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## Refinement of the eutectic composition in the $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$ system

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**Abstract:** The  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  alloy with the eutectic structure was obtained by cold crucible induction melting followed by crystallization. The mole ratio of components in the initial powder mixture was 35 : 65. The structure and composition of the  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  material were studied by X-ray diffraction, scanning electron microscopy, and X-ray microanalysis. The composition of the alloy is represented by two boride phases — cubic  $\text{LaB}_6$  and hexagonal  $\text{VB}_2$ . Two-phase eutectic regions up to 500  $\mu\text{m}$  in size represent a  $\text{LaB}_6$  matrix filled with 0.8–2.0  $\mu\text{m}$  thick  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers (filamentary, rod crystals).  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers are predominantly oriented along the direction of the temperature gradient that appeared when cooling the melt, i.e. from the outer surface of the sample to its center. The integrated phase area analysis was used to determine the eutectic composition:  $42 \pm 1 \text{ mol\% LaB}_6$  and  $58 \pm 1 \text{ mol\% VB}_2$ .

**Keywords:** lanthanum hexaboride, vanadium diboride, eutectic, cold crucible method, anisotropy.

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## Уточнение эвтектического состава в системе $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$

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**Аннотация:** Сплав с эвтектической структурой системы  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  был получен индукционной плавкой методом холодного тигля с последующей кристаллизацией. Мольное соотношение компонентов в исходной порошковой смеси составляло 35 : 65. Методами рентгеновской дифракции, сканирующей электронной микроскопии и микрорентгеноспектрального анализа исследованы структура и состав материала  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$ . Состав сплава представлен двумя фазами боридов – кубическим  $\text{LaB}_6$  и гексагональным  $\text{VB}_2$ . Двухфазные эвтектические области размером до 500 мкм представляют собой

матрицу  $\text{LaB}_6$ , наполненную волокнами  $\text{VB}_2$  (нитевидными, стержневыми кристаллами) толщиной 0,8–2,0 мкм, которые преимущественно ориентированы вдоль направления температурного градиента, возникшего при охлаждении расплава, т.е. от внешней поверхности образца к его центру. С помощью метода анализа интегральной площади фаз установлен состав эвтектики:  $42 \pm 1$  мол. %  $\text{LaB}_6$  и  $58 \pm 1$  мол. %  $\text{VB}_2$ .

**Ключевые слова:** гексаборид лантана, диборид ванадия, эвтектика, метод холодного тигля, анизотропия.

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## Introduction

Materials using quasi-binary systems containing rare-earth metal hexaborides (primarily  $\text{LaB}_6$ ) and transition metal diborides ( $\text{MB}_2$ , where M can be Ti, Zr, Hf, Ta, Nb, V, Cr, W, and Mo) have been the focus of research for decades due to their outstanding thermal emission properties [1–4]. When compared to poly- or single-crystal  $\text{LaB}_6$  commonly used for making thermal emission cathodes, materials based on  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{MB}_2$  eutectic systems have a lower work function and higher emission current density at the same operating temperature. Studies [2, 5, 6] show that the cathode manufacturing process significantly affects its thermal emission properties: directionally crystallized cathodes made from  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  and  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{ZrB}_2$  systems have higher emission currents than their sintered polycrystalline analogs. The directionally crystallized cathode materials manufactured by zone melting have a two-phase structure. The  $\text{LaB}_6$  matrix phase is regularly «reinforced» by rod-like or plate crystals of the diboride phase.

Better thermal emission properties associated with the formation of such a structure are of great importance for thermocathode materials. There is also another effect applicable to a wider range of materials. It occurs in directionally crystallized materials made from  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{MB}_2$  systems and results in a significant

increase in their physical and mechanical properties compared to their monocrystalline and sintered analogs [7–13].

In order to create materials using  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{MB}_2$  eutectic systems, reliable data on the phase equilibria in such systems, their composition, and eutectic temperature are required [14–23]. Experimental measurements of these properties in high-temperature oxygen-free systems are technically challenging, so the available literature is sparse. Furthermore, such data has to be verified, since it was obtained using outdated techniques. For example, [14, 15] report contradictory eutectic properties for  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$ . A possible reason is a molar to a mass concentration conversion error.

This study aims to obtain a more precise eutectic composition of the  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  system experimentally. Another goal is to make eutectic compositions by induction melting without special directional crystallization equipment. It is of practical interest since industrial-grade induction melting is more affordable compared with zone melting. In contrast, induction melting does not guarantee identical temperature gradients across the material volume. Therefore, the assessment of the structure regularity (when a continuous eutectic structure or individual eutectic regions with different orientations are formed) is of particular interest.

## Methods

We made lanthanum and vanadium borides by means of the borothermal reduction of oxides using commercially available  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  (99.99 % purity),  $\text{V}_2\text{O}_5$  (99.0 %), and amorphous boron (99.0 %) powders. A vacuum resistance furnace at 1650 °C ( $\text{LaB}_6$ ) and 1200 °C ( $\text{VB}_2$ ) was used. The isothermal hold time was 1 h at  $10^{-1}$  Pa residual gas pressure.

The average particle size of the  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$  powders measured by laser diffraction was 5 to 10  $\mu\text{m}$ . The powders contained only the target phases (cubic  $\text{LaB}_6$  and hexagonal  $\text{VB}_2$ ) without the initial components or any other crystalline phases. Elemental analysis indicated the presence of oxygen adsorbed at the particle surface, amounting to 1.2 wt.%. We used a UnionProcess HD-1 attritor (Union Process, USA) with silicon carbide grinding bodies for mixing and grinding the powders to a 1.5  $\mu\text{m}$  average particle size for 6 h in the BR-1 solvent (gasoline). About 0.7 wt.% SiC was added to the mixture due to the wear of the grinding bodies.

The concentration of the mixture components was selected to match the eutectic point, as reported in [14, 15]. Ordanyan S. [14] specifies the molar content of  $\text{VB}_2$  in the eutectic as 69 mol.%, which corresponds to 44 wt.% mass concentration of  $\text{VB}_2$ . However, according to [14, 15] the mass content of  $\text{VB}_2$  is 40 wt.%. This discrepancy may be a result of a concentration conversion error in [14], so we opted for a  $\text{VB}_2$  40 wt.% (65 mol.%) experimental mixture.

After drying, the powder was compacted into cylinders 40 mm dia. and 40 mm high using a hydraulic press. Rasplav 2 and Rasplav 3 furnaces (made in Russia) were used for induction melting of the samples. We applied the cold-crucible technology in an argon flow described in [22].

The resulting crystallized ingot was cut in two mutually perpendicular directions using a diamond cutting disc.

The microstructure of the polished sections was analyzed with a Tescan Vega 3SBH scanning electron microscope (SEM) (Czech Republic).

We used a Rigaku SmartLab 3 multipurpose diffractometer (Japan) in the  $2\theta = 10^\circ\text{--}80^\circ$  angular range ( $\text{CuK}_\alpha$  radiation, Ni filter,  $0.01^\circ$  scan step) for X-ray phase analysis of the initial components, powders, and

crystallized alloys. The phase composition and lattice cell properties were estimated with the SmartLab Studio 3 software and the ICDD PDF-2 diffraction database.

The concentration of components in the eutectic alloy was estimated by means of three alternative methods:

- SEM-EDX elemental composition analysis with an Aztec X-Act X-ray energy dispersive spectroscopy analyzer (Oxford Instruments, UK);

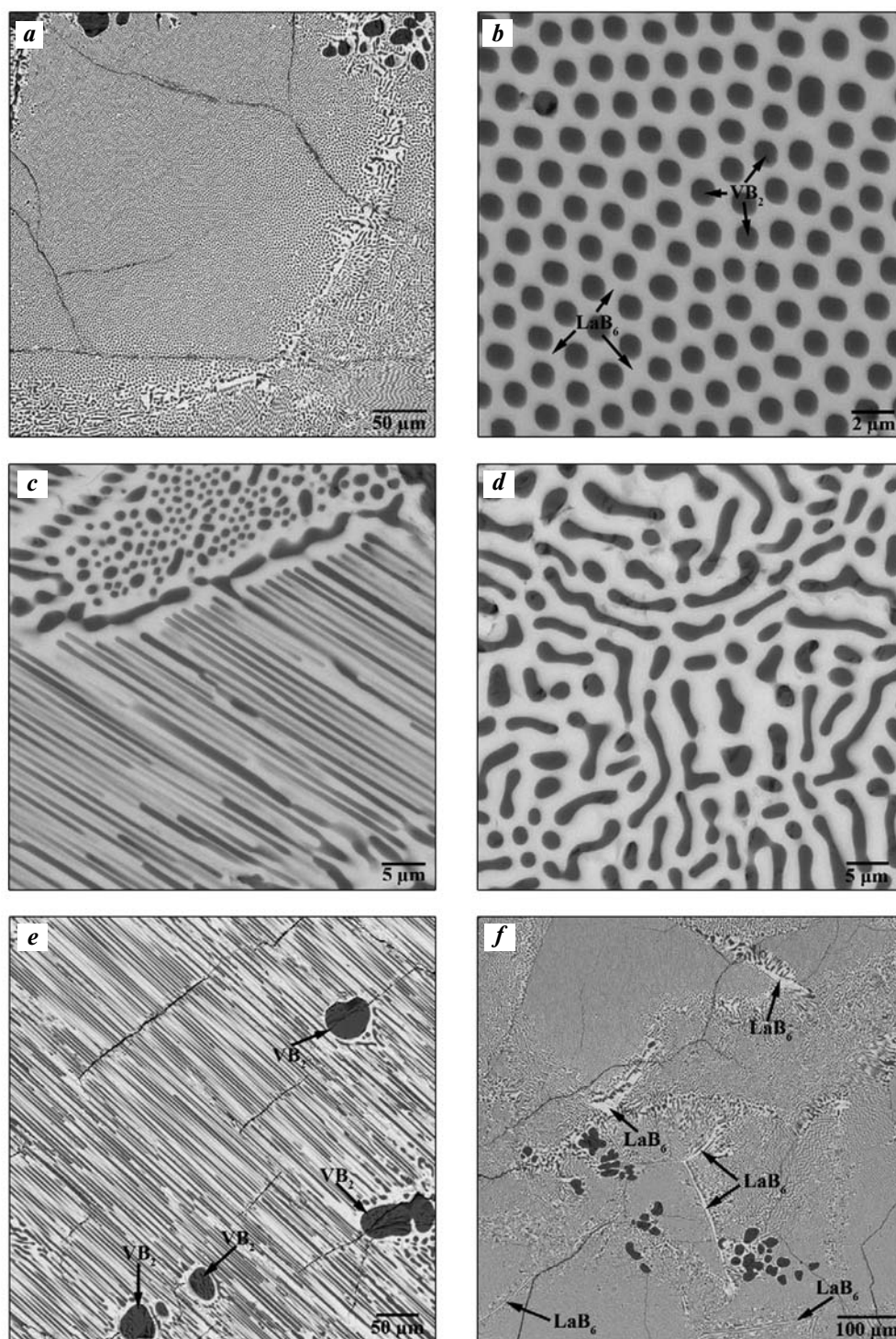
- FP XRD analysis with the SmartLab Studio 3 software;

- IAP was applied to the SEM images of the polished sections using the Thixomet Lite software package (Russia).

## Results and discussion

Fig. 1 shows the results of the  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  crystallized alloy SEM analysis. The alloy consists mainly of extensive (up to 500  $\mu\text{m}$ ) two-phase eutectic regions where the hexagonal  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers (filamentary, rod-like crystals extended along the C crystallographic axis) are located in the  $\text{LaB}_6$  matrix (Fig. 1, *a, b*). The  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers are predominantly oriented along the temperature gradient created during the melt cooling, i.e., from the outer surface of the sample to its central region. However, there are local deviations from the predominant direction (Fig. 1, *c*). The degree of structure regularity is lower than that of zone-melting materials [2–13] as was expected.

However, in comparison with the  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--NbB}_2\text{--W}_2\text{B}_5$  alloy that we obtained earlier by electric arc melting [23], in the  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  made by the cold-crucible technology, the arrangement of the eutectic regions is more ordered. Depending on the melt local cooling rate, the diameter of the  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers varies from 0.8 to 2.0  $\mu\text{m}$ . Fibers over 2  $\mu\text{m}$  tend to merge (Fig. 1, *d*). In some cases, probably where the specified concentration was disturbed due to imperfect mixing, large (up to 100  $\mu\text{m}$ ) single-phase  $\text{VB}_2$  areas with prominent rounded contours were formed (Fig. 1, *e*). Besides the deviations in concentration, this could be caused by the presence of vanadium oxide impurities on the  $\text{VB}_2$  surface preventing the contact interaction between La and V borides in the melt. Extended curved  $\text{LaB}_6$  «films» (Fig. 1, *e*) up to 10  $\mu\text{m}$  thick were also observed between some eutectic regions.



**Fig. 1.**  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  alloy structure (SEM)

*a* – general view of alloy structure; *b* – area of ordered quasibinary eutectic; *c* – area of quasibinary eutectic with different rod orientation; *d* – area of coarse conglomerate eutectic; *e, f* – areas of quasibinary eutectic with large single-phase  $\text{VB}_2$  and  $\text{LaB}_6$  inclusions

**Рис. 1.** Структура сплава  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  (СЭМ)

*a* – общий вид структуры сплава; *b* – область упорядоченной квазибинарной эвтектики; *c* – область квазибинарной эвтектики с различной ориентацией стержней; *d* – область эвтектики грубого конгломерата; *e, f* – области квазибинарной эвтектики с крупными однофазными включениями  $\text{VB}_2$  и  $\text{LaB}_6$

In addition to the eutectic areas, the alloy contains both  $\text{VB}_2$  and  $\text{LaB}_6$  crystallization areas. For this reason, we cannot identify whether the composition (eutectic, according to [14, 15]) is in the pre-eutectic or over-eutectic area of the  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  quasi-binary section.

X-ray phase analysis of the alloys confirmed their two-phase composition (Fig. 2). No crystalline phases except for hexagonal  $\text{VB}_2$  and cubic  $\text{LaB}_6$  were found. The XRD patterns of two mutually perpendicular sections in the crystallized alloys differ in the reflection intensity ratios for different families of lattice planes. It should be noted that the analyzed polished surfaces of *A* and *B* samples contain both transverse and longitudinal sections, and that the ratios of their areas were not equal. Furthermore, due to the above-noted direction of the alloy crystallization temperature gradients, the presence of eutectic regions oriented at arbitrary angles to the polished surface is inevitable.

The abnormally high intensity of (100) and (200)  $\text{LaB}_6$  reflexes is strongly pronounced in the XRD pattern *B* in contrast to *A*, where there is a smaller excess over the peak (110) (see Fig. 2), and in which 100 % in-

tensity is standard. For  $\text{VB}_2$ , we can note the anomalous intensity of the reflex (100) in pattern *B*. The deviations from the crystallographic standards can be explained by the anisotropic structure of the alloy and the preferential reflection from the corresponding lattice planes.

The  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$  phase lattice cell properties are close to their standard values (Table 1). Since there are no significant crystal lattice distortions, this confirms the opinion of S. Ordanyan [14, 15] that  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$  are insignificantly soluble in their solid state.

Table 2 lists the concentrations of eutectic alloy components estimated by EDX, IAP, and FP XRD. It also includes the data from [14, 15] for comparison.

The EDX method did not detect the oxygen impurity in the crystallized samples which we detected during the boride powder synthesis. This may be due to the fact that the oxygen was removed as volatile boron suboxide ( $\text{B}_2\text{O}_3$ ) during the sample sintering and melting experiment. A silicon carbide impurity content reached 0.7 wt.% after co-milling of boride powders. It was found locally in the peripheral regions of the crystallized alloy. It can be attributed to the gravity separation of the melt since the phase densities are different.

Table 1. Unit cell parameters of  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$  phases in the crystallized alloy

Таблица 1. Параметры элементарной ячейки фаз  $\text{LaB}_6$  и  $\text{VB}_2$  в закристаллизованном сплаве

| Phase          | Experiment          |                     | Standard     |              |
|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------|
|                | <i>a</i> , Å        | <i>c</i> , Å        | <i>a</i> , Å | <i>c</i> , Å |
| $\text{LaB}_6$ | $4.1562 \pm 0.0005$ | —                   | 2.1569       | —            |
| $\text{VB}_2$  | $2.9974 \pm 0.0005$ | $3.0560 \pm 0.0005$ | 29976        | 3.0562       |

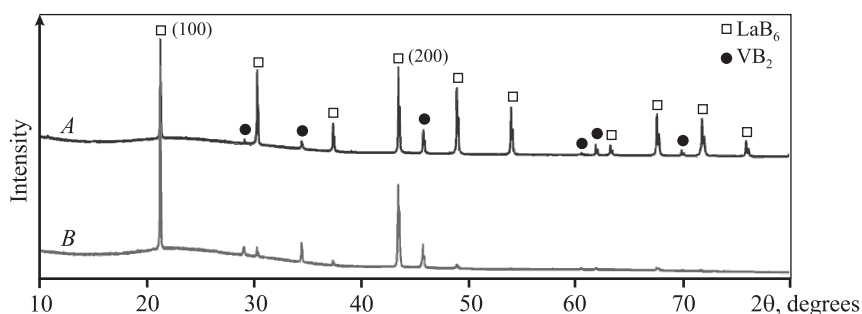
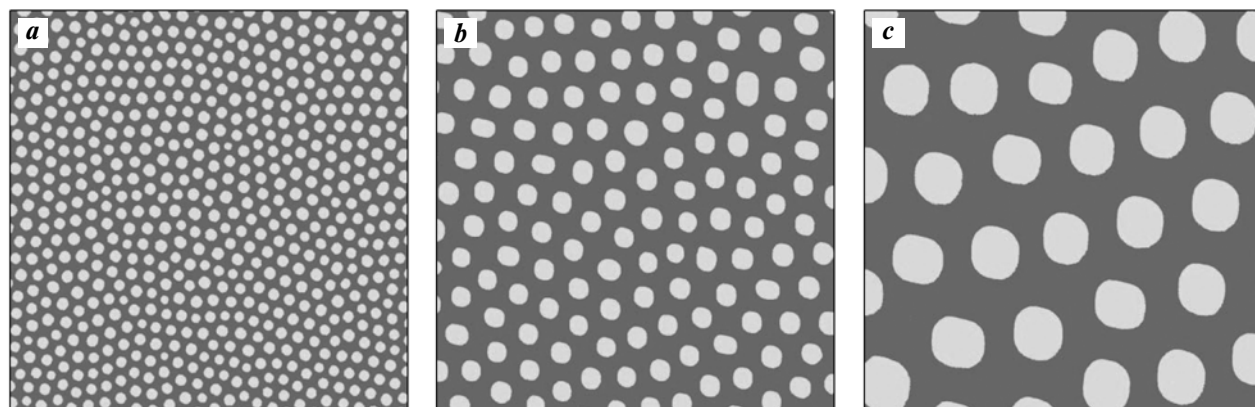


Fig. 2. XRD pattern of  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$  alloy

*A* and *B* – polished sections with predominant content of transverse (*A*) and longitudinal (*B*)  $\text{VB}_2$  fiber sections

Рис. 2. Дифрактограмма сплава  $\text{LaB}_6$ – $\text{VB}_2$

*A* и *B* – шлифы с преимущественным содержанием поперечных (*A*) и продольных (*B*) сечений волокон  $\text{VB}_2$



**Fig. 3.** Example of micrograph binarization for  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  alloy eutectic areas

*a* –  $\times 4500$ , *b* –  $\times 12000$ , *c* –  $\times 20000$  magnification

**Рис. 3.** Пример бинаризации микрофотографий эвтектических областей сплава  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$

*a* – увеличение  $4500\times$ , *b* –  $12000\times$ , *c* –  $20000\times$

**Table 2. Contents of components (mol.%) in  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$  eutectic alloy**

Таблица 2. Содержание компонентов (мол.%) в эвтектическом сплаве  $\text{LaB}_6\text{--VB}_2$

| Detection method | $\text{LaB}_6$ | $\text{VB}_2$ |
|------------------|----------------|---------------|
| IAP              | $42 \pm 1$     | $58 \pm 1$    |
| EDX              | $38 \pm 4$     | $62 \pm 4$    |
| FP XRD           | $35 \pm 5$     | $65 \pm 5$    |
| From [14]        | 31             | 69            |
| From [15]        | 35             | 65            |

X-ray analysis cannot selectively examine the sample surface. Thus the result characterizes the concentrations of components not only in the eutectic but also in large single-phase regions (see Fig. 1, *d–e*). This significantly reduces the accuracy of this method as applied to this problem. IAP and EDX methods can select a specific sample region, so they were used to directly analyze the eutectic regions. However, due to the large content of light boron atoms, the component concentration measurement error (MSE) for the EDX method is also high.

Twenty binarized micrographs of the eutectic regions with  $\text{VB}_2$  fiber cross sections from different sample sections were taken for multiple IAP measurements (Fig. 3). Statistical processing of the results indicated that the eutectic contains 42 mol.% of  $\text{LaB}_6$  and 58 mol.% of  $\text{VB}_2$  (1 % MSE).

## Conclusion

As a result of the induction melting experiment and subsequent crystallization of the samples made from a mixture of  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $\text{VB}_2$  boride powders, alloys with a clear eutectic structure were obtained. The two-phase eutectic regions up to 500  $\mu\text{m}$  are an  $\text{LaB}_6$  matrix filled with  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers (filamentous, rod-shaped crystals) 0.8–2.0  $\mu\text{m}$  thick. The  $\text{VB}_2$  fibers are predominantly oriented along the melt cooling temperature gradient, i.e., from the outer surface to the center.

The alloys contain only two boride phases: cubic  $\text{LaB}_6$ ; and hexagonal  $\text{VB}_2$ . X-ray methods detected no mutual solubility of the phases.

The comparison of the alloy component concentration measurements by different methods showed that IAP is best suited to measuring eutectic concentration components. The eutectic composition determined by IAP is as follows:  $42 \pm 1$  mol.% of  $\text{LaB}_6$  and  $58 \pm 1$  mol.% of  $\text{VB}_2$ . The discrepancy with the published data is 11 mol.%. [14] and 7 mol.% [15].

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