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**The Twenty-eighth  
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# 8.

## Ukrainian families and minors fleeing from war

*Giovanni Giulio Valtolina and Nicoletta Pavesi*

Data provided by UNHCR<sup>1</sup> indicates that as of September 13, 2022 7,278,696 Ukrainian refugees had reached various European countries, and more than 4 million of them had already received a Temporary Permit or another form of protection. A significant portion of them moved to countries close to Ukraine: more than 1.3 million were registered in Poland, while more than 90,000 settled in Slovakia and Moldova. Nonetheless, the Ukrainian diaspora has affected all of the European nations: more than 1 million refugees were recorded in Germany, and at least 665,800 of them asked for temporary protection; the Czech Republic received 431,462 refugees, and almost all of them held a temporary protection permit. In Italy, by September 13, 2022 UNHCR registered 159,968 refugees, and 153,664 of them obtained temporary protection status.

In this essay, after providing some data regarding Ukrainian families and minors who fled their country after the Russian invasion and moved to Italy, we will focus on the extraordinary effort made to improve reception programs, on the peculiar condition of minors who reached our country accompanied by adults who were not their parents, and finally on the experience of placing these fleeing families into Italian households.

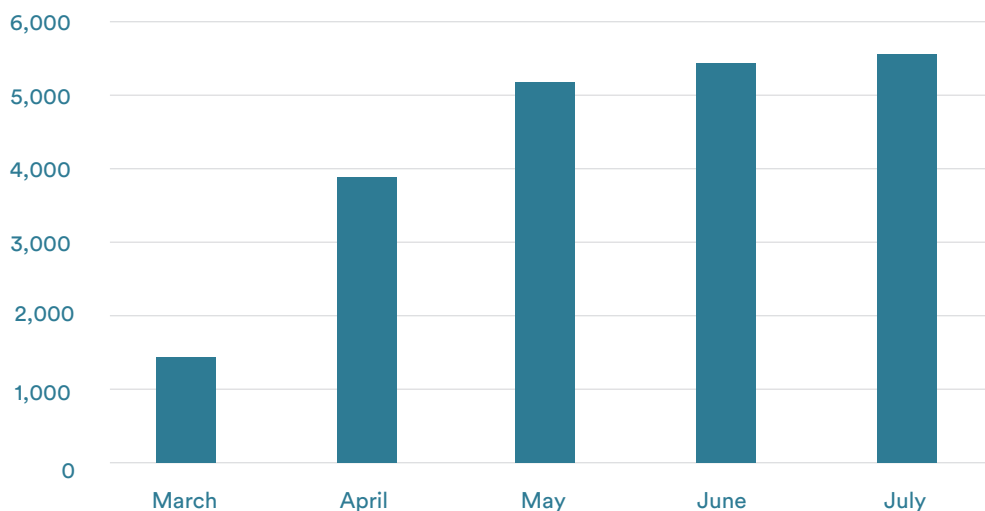
<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Operational Data Portal. Ukraine Refugee Situation*, available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

## 1. Dimensions of phenomenon

At the beginning of September, in Italy there were 159,968 refugees coming from Ukraine (UNHCR data). Almost all of them had a temporary protection permit (155,032 people).<sup>2</sup> 72% of them were female and 39% (59,908) were minors. Approximately 40,000 adults also had children with them. Regarding minors, there were 26,215 teenagers between the age of 10 and 17 years old; 19,654 between 5 and 9; 9,664 between 2 and 4; and 4,375 between 0 and 1. Their gender difference was just about the same: 29,715 female and 30,193 male.

Overall, they arrived in our country accompanied by an adult, even though some of them were orphans: family members, acquaintances, or educators working in the Ukrainian institutes where these children previously lived. However, if the person accompanying them was neither a parent or an adult legally responsible for them, according to the Italian legal system they needed to be considered unaccompanied foreign minors, and because of that – as the latest data reports – since July there were already 5,577 of them. If before the conflict the number of unaccompanied minors originally from Ukraine was practically nonexistent (only 4 children registered by June 2021), their presence instead increased after the Russian invasion, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1. Presence of Ukrainian unaccompanied minors. July 1st, 2022



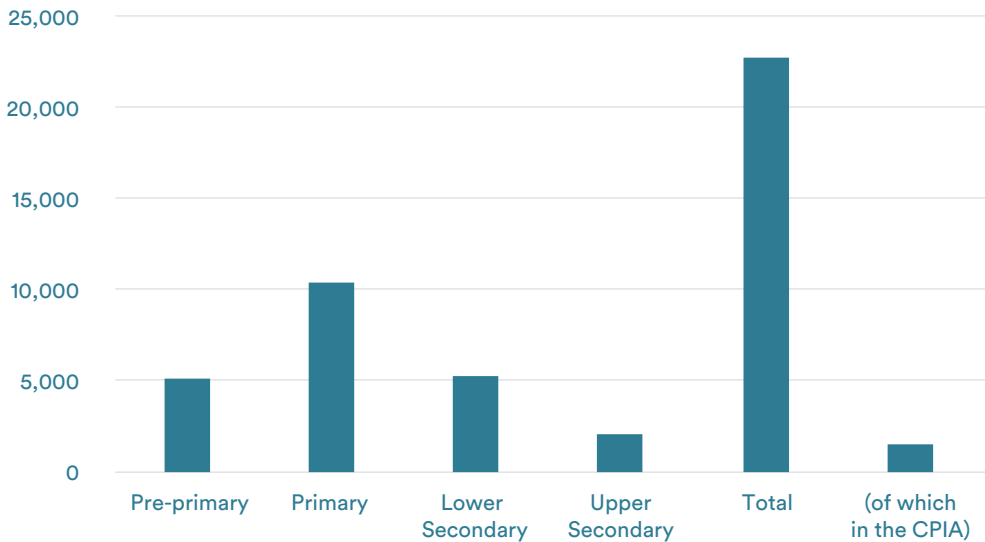
Source: General Directorate of Immigration and Integration Policies - Second Division

<sup>2</sup> Dipartimento della Protezione Civile, *Emergenza Ucraina. Dashboard richieste di protezione temporanea*, available at: <https://mappe.protezionecivile.gov.it/mappe-e-dashboards-emergenze/mappe-e-dashboards-ucraina/ri-chieste-di-protezione-temporanea>.

At the end of June, there were 2,814 girls representing 52% of the total number of Ukrainian unaccompanied minors. More than 90% of them were unaccompanied foreign girls. About 1/3 of Ukrainian unaccompanied minors resided in Lombardy, and 13% in Emilia-Romagna. Smaller groups were instead located in Veneto (9%), Latium (8%), Piedmont, Tuscany, and Sicily (6%).

According to the Ministry of Education, on May 9, 2022, the Ukrainian students welcomed into public and private schools since February 24 were distributed according to the percentages provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Ukrainian students welcomed into Italian schools



Source: Ministry of Education (*Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022*)

21% of the students attended Lombard schools, 12% were in Emilia Romagna, and 11% in Campania.

## 2. Enhancing the reception program

Because of the arrival of so many Ukrainian refugees, the whole system of reception and integration managed by local institutions and emergency welcoming centres administered by Prefectures were widened. Access to these locations was also offered to Ukrainian refugees who had not made a formal request for international protection. Furthermore, Decree Law No. 21/2022 allowed additional forms of widespread reception involving the Third Sector and access to financial subsidies for those people who had already secured an accommoda-

tion for themselves. All these extraordinary measures were provided for by the Ocdpc no. 881 (March 29, 2022).

The Civil Protection Department published operational guidelines to provide reception and assistance to Ukrainian refugees, outlining the national and regional models of coordination, as well as the definition of reception activities and facilities. In addition, the online platform “#OffroAiuto” (I Give Help) was set up, allowing citizens, companies and agencies belonging to the Third or Private Social Sectors to provide goods, services, and accommodation on behalf of Ukrainian migrants once they arrived in Italy.

Furthermore, the Civil Protection Department issued a notice related to the acquisition of expressions of interest to carry out widespread reception activities within the national territory to support people arriving from Ukraine and fleeing the war. The Assessment Commission responsible for the evaluation of the expressions of interest received 48 applications from agencies of the Third Sector. Only one of them was excluded because the necessary documentation was not submitted. As far as the remaining 47 applications, 29 were accepted thus adding 17,012 places available for hospitality in apartments, families and other institutions, while the other 18 were turned down. Initially, only 9 agencies signed the agreement, providing in all 5,219 lodging places. The remaining 11,793 were still virtually available. Later, the Commission saw 5 more organisations backing out, bringing the final count to 24 agencies still involved in the program.

The Decree published by the President of the Council of Ministers (March 28, 2022) regulated the temporary protection program offered in Italy to people fleeing Ukraine because of the Russian invasion. Meanwhile, the Police headquarters issued for them a one-year residence permit that could be extended for another year, allowing them – among other things – to enroll into the National Healthcare System and have access to work, study, and other services of assistance and reception.

According to this Decree, people requesting a residence permit for temporary protection and finding an independent accommodation with relatives, friends or hosting families could also apply for financial subsidies for themselves, their children, and minors whom they were legal guardians of, by using an online platform set up by the Civil Protection Office. On the institutional website a specific manual available in 3 languages (Ukrainian, Italian, and English) was also uploaded.

### 3. Unaccompanied minors coming from Ukraine

All minors arriving from Ukraine in the European Union (EU) should be able to have access to their rights immediately and without discrimination, receiving also the necessary psychological support and healthcare assistance, as well as access to education. This is what the European Commission hopes for regarding the emergency crisis due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

As of June 30, 2022, the total number of unaccompanied foreign minors arrived in Italy from Ukraine was 5,392. According to Law 47/17, reiterated again in the Minors Plan devised to welcome Ukrainian refugees, it is considered an unaccompanied minor every child coming from Ukraine and living in Italy with no parents, even though he/she might be under the direct care of a trusted adult of the family, like an aunt or a grandmother, as well as a director or an educator belonging to the Ukrainian institution where the child was living before. To every minor, then, the Juvenile Court must assign a guardian taken from the list of volunteer tutors or appoint an institutional one. In this regard, the President of the AIMMF (the Italian Association of Judges for Minors and Families) stated that the appointment of an Italian guardian should not prevent the children's connection to their emotional references or travel companions. The assignment of an Italian guardian is determined by the immediate need to offer a concrete support to them during a difficult time. Providing an Italian guardian with legal expertise, knowledge of the local language and civic institutions, represents an actual improvement from before and a real help for minors and their Ukrainian chaperones, supporting them while dealing with a really complicated governmental Italian system.

#### 4. Unaccompanied minors from Ukraine: the case studies of Catania and Bolzano

On May 11, 2022, 63 minor orphans from Ukraine arrived in Sicily. Their age was between 4 and 16 years old, and they came from orphanages located in Mariupol and Kramatorsk. The Community "Papa Giovanni XXXIII" coordinated this humanitarian mission. These children were also accompanied by 21 people that included some educators and their own children. Minors were hosted in the local Diocese of Trapani, as well as at a facility run by the Community "Papa Giovanni XXXIII" in Modica, and 2 more centres belonging to the Foundation "Ebbène" located in Catania. At that time, all these places were trying to be part of the circuit of widespread reception, meaning their inclusion into the 15,000 accommodation places made available by the Third Sector via direct procurement.

However, the Department of Civil Protection decided to dismiss the agreements related to widespread reception programs planned in Sicily, Calabria, and Basilicata; meanwhile, other reception programs involving organisations located in different Italian regions were accepted.

The emerging issue – completely new for the Italian context – was that these minors, whom the Italian institutions considered as unaccompanied foreign minors, had to be relocated into other facilities accredited by the Sicilian region, without acknowledging the presence of their Ukrainian educators, their emotional bond with these adults (being orphans), relationships established among them over time, and their well-being determined by the creation of a comfortable habitat in Italy. Fortunately, thanks to the involvement of people in charge of the hosting facilities, in June the Social Services Office of the Municipality of

Catania, executing a mandate issued by the Juvenile Court, transferred the first group of 12 minors along with 2 of their educators into another location with adequate quality standards.

Considering all minors in Italy without a parent as unaccompanied foreign minors and therefore individuals to be placed into a community, however, could have different interpretations, as the case of the Bolzano Juvenile Court manifested. In fact, the provision issued on April 6, 2022, rejected the requests for ratification of the reception measures and of the appointment of a guardian for a group of minors who had arrived in Italy accompanied by the person responsible for the “family-type” orphanage that hosted them in Ukraine. The supervisor had presented the measures adopted by the Ukrainian authorities entrusting these minors to the family-type orphanage and the letters from the Ukrainian Consulate in Milan and the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice, which confirmed that she was their guardian and care provider.

Despite the documentation provided and the evident emotional bond existing between Mrs. A. and the minors, the Juvenile Public Prosecutor ordered then to divide the group and to consider the minors as unaccompanied. Therefore, the Bolzano social services identified suitable centres for their relocation, thus separating them from their “foster parent”. These decisions sparked the involvement of both the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice and the Ukrainian Consulate in Milan. They sent to the Bolzano Public Prosecutor’s Office specific information attesting the existence in Ukraine of the lawfulness of the “family type” orphanage and the validity of the Ukrainian measures applied, which should have been directly recognized and enforced pursuant to the 1996 Hague Convention. Against the appeal presented by the Public Prosecutor’s Office at the Juvenile Court, an intervention was carried out aimed at preventing the separation of minors from the foster parent and enforcing the Ukrainian measures. The Court, then, accepted the requests presented by Mrs. A. and assigned the custody of the minors to the Social Services of the Municipality, discharging them from the community, entrusting them to Mrs. A., and supporting her in the minors’ temporary integration process and school education while in Italy. The decision of the Bolzano Juvenile Court, therefore, clarifies how the absence of a parent does not necessarily mean the need to find a host community, when instead there is the possibility of a family placement, where the concept of family member is understood in a broader sense including people living together and with no direct family-ties. It also specifies that Ukrainian minors accompanied not by a parent but by another “family member” – understood in a broader sense – cannot be automatically classified as “unaccompanied foreign minors.” This aspect surely invites us to reassess data provided by the Civil Protection Department, recording for instance in the month of August the arrival of more than 47,000 Ukrainian minors, and 4,660 were unaccompanied minors registered in the Labor Ministry database. Over 3,000 of them were then entrusted to families, and more than 840 were assigned to institutions.

## 5. The dispositions of the Deputy Commissioner

The Deputy Commissioner, Francesca Ferrandino, responsible for the coordination of measures and procedures aimed at assisting unaccompanied minors coming from Ukraine, in accordance with her duties proceeded to put together a “Plan for unaccompanied foreign minors,” that was adopted on March 25, 2022. This document described the activities carried out by institutional organizations involved in different ways in the reception assistance program for unaccompanied foreign minors within the national territory. In particular, the Plan offered guidelines to identify and monitor unaccompanied foreign minors residing in Italy, to evaluate the reception system, the hosting facilities, and the different forms of temporary foster care.

The Plan was subsequently updated with a specific addition – shared with other administrations and protection associations directly involved with unaccompanied Ukrainian minors – outlining procedures to be followed to improve channels of communication and reception when transfers of unaccompanied foreign minors were going to take place from Ukraine into our country. Specifically, the Addition highlighted the need that, since the initial contacts between Ukrainian institutions and associations promoting these transfers, the Department of Civil Protection, the Department of Civil Liberties and Immigration, and the Department of Public Security had to be informed, and that – at least ten days before the actual transfer – the organization involved needed to provide the competent authorities, even at local level, with all the necessary information, including the presence of any further reasons for vulnerability and special needs, the presence of chaperones, any guardianship and legal representation adopted by Ukrainian authorities, in addition to the reception measures in place. Finally, once the communication from the promoting association with the requested information was received, the local competent Prefecture based on the place of reception set up along with the Deputy Commissioner a coordinating panel with all the institutions involved, to also arrange specific actions to meet the newcomers’ educational and health needs.

## 6. Hosting small families in local households

In Italy the reception of refugees in families has had a recent history, although prior experiences of family solidarity dating back to the Balkan war had already occurred, when civil society got involved spontaneously to welcome refugees coming from the former Yugoslavia. As Bona (2016) points out, the public system was not prepared to welcome the approximately 80,000 refugees who arrived in our country between 1992 and 1995. For this reason, associations, networks, groups of citizens and families started giving generic hospitality to people and families fleeing the war. This experience was quite instrumental when in 2002 the refugee reception system began to take shape, and through



various transformations this has now become the SAI. “It is precisely from that period of activism – however naive and improvised – that the impulse came about to establish a first embryonic reception system and develop a legal framework for the right to asylum” (Marchetti, 2018: 188). Nevertheless, a few years went by before other similar experiences happened. In 2008, the “*Rifugio Diffuso*” project was set up in Turin, involving along with the municipal administration also associations, voluntary organizations, families, and individual citizens. Even though various experiences of welcoming refugees into families have taken place, no cumulative data is currently available in order to provide a clear picture of this phenomenon. However, it is evident that these experiences are quantitatively marginal.

Conversely, the Ukrainian crisis has indeed sparked an impressive mobilization of civil society and families who opened their homes to individuals or groups, in many cases involving people who had never offered hospitality before or had been exposed to the issue of social inclusion of forced migrants. From this perspective, the “proximity and involvement” effect that occurred when the aforementioned war in Bosnia seems to have been reproduced, a “war at home” (Rastello, 1998) that triggered almost immediately feelings of closeness within circuits – such as parishes and third sector associations – which already had experiences of solidarity, as well as with “new families”, not yet accustomed to experiences of active citizenship. “I saw the images on television, and I said to myself: how can I stay here and watch? These people are running away. We have room at home, and it came naturally to offer hospitality (...). No, I have never dealt with refugees, it is not a topic that matters to me.”

One of the families interviewed also pointed out how different it was the response to the request for hospitality made by Afghan women fleeing their country in August 2021, which had not drawn any attention because these women were always accompanied by a male relative and were also perceived as distant because of their religion, culture, and language. Instead, in the case of Ukrainian groups, they were mostly made up of mothers or grandmothers with children and were perceived much “closer” in terms of religion and culture. For this reason, in good faith many more families thought it was easier to open the doors of their households, especially during the first wave of arrivals.

For many, the informal dimension has been the hallmark of this experience. Requests for hospitality have often used the network of acquaintances, especially Ukrainian communities already present in our territory acting on their behalf as informal mediators, or even have been a direct resource for the reception. In other cases, instead, the reception went through the channels of the public administration. “We have given our availability to the Municipality. For a while nothing happened... Then the police came to inspect the place and within a week M. and her daughter arrived.”

As Campomori (2022) states, the dimension of informality is a clear sign that people usually know how “to get by”, precisely thanks to the informal support provided; but it also represents an obstacle to an adequate circulation of information, which instead happens more promptly and correctly within the formal reception system.

Another typical feature of Ukrainian refugees is the temporary nature of their intention to stay as guests. “Most Ukrainian refugees do not consider themselves refugees and have no intention of applying for international protection; rather they perceive themselves as people temporarily forced to live outside their country, but ready to go back to Ukraine as soon as they can” (Ibid.: 329). This attitude has had inevitable repercussions on the family reception program. If the “classic” idea was for the host family to share its resources and social relationships to promote integration, becoming a sort of bridge between reception structures and independence, in the case of Ukrainians this goal often was not pursued. “Now I have been hosting O. and his son since March. We still struggle to communicate. They do not speak English and are not learning Italian. We suggested V. (the son) to attend Italian classes, instead he stays all the time in his room. At least O. sometimes comes shopping with me... he does not want to go out. O. tells me that he talks to his friends online... here in town there are no Ukrainian boys of his age.” Adolescent boys and girls in fact represent, both in the words of their families and those who were interviewed, a vulnerability within a vulnerability. These risks have connected them to the traumas they had already suffered and to the experience of critical events in their lives (adulthood, trauma of war and flight, immersion in a context in which they have communication difficulties, comparison with Italian teenagers, etc). The lack of a formal support network for families (ranging from the linguistic/cultural mediator to the psychologist) has made living together in some cases challenging. “At the beginning the impact was difficult. I confess that I thought everything was going to be easier... I am a generous person and a host, but you come to my house and need to try to interact with me. Well, that is not exactly how it went. We are different, and these differences take a toll on coexistence... We were not prepared, and that’s about it. In retrospect I can say that we embarked on this experience completely unaware of the situation... It is not like hosting the kids who arrive here with my children’s cultural exchange program... Would I do it again? I do not know... maybe if we had some help. Instead, they left us alone.” One of those people who were interviewed highlighted the fact that a significant portion of host families had false expectations regarding hospitality. Some of them thought that they were finally going to be grandparents, some others to have company, and some to receive support in their daily life. Checking out host families ahead of time would eventually have prevented some misunderstandings, which also caused abrupt interruptions of reception programs and the relocation of the group into the CAS facility.

Families were aware that they were providing only a temporary shelter. In some cases the short time needed to host them pushed families to volunteer, acknowledging also the fact that the burden of the reception program fell entirely on families. This might have partially selected the host families.

Then the problem of the “aftermath” remains. In some families the hospitality program went well and beyond the 3 to 6 months agreed upon at the beginning, while other groups faced serious difficulties to continue providing hospitality. Therefore, some refugees are already making their way home, while others intend to stay even longer.

## 7. Final considerations

The great attention drawn by the Ukrainian crisis in our country has resulted in a “grass-roots” movement of solidarity bringing civil society to play a leading role in welcoming fleeing families. The system has certainly moved fast, both at European and national level. In Italy, in particular, the crisis “has somehow triggered a process of innovation of the system, which hopefully could become a new model of reception on behalf of all migrants fleeing conflicts such as the one that broke out in Ukraine” (Campomori, 2022: 331). As a matter of fact, the specific literature on this topic argues that two different paths have been created within the system, and one of them is considered a “privileged” one, as is the case of Ukrainian refugees. This model could be then applied to the entire reception system, making it more flexible regarding the territory in which refugees can settle, by taking into account any existing family or friend networks that should be valued and included in planning their reception, investing more on that widespread system which has proven to be so effective in the case of Ukrainian refugees.

In reference to the reception program with local families, the difficulties encountered can be an opportunity to highlight some issues that need to be accounted for while handling similar projects. First, the economic factor. The lack of specific support to families greatly affects the number of households able to open their doors. Most likely, financial support would increase the number of potential welcoming families. Another aspect concerns the sense of abandonment felt by these families. It is helpful, instead, for them (in case of need) to have access to linguistic mediation services, support on bureaucratic obligations, and assistance when faced with vulnerabilities shown by their guests. As a matter of fact, the pioneering reception experiences and those run by Sprar/Sai facilities have underscored the need for accompaniment, even though it is aimed at lower numbers of people, setting up a tutoring program that perhaps is not suitable to larger groups of people. Between an ongoing accompaniment (perhaps not always necessary) and total abandonment, one can perhaps think of an “on call” support system, which allows host families to have a point of reference in case of need, without however feeling “under surveillance”.

Another aspect spells out the need to provide clear and specific information to families volunteering for reception programs, thus preventing false expectations and problems and/or failures during the process. The creation of only one register of host families could also enhance the matching process when the time comes.

The mediation provided by third sector organizations and ethnic networks has even proved to be very effective while welcoming Ukrainian women and minors. This is an element that must be kept in mind when aiming to promote and strengthen reception programs with local families.

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The 28<sup>th</sup> edition of ISMU Migration Report inevitably addresses the tragic events connected to the war in Ukraine, analysing the conflict from the perspective of human mobility. The volume traces the inflows and outflows from Ukraine to Europe and Italy, analysing the reasons why the reception granted to Ukrainians differs from the reception conditions that have been granted to asylum seekers of other nationalities over the past decade.

While paying particular attention to the conflict in Ukraine, the Report also turns the spotlight on some countries that tend to be forgotten, such as Afghanistan, Syria and Countries of the African continent.

Alongside the analysis of statistical data (ISMU estimates that the number of foreigners living steadily in Italy slightly exceeded 6 million individuals, as of 1 January 2022), the Report covers the traditional areas of interest of health, work, education and the juridical framework. Moreover, the Report is enriched by several in-depth studies including analyses of how recent Italian political elections treated the “Migration issue” and of the role played by diaspora communities between local integration and international cooperation.



*Fondazione ISMU ETS is an independent research centre founded in 1992 promoting research and training activities on migration, integration and the ever-growing ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary societies. As an independent scientific body, it proposes itself as a service provider open to the collaboration with national and European institutions, local administrations, welfare and health-care agencies, non-profit organisations, schooling institutions, Italian and foreign research centres, libraries and documentation centres, international agencies, diplomatic and consular representations.*

Via Copernico 1,  
20125 Milan, Italy  
+39 02 6787791  
ismu@ismu.org  
www.ismu.org

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