GUIDE
Supporting Guardians of Unaccompanied Children

GUIDE: Supporting Guardians of Unaccompanied Children

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Assessment of national capacity on the types of support provided to guardians of unaccompanied migrant children – Report

Italy

D4.1

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In memory of Mr Khalil Cambron (Eurochild), whose work and dedication greatly contributed to the creation of this report. Khalil led the early stages of research, bringing valuable insight to the process. He also developed key methodological tools and contributed to shaping the project's training content. His commitment to children's rights and inclusive policy development remains an inspiration.

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Executive summary

This report presents an assessment of the national capacity in Italy to support guardians of unaccompanied foreign minors, with particular attention to the needs of guardians supporting unaccompanied minors with disabilities. Developed within the framework of the GUIDE project and led by CESIE ETS, the report combines desk research, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders including guardians and other professionals within the guardianship system.

The report is structured as follows:

Part I. Policy and Legislative Frameworks

Italy's guardianship framework is primarily shaped by **Law No. 47/2017** (the "**Zampa Law**"), which introduced significant protections for unaccompanied foreign minors. This includes:

- Establishment of the **volunteer guardianship system**, assigning trained citizens as legal guardians through the Juvenile Courts.
- Prioritisation of the best interests of the child through procedures for identification, age assessment and placement.
- A two-phase reception system: emergency accommodation in FAMI centres followed by longer-term care in SAI facilities offering integration services.
- Recognition of the **double vulnerability** of unaccompanied minors with disabilities, although intersectional policies and disaggregated data remain lacking.

The law created a coherent framework across the country, though challenges remain in its uniform implementation, especially concerning emergency responses and disability inclusion.

Part II. Services for Guardians and Unaccompanied Minors

Unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy are entitled to a wide range of services, including:

- **Accommodation** in first (FAMI) and second (SAI) reception facilities, with tailored integration plans.
- **Legal representation** through the appointment of guardians within 48 hours.
- **Education**, with access to public schooling and tailored language support.
- **Healthcare**, including mental health services, through mandatory enrolment in the National Health System (SSN).
- **Social integration** support, including cultural mediation, mentorship and community-based activities.

Services for guardians include initial training (mandatory before appointment), local support networks and sporadic access to help desks and peer-support mechanisms. However, systematic support, continuous training and mental health or burn-out prevention services remain largely absent.

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The unique needs of children with disabilities are insufficiently addressed, with most professionals and guardians lacking training in supported decision-making and inclusive practices.

Part III. Key Findings from the Assessment

The qualitative assessment identifies several persistent gaps and challenges:

- **Minors are often unaware of their guardians' existence or role,** highlighting a lack of effective communication and empowerment within the guardianship system.
- **Coordination between guardians and reception centres is fragmented,** and guardians are sometimes seen merely as supervisory figures.
- **Limited training and support** for guardians, particularly on disability inclusion and complex vulnerabilities.
- **Structural issues** in appointment procedures (e.g., delays, incomplete communication from courts) and reduced use of volunteer guardians for youth over 16.
- **Transition to adulthood** as a particularly fragile phase, with risks of homelessness and social exclusion upon turning 18.
- **Voluntarism is a barrier,** as balancing guardianship with personal/professional life proves to be a challenge, with insufficient compensation or institutional support.
- **Disability-specific gaps,** as no systematic tools or training exist to address the specific needs of minors with disabilities, and guardians report a lack of guidance on navigating these situations.

Despite these issues, existing **local peer networks** and initiatives (e.g., "Tutori in Rete") offer promising practices for future strengthening of the system. Furthermore, the newly established **National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** could play a role in filling current policy and capacity gaps, particularly regarding training and oversight.

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Methodology

This report is an assessment of the capacity of Italy on the types of support provided to guardians of unaccompanied migrant children, developed by CESIE ETS. The report aims to focus on unaccompanied children with disabilities and their guardians while assessing the services available for them. It was produced in the framework of the GUIDE project, a project that develops a transnational action to strengthen the capacity of national guardianship systems and the support available for guardians, competencies and visibility of guardians. The project is implemented in 5 countries namely: Bulgaria, Greece, Slovakia, Italy and Poland.

The report builds on previous research and reports conducted in the framework of the GUIDE project, in particular, the capacity data analysis, implemented as a needs assessment and situational analysis, which supported the development and implementation of the training program and workshop for guardians. The capacity data analysis included an overview of the general context and legislative framework related to unaccompanied migrant children with disability, of the guardianship of unaccompanied migrant children with disability in the social sector and an evaluation of future trends and challenges.

This report is based on literature reviews, 5 extensive interviews, and 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) with multiple stakeholders, particularly children and guardians, as well as guardianship system personnel from both state and civil society organisations that provide services for unaccompanied children in each country, with a focus on unaccompanied children with disabilities. It includes an overview of the legal and policy frameworks related to the guardianship modalities and roles of guardians, a description of the state of play of services available for guardians and a qualitative analysis of those services.

This report and other project outputs build on a framework document developed at the GUIDE project inception, which guides partners' work on the project. It shares several components with contemporary approaches to Early Childhood Interventions, such as Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model, an empowering and participative definition of children and disability, evidence-based support that is early, holistic, and continuous, and assessments and case management planning through transdisciplinary teams. It employs a systemic approach using the integrated child protection systems model.

The purpose of this report is to map existing guardianship system components and functions across the country, map the existing services provided to guardians and carers of unaccompanied migrant children and assess their availability, accessibility and efficiency. It aims to identify key gaps and challenges and provides initial recommendations for enhancing the guardianship system, especially in terms of supporting both guardians and children with disabilities, to ensure sustainable and effective outcomes. Following the assessment, roundtables will be organised in Italy with stakeholders, public authorities and guardians, to discuss the findings of the assessment and identify recommendations related to the gaps, challenges and best practices about national guardianship systems for unaccompanied minors. Assessment findings will be presented and analysed with the aim to create a list of actionable recommendations, on safe and appropriate guardianship for children with disabilities.

The target audience of the report includes project stakeholders, guardians, local organisations, local and national authorities, and the children for whom we all have a responsibility. It also targets EU project funders, and the broader community of donors, policymakers, and practitioners related to the subject matter.

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Part I. Overview of policy and legislative frameworks related to guardianship for unaccompanied foreign minors

Legislative and Institutional Framework

The European Union (EU) has adopted various directives and regulations to harmonise asylum procedures across Member States, including those concerning unaccompanied minors. Nevertheless, national implementation remains inconsistent. In emergency situations, such as the humanitarian crisis caused by the Russian war in Ukraine, this inconsistency has become more evident. Recent experience has highlighted that even in emergency situations, not all children are found by EU officials to be unaccompanied as defined above, even though many have been separated from their parents or previous legal or customary caregiver. Such children, despite living with extended family members, may face risks similar to those encountered by unaccompanied refugee children.

In **Italy**, the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors is governed by **Law No. 47 of 7 April 2017**, commonly known as the Zampa Law. The result of extensive civil society advocacy, the law was designed to fill significant protection gaps by creating a coherent national framework. It affirms that all unaccompanied minors – defined as non-EU children in Italy without legal parental representation – are entitled to the same rights and protections as Italian and EU member states' children, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Among the law's key innovations is Article 5, which outlines identification and age assessment procedures, prioritising documentation but allowing multidisciplinary evaluations when needed. Minors must be informed, heard, and presumed to be children throughout the process, which precludes detention and ensures placement in appropriate reception facilities.[1] The reception system itself is divided into two stages: initial care in FAMI (Fondo Asilo, Migrazione e Integrazione) centres, run by Prefectures, for up to 30 days, followed by longer-term integration support in SAI (Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione) centres, managed by local authorities. These second-stage facilities provide educational, psychological, legal, and vocational services to support minors' autonomy and social inclusion.

One of the most impactful elements of the Zampa Law is Article 11, which introduced **the volunteer guardianship system**. Citizens trained according to an official training programme and appointed by Regional Ombudspersons may serve as legal guardians to a maximum of three minors, under strict criteria. These guardians act in accordance with the Italian Civil Code and the best interest of the child principle, representing the minor in legal, educational, and healthcare matters while monitoring reception conditions and promoting rights. As the name suggests, volunteer guardians carry out their responsibilities without remuneration, as provided by the Civil Code. They can nonetheless receive reimbursements for specific expenses, such as travel, costs associated with the minors' care, and, in some cases, compensation for more demanding tasks.

[1] Rozzi, E., ASGI (2017): The new Italian law on unaccompanied minors: a new model for the EU? https://eumigrationlawblog.eu/the-new-italian-law-on-unaccompanied-minors-a-model-for-the-eu/

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The Zampa Law helped standardise previously fragmented regional practices and closed the EU infringement proceeding No. 2014/2171 against Italy for delays in guardian appointments.[2] By institutionalising a structured list of volunteer guardians at Juvenile Courts, the law significantly reduced the time it takes to assign guardians and thus enabled minors to apply for asylum more promptly.

Volunteer guardians **work in coordination** – not replacement – of institutional actors and professionals within the child protection system. Their role is both legal and relational: serving as a point of trust, advocating for the child's best interests, and helping minors navigate complex procedures and begin paths toward integration. Volunteer guardians are assisted by a **network** of institutional actors and civil society organisations that provide essential resources and expertise to meet the complex needs of these children. This includes professionals working in reception facilities, such as managers, operators, cultural mediators, ethnopsychologists, and social workers, as well as representatives from local authorities and Juvenile Courts. These stakeholders play a vital role in understanding and addressing the cultural, psychological, and social needs of minors from diverse backgrounds, ensuring individualised and sensitive care. Organisations from the third sector, which specialise in the protection and integration of unaccompanied minors, also contribute significantly by offering training and continuous support to guardians, often in cooperation with regional Ombudspersons.

The Zampa Law was conceived as a strategic legislative framework aimed at ensuring the protection, guardianship, and social integration of unaccompanied foreign minors. Nevertheless, its implementation as a prescriptive and uniform mechanism for reception structures and volunteer guardians has constrained the adaptability required for effective multi-stakeholder coordination within the guardianship system.

Procedures for identifying and protecting unaccompanied foreign minors

The procedures to be put in place when a foreign unaccompanied minor enters the Italian territory are:

1. Immediately after tracing and identifying the minor in the territory, the Authority of Public Security is obliged to report its presence to the Prosecutor's Office Republic at the Juvenile Court, to the Juvenile Court and to the Directorate General of Immigration and Integration Policies at the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy.

2. Identification is made through the documents issued by the relevant state administration if in possession; if the minor is not in possession of a passport, he or she will undergo identification by police officers.

3. The public authority, through the child protection organs, shall place the unaccompanied alien minor in a safe place. Responsible for taking charge is the municipality of the place where the minor is (subject to the possibility of relocation).

4. The rule requires the first reception to be in centres managed by the Ministry of the Interior. The first reception facilities provide services for the transfer of the minor to second reception centres, not exceeding 30 days.

[2] European Commission, INFR (2014)2171.
https://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/17/DOSSIER/0/921010/index.html?part=dossier_dossier1

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5. Following the report of an unaccompanied alien minor, thus lacking legal representation, the territorially competent Juvenile Court appoints a guardian.

6. The Questore issues a permit, and it can either be for a minor age, or for family reasons (in case any fostering procedure took place).

Emergency responses and the war in Ukraine

In response to the **Ukrainian humanitarian crisis**, Italy introduced slight adjustments to the guardianship system for unaccompanied minors, focusing particularly on children arriving without parents but accompanied by relatives, neighbours, or family friends. According to the plan adopted in March 2022 and the Ministry of the Interior's Circular No. 0020815 of 10 March 2022, such minors **must still be considered unaccompanied unless accompanied by individuals holding formal parental responsibility**. While these accompanying adults cannot act as legal guardians, they may request formal guardianship through the Juvenile Court. To facilitate care arrangements under emergency conditions, Italian NGOs have recommended simplified written declarations of consent from parents or legal guardians, allowing temporary placement with trusted individuals in Italy.

International organisations, such as UNHCR and UNICEF, have emphasised the importance of preserving family unity and avoiding unnecessary separations, urging authorities to conduct thorough social assessments before making decisions. Therefore, ordinary procedures were maintained, with greater operational flexibility. Additionally, where possible, a **case-by-case approach** was adopted in order to preserve the best interests of the child. This is the case of the Supreme Court of Cassation judgment no. 17603 of June 20, 2023, ruling that under the 2016 Italy–Ukraine Consular Convention and the Hague Convention of 1996, guardianship decisions made by Ukrainian consular authorities can be recognised in Italy when necessary and if they comply with international standards.

Legal framework for unaccompanied foreign minors with disability

The latest data provided by the Rete SAI (Sistema Accoglienza e Integrazione) estimates that in 2023, 0.4% of unaccompanied minors received in the SAI system had disabilities, 0.4% required special health procedures, and 2% suffered from mental health issues.[3] **Disability** among unaccompanied foreign minors represents a clear instance of double vulnerability, creating significant challenges for both reception and integration. Meeting the needs of these minors requires more than basic care; it demands tailored support systems that recognise their specific vulnerabilities. However, national migration and child protection systems often lack the frameworks to address this intersection. While **Italy does not offer intersectional policies in this area** and has been criticised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child for its lack of disaggregated data on children with disabilities, it does legally recognise unaccompanied foreign minors as particularly vulnerable and entitled to the same rights and protections as Italian and EU children, therefore falling under the same legislative framework. This includes :

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Italy in 2009;

[3] SAI Central Service, "22° Rapporto nazionale del Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione", 31 december 2023.

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- Law 104/1992, the core legislation on disability rights, focusing on autonomy, social inclusion, and access to services. Legal guardians, however, are excluded from some assistance benefits granted to parents.
- Law 328/2000: Establishes the integrated system of social and welfare services, including the creation of individualised "life projects" for children with disabilities.
- Law 53/2003: Defines essential education and training services.
- Italian Constitution: Guarantees education (Art. 34) and mandates the removal of barriers to equality and personal development (Art. 2 and 3).
- Legislative Decree No. 20/2024: Establishes the National Authority for the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, effective from January 2025.

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Part II. State of play on services for guardians of unaccompanied foreign minors

Services for unaccompanied foreign minors

As previously outlined, unaccompanied foreign minors, regardless of whether they enter Italian territory regularly or not, are entitled to all the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which Italy ratified in 1991 through Law No. 176. The Convention establishes that in all decisions concerning minors, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration, and that its principles must be applied to all minors without discrimination. Beyond these core principles, the Convention recognises a broad range of rights for all children, including, inter alia: the right to life, survival and development; the right to protection from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation; the right to health and access to healthcare services; the right to education; and the right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting them.

Law No. 47/2017, known as the Zampa Law, represents a significant step forward in the Italian legal system for the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors, as it introduced a more coherent and integrated regulatory framework specifically aimed at ensuring the full and effective operationalization of the rights recognised under the UNCRC, reinforcing safeguards and promoting a coherent approach across the national territory.

In Italy, after being identified and throughout their period of protection, unaccompanied foreign minors (MSNA) have access to a range of services designed to ensure their well-being and integration.

These services include:

Accommodation: Upon arrival in the national territory, unaccompanied foreign minors are placed in *first reception centres*. Stays in these centres should be as short as possible, limited to the time strictly necessary for identification, age assessment, and the provision of immediate relief and protection, and in any case not exceeding 30 days. During this initial phase, a preliminary interview is conducted to ensure that the child is properly heard and that all relevant information is gathered to assess their best interests.

Following this phase, minors are transferred to *second-level reception centres*, more stable, long-term facilities that provide not only accommodation and basic services, but also access to information, individualised support and guidance aimed at fostering their social and economic inclusion. The majority of these facilities are part of the SAI system (Reception and Integration System), a national network of local authorities which, often in collaboration with third-sector organisations, delivers integrated and community-based reception services tailored to the specific needs of each minor. The SAI model provides gradual, personalised support, through individualised projects that take into account each minor's background, skills and vulnerabilities. The aim is to equip them with the tools needed to achieve independence in social, cultural and economic terms. Second-level reception also includes facilities funded through the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services (FNPSA), AMIF resources, or directly by regional and municipal authorities, provided they are accredited or authorised at the local level.

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Minors are guaranteed accommodation in these centres until they reach adulthood, and for an additional six months thereafter, with the possibility of further extensions to allow for the completion of their integration process.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Zampa Law promotes the use of foster care for unaccompanied minors as a priority over placement in residential facilities.

Legal Assistance: When the presence of an unaccompanied foreign minor is reported, the Juvenile Court with territorial jurisdiction appoints a legal guardian within 48 hours. The guardian is responsible for representing the minor's best interests and ensuring that their rights are protected. This system is designed to guarantee that every unaccompanied minor has legal representation throughout their reception and integration process. While awaiting the appointment of a guardian, the legal representative of the reception facility temporarily assumes this role.

Education: Unaccompanied foreign minors have the right to access the national education system under the same conditions as all other minors residing in the country, regardless of their origin. Italy has a unified and inclusive education framework that ensures access to compulsory education and the right to education up to the age of 18. This system equally applies to children in alternative care, including unaccompanied foreign minors, and is supported by national guidelines promoting flexible enrolment procedures, such as allowing school registration at any time of the year without requiring the use of the online platform. The Zampa Law has reinforced the right to education by encouraging the development of tailored educational projects, the use of cultural mediators and apprenticeship programmes. Additional initiatives are carried out through collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the AMIF programme, with targeted actions to support Italian language learning and the school integration of newly arrived unaccompanied minors.

Healthcare: Under Italian legislation, unaccompanied foreign minors present on the national territory are entitled to mandatory enrolment in the National Health Service (SSN), including during the period in which they are awaiting the issuance of a residence permit. This right is explicitly recognised by the Prime Ministerial Decree of 12 January 2017, which, in defining the new Essential Levels of Care (LEAs), establishes that "foreign minors present on the national territory, even if not in compliance with entry and residence regulations, are enrolled in the SSN and enjoy healthcare under the same conditions as Italian citizens." In the same year, the Zampa Law reinforced this provision by mandating the free and automatic enrolment of unaccompanied minors in the SSN, explicitly stating that neither residence registration nor a residence permit is required for their enrolment, which must occur following official notification of their presence on the national territory.

Access to healthcare for unaccompanied foreign minors includes not only general medical care but also mental health support and specialised services when needed. Psychological assistance is available through counselling and support programmes aimed at addressing trauma and promoting emotional well-being and social integration. Specialist care prescribed by a General Practitioner or a chosen pediatrician is delivered through hospital outpatient clinics or local health districts. In addition, some services can be accessed directly, without referral, through dedicated facilities such as family counselling centres, mental health clinics, vaccination centres, addiction services, and HIV prevention units.

Social Integration

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Social integration is a central component of the reception process for unaccompanied foreign minors. As part of the services provided in second-level reception facilities, minors are supported in building meaningful connections within their community.

Cultural mediation plays a pivotal role, offering linguistic and intercultural support to help minors understand and navigate the new social and cultural context. In legal contexts, the involvement of a cultural mediator is anticipated throughout the identification process and guaranteed during the initial interview. The cultural mediator is responsible for providing helpful information to the minor about their rights and legal status. Additionally, the presence of a cultural mediator may be requested in other procedures, such as socio-health assessments, as well as in any jurisdictional and administrative proceedings.

Personalised integration plans are developed based on each minor's background, strengths and vulnerabilities, with the goal of fostering independence and inclusion. Minors are encouraged to participate in a range of social, cultural and recreational activities, including sports, arts and community-based events, which contribute to their personal development and sense of belonging. These integration pathways are designed to promote active citizenship and inclusion, with specific attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations. The SAI model ensures that such support continues until the minor reaches adulthood, and potentially beyond, to allow for the successful completion of their integration process.

Services for volunteer guardians

Volunteer guardians for unaccompanied foreign minors are appointed by the Juvenile Court and supported both by the Italian Authority for Children and Adolescents (AGIA) and by the Regional Guarantor for Childhood and Adolescence, depending on the territory. Under the Zampa Law, applicants shall be selected and properly trained by the Regional Guarantors. Effectively, this translates into the completion of a **mandatory training course** that covers legal, psychosocial and phenomenological aspects of migration, child development and the role and responsibilities of the guardian. Once appointed, guardians operate within a network that includes, inter alia, reception facility staff, social workers, cultural mediators and psychologists.

Third-sector organisations that specialise in the care and management of unaccompanied foreign minors also provide invaluable support. For instance, in the Province of Palermo the Regional Guarantor collaborates with local organisations to train guardians before they volunteer, prior to the Court appointing them to minors. Said support network plays a critical role in reinforcing the guardian's efforts, which is often underestimated. Collaborations with bodies such as UNICEF, as well as with local health and educational services and community organisations, help to create a comprehensive care system for guardians. These collaborations serve to provide not only practical assistance but also emotional and psychological support, preventing isolation and burnout.

Moreover, continuous training and education for guardians are indispensable. Initial training provides the foundational knowledge and skills necessary for guardianship, but ongoing professional development ensures that guardians remain updated on the latest methodologies, legal requirements, and best practices. Peer-to-peer opportunities, such as those provided in Palermo by the PENC centre, UNHCR and the Italian Council for Refugees (CIR), are especially valuable for sharing experiences and best practices, significantly enhancing a guardian's ability to provide effective care. These organisations also maintain direct and continuous contact with the minors, ensuring their needs are met through consistent and holistic support.

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Training, tools and support for unaccompanied foreign minors with disability and their guardians

Professionals and volunteers working with unaccompanied migrant children in Italy, including guardians, carers and frontline staff, are not yet systematically or uniformly trained to identify and respond to the complex and layered vulnerabilities of foreign minors with disabilities. While some training opportunities exist, particularly at the local level or through targeted EU-funded projects, there is **no national, structured system of capacity-building or mandatory training** specifically tailored to this group.

Unaccompanied foreign minors are inherently considered vulnerable, and this vulnerability is often compounded by pre-existing conditions, trauma suffered during migration, or the challenges they face upon arrival. When disability is also present – whether physical, psychological, or developmental – the child's condition involves a **double vulnerability**, demanding a highly sensitive and tailored response. Mental health issues, in particular, are not uncommon: in 2022, 1.9% of the minors hosted in the SAI system showed signs of psychological distress, 0.3% required specialised healthcare, and 0.2% had a formally recognised disability. However, these numbers may underestimate the actual situation, given the lack of systematic screening and the difficulty of identifying invisible or trauma-induced disabilities.

Reception and care systems are not always equipped to deal with such complexity. Supported decision-making approaches and other practices that take into account the specific needs of minors with disabilities are rarely known or applied by guardians and professionals, and no standardised tools or protocols exist at the national level to guide their work. Burn-out prevention mechanisms for guardians and carers, particularly those operating on a voluntary basis, are also lacking or fragmented.

In this context, the **recent establishment of the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (Autorità Garante nazionale dei diritti delle persone con disabilità), operational since 1 January 2025, could mark an important step forward. While it does not currently offer specific training or tools for those working with unaccompanied minors, the Authority is mandated to **promote the effective implementation of disability rights, combat discrimination and disseminate good practices and models of reasonable accommodation**. However, the legislative decree establishing the National Authority provides for forms of cooperation with the National Guarantor for the Rights of Persons Deprived of Liberty (Garante nazionale dei diritti delle persone private della libertà personale), which, among other things, deals with cases of deprivation of liberty of migrants. The National Authority may therefore play a key role in fostering future capacity-building activities and in improving care for children with disabilities across all settings, including migration and child protection services. Moreover, by receiving complaints and monitoring facilities, it could act as an additional layer of oversight in cases where the rights and needs of unaccompanied children with disabilities are not adequately protected.

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Part III. Assessment: Qualitative analysis of the state of play

Issues, gaps and lessons learned: unaccompanied foreign minors

The guardianship system in Italy is structured around a wide range of actors, working in different roles and with different expertise, to guarantee the best interest, the integration, the well-being and the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors. From the perspective of the minor, having a volunteer guardian means not being alone in a new and often confusing environment composed of an entire network of people and organisations working together to ensure the child feels safe, understood, and supported.

In the reception facilities where the minor may live, there are many professionals dedicated to their well-being. These include staff members, cultural mediators, psychologists with experience in cross-cultural support, social workers, and facility managers. Each of them plays a key role in listening to the minor's story, understanding their background and challenges, and helping them navigate life in a new country while respecting their identity and individuality.

Local authorities and Juvenile Courts also contribute by protecting the minors' rights and making decisions that are in their best interest, always aiming to secure a stable and caring environment for them to grow.

Additionally, organisations from civil society, especially those focused on supporting and integrating unaccompanied minors, offer valuable services to both minors and volunteer guardians. Although all these people and institutions work together to protect and accompany the minor, many children and adolescents often find it confusing and difficult to understand. From the perspective of the minor, it can be hard to determine how all these different people and organisations are connected, and what each of them is actually responsible for. Interviews and focus groups conducted with unaccompanied minors and volunteer guardians reveal that **many minors are not fully aware of their rights, nor do they clearly understand the protection system that surrounds them.** Notably, the right to have a guardian and the role of this actor are often not clear, resulting in the perception of being left out of the decision-making process and being uncertain about who to turn to for specific needs or problems.

This lack of clear and accessible information can lead to feelings of isolation, mistrust, or disorientation, which is exacerbated by **the complex process of coordination and collaboration** among these actors and volunteer guardians. In the context of reception centres, volunteer guardians reported facing challenges, in some cases, in coordinating with facility staff and social workers. These difficulties stem primarily from their role as monitoring and supervising adults of the integration process and well-being of the unaccompanied minor, which often places them in a delicate position between oversight and collaboration. Their involvement is meant to ensure that the rights and needs of the minors are respected, yet this supervisory function can sometimes lead to tension or misunderstandings with professionals directly involved in daily care and support activities. This aspect highlights the need for a more efficient and **structured coordination framework**, including a clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of each actor within the network. Such improvements can be achieved through the **formalisation and institutionalisation of tools and mechanisms that facilitate shared responsibility**, all guided by the overarching principle of acting in the best interest of the child.

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For many minors, especially those dealing with trauma, language barriers, or cultural differences, navigating this complex system without proper guidance becomes an additional challenge. Therefore, ensuring that minors are well-informed, involved, and empowered within the system is just as important as the services themselves.

The transition from childhood to legal adulthood represents a particularly vulnerable period for unaccompanied foreign minors, and volunteer guardians often struggle to provide effective guidance and response, due to limited training and services. Upon reaching 18 years of age, many minors face abrupt changes, including the loss of accommodation and support services. Under the normative umbrella, the transition can take the form of administrative continuity, allowing to extend the existing residence permit till the age of 21, or the conversion of the minor residence permit into a permit for educational, work, or future employment purposes. This phase can lead many young adults to homelessness, unemployment, and increased risk of exploitation, requiring homogeneous provisions at the administrative level, as well as preparedness at the socio-economic one.

The global socio-political landscape indicates a likely increase in the number of unaccompanied foreign minors arriving in Europe and Italy, driven by factors ranging from war and environmental degradation to political persecution and economic migration. Moreover, in recent years, the Italian political system has shown a growing tendency to derogate from established protections for migrants, particularly through increasingly restrictive border control policies. This shift raises concerns about the safeguarding of human rights, especially for unaccompanied minors, who represent one of the most vulnerable groups among migrants. An important example is Decree Law 133/2023, marking a step back in the protection and inclusion of unaccompanied foreign minors. The law extends the maximum stay in initial reception centres from 30 to 45 days and allows 16-year-olds to be temporarily housed in adult centres when MSNA facilities are unavailable. Such measures risk overlooking their specific needs and vulnerabilities, potentially exposing them to environments that are ill-suited to their developmental, psychological, and safety requirements.

Issues, gaps and lessons learned: volunteer guardians

The research and desk analysis conducted in the framework of the GUIDE project, and the information drawn from focus groups and interviews with volunteer guardians and the guardianship system network, show the main challenges for an effective guardianship system and model in Italy. Relevant issues and gaps emerged in relation to the work and support of volunteer guardians in the effective implementation of their responsibility role of unaccompanied foreign minors, including – but not limited to – *the fragmented coordination and communication with institutions and the protection network; limited training and refresher courses opportunities; limited recognition and support for the guardianship role; cultural and linguistic barriers; transition to adulthood.*

Guardians frequently encounter obstacles in establishing effective communication with institutions such as Juvenile Courts, social services, and reception facilities. Instances have been reported where appointment decrees lack essential contact information for both guardians and reception centres, leading to delays in the guardianship process. Similarly, the absence of timely notifications regarding minors' appointments or hearings often results in volunteer guardians being uninformed, thereby impeding their ability to fulfil their responsibilities effectively. Additionally, the fragmentation of social services across numerous small municipalities exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for guardians to access consistent support and information.

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At a structural level, many guardians, reception centres, and associations have reported that in some cases, Juvenile Courts refrain from appointing volunteer guardians for unaccompanied foreign minors over the age of 16, instead favouring institutional guardianship, typically represented by the mayor of the municipality where the minor is received. This practice, reported in Palermo, does not ensure that the limited time available between the minor's arrival and their 18th birthday is used effectively to support their integration. The absence of a dedicated volunteer guardian may lead to missed opportunities for personalised support, guidance, and timely access to essential services.

Volunteer guardians participating in focus groups in Sicily reported significant delays in administrative procedures involving key institutions, such as the Police Headquarters and Prefectures. In addition, coordination among the various specialised stakeholders and services is often weak. This creates barriers in carrying out routine but essential processes, including the issuance of identification documents, tax codes ("codice fiscale"), and health cards ("tessera sanitaria"). It also complicates efforts to support the minors' social inclusion and respond adequately in cases of particular vulnerability.

Moreover, research and stakeholder interviews reveal common challenges in the collaboration between reception centres and volunteer guardians. These challenges draw, in part, from the high operational workload faced by reception staff and, on the other hand, from a recurring misperception of guardians as merely fulfilling a supervisory or compliance-monitoring role rather than acting in their adult and guidance role for the best interest of the child. This dynamic not only undermines mutual trust and cooperation but also contributes to an underestimation of the guardian's role. In many cases, reception structures assume responsibility for a broad range of the minor's daily needs, reducing the guardian's function as a mere legal representative, while overpassing their role as guiding adults and the relational dimension of their engagement with the minor. Additionally, the limited integration of social services' perspectives and expertise into the training and capacity-building of volunteer guardians, broadens the sometimes fragile collaboration among reception centres and volunteer guardians.

A broader, systemic gap is linked to the voluntary nature of guardianship itself, which can limit the capacity of guardians to balance these responsibilities alongside their professional and personal lives. In response, the 2020 Budget Law increased funding for the reception of unaccompanied minors, and Interministerial Decree no. 229/2022 outlined procedures for reimbursing expenses and granting paid leave for volunteer guardians. While this decree represents a significant step forward in reinforcing the guardianship support system, it has yet to be implemented by many Juvenile Courts.

With regards to additional training and refresher courses, while the official training program for guardians exists and it's a compulsory step for their appointment by the Regional Ombudsperson for Children and Adolescents (AGIA) and the Juvenile Court, there is a notable lack of continuous professional development opportunities. Guardians have expressed the need for ongoing training to address complex issues such as substance abuse, psychological trauma, illegal employment in agriculture and cultural integration. The absence of regular refresher courses and support mechanisms leaves guardians ill-equipped to handle the evolving needs of unaccompanied foreign minors under their volunteer guardianship.

Volunteer guardians denounce the **lack of a structured support network**, which contributes to feelings of isolation, hindering the sharing of best practices and collaborative problem-solving. Indeed, guardians often feel undervalued and unsupported in their roles. There is a pervasive sense of abandonment and a lack of institutional recognition, which can lead to decreased motivation and, in some cases, requests for removal from the guardianship registry. Some initiatives, usually regionally or locally based, created some *helpdesks* providing support in the legal field, facilitating cultural mediation and psycho-social

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support. However, these initiatives are often project-based and run by civil society, being therefore time-bounded and lacking long-term human and financial resources. In Palermo and other Italian cities, peer-to-peer support groups have been initiated with the backing of UNICEF, UNHCR, CIR, and Centro Penc. These initiatives allow guardians to exchange best practices, share challenges, and foster a sense of solidarity, particularly in managing cases involving severe vulnerability.

Effective communication between guardians and unaccompanied foreign minors is frequently hindered by cultural and linguistic differences. The absence of intercultural mediators exacerbates misunderstandings and limits the development of trust. Guardians may struggle to comprehend the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the minors, leading to misinterpretations and ineffective support. Incorporating intercultural mediation is crucial to bridge these gaps, facilitating better understanding and fostering stronger relationships between guardians and unaccompanied foreign minors.

At the national level, it is noteworthy to mention the existence of Tutori in Rete, the Italian network of associations and informal groups of volunteer guardians of unaccompanied foreign minors. Established as a second-level association according to Italian law, the network strengthens the voluntary protection system through the promotion and representation of volunteer guardians at a national level and the construction of collective spaces organised at the national, regional and provincial level, to make available and share experiences, good practices and advocacy. The association represents Italian volunteer guardians at the European level, being an active member of the European Guardianship Network (EGN).

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Conclusions

The Italian guardianship system, rooted in Law 47/2017 and the Italian Civil Code, represents a progressive legal framework that promotes **active citizenship** in the protection and integration of unaccompanied foreign minors. These minors are recognised by law as holding the same rights and duties as Italian and EU children. The system is built on collaboration among professionals from the protection and integration sectors, where volunteer guardians do not replace institutional actors but contribute to a holistic, child-centred approach.

However, the number of unaccompanied minors currently in Italy significantly exceeds that of active volunteer guardians. This gap underscores the need to raise public awareness of the guardian's role and to **expand training and appointment opportunities** across the country.

Becoming a volunteer guardian should be understood as a long-term civic commitment that requires **continuous support in education and update.** Beyond the initial compulsory training required to join the Juvenile Court's official registry, ongoing training - supported at the local, regional, and national levels - should be largely guaranteed. Civil society organisations, in cooperation with the national and regional Ombudspersons for Children and Adolescents (AGIA), already play a key role in delivering these trainings. Formalising such opportunities through public policy would strengthen the guardians' capacity to support the protection, integration, and well-being of minors.

Volunteer guardians also need structured and accessible support mechanisms. These range from **multiservice help desks** offering guidance on legal, psychological, social, cultural, and linguistic matters, to direct individual support. While many guardians have benefited from desks housed within local social service offices and funded through national or EU initiatives, such services are often project-based and temporary. This leads to fragmentation, disrupts professional continuity, and can erode **guardians' sense of institutional support and trust**. **Peer support networks** have emerged to fill these gaps, fostering the exchange of best practices and offering emotional support in the absence of adequate institutional resources.

The guardianship system functions through the synergy of various public actors, including Juvenile Courts, municipal administrations, social services, and national and local health and education services. **Strengthening dialogue among these institutions and volunteer guardians is essential to bridge the gap between policy and practice.** Establishing local, regional, and national roundtables would foster civil society participation and **integrate the voices of guardians and minors into policy-making.** The *Tutori in Rete* network stands out as a promising initiative that channels guardians' and minors' insights to the national level.

Each professional within the guardianship system should play a clearly defined role, contributing according to their area of expertise. The current **lack of a unified operational framework specifying responsibilities can hinder cooperation,** particularly between reception centres and guardians. **Tools and mechanisms that facilitate shared responsibility** - anchored in the principle of the best interest of the child - would increase the system's efficiency. Similarly, recognising the perspectives of all actors, including those of the minor, the guardian and the reception centres' social workers, would foster a more collaborative approach. This is particularly important in helping minors navigate the complex network of services and **better understand the role of their guardian,** who could be overlooked due to the reception centre's main role in managing daily needs.

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At the procedural level, key changes are needed to make the appointment of guardians more efficient. It is essential to **standardise and digitalise the guardian appointment process** within Juvenile Courts, ensure that guardians receive timely and comprehensive information about the minor, and establish direct, ongoing communication channels between the Court and appointed guardians.

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