisions of the 1954 Hague Conventions to requests received from abroad (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA; see also Art. 11a PILA).

With regard to requests made by Switzerland to other countries, reference is made to the Guide on Judicial Assistance. It is, however, worth noting that, in relation to costs, Swiss representations in those states where no agreement exists in this regard will request the Swiss authority to guarantee a refund in the event that charges are made.

## **F. Special Questions**

### **1. Service addressed to foreign states or foreign state-owned companies**

In the case of service addressed to foreign states (including embassies and consulates) or to foreign state-owned companies, Article 16 of the European Convention on State Immunity of 16 May 1972 applies (SR 0.273.1). Under paragraph 4 of this provision, the periods for entering into the proceedings and the methods of appeal against a judgment by default begin to run two months after the service of the document or the judgment with the department of foreign affairs of the state addressed. In addition, the courts having jurisdiction may not assign a period shorter than two months from the receipt of the documents by the department of foreign affairs (Art. 16, para. 5). These

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<sup>20</sup> This means certification that the translation is complete and correct.

rules, which are in keeping with normal practices, should also be respected outside the scope of application of the said Convention.

The FOJ is willing to provide support and explanation of the procedures in the different countries.

## **2. Service addressed to Swiss nationals abroad**

Reference should be made to the explanations on alternative channels for affecting service addressed to Swiss nationals abroad by Swiss diplomatic or consular representatives. These can be found under i), p. 17, 2.2, p. 19, 3, p. 19 and on the pages relating to each country in the Guide on Judicial Assistance. For requirements regarding translation and form and the explanations under 1, p. 20 and 2, p. 23 apply *mutatis mutandis*.

If the Swiss citizen has more than one nationality, i.e. is also a national of the requested state, the ordinary channel should be followed; the Swiss consular or diplomatic representative may not serve documents (for exceptions see ii), p. 18). If the Swiss citizen is also a national of a third state, the Swiss consular or diplomatic representative is permitted to serve documents.<sup>21</sup>

Besides the alternative channels described, there are further ways of serving documents listed on the pages referring to each country.

## **3. Service of documents which institute proceedings and Recognition of Judgments**

The Hague Conventions do not regulate the legal effects of serving documents.

Furthermore, the regulations that govern the service of documents in relation to the main proceedings are not necessarily the same as those applied in relation to the recognition procedure, in which, as a condition for the recognition of a judgment, it must be ensured that the document instituting the proceedings was duly served (see for the respective requirements e.g. Art. 27 para. 2 let. a PILA; but see also Art. 34 no 2 LugC and the declaration issued by Switzerland on Article III para. 1 of Protocol 1). Thus, as we have already indicated, although the USA does not object to the service of documents on its territory by diplomatic agents, the subsequent judgment will not necessarily be recognised, for example, when the documents have been served in a language that the addressee did not understand (see 1.1, p. 20).

## **4. Address of addressee unknown – Service by Public Notice**

When the address of the addressee of service is unknown, the Hague Conventions do not apply (Art. 1 para. 2 Hague Service Convention; Art. 1 para. 1 1954 Hague Convention). Therefore, when an authority wishes to proceed with service by means of public notice in a foreign country, it is recommended in principle to follow diplomatic channels. In addition, as the obligation to grant assistance no longer follows from a convention, the state addressed is free to decide whether it cooperates or not. It should be noted here that the CPC permits the authorities to proceed with a public notice in Switzerland when the address of the addressee is unknown and cannot be ascertained

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<sup>21</sup> See footnote 12

despite making reasonable enquiries or when service is impossible (see Art. 141 CPC).

In the opinion of the FOJ, a Swiss or a foreign authority may proceed with the publication of notices addressed to an indeterminate number of persons whose identities are unknown (notice to creditors, appeal for beneficiaries of a will) by addressing their request to their representation in the country of publication. The representation is then charged with arranging publication.

## **5. Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons, Federal Act on the Free Movement of Lawyers and Assistance**

With the entry into force on 1 June 2002 of the AFMP and the FMLA, a lawyer domiciled in the territory of the European Union may, under certain conditions, represent clients in Switzerland. Against this background, several judicial authorities have asked the FOJ whether the new law permits them to effect service without using the assistance channels.

First of all, it should be noted that this legislation does not regulate questions of assistance. Furthermore, under Article 140 CPC, the court may instruct parties with domicile or registered office abroad to provide a domicile for service in Switzerland.

There are two different cases: either a party domiciled in Switzerland is represented in a Swiss court by a lawyer whose registered office is on EU territory, or both the party and his or her legal representative are domiciled on EU territory.

In the first case, the FOJ is of the opinion that the assistance channels do not have to be followed. Indeed, due to the fact that the party concerned by service is domiciled in Switzerland, service made to his or her lawyer (see Art. 137 CPC) has no effect abroad and consequently is not capable of undermining the sovereignty of the state in which the lawyer has his or her registered office. Postal service to the lawyer for the parties is, as a result, permissible in such a case.

In the second case, due to the fact that the party is domiciled abroad, service has legal effects abroad and is, as a result, capable of infringing on the sovereignty of the state involved. It is advisable, therefore, to follow the assistance channels. It should be recalled that there are bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the countries bordering it that permit direct correspondence between authorities (see 2, p. 11).

## **6. Domicile for service**

Under Article 140 CPC, the court may instruct parties with domicile or registered office abroad to provide a domicile for service in Switzerland. This instruction should also include a reference to what happens if a domicile for service is not provided (see Art. 141 CPC: Public notice) and has legal effects, so notice of this should be served abroad via judicial assistance channels (see e.g. Federal Supreme Court ruling 143 III 28 E. 2.2.1).

## **7. Deadline compliance**

Submissions to the Swiss authorities must be filed no later than the last day of the limitation period with the relevant authority (e.g. the court dealing with the case) or by handing over documents to Swiss Post, a diplomatic mission or consular office of Switzerland for forwarding to the court (see Art. 143 CPC). When setting the limitation period the relevant authority can, provided it has the discretion to do so, take account of particular circumstances in the state in which service is effected (e.g. poor or unreliable postal service; nearest Swiss representation is in another country).

### III. OBTAINING EVIDENCE

#### A. Foreword

##### 1. Overview

In addition to requests for service of documents, which in practice account for two thirds of all applications, judicial assistance in civil proceedings also includes requests made in order to obtain evidence (letters of request). The object of such applications is for example to obtain statements from witnesses, the production of documents, or an expert opinion.

The 1954 Hague Convention deals with requests relating to obtaining evidence in Chapter II: "Letters of request". The Hague Evidence Convention is devoted exclusively to this subject. It makes provision for obtaining evidence by means of letters of request (Chapter I), on the one hand, and through diplomatic or consular officers and through commissioners (Chapter II), on the other.

##### 2. Where procedures for assistance need not be followed

According to international law, each state is obliged to respect the territorial sovereignty of other states. The territorial sovereignty of a state can, however, occasionally come into conflict with the judicial jurisdiction of the court in another state. It is generally accepted that a party domiciled in one state may come under the jurisdiction of another state.

Against this background and in codification of previous practice, the legislator has provided for the following provision in Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA: "However, a party to proceedings who is in Switzerland may be directly requested to transmit submissions or evidence if the request is made without threat of penalty and is served by way of legal assistance."

The Federal Council Dispatch outlines this rule as follows: "Under this provision, the foreign authority conducting the proceedings (or a party representative in US discovery proceedings) may contact a party to the proceedings staying in Switzerland directly and request that party to transmit a submission (written statement, written information, etc.) or a means of evidence (e.g. a physical record within the meaning of Art. 177 CPC). The prerequisite is that the foreign authority does not threaten criminal sanctions in the event of non-compliance and that the request is served by means of judicial assistance. If the party to the proceedings in question has a domicile for service abroad (e.g. with their legal representative in the state where the proceedings are taking place), the judicial assistance route is not required at all. In such a case, service does not constitute a sovereign act 'in Switzerland' within the meaning of the draft Article 11 paragraph 1 PILA."<sup>22</sup>

Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA refers only to the parties to the proceedings. In the event that the person to whom the invitation is directed is *not a litigant*, but a *third party* (witness, expert), he or she may not be regarded as being subject to the judicial jurisdiction

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<sup>22</sup> Unofficial translation of an excerpt from the Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 2.

of the court involved. In such cases, the legal proceedings must be carried out according to the proper procedure for judicial assistance. The mere invitation to go abroad does not have to follow the procedure for judicial assistance, provided, however, that it is not accompanied by any kind of coercive measure or that such a measure will not automatically result in the event of a refusal.

The threat of penalty within the meaning of Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA may also arise from the law. However, it must be an immediate threat. The mere fact that the court has the option of imposing a criminal sanction at a later stage of the proceedings does not constitute a threat of penalty within the meaning of Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA. There is no threat of penalty within the meaning of Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA if the requesting court merely threatens procedural sanctions, such as dismissal of the action, refusal to hear a claim or a decision based on the files or the statement of facts by the opposing party, even if such sanctions may be more drastic for the party concerned than a threat of penalty.

The Federal Council's message goes on to state: "The party to the proceedings in question is entitled to comply with the request from the foreign authority. By doing so, it does not fulfil the elements of the offence under Article 271 No. 1 SCC. However, it must observe the restrictions of the Swiss legal system, in particular the statutory confidentiality obligations. These include, for example, any obligations under Article 273 SCC (concerning manufacturing or trade secrets) or Article 47 Banking Act<sup>23</sup> (concerning bank customer secrecy). Only a Swiss court can release a person from these obligations." From the mention of statutory confidentiality obligations, it can be concluded that the legislator did not assume a comprehensive confidentiality obligation, as derived by some authors from Federal Supreme Court Decision 148 IV 66. Under the heading of Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA, information concerning third parties may therefore also be transmitted. However, this is subject to the condition that the information is intended for the transmitting party's own proceedings and not for the proceedings of a third party (such as criminal or tax proceedings against a customer or employee of the transmitting party), as the transmitting party no longer has the status of a party to the proceedings in relation to the third-party proceedings. Data protection issues are governed by the law of the foreign state in which the proceedings are taking place.<sup>24</sup>

If the requested party to the proceedings must first obtain the information or items to be transmitted from a third party, it must observe the restrictions set out in Article 271 no. 1 SCC. In doing so, it may not act towards the third party in the manner of an authority or a representative of the foreign court. The Federal Supreme Court's practice in this regard is quite strict (see BGE 114 IV 128).<sup>25</sup>

The Federal Council Dispatch concludes by clarifying the following: "Article 11 paragraph 2 PILA is not intended to apply in cases where a representative of the foreign authority travels to Switzerland to receive a submission or evidence. Such actions are only possible in accordance with Chapter II of the Hague Convention and Switzerland's Declaration No. 5 thereto. Similarly, the provision shall not apply to the oral transmission of information. Instead, paragraph 3 shall apply in this case." The Hague Convention and its Chapter II are discussed in Chapters III. B and III. C below. The oral

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<sup>23</sup> SR 952.0.

<sup>24</sup> Art. 2 para. 3 FADP. See also Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 5.2, explanations on Declaration No 5 para. 5.

<sup>25</sup> For the somewhat controversial discussion of the practice of the Federal Supreme Court, see for example SCHRAMM, p. 491 ff., additional comments on p. 494.

transmission of information pursuant to Article 11 paragraph 3 PILA is dealt with in Chapter III. D.

## **B. The competent authorities and transmission procedures**

### **1. Hague Evidence Convention**

#### **1.1 Under Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention**

In Chapter I, which governs letters of request, Article 1 paragraph 1 of the Hague Evidence Convention provides that the judicial authority of a contracting state may request by letters of request the competent authority of another state to perform any judicial act. The FOJ is of the opinion that the application for judicial assistance under Chapter I must in fact be issued by an *authority* and not by a private person, such as a lawyer. This interpretation follows from the text of the Convention.<sup>26</sup> It also provides for the limitation of any possible abuse by those receiving a request to the extent that the authority in question may proceed to filter the evidence required according to its relevance to the case at issue. Swiss authorities may only refuse an application within the limits of Article 12 of the Hague Evidence Convention.

The request for judicial assistance is sent to the Central Authority of the state addressed (the receiving authority), where applicable, via the Central Authority of the requesting state.<sup>27</sup> The central cantonal authority of the place in which the request is executed is therefore the receiving authority when the application comes from a foreign country. Such applications may, however, be lodged with the FOJ, which will transfer them to the competent central cantonal authority.

Swiss applications are transferred to the Central Authority designated by the state addressed (see the Guide on Judicial Assistance) or directly to the executing authority if there is a bilateral agreement allowing direct communication between authorities (see 2, p. 11).

In the event that an authority receives an application for the execution of which it is not competent, it is required under Article 6 of the Hague Evidence Convention to forward the application without delay to the competent authority.

#### **1.2 Under Chapter II Hague Evidence Convention**

The requesting authority will generally be the authority dealing with the case in the requesting state. Under Article 17 of the Hague Evidence Convention, however, it is sometimes the parties or their representatives who file the request by attaching the relevant court decision relating to the appointment of a commissioner to take evidence.

As under Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention, the application for judicial assistance shall be sent to the Central Authority of the state addressed (receiving

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<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the Hague Service Convention, the Hague Evidence Convention does not mention “judicial officers”.

<sup>27</sup> In Switzerland, the following cantons require that requests be filed via the central cantonal authority: Jura, Neuchâtel, Schwyz (for all requesting authorities apart from courts) and Zurich.

authority) if applicable via the Central Authority of the requesting state.<sup>28</sup> However, since 1 January 2026, the FOJ acts as both the receiving and authorising authority in Switzerland. A copy of the request must be sent to the central authority of the canton in which the evidence is to be taken.

Swiss applications are transferred to the (Central) Authority designated by the state addressed. The explanations provided by the contracting states should be referred to.

In the event that an authority receives an application for the execution of which it is not competent, it is required under Article 6 of the Hague Evidence Convention to forward the application without delay to the competent authority.

## **2. 1954 Hague Convention**

Letters of request must be issued by a *judicial authority*, in the same way as stipulated in the Hague Evidence Convention.

The foreign judicial authority must send its application to the diplomatic representation of its nation in Switzerland. The diplomatic representation will send the application to the FOJ, which, in turn, will send it to the competent cantonal authority.

A Swiss request must be sent to the FOJ, which will send it to the competent Swiss diplomatic representation in the country of destination, which, in turn, will send it to the authority designated as being competent by the country of destination in accordance with Article 9 of the 1954 Hague Convention. For detailed information, see the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

## **3. Absence of an agreement**

Where there is no international agreement, Switzerland applies the 1954 Hague Convention to foreign requests and to Swiss requests to other countries (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA).

Swiss requests, if there is not a contrary custom, follow diplomatic channels (see, 2.2, p. 19). See also the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

## **4. Other channels of transmission**

See 4, p. 19.

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<sup>28</sup> See footnote 27.

## C. Requirements for the Application

### 1. Hague Evidence Convention

#### 1.1 Application under Chapter I

##### *i) Form*

The Hague Evidence Convention does not require the use of a standard form for the application. In order to avoid omitting any information in the application, it is, however, recommended to use the sample letter or request provided on the webpage [www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare

##### *ii) Contents (Art. 3 Hague Evidence Convention)*

In accordance with Article 3 of the Hague Evidence Convention, the letter of request must specify the following:

- The requesting authority and, if possible, the requested authority;
- The names and addresses of the parties, and, if applicable, of their representatives;
- The nature and the purpose of the proceedings, and a summary of the case;
- The evidence to be obtained or other judicial act to be performed.

If appropriate, the letters of request shall also specify:

- The names and addresses of the persons to be questioned;
- The questions to be put to these persons, or a statement of the subject matter about which the persons are to be questioned;
- The documents or other property to be inspected;
- Any request for the evidence to be given on oath or affirmation and, if necessary, any special form to be used;
- Any special procedures required in accordance with Article 9 of the Hague Evidence Convention;
- Any additional indications such as in the example letter of request to be found on [www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare > Zivilrecht.

No legalisation or analogous formality is required.

##### *iii) Language and translations (Art. 4 Hague Evidence Convention)*

Each contracting state must accept letters of request written in French or in English, or with an attached certified<sup>29</sup> translation in one of these languages, unless a reservation prevents it from doing so.

Switzerland has issued a reservation in accordance with which the letters of request and their annexes must be written in German, French or Italian or translated into one of these languages, depending on where the request is executed.

For letters of request intended for a foreign country, please refer to the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

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<sup>29</sup> This means certification that the translation is complete and correct.

iv) *Execution*

a) Applicable Law (Art. 9 Hague Evidence Convention)

In general, the execution of a letter of request is carried out in accordance with the law of the requested authorities. In Switzerland this means the cantonal laws on the administration of justice and the CPC, in accordance with Article 122 of the Federal Constitution (SR 101).

The requested court shall apply the appropriate measures of compulsion in the instances and to the same extent as are provided by its internal law for the execution of orders issued by authorities of its own country or of requests made by parties in internal proceedings (Art. 10 Hague Evidence Convention).

When the application of the law of the requesting state is requested (Art. 9 para. 2 Hague Evidence Convention), the request shall be met unless the form is incompatible with the law of the state addressed or if its application is not possible due to practical difficulties.

This means that affidavits, which should be provided with the witness' statements and which are often required in the US instead of an oath, can be approved without problem. It should be noted that the witness must consent to this. If the witness is unwilling, he or she cannot be forced to act.

*Cross-examination* may also be admissible. In such cases, however, the Swiss judge remains in control of the questioning and must intervene when he or she considers it necessary. It is in particular the judge's responsibility to inform the witness of the right to refuse to give evidence or of prohibitions to give evidence. The judge is also the only person authorised to use coercive measures against the witness.

When, on request of the requesting state, a special form is used, the said state must meet the expenses thereof (Art. 14 para. 2 Hague Evidence Convention).

b) Obtaining evidence via a person appointed by the authorities addressed (Art. 14 para. 3 Hague Evidence Convention)

Authorities that receive but are not in a position to execute a letter of request may instruct an authorised person to do so. In particular, when a request is sent to countries with a system of common law, the requested court may be unable to execute the letter of request by itself because, according to its procedural rules, it is the parties' responsibility to gather the evidence.

In accordance with Article 14 paragraph 3 of the Hague Evidence Convention, the requested authorities may, in such a situation, authorise a qualified person to execute the letter of request if the requesting authority agrees. By giving its consent, the requesting authority declares itself willing to meet the ensuing costs (see f), p. 34).

c) The right to refuse to testify / Banking secrecy

The person to be questioned or who is requested to produce documents may claim to be exempt or prohibited from providing evidence, either on the basis of the law of the state addressed, or of the law of the requesting state (Art. 11 Hague Evidence Convention).

It should be noted that Article 47 paragraph 5 of the Federal Act of 8 November 1934 on Banks and Savings Banks (SR 952.0) makes a reservation in favour of federal and

cantonal provisions relating to the duty to inform the authority and to testify in court. Bankers, who are essentially required to cooperate, are subject to Article 166 paragraph 2 CPC as confidants of professional secrets. They may refuse to cooperate if they can show credibly that the interest in protecting confidentiality outweighs the interest in establishing the truth (limited right of refusal). The judge in this case weighs up the interests and decides on a case-by-case basis if the disclosure duty outweighs professional confidentiality and if banking secrecy should be lifted.

- d) Participation of the members of the court of the requesting authority or of the parties or of their representatives

If the requesting authority wishes that certain of its court officers witness the execution of a letter of request, it must ask the authority in charge of the execution for preliminary authorisation (Art. 8 together with Art. 35 para. 2 let. c Hague Evidence Convention; reservation by Switzerland). The parties and/or their representatives may also be present at the execution of the letter of request if they so desire (Art. 7 Hague Evidence Convention).

In our view, in such cases the foreign requesting authority and/or the parties and/or their representatives must be able to intervene if they so desire. The Swiss judge, however, remains the master of the proceedings and the only person authorised to take coercive measures against the person addressed by the letter of request. He may furthermore remind the witness of his or her right to refuse to give evidence or that he or she is forbidden to give evidence.

- e) Grounds for refusal

The authorities addressed may only refuse a request in the following cases:

- Where the case is not civil or commercial in nature (see D, p. 12);
- If the application does not fulfil the formal requirements (Art. 3 Hague Evidence Convention) or was not sent with the required translation (Art. 4 Hague Evidence Convention). In this case, the requesting authority should first of all be asked to complete its application (Art. 5 Hague Evidence Convention);
- If the authenticity of the application is unclear (generally, the fact that the application has been sent through the proper channels is sufficient proof of its authenticity; see also the different agreements on the abolition of legalisation on foreign public documents that have been ratified by Switzerland; SR 0.172.030.3/.037.43);
- If the execution of the application is not within the jurisdiction of the courts (Art. 12 para. 1 let. a Hague Evidence Convention; e.g. in the event that an amount of money needs to be collected in Switzerland and that the parties themselves have to act by way of forcible execution);
- If the state addressed is of the opinion that the execution of the application is liable to violate its sovereignty (e.g. coercive measures ordered in support of foreign decisions that influence the proceedings) or its security (Art. 12 para. 1 let. b Hague Evidence Convention);
- If the requested form of execution of the application is contrary to the legislation of the state addressed (before finally refusing the application, the foreign country should be asked if the requesting court accepts the execution being carried out in the forms authorised by the laws of the state addressed; Art. 9 Hague Evidence Convention).

- f) Costs

It is not possible in principle to charge any costs for the services carried out to the requesting state (Art. 14 para. 1 Hague Evidence Convention). The state addressed, however, may claim the reimbursement of compensation paid to experts and

interpreters, and of costs ensuing from the enforcement of a special procedure called for by the requesting state, in accordance with Article 9 paragraph 2 of the Hague Evidence Convention.

Once the authority addressed has authorised a person to initiate the obtaining of evidence according to Article 14 paragraph 3 of the Hague Evidence Convention (see b), p. 33), and has obtained consent of the requesting authority after indicating the approximate amount of the costs, it has the right to charge the requesting authority for the costs engendered. The consent of the requesting authority implies an obligation to reimburse the costs that result from using the services of a third party. If the requesting authority does not give its consent, it will not be liable for these costs.

It is provided in Article 26 of the Hague Evidence Convention that each contracting state may, in the event that it is so liable in terms of its constitution, invite the requesting state to reimburse the execution costs of the letter of request, and in relation to the summons, the expenses due to the person who gives evidence and who makes a record of the judicial enquiries. When a state makes use of this provision, any other contracting state can invite this state to reimburse the aforementioned costs.

It should be emphasised that the aforementioned provision must be regarded as an exception. As a rule, the costs are settled as indicated above, in accordance with the provisions of Article 14 of the Hague Evidence Convention.

In relation to Switzerland, the special terms of Article 26 of the Hague Evidence Convention are not applicable, as there is no corresponding constitutional provision. In the event that another contracting state relies on Article 26 of the Hague Evidence Convention, it must first indicate its pertinent constitutional provision. Switzerland could, in this case, demand reciprocity.

v) *Letter of request relating to “pre-trial discovery” proceedings*

The CPC imposes an obligation to produce exhibits that are likely to be relevant to the case. Persons who are not party to the proceedings may be exempt from this obligation provided they can claim the total or limited right to refuse to give evidence (see Art. 160 ff. CPC). It is incumbent upon the judge to decide which documents need to be produced.

The states with common law legal system have a stage in the proceedings called “*pre-trial discovery*”, which takes place after the commencement of the action but before the main hearing. According to the American “discovery” system, each party has the obligation to inform the opposing party of all information that is relevant to the case, the concept of relevance being interpreted in the broadest sense. This stage of the proceedings is conducted largely without judicial intervention. The judge only intervenes if the parties fail to reach an agreement, in particular if one of the parties fails to collaborate. The judge may, in this case, use coercive measures.

For the majority of countries in Europe, including Switzerland, the relevance and the specification of the facts to be established in civil proceedings must meet very demanding requirements. This is why Article 23 of the Hague Evidence Convention makes it possible for contracting states to declare that they will not execute a letter of request filed by states governed by common law relating to a pre-trial discovery of documents. Switzerland, without completely excluding assistance in the context of a pre-trial

discovery, reserves the right, according to the conditions established below, to refuse requests for assistance that have such proceedings as their objective.

Switzerland therefore executes applications by foreign countries for judicial assistance formulated in the framework of pre-trial discovery, but always requires *i*) that applications be sent to Switzerland by a competent foreign court and not directly by the parties concerned, and *ii*) that applications precisely describe the evidence required and the purpose for which it is requested. Requests that are formulated in general terms and require the opposing party to indicate the documents in his or her possession with the aim of obtaining information that bears no relation to the case or to attempt to discover evidence to substantiate a claim (“*fishing expeditions*”) are rejected. In other words, this means that applications by foreign countries for judicial assistance relating to pre-trial discovery are dealt with in the same way as internal Swiss applications for the production of documents.

A direct and necessary relationship therefore needs to exist between the request and the proceedings pending abroad. The letter of request must prove to be sufficiently relevant on a factual level.

The request will be refused if a person is asked to indicate the exhibits relating to the case that are or were in his or her possession or care, or over which he or she has or had a power of disposal. The same holds true when a person is expected to submit any document other than those stated in the application for judicial assistance. The aim is to prevent the party who bears the burden of proof to shift his or her obligation to the opposing party, or even to a third party.

Such letters of request must not, however, damage the interests of the persons concerned that are worthy of protection. This provision, which is a general clause in itself<sup>30</sup>, is intended to take the banking and professional secrecy that is characteristic of Swiss law into consideration, without however leading to an automatic refusal of applications for judicial assistance based on a pre-trial discovery procedure.

## 1.2 Request under Chapter II of the Hague Evidence Convention (Art. 15 to 22 Hague Evidence Convention)

### *i) General*

As mentioned above, in accordance with Article 271 paragraph 1 SCC, those persons who carry out activities on behalf of a foreign state on Swiss territory without lawful authority, where such activities are the responsibility of a public authority or public official, are committing an offence (see B, p. 10). Thus, unless they have authorisation, foreign parties who proceed with the hearing of witnesses or obtaining evidence on their own initiative in Switzerland are liable to be punished (the ordinary preparation of a case<sup>31</sup> by a lawyer has, however, always been possible without authorisation). This situation presents certain disadvantages for countries, such as the United States, which consider that the parties have authority to obtain evidence.

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<sup>30</sup> Article 156 CPC: Safeguarding legitimate interests, reads “The court shall take appropriate measures to ensure that taking evidence does not infringe the legitimate interests of any parties or third party, such as business secrets.”

<sup>31</sup> Obtaining of evidence taken into consideration in terms of the place of residence of the witnesses, etc.

The Hague Evidence Convention compensates for this disadvantage by providing in its Articles 15, 16 and 17 that diplomatic or consular officials and court-appointed commissioners may take procedural steps in preparation for a trial, subject to certain conditions (Art. 21 Hague Evidence Convention). In conformity with these provisions, Switzerland has made use of its right to issue a reservation in relation to this provision whereby the aforementioned persons need to obtain authorisation with the FOJ before executing procedural steps in preparation for a trial (see however D, p. 42, regarding special rules for video hearings). Until the end of 2025 the FDJP was the competent authority.

*ii) Conditions laid down in Article 21 Hague Evidence Convention – Procedural safeguards*

Article 21 of the Hague Evidence Convention imposes the following conditions:

- The consular representative or commissioner can take any evidence insofar as the procedural steps considered are compatible with the law of the state of execution and accord with the authorisation granted (for foreign applications relating to this issue, see iii), p. 38). Under the same conditions, he may also examine a witness under oath or solemn declaration (Art. 21 let. a Hague Evidence Convention).
- With the exception of the cases in which the person specified by the procedural measure is a national of the state in which the proceedings have begun, any request to appear or to give evidence must be written in the language of the place where the evidence is taken or be accompanied by a translation into such language (Art. 21 let. b Hague Evidence Convention).
- The summons must indicate the fact that the person concerned may be assisted by his counsel, and that he is not obliged to appear or to participate in the evidence-taking. The person in question is therefore free not to cooperate at all or to interrupt the taking of evidence (Art. 21 let. c Hague Evidence Convention). The consular or diplomatic official or the commissioner may not take any coercive measures against the witness. Article 18 Hague Evidence Convention, however, provides that states may declare that foreign persons authorised to take evidence may apply to the competent authority to obtain the assistance required to carry out such acts by using coercive measures. Switzerland has made no declaration in relation to this subject, which makes it impossible to force the persons specified by the procedural steps to collaborate in terms of Chapter II of Hague Evidence Convention. In the event of a refusal to collaborate, the only available procedure is the one provided for in Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention.
- In contrast to the proceedings under Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention, the evidence is to be taken, as a rule, according to the procedures provided for by the law of the requesting court. However, if the specified procedures are against the law of the state of execution, they may not be used.
- Cross-examination is also authorised, during which the witness is examined by the lawyers of both parties (Art. 21 let. d Hague Evidence Convention). For applications sent to Swiss authorities, see iii), p. 38.
- The person to be heard may invoke, as in the context of a letter of request according to Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention, a privilege (Art. 21 let. e, together with Art. 11 Hague Evidence Convention).

*iii) Form requirements*

There is no mandatory form for requests under Chapter II. It is, however, recommended to use the sample letter or request to be found on the webpage [www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare.

The Hague Conference is working on an optional form for requests under Chapter II. Publication is expected by mid-2026.

*iv) Authorisation procedure before the Swiss authorities, and content of the application (not applicable to video hearings)*

In Switzerland, for the obtaining of evidence under Chapter II is subject to prior authorisation by the FOJ (see Switzerland's Declaration No. 5 to Articles 15 to 17 Hague Evidence Convention. This does not apply to video or telephone hearings (see D, p. 42).

Foreign requests must be sent directly to the FOJ, with a copy to the Central Authority of the canton on the territory of which evidence will be taken (see Declaration No. 5, para. 1). They (and the enclosures) must be submitted in the official language of this canton.. The request may be submitted electronically (Declaration No. 5, para. 4). When the procedural conditions and safeguards according to Article 21 Hague Evidence Convention are met, the FOJ grants the authorisation. If procedural costs are charged, an advance payment is usually required beforehand (Art. 5 and 13 of the Ordinance on Costs and Remuneration in Administrative Proceedings [SR 172.041.0]; CHF 100 to 5000).

If cross-examination is intended, there are two possible approaches. First, a sole commissioner can be appointed – for example, a neutral person – who will chair the taking of evidence and will see to it that the examination by the lawyers of the parties is conducted in accordance with Swiss law (no coercion, reminder of exemptions or any prohibition from giving evidence). In this case only one authorisation will be given. Second, it is also possible that each agent is appointed commissioner. In this case, authorisation will be granted to each person to conduct the examination (see Declaration No. 5, para. 2).

The application for authorisation must:

- Briefly describe the nature and subject matter of the proceedings;
- Indicate the amount in controversy; this is necessary in order to fix the amount of the advance on procedural costs. The decision on the authorisation will be taken only after payment of the advance on procedural costs.
- Indicate the identity and the address (fax number included) of the litigants;
- Indicate the identity and the address (fax number included) of the counsels of the litigants;
- Indicate the form of, and the grounds for, the intended procedural formalities; it is recommended to describe in sufficient detail the modalities of the procedural formalities to insure that the authorisation will cover all the procedural formalities envisaged. If possible, the name and address of all participants in the procedural formalities should figure in the application;
- Indicate the name and address of the persons involved in the intended procedural formalities;
- Indicate the name and address of the person or persons who are to supervise the evidentiary proceedings if the application is one under [Article 17](#) of the Hague

Evidence Convention. Under Articles 15 and 16, on the other hand, all consular or diplomatic officials in the relevant embassy or consular agency will be given authorisation to supervise the taking of evidence;

- Propose a date for the intended taking of evidence. The request should be filed two months before the proposed date.

In addition, the application has to include a copy of the court decision appointing the commissioner.

Before sending the application, it is recommended that written confirmation is requested from prospective witnesses to the effect that they are cooperating of their own accord, that they know they cannot be subjected to any coercive measures, cannot be forced to participate or to appear and have the right to refuse to give evidence on the basis of privileges both under the law of the state addressed and of the state of origin (Art. 21 Hague Evidence Convention). In the event that the person concerned subsequently does not wish to cooperate, the entire procedure will have been unnecessary while having generated costs.

Finally, the application need not be made by the foreign court; it may be made by a party or its attorney. The application should then be accompanied by a power of attorney or by an authorisation of the foreign court. As mentioned, the application needs to be accompanied by the court decision appointing the commissioner.

The Federal Department of Justice and Police must serve the authorisation. In order for this service to be made in time it is suggested that the applicant designate a person in Switzerland who will accept service of the authorisation. In the absence of such an agent for service, the authorisation will have to be served through the channels of judicial cooperation, which unavoidably prolongs the proceedings.

v) *Swiss applications to a foreign country or evidence taken by Swiss diplomatic or consular representatives*

The FOJ refers to the declarations made by the contracting states on the Hague Evidence Convention. The explanations under ii), p. 37 should be referred to for conditions and procedural safeguards laid down by Article 21 of the Hague Evidence Convention.

Generally speaking, the Swiss embassies and consulates (Swiss diplomatic or consular representatives) may take evidence in civil and commercial matters from Swiss citizens and other individuals they represent if the host country permits (Article 15 Hague Evidence Convention).

Evidence in civil and commercial matters may only be taken by a Swiss diplomatic officer or consular agent from host state's citizens or from citizens of other countries (Art. 16 Hague Evidence Convention) if the competent authorities of the host state have given their permission, unless the host state has declared that evidence may be taken without its prior permission.

The FOJ is willing to provide support and explanation of the procedures in the different countries. In order to ensure coordination with the Swiss diplomatic and consular representatives and that they are properly instructed, it is recommended that the FOJ is contacted in good time.

## 2. 1954 Hague Convention

### 2.1 Basis

Chapter II of the 1954 Hague Convention served as the basis for Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention, which is why only the differences between the two conventions will be dealt with below. For further information see i) - iv), p. 32 et seq.

Chapter II of the Hague Service Convention is new. There is no corresponding chapter in the 1954 Hague Convention. For the obtaining of evidence by private persons or by diplomatic officers and consular agents in the context of the 1954 Hague Convention, see 2.7, p. 41.

### 2.2 Form and content

As in the case of the Hague Evidence Convention, no form is provided by the 1954 Hague Convention. Furthermore, the 1954 Hague Convention does not indicate what information is required for the application. We recommend using the sample letter of request on our webpage for the Hague Evidence Convention ([www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare > Zivilrecht), based on the model used by the Hague Conference on Private International Law.

### 2.3 Language and translation

Requests for judicial assistance are in principle to be made in the language of the authority (i.e. the court) requested to execute them, or must be accompanied by a certified<sup>32</sup> translation in that language (Art. 10 1954 Hague Convention). Unless otherwise stated by a bilateral agreement (see 2, p. 11), foreign applications must be in the language of the canton executing the request. Unlike Article 4 paragraph 3 of the Hague Evidence Convention, Article 10 of the 1954 Hague convention does not invite a contracting state which has more than one official language to specify by declaration the language in which the request or the translation thereof shall be expressed for execution in the specified part of its territory. Switzerland has thus made no declaration; Swiss authorities consequently receive from time to time letters written in one of the Swiss official languages, but not in the one of the place of execution. In such cases, the FOJ recommends executing the request nonetheless, if possible, and inviting the requesting authority to draw up its request in the official language of the place of execution in future. In the case of Swiss requests to a foreign country, please consult the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

### 2.4 Applicable law

In accordance with Article 14 paragraph 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention, the authorities addressed apply their own law. When the requesting state calls for the request to be executed in accordance with its own law, its request will only be rejected if the required form is contrary to the legislation of the state addressed.

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<sup>32</sup> This means certification that the translation is complete and correct.

## 2.5 Grounds for refusal

These are the same as those indicated in the Hague Evidence Convention (see e), p. 34).

## 2.6 Costs

As a rule, judicial assistance is free of charge. However, contrary to what is established by the Hague Evidence Convention, expenses paid to witnesses as well as costs due to the appearance of a witness can be charged. Furthermore, as in the Hague Evidence Convention, expenses paid to experts as well as costs resulting from the application of foreign law to execution are subject to reimbursement (Art. 16 para. 2 1954 Hague Convention; however, for Austria, see the supplementary agreement of 26 August 1968; SR 0.274.181.631, Art. 7 para. 2).

## 2.7 Obtaining evidence directly by the parties in Switzerland or the diplomatic officers or consular agents under the 1954 Hague Convention

### *i) Activities carried out by the parties in Switzerland*

The taking of evidence by a person appointed commissioner is one of the main innovations of the Hague Evidence Convention. The 1954 Hague Convention, on the other hand, does not authorise this. Consequently, Article 271 SCC remains fully applicable.<sup>33</sup> This is, however, subject to article 11 paragraph 3 PILA (see D, p. 42).

Authorisations under Article 271 SCC are granted only in exceptional cases. Authorisation is not granted unless judicial cooperation is theoretically possible (i.e. when there is no ground for refusal) and in the event that it appears practically impossible, or even absurd, to require Switzerland's public authorities to assist in the matter (see VPB/JAAC 1997 [61/82], p. 789 f.).<sup>34</sup>

### *ii) Activities carried out by diplomatic officers or consular agents*

Article 15 of the 1954 Hague Convention authorises foreign requesting authorities to have their requests executed directly by diplomatic officers or consular agents in the state of execution if an agreement between the interested states expressly permits this or if the state in the territory where the letters of request are to be executed does not object. Switzerland has not entered into an agreement of this type and does not, as a general rule, permit diplomatic officers or consular agents to obtain evidence on its territory (VPB/JAAC 1968-1969 [34/15], p. 34).

In those countries in which procedural actions are to be taken by the parties rather than by the court, the Swiss Embassies and Consulates may, with the consent of the host country, invite Swiss and foreign nationals to appear for questioning or may question those individuals in their homes. The diplomatic and consular officers of Switzerland must not, however, use coercive measures.

<sup>33</sup> See also I.B, p. 7

<sup>34</sup> For example, if a foreign court requests an on-site inspection.

### **3. Obtaining evidence in the absence of an agreement**

In the absence of an agreement, the Swiss authorities apply the 1954 Hague Convention to foreign requests (see Art. 11 para. 1 PILA and also Art. 11a PILA).

As a general rule, requests must be translated.

For costs relating to foreign requests, see Article 16 of the 1954 Hague Convention. In relation to Swiss requests to other countries, for the countries where there is no agreement in relation to this matter the FOJ will request a guarantee from the Swiss authority that any costs that are charged will be reimbursed.<sup>35</sup>

In the absence of contrary practices or agreements, Swiss requests made to foreign countries follow diplomatic channels (see 2.2, p. 19). For information on the position in specific countries, reference is made to the Guide on Judicial Assistance.

Switzerland does not generally permit diplomatic officers and consular agents to obtain evidence on its territory (VPB/JAAC 1968-1969 [34/15], p. 34; see ii), p. 41.

As reciprocity is usually required between countries without a mutual agreement, neither is it generally possible for Swiss diplomatic officers and consular agents to obtain evidence in another state.

## **D. Use of electronic means of communication**

### **1. Hearing by video conference**

The conduct of a hearing by a foreign authority or foreign lawyers by video conference of witnesses or parties who are physically<sup>36</sup> located in Switzerland constitutes an act by a public authority on Swiss territory.

Under the Hague Evidence Convention, several case scenarios can be envisaged.

#### **1.1 Chapter I of the Hague Evidence Convention**

First, the authorities and the agents for the parties may participate at a hearing of the party and/or third parties that is conducted by a Swiss judge (Art. 7 and 8 Hague Evidence Convention). Such participation is possible under the same conditions as when the authority and/or the agents for the parties are physically present in Switzerland (see d), p. 34). In particular, the Swiss judge remains master of the proceedings and is the only person with the authority to order coercive measures. The costs related to a hearing by video conference can be charged to the requesting state (Art. 9 para. 2, Art. 14 para. 2 Hague Evidence Convention).

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<sup>35</sup> The entry “Kostengutsprache nötig“ in the Guide indicates that such a guarantee will need to be obtained.

<sup>36</sup> Unlike the case where the parties are required to fill in a questionnaire, a hearing by video conference is interactive. The questions asked and the answers given are therefore to be regarded as a whole and consideration should be given to the location of the persons concerned (see Markus, , p. 65 et seq., who deals with the problem of hearings by video conference and by telephone).

## 1.2 Chapter II of the Hague Evidence Convention

It is also conceivable that a video conference is held within the framework of Chapter II of the Hague Evidence Convention. In such cases, the provisions set out above in 1.2 (p. 36) were previously applicable. However, since the beginning of 2026, no authorisation is required for such conferences, provided that the conditions listed in paragraph 3 of Switzerland's Declaration No. 5 (subparas. a-k) are met.

The Federal Council stated the following in this regard: "In order to preserve Swiss sovereignty, but also to protect the person concerned, the action must be announced. This notification replaces the obligation to obtain prior authorisation. Letter a stipulates that the FOJ and the competent cantonal central authority must be informed of the planned telephone or video conference and its timing. It does not matter who provides the information to the authority. The relevant notification may be issued by the foreign civil court, one of the parties to the proceedings or their legal representatives in Switzerland or abroad, or even by the person concerned or their legal representative. In any case, the notification must be made 'in good time'. This term is [...] to be understood within the meaning of [Article 19 of the Hague Evidence Convention]. The cantonal central authority must be given sufficient advance notice to enable it to participate in the telephone or video conference if it so wishes. [According to letter a, the] communication shall in any case be deemed to have been made in good time if it is received by the FOJ at least fourteen days before the planned telephone or video conference. The timeliness of notifications received later depends on the circumstances of the individual case. This provision is not intended to preclude the authorities from accepting notifications at short notice in urgent cases. [-] Letter b contains a list of information on the foreign civil proceedings and the planned telephone or video conference that must be included in the notification. [...].

In addition, if the foreign court has appointed a commissioner, the relevant court order must be enclosed with the notification as set out in letter c. According to letter d, the authorities may request further information. [...] The requirement set out in letter f, which requires the submission of a declaration by the person concerned stating that they have taken note of the rules listed [in paragraph 3 of the Declaration No.5] and agree to participate in the telephone or video conference, goes beyond previous practice. [...] No specific form is required for the declaration. It may therefore also be made by e-mail, for example. The person concerned may subsequently withdraw their consent (let. g)." <sup>37</sup> According to paragraph 4 of Declaration No.5, the entire notification to the FOJ under letter a may be made by e-mail.

The Federal Council further states: "The procedural rights of the person concerned are primarily dealt with in letters g–i, which refer, among other things, to Articles 20 et seq. of the Hague Evidence Convention. Article 21 of the Hague Convention in turn contains a reference to Article 11 of the Hague Convention, which deals with the rights of the person concerned to refuse to testify. [The right provided for in letter i] to have essential statements made by other persons during the telephone or video conference translated [...] corresponds to a general principle of Swiss law derived from the constitutional right to be heard."

Lastly, the following statements by the Federal Council should be noted: "The regulation applies in cases where the person concerned is in Switzerland during the respective telephone or video conference. It does not stipulate that the person concerned

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<sup>37</sup> Unofficial translation of an excerpt from Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 5.2, explanations on Declaration No. 5 para. 3, let. a–k.

must go to a specific location (e.g. the premises of the local civil court) in order to participate in the telephone or video conference. However, they must be in the specified canton (see para. 3 subpara. b). Conversely, according to its wording, the rule requires that the person conducting the questioning or the court conducting the hearing be abroad at the time in question."

According to the new Article 11 paragraph 3 IPRG, which came into force on 1 January 2026, Chapter II of the Hague Convention 70 and the related declaration by Switzerland also apply *mutatis mutandis* to hearings outside the evidentiary proceedings (e.g. for the submission of motions and arguments by the parties or for the granting of the right to be heard). Moreover, the aforementioned rules also apply to civil proceedings in non-contracting states of the Hague Convention.<sup>38</sup>

As to the formalities: A template for announcing a video hearing is available at [www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Rechtshilfeführer > Muster und Formulare > Zivilrecht. The notification can be sent electronically to [videohearing@bj.admin.ch](mailto:videohearing@bj.admin.ch) with a copy to the competent cantonal Central Authority (address at [www.rhf.admin.ch](http://www.rhf.admin.ch) > Zivilrecht > Behörden). The sender will receive an automatic confirmation of receipt stating that the requested action does not require authorisation, provided that the conditions of Declaration No. 5 are met.

## 2. Hearing by Telephone

A hearing by telephone is possible under the same conditions as a hearing by video conference. However, the problem of identifying the parties is even more pronounced in the case of a telephone hearing than in the case of a video conference hearing. In addition, the formal aspect of a normal hearing, which encourages the witness to respond carefully to the questions asked, is lacking in the case of a telephone hearing.<sup>39</sup> The FOJ therefore advises against the use of telephone conferences on a larger scale in civil proceedings.

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<sup>38</sup> See Federal Council Dispatch Video Hearings, sec. 4.1, 4.2 and 6, explanations on Art. 11 para. 3.

<sup>39</sup> As to other dangers, see Markus, Videokonferenzen, S. 377 ff.

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## CONTACTS

- The Private International Law Unit is responsible for authorizations pursuant to Art. 17 HBewUe70 and Art. 271 StGB in the area of civil law:  
Federal Office of Justice FOJ, Private International Law Unit, 3003 Bern, Tel.: 058 463 88 64; E-mail: [ipr@bj.admin.ch](mailto:ipr@bj.admin.ch) or
- The International Legal Assistance Unit is responsible for requests for legal assistance and service of documents in civil matters:  
Federal Office of Justice, Division for International Legal Assistance, 3003 Bern, Tel.: 058 462 11 20; E-mail: [irh@bj.admin.ch](mailto:irh@bj.admin.ch).

## MODIFICATIONS OF THE GUIDELINES

Where	What	When
Through-out the text	General adjustments in the context of the entry into force of the new rules on video hearings.	Jan. 1, 2026
III.D	Special rules for taking of evidence by video	Jan. 1, 2026