EPIDEMIOLOGICAL LINKS AND GRAZING-RELATED BIOSECURITY RISKS IN TWO SUCCESSIVE SHEEP POX OUTBREAKS IN IASI COUNTY, ROMANIA

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Abstract

Sheep pox represents a major threat to small-ruminant production systems, particularly in extensive and semi-extensive farming, where grazing practices and flock movements may facilitate disease transmission. This study examines the epidemiological characteristics of two successive sheep pox outbreaks recorded in Iasi County, Romania, in 2026, focusing on their spatial and temporal relationship and the implications of grazing management for farm biosecurity.

The first outbreak occurred in a commercial flock initially estimated at approximately 650 sheep and was confirmed on 31 July 2026. A second outbreak was reported on 3 September 2026 in a separate holding comprising 233 sheep, located approximately 2.4 km from the first. Official epidemiological records were analyzed alongside field observations and information obtained during the epidemiological investigation.

Verbal information collected during the investigation suggested that the second affected flock had previously grazed on pasture used by the first flock. Although this information was not independently verified through official documentary records, it indicates a potential epidemiological link associated with grazing management. Considering the environmental resistance of capripoxviruses, indirect transmission through contaminated grazing areas represents a biologically plausible hypothesis. However, the available evidence does not establish the actual transmission pathway.

These findings highlight the importance of integrating pasture-use history, flock movement monitoring and environmental biosecurity into sheep farm management. The study emphasizes the need for coordinated surveillance and preventive measures targeting epidemiologically connected holdings, particularly in extensive grazing systems.

Key words: *sheep pox; Capripoxvirus; epidemiological investigation; biosecurity; sheep production*

INTRODUCTION

Sheep pox and goat pox (SPGP), caused by sheeppox virus (SPPV) and goatpox virus (GTPV) of the genus *Capripoxvirus* (family *Poxviridae*, subfamily *Chordopoxvirinae*), are highly contagious, WOAH-listed transboundary diseases of small ruminants associated with substantial direct and indirect production losses and severe trade restrictions [1]. Their epidemic potential is well documented: an analysis of 18 years of global SPGP data showed the

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disease emerging into new geographic areas, including occasional incursions into previously free countries, with outbreak likelihood linked to the economic status of the affected region and to the size of its small-ruminant population [2].

Transmission occurs primarily through direct contact between animals, but the high environmental resistance of capripoxviruses also enables indirect spread via contaminated equipment, surfaces, water, feed and wool. This route is of particular importance in extensive grazing systems, where flocks share pastures, watering points and shearing facilities [3].

After decades of low incidence in the European Union, SPGP re-emerged with unusual intensity in south-eastern Europe. Between 2022 and 2024, numerous outbreaks were reported in Spain, Bulgaria and Greece, and phylogenetic analyses of the epidemic strains from these episodes have been published [4]. In Greece, the scale of the outbreaks and the vaccination-based control strategy adopted were documented in the WOAH-facilitated regional expert reporting [5]. Comparable endemic pressure and control difficulties have been described in small-ruminant systems in south-western Ukraine [6].

This regional wave carries particular implications for Romania, where the national sheep sector is strongly oriented toward live-animal exports and depends on continuous access to external markets [7]. According to Eurostat data for 2024, Romania maintained an estimated inventory of 10.443 million sheep and goats, ranking second in the European Union after Spain [7]. The authors of the index report emphasized that this high national density, together with Romania's strategic position in European livestock trade, poses a significant risk of further spread and requires enhanced clinical monitoring and disease reporting, stringent restrictions on animal movements and strong biosecurity measures [8]. The awareness gap is equally relevant at practitioner level: in a recent five-country survey, Romanian veterinarians rated sheep and goat pox among the regionally variable, insufficiently perceived epidemic risks of livestock [9].

The first laboratory-confirmed outbreaks of SPGP in Romania occurred in the month of June, 2025 (started on the 16th and confirmed on the 17th of June) in the locality of Dobrotești, Teleorman County, in southern Romania [10]. Clinical suspicions of a pox-like malady were reported on two small-ruminant holdings: one with 490 sheep and a smaller mixed flock of 240 sheep and goats. Affected animals displayed signs highly consistent with capripoxvirus infection, including acute pyrexia, generalized papular-to-pustular cutaneous eruptions localized on the abdomen, mammary gland and oral mucosa, and respiratory distress. To reach a clear and unequivocal diagnosis, an array of specimens, including whole blood, affected tissue (cutaneous scabs), serum, and conjunctival and nasal swabs, collected from three sheep with severe clinical signs was submitted to the National Reference Laboratory at the Institute for Diagnosis and Animal Health (IDSA) [10]. The diagnosis was established through an integrated diagnostic cascade: serological screening by double-antigen ELISA yielded positive results for anti-c*apripoxvirus* antibodies in 100% serum samples, confirming viral circulation within the affected holdings; real-time PCR detected *capripoxvirus* DNA in every diagnostic matrix examined. The presence of viable viral form was confirmed as well due to the appearance of the by the book cytopathic (cellular alterations induced by the viral infection) effects on OA3.Ts ovine testis cells after one week of incubation; and histopathological examination of cutaneous lesions revealed ballooning degeneration of keratinocytes and pathognomonic eosinophilic intracytoplasmic inclusion bodies (Borrel

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bodies). Post-mortem examination further documented grey-white confluent skin nodules, splenomegaly with petechial hemorrhages and apical interstitial pneumonia [10]. This investigation thus provided the first officially confirmed laboratory diagnosis of SPGP on Romanian territory. Since then, a total of 84 outbreaks have been confirmed in Romania.

Within the European Union, SPGP is legally addressed as a listed disease under Regulation (EU) 2016/429 (the Animal Health Law) and Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/687, which prescribe stamping-out, movement restrictions, protection and surveillance zones and epidemiological enquiry [11,12]. During the 2026 Romanian epizootic episode, the disease situation in Iași County was regulated at Union level by Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2026/1108 as amended by Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2026/1956, which established restricted, protection and surveillance zones [13].

One year after the Teleorman confirmation, suspected SPGP outbreaks were reported in the summer of 2026 in Iasi County, in north-eastern Romania, approximately 13 months later and around 367 km away. The temporal and geographical separation between the outbreaks reported in Teleorman County in 2025 and those identified in Iasi County in 2026 indicates the occurrence of sheep pox in different regions of Romania. However, the available epidemiological information does not establish whether these events were directly connected or resulted from independent introductions of the virus.

The first outbreak identified in Iași County was confirmed in July 2026, and a second outbreak emerged approximately five weeks later on another holding in the same commune, with an additional outbreak recorded in October 2026 in neighboring Neamt County, within the surveillance area of the second outbreak. At county level, the Iasi Local Committee for the Control of Diseases (CLCB Iasi) adopted the Action Plan for the eradication of sheep and goat pox (Decision no. 15 of 03.08.2026, as put into application by Decision no. 19 of 11.09.2026), operationalized by DSVSA Iasi [14,15,16,17,18].

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study was designed as a descriptive epidemiological investigation of two successive sheep pox outbreaks reported in Iasi County, Romania, between July and September 2026 [19].

Official epidemiological data were obtained from the World Organization for Animal Health Information System (WAHIS), including outbreak notification and confirmation dates, susceptible animal populations, reported cases, deaths, and animals killed and disposed of during disease control operations. Additional information on the regional epidemiological situation was obtained from the European Union Animal Disease Information System (ADIS) [20].

Field information was collected during official veterinary control activities conducted by DSVSA Iasi. These data included the geographical locations of the affected holdings, clinical observations, epidemiological anamnesis concerning flock movements and grazing practices, and the disease control measures implemented by the competent veterinary authorities [14,15,16,17].

The spatial relationship between the two outbreaks was assessed using the geographical coordinates of the affected holdings, while their temporal relationship was evaluated based on the dates of disease onset and laboratory confirmation. Particular attention was given to the reported successive use of the same grazing area by the two affected flocks.

The potential epidemiological relationship between the outbreaks was evaluated descriptively. No environmental

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sampling or comparative viral genomic sequencing was performed; therefore, the investigation was not designed to establish a definitive transmission pathway.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First outbreak - Outbreak 1 - (Popești, farm holding, type A commercial exploitation). Clinical suspicion was raised on 28.07.2026 (Figure 1) in a sheepfold in the locality of Popești; latitude 47.172744, longitude 27.230243 (Figure 2); the outbreak was officially confirmed on 31.07.2026 and ended on 03.09.2026. According to the initial field investigation conducted on 28 July 2026, the holding comprised approximately 650 sheep, of which 34 animals exhibiting clinical signs were identified and isolated, with seven deaths already recorded at the time of the initial assessment.

The final outbreak data reported to the World Organization for Animal Health Information System (WAHIS) indicated 611 susceptible sheep, 611 reported cases, 74 deaths, and 537 animals killed and disposed of as part of the disease eradication measures (Table 1) [19]. The initial field observations and the subsequent official reporting figures are therefore presented separately, as they correspond to different stages of the epidemiological investigation. The difference between the initially estimated flock size and the population recorded in WAHIS could not be resolved from the available documentation.

The number of cases reported in WAHIS should not be interpreted as evidence that all 611 animals exhibited clinical signs, since individual clinical status was not available for the entire reported population.

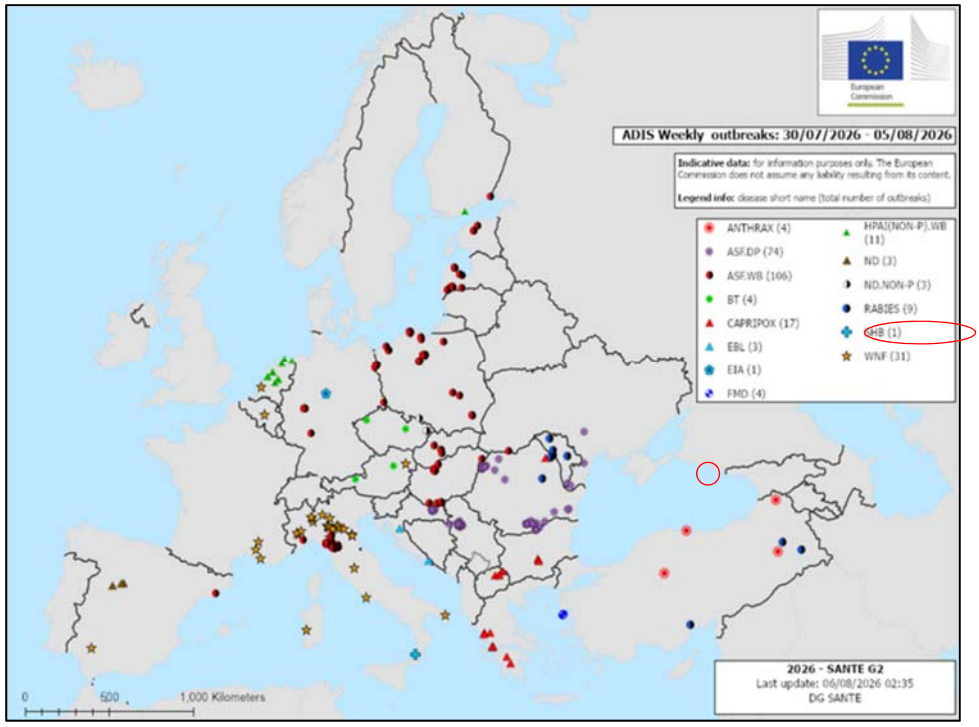


Fig. 1 European distribution of SPGP, 30.07.2026-05.08.2026
Source: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/tracesnt/adis/public/notification/outbreaks-weekly-report

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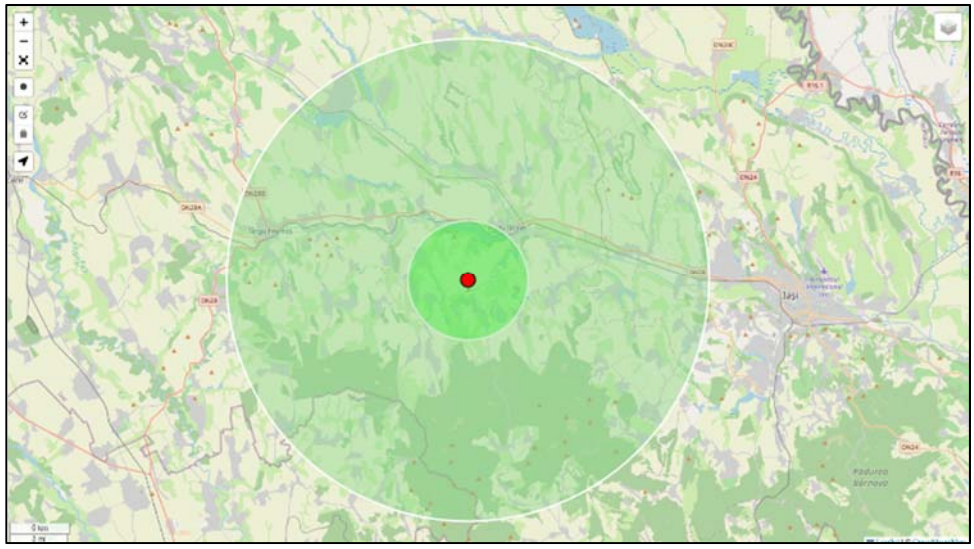


Fig. 2 Authors' own elaboration on the outbreaks (red) inside the protection (min. 5 km, opaque green) and surveillance (min. 20 km, translucent green) zones around the 1st outbreak
Sources: https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm; Coordinates and data →https://wahis.woah.org/#/event-management

Table 1 Sheep pox outbreaks recorded in the study area and adjacent region, July-October 2026 (WAHIS data)

Outbreak (holding)	County	Start	Confirmation	End	Susceptible	Cases	Deaths	Killed and disposed of
Popești	Iași	28.07. 2026	31.07. 2026	03.09. 2026	611	611	74	537
Obrijeni	Iași	03.09. 2026	09.09. 2026	12.10. 2026	233	233	24	209
Bîra (on-going)	Neamț	13.10. 2026	15.10. 2026	-	225	225	10	215

Note: All affected animals were sheep (domestic). Species data per WAHIS; no animals were vaccinated and none were slaughtered for commercial use.

Second outbreak – Obrijeni. The second outbreak was identified in a backyard sheep holding located in Obrijeni, Popești commune, Iasi County (latitude 47.15534, longitude 27.2123244; Figure 3). The onset of the outbreak was reported on 3 September 2026, approximately five weeks after the confirmation of the first outbreak in Popești. Official confirmation was obtained on 9 September 2026, and the outbreak was declared resolved on 12 October 2026. According to WAHIS records, the holding comprised 233 susceptible sheep, with 233 reported cases and 24 deaths. The remaining 209 animals were killed and disposed of as part of the official disease eradication measures (Table 1) [19]. The geographical proximity and temporal succession of the two outbreaks provided the basis for investigating a potential epidemiological relationship between the affected holdings. Information obtained through epidemiological anamnesis concerning the successive use of the same grazing area is discussed separately in the section addressing potential transmission pathways.

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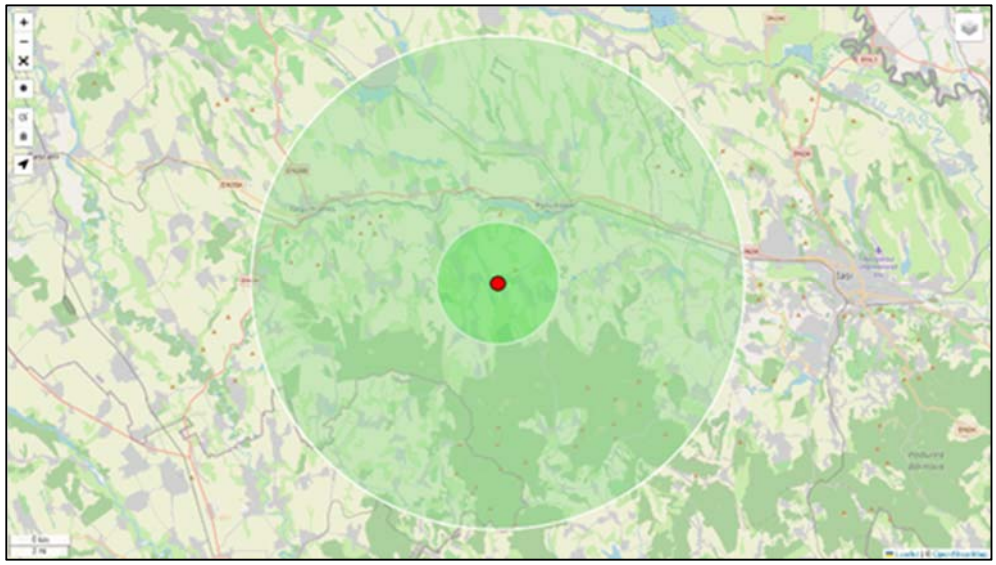


Fig. 3 Authors' own elaboration on the outbreaks (red) inside the protection (min. 5 km, opaque green) and surveillance (min. 20 km, translucent green) zones around the 2nd outbreak
Sources: https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm; Coordinates and data →https://wahis.woah.org/#/event-management

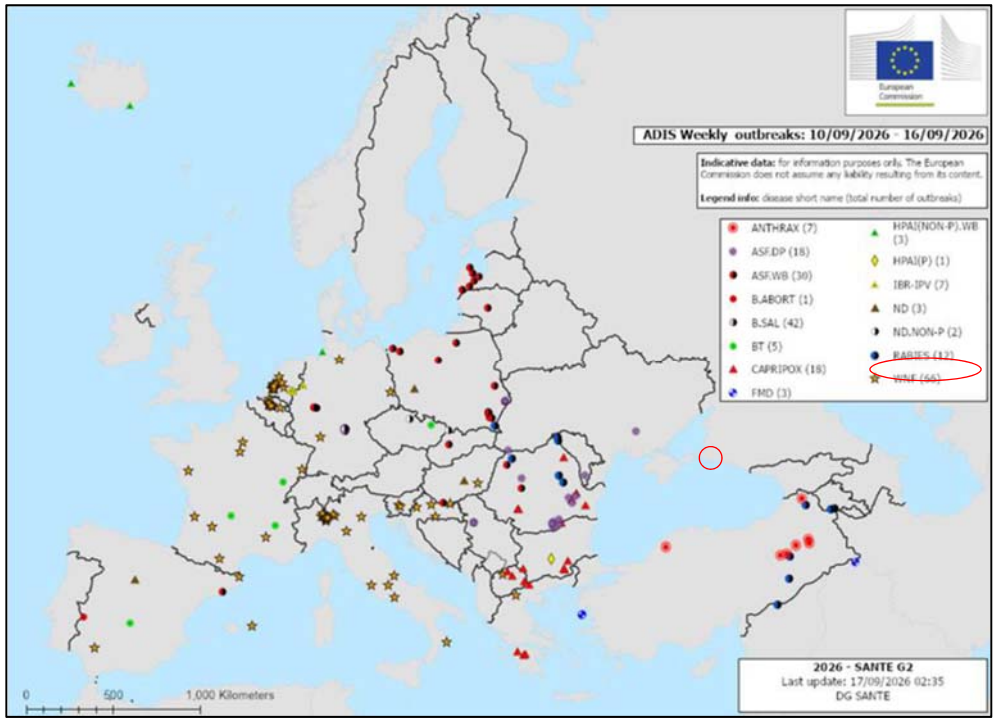


Fig. 4 European distribution of SPGP, 10.09.2026-16.09.2026
Source: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/tracesnt/adis/public/notification/outbreaks-weekly-report

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Subsequent regional development. A third outbreak of the same regional epizootic was notified on 13.10.2026 in Bîra (Neamț County) (Figure 5), confirmed on 15.10.2026 and still on-going at the end of the reporting window, with 225 susceptible sheep, 225 cases, 10 deaths and 215 animals killed and disposed of (Table 1). This confirms the continuing south-eastern-European spread of the 2026 wave in which the two Iași outbreaks occurred (Figure 6).

The geographical distribution of all three outbreaks and their corresponding protection and surveillance zones is illustrated in Figure 8.

Epidemiological link. The two sheep pox outbreaks recorded in Popești and Obrijeni occurred within the same commune, at an approximate straight-line distance of 2.4 km between the affected holdings (Figure 7). The second outbreak was reported on 3 September 2026, 34 days after the laboratory confirmation of the first outbreak on 31 July 2026.

According to information obtained through verbal discussions during the epidemiological investigation, the flock subsequently affected in Obrijeni reportedly grazed on pasture previously used by the flock involved in the Popești outbreak. Although this information was not formally documented in the available official investigation records, the reported successive use of the same grazing area suggests a potential epidemiological link between the two holdings and highlights the importance of grazing-related biosecurity practices.

Capripoxviruses can remain infectious in contaminated organic material, particularly dried scabs, for prolonged periods. Consequently, indirect exposure through contaminated grazing environments or associated equipment represents a biologically plausible transmission mechanism.

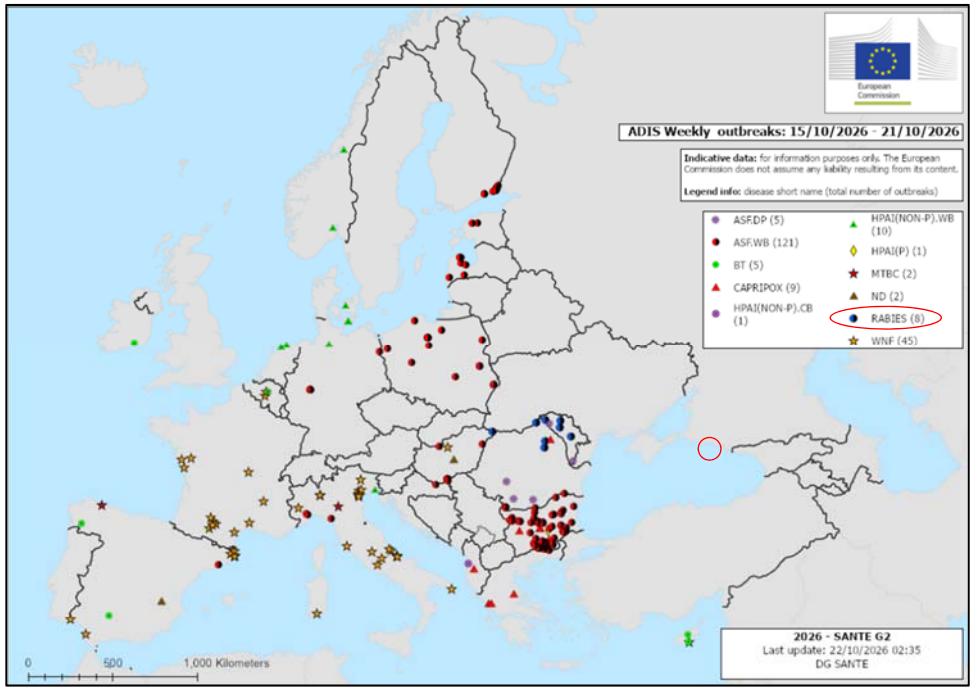


Fig. 5 European distribution of SPGP, 15.10.2026-21.10.2026
Source: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/tracesnt/adis/public/notification/outbreaks-weekly-report

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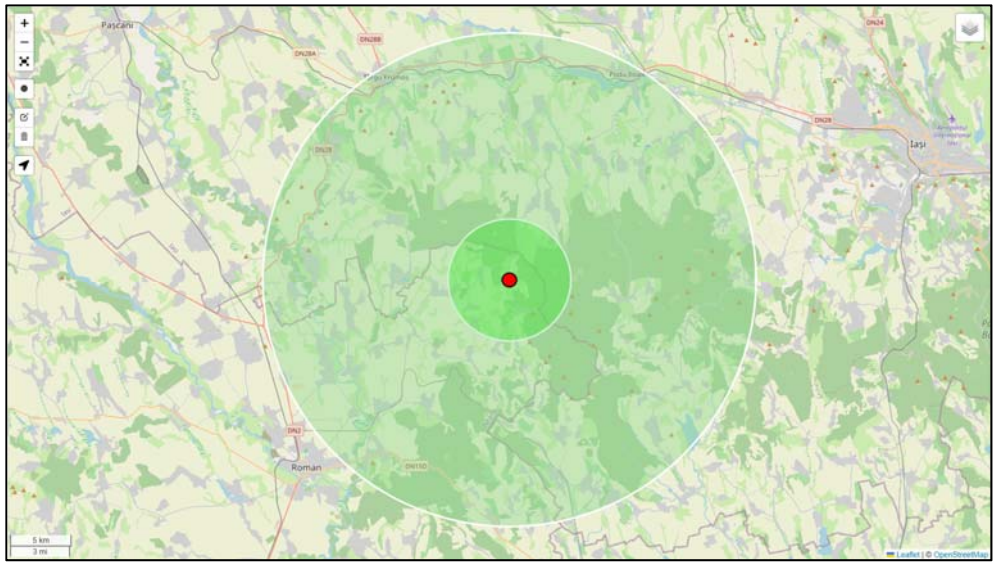


Fig. 6 Authors' own elaboration on the outbreaks (red) inside the protection (min. 5 km, opaque green) and surveillance (min. 20 km, translucent green) zones around the 3rd outbreak
Sources: https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm; Coordinates and data →https://wahis.woah.org/#/event-management

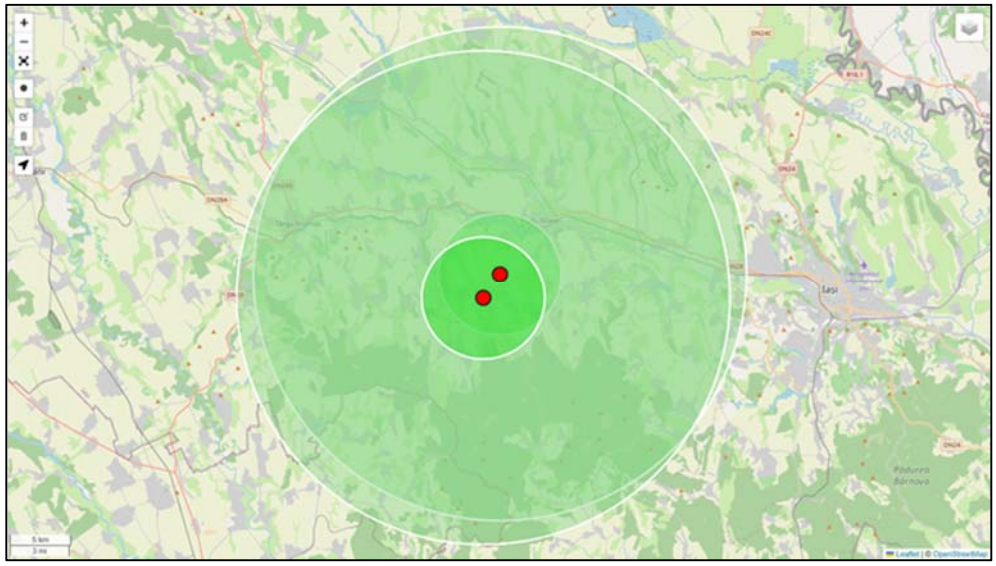


Fig. 7 Authors' own elaboration on the outbreaks (red) inside the protection (min. 5 km, opaque green) and surveillance (min. 20 km, translucent green) zones around the 1st and 2nd outbreaks
Sources: https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm; Coordinates and data →https://wahis.woah.org/#/event-management

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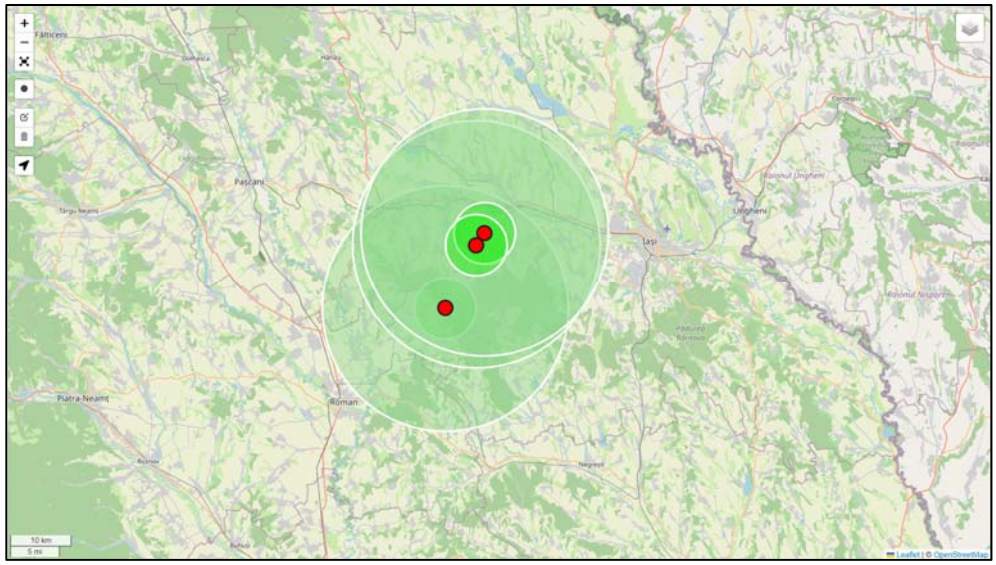


Fig. 8 Authors' own elaboration on the outbreaks (red) inside the protection (min. 5 km, opaque green) and surveillance (min. 20 km, translucent green) zones around the all three outbreaks
Sources: https://www.freemaptools.com/radius-around-point.htm; Coordinates and data →https://wahis.woah.org/#/event-management

However, the presence of infectious virus on the shared pasture was not investigated, and no comparative viral genomic sequencing was performed to establish a genetic relationship between the outbreaks.

Therefore, the available evidence supports the identification of shared pasture use as a potential epidemiological risk factor but does not demonstrate that environmental transmission occurred. Other possible transmission routes, including indirect contact through contaminated equipment, personnel or animal movements, cannot be excluded.

From a sheep production management perspective, these observations highlight the importance of documenting pasture-use history, monitoring movements between grazing areas and incorporating potentially contaminated pastures into epidemiological investigations and farm biosecurity planning [4,6].

Measures applied and legislative framework. Following the laboratory confirmation of the first outbreak on 31 July 2026, official disease control measures were implemented under the supervision of DSVSA Iasi, in accordance with the applicable European Union legislation and the county-level disease control action plan.

These measures included the killing and disposal of animals in the affected holding, restrictions on the movement of susceptible animals, and the establishment of protection and surveillance zones around the outbreak locations. The county-level response was coordinated through the Local Committee for Disease Control (CLCB Iasi), based on Decision No. 15 of 3 August 2026 and Decision No. 19 of 11 September 2026 [14,15].

Veterinary practitioners in Iasi County were informed of the epidemiological situation on 13 August 2026, while additional movement restrictions concerning small ruminants were communicated to relevant stakeholders on 31 August 2026 (official communication No. 17110) [18].

The measures were implemented within the framework established by Regulation

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(EU) 2016/429 and Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/687, together with the applicable European Union implementing decisions concerning sheep pox and goat pox outbreaks in Romania [11,12,13].

Prophylactic considerations. The occurrence of successive sheep pox outbreaks in geographically neighboring holdings highlights the importance of integrating disease prevention into routine sheep production management, particularly in extensive and semi-extensive grazing systems. In such systems, flock movements, successive pasture use and shared agricultural facilities may create epidemiological connections between holdings, even in the absence of direct animal-to-animal contact [21].

The epidemiological observations from the present study suggest that grazing management should be considered an important component of farm biosecurity. Preventive strategies should include documenting pasture-use history, avoiding the introduction of susceptible flocks onto potentially contaminated grazing areas, controlling animal movements between holdings, and ensuring appropriate cleaning and disinfection of shared equipment. Particular attention should be given to watering points, animal handling facilities and shearing equipment, which may represent potential sources of indirect exposure when contaminated.

In Romania, sheep pox prevention and control are implemented within the European Union animal health framework, with emphasis on early detection, movement restrictions, epidemiological surveillance and official disease eradication measures. Vaccination may represent an additional control option in specific epidemiological circumstances, subject to the applicable legislation and authorization by the competent veterinary authorities. Experiences reported from other affected European countries, including Greece, demonstrate the importance of evaluating vaccination strategies within broader disease control programmes [5].

From a livestock management perspective, the findings underline the need for coordinated biosecurity planning at both farm and regional levels. Effective prevention requires cooperation between livestock farmers, veterinary practitioners and competent authorities, particularly where neighboring flocks may use interconnected grazing areas or agricultural facilities. Further epidemiological investigations, including environmental sampling and molecular comparison of viral isolates, would be valuable for clarifying the potential role of indirect transmission between affected holdings [4, 9].

CONCLUSIONS

The two successive sheep pox outbreaks identified in Iasi County showed a clear spatial and temporal association, with epidemiological anamnesis indicating the successive use of the same grazing area by the affected flocks. Given the environmental resistance of *capripoxviruses*, shared pasture use represents a plausible epidemiological risk factor, potentially facilitating indirect transmission through environmental contamination. However, the available evidence does not establish a direct transmission pathway, and alternative routes of infection cannot be excluded.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating grazing management into biosecurity strategies for extensive and semi-extensive sheep production systems. Particular attention should be given to the movement of flocks between grazing areas, the successive use of potentially contaminated pastures, and the cleaning and disinfection of shared equipment. The potential involvement of contaminated shearing equipment and other fomites should also be considered during epidemiological investigations.

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The occurrence of successive outbreaks within a geographically restricted area highlights the need for coordinated surveillance, effective movement controls, and improved communication between livestock farmers and veterinary authorities. County-level disease control strategies should incorporate grazing-related biosecurity measures and the monitoring of epidemiologically connected holdings. In high-risk situations, emergency vaccination strategies may also be considered, subject to the applicable European Union legislation and authorization by the competent veterinary authorities.

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