Recent Trends in Chemical and Material Sciences
Vol. 2

Study on Nanophosphors with Partially Polymerized SiO$_4$ Tetrahedra Produced by Evaporation of Ca$_2$Y$_8$(SiO$_4$)$_6$O$_2$: Eu Polycrystals

M. G. Zuev[1,2*], V. G. Il'ves[3], S. Yu. Sokovnin[2,3] and E. Yu. Zhuravleva[2]

ABSTRACT

Nanophosphors in the amorphous state were produced for the first time by pulsed electron beam evaporation of micrometer-sized polycrystalline phosphors of the composition Ca$_2$Y$_8$(SiO$_4$)$_6$O$_2$: Eu. It was found that the Raman spectrum is modified and the forbidden band width of the samples increases when the particle size lowers from micro- to nanodimensional state. The spectral luminescent characteristics in polycrystalline and amorphous states have been examined. It was established that during the transition to nanoamorphous state the phosphors change their photoluminescence color from red-orange (Eu^{3+}) to blue (Eu^{2+}).

Keywords: Nanophosphor; microscopy; raman spectra; luminescence; Eu^{3+}; Eu^{2+}.

1. INTRODUCTION

The processes of formation of nanophosphors and the study of the nature of their luminescence represent a topical problem. Of interest is the effect of nanodimensional state of phosphors on radiationless losses and luminescence yield, on broadening and displacement of bands, on the variation in the structure of optical centers, as well as on vibrational spectra. Silicates with oxyapatite structure are known as effective matrices for luminescent materials if they are activated with RE ions [1-8]. There is no information in the literature about the production of nanophosphors based on silicates of the composition Ca$_2$Y$_8$(SiO$_4$)$_6$O$_2$: Eu in amorphous state. It is known that nanophosphors can find application in nanophotonics [9,10]. New nanophosphor can be used as components to create white LEDs.

The aim of this study is to develop the method for obtaining new complex oxide silicate nanoluminophores containing europium ions, to consider the mechanism of reduction of Eu$^{3+} \rightarrow$ Eu^{2+} ions in the process of evaporation of polycrystalline phosphors by an electron beam (EBE), to determine the spectral-luminescent characteristics of the obtained phosphors.

In this work, using method EBE of polycrystalline phosphor Ca$_2$Y$_8$(SiO$_4$)$_6$O$_2$: Eu targets, we were the first to produce nanopowders (NP) in the amorphous state. A modification of the Raman spectra was found when the particle size decreased from the bulk to the nanodimensional state. Along with isolated SiO$_4$ groups, a small condensation of SiO$_4$ tetrahedra occurs in nanoamorphous samples, which is analogous to the polymerization effect in rapid-quenched silicate melts. In a number of works it was shown that polymerization processes affect the characteristics of phosphors [11,12]. Their spectral luminescent characteristics have been studied. It was established that during the transition to nanoamorphous state the phosphors change their photoluminescence color from red-orange (Eu^{3+}) to blue (Eu^{2+}).

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[1]*Institute of Solid State Chemistry, Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia.*
[2]*Ural Federal University (Named After First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin), Ekaterinburg, Russia.*
[3]*Institute of Electrophysics, Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia.*
Corresponding author: E-mail: zuev @ihim.uran.ru;

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to obtain NP, we first synthesized $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ compounds (δ – nonstoichiometry) with oxyapatitie structure. The samples were synthesized by annealing of a mixture of reagents $CaCO_3$, Y_2O_3, Eu_2O_3, and SiO_2 (at least 99.99% purity grade) in air. Stoichiometric amounts of the initial components were mixed in an agate mortar with addition of ethanol. Then the powders were placed into alundum crucibles and annealed in air in the temperature interval 1000 – 1450°C with intermediate grinding of the charge. The total time of annealing was 100 h. The XPA was carried out on a Shimadzu XRD-7000 diffractometer (CuK_{α} radiation, CM-3121 counter monochromator, Scintillation Counter detector) using the ICDD card-file. The X-ray diffraction patterns of the produced samples recorded in the angle interval 2θ = 5 - 70° were refined by the full-profile Rietveld method with the use of the ICDD card-file. Fig. 1 shows typical X-ray diffraction patterns of the synthesized solid solutions $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}(SiO_4)_6O_2$. The solid solutions belong to the structural type of oxyapatite. These compositions were chosen because in the series of $Ca_2Y_{8(1-x)}Eu_{8x}(SiO_4)_6O_2$ phosphors the solid solution with x = 0.2 has the maximal integral luminescence intensity of Eu^{3+} ions. At x > 0.2, concentration quenching of Eu^{3+} luminescence is observed. The lattice parameters of the $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ compound were a = 9.34719, c = 6.78283 Å, and V = 513.220 Å³.

Fig. 1. The X-ray diffraction patterns of Ca₂Y₆.₄Eu₁.₆Si₆O₂₆₋δ

The nanopowders were produced in vacuum by EBE of ceramic targets obtained from $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ on a NANOBIM-2 facility [13]. The targets in the form of disks with 20–30 mm diameter and height to 20 mm made of bulk phosphors were produced by annealing of disks at 1400ºC for 40 h. The energy of electrons was 40 keV, the electron beam pulse energy was 1.8 J, the pulse duration was 100 μs, and the pulse frequency was 100–200 Hz. The duration of target evaporation was 40–60 min. The target rotation rate was 8.3 rev/min. The nanopowders were deposited on 4 mm thick noncooled glass substrates placed around the target. The nanopowders were collected from the glass substrates with the use of titanium foil.

The specific surface area of the powders (S_{sp}) was determined by the Brunauer-Emmett-Teller (BET) method [14] on a Micromeritics TriStar 3000 device. The microscopic analysis of the NP was carried out a JEOL JEM 2100 transmission electron microscope. The thermal analysis of the NP was performed on a NETZSCH STA-409 thermal analyzer using TG and DSC methods. Raman spectra were recorded using the Renishaw U1000 Raman microscopespectrometer using an argon laser (?λ= 514.5 nm) as an excitation source. The photoluminescence and excitation spectra were recorded respectively on an MDR-204 spectrometer (D lamp, R928 photomultiplier from Hamamatsu) and a Cary Eclipse fluorescence spectrophotometer (Xe pulse lamp with exceptionally long lifetime, pulsed at 80 Hz, pulse width at half peak height ~ 2 μs, peak power equivalent to 75 kW). For the

experimental estimation of the forbidden band width, the absorption spectra were recorded on a UV-2401 PC device (Shimadzu).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The powders had a white color. The average particle size of the NP was estimated using the method BET and determined from the HR-TEM results. The characteristics of the BET surface and the properties of the nanoparticles are as follows: S_{sp} (BET) = 232.25 m^2/g, ρ = 4.5 g/cm^3, $d_{BET} \approx$ 5.7 nm. According to the HR-TEM data, d_{HR-TEM} = 15−18 nm. The microscopy and electronography data show that the NP are practically amorphous (JEOL JEM 2100 microscope). Fig. 2 displays the TEM pictures of the NP produced on the basis of $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$. According to the XPA data, the NP are X-ray amorphous. Synchronous DSC-TG analysis (heating) of the nanoparticles was carried out to determine the NP crystallization temperature (T_{cr}). Crystallization of amorphous nanoparticles begins at a low temperature as indicated by a strong exothermic peak in the temperature interval from 330 to 1000ºC. The low thermal stability of the NP (the initial crystallization temperature is T_{cr} = 330º C) is caused by the effect of the nanoparticle size factor. The large extent of the exothermic peak is indicative of a slow kinetics of amorphous NP transformation into crystalline powder, which is most likely to be due to different granulometric composition of amorphous nanoparticles.
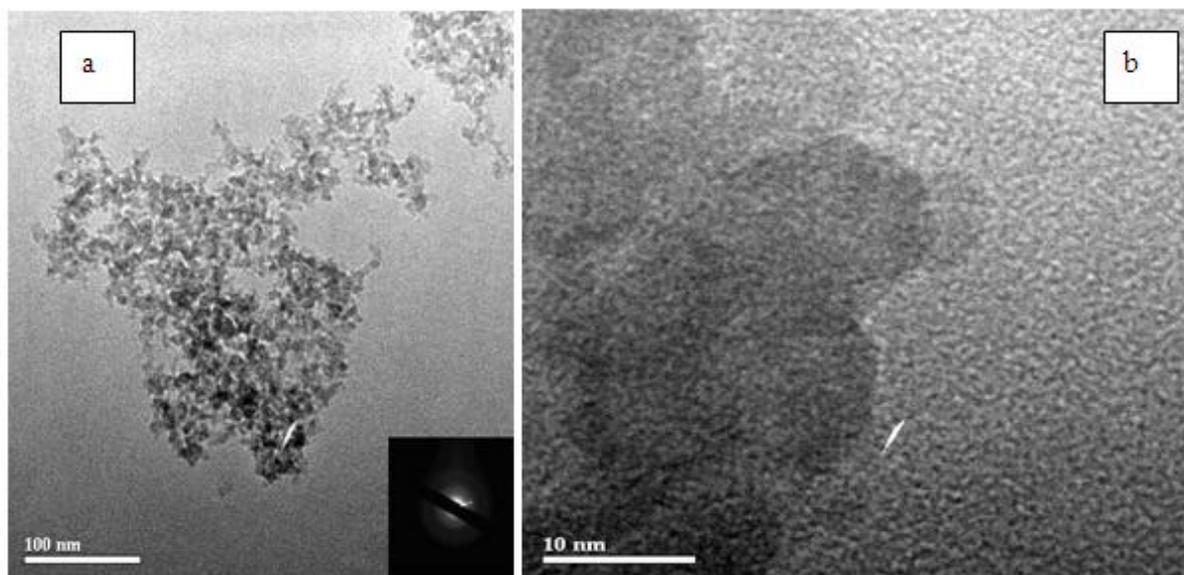

Fig. 2. The TEM images of the NP at different magnifications: (the inset in Fig. 1,a shows an electron diffraction pattern of amorphous NP); 1,b – quasispherical amorphous nanoparticles

The Raman spectra of the $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ micropowder and NP were studied (Fig. 3). In the oxyapatite crystals (sp. gr. P6₃/m, Z = 1), the site-symmetry of atoms was Y1 – 4f, Ca – 4f, Y2 – 6h, Si – 6h, O – 6h, O – 6h, O – 12i, O – 2a; Z = 1. As a result of group-theoretic analysis, the following representation was obtained for the optical vibrations of silicate (1) [15]:

$$\Gamma_{Ca2Y8(SiO4)6O2} = 12A_g \text{ (R)} + 8E_{1g} \text{ (R)} + 13E_{2g} \text{ (R)} + 8A_u \text{ (IR)} + 12E_{1u} \text{ (IR)}. \tag{1}$$

Thus, 33 lines should be expected in the Raman spectra, and 20 bands in the IR spectra. The vibrational spectrum of real crystals of $Ca_2Y_8(SiO4)_6O_2$: Eu can differ from the spectrum of ideal crystals. This difference can be due to the presence of defects in the crystal lattice. Europium substituting for yttrium atoms may also occupy the 4f and 6h sites. The Raman spectrum of real crystals containing europium impurity and of NP may differ from that of ideal crystals. This difference may be due to the presence of structural defects.
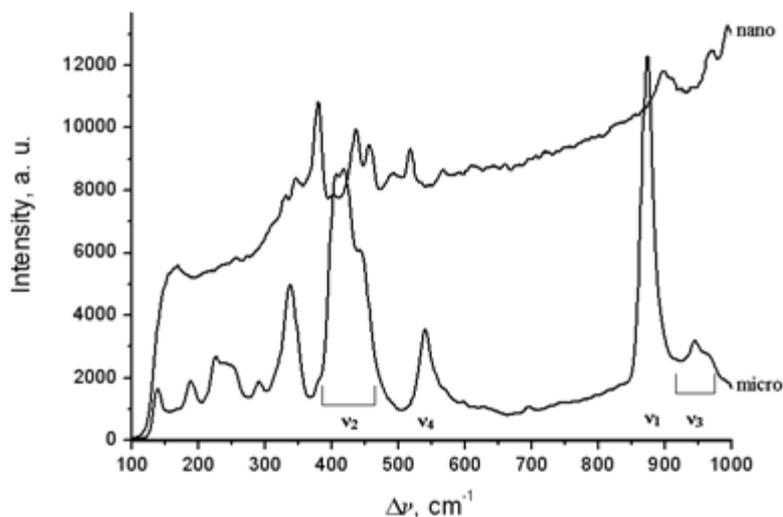
Fig. 3. The raman spectra of micro- and NP

The frequencies v_1, v_2, v_3, and v_4 of the inner vibrations of isolated tetrahedra SiO_4 are denoted. The spectrum of amorphous NP demonstrates the formation of a structure that differs slightly from that of the initial polycrystalline sample. The arrangement of lines in the NP spectrum indicates that it contains mainly isolated groups SiO_4. At the same time, the appearance of frequencies in the region $600 - 700$ cm^{-1} testifies to the formation of an insignificant concentration of polymerized silicon-oxygen fragments in the sample [16]. The displacement of the lines in the interval $290 - 350$ cm^{-1} into the high-frequency region is presumably due to the increase in the force coefficient value of component E_{2g} of the libration vibration of the SiO_4 complex. The frequencies v_2, v_1, and v_3 are also shifted into the high-energy region. The frequency v_4, on the contrary, is shifted into the low-frequency region. These effects in the spectrum can be induced by the unification of a large number of oxygen vacancies in the sample that appear during evaporation of microsamples. The unification of vacancies leads to translation symmetry breakdown. Such symmetry breakdown can be also the cause of line strength reduction at v_1 [17,18].

The fundamental absorption spectra of the samples have been recorded. The forbidden band value was found to increase from ~3.57 to ~4.21 eV at the absorption edge when going from micro- to NP. The absorption edge of phosphors is determined by the absorption in the charge transfer band (the $4f$ $^72p^{-1}$ state). Here, optical absorption includes the p state of oxygen which is sensitive to a change in the environment of the Eu^{3+} ion [1].

 Fig. 4 depicts the photoluminescence spectra of $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ polycrystals and NP at $\lambda_{ex} = 394$ nm. The $^5D_0 \rightarrow {}^7F_0$ transition band is inhomogeneously broadened. Its decomposition into Gaussian components allows distinguishing two bands. The Gaussian 1 has $\lambda_{max} = 577.6$ nm, and 2 - $\lambda_{max} = 579.9$ nm.These bands confirm the existence of two optical centers formed by Eu^{3+}. Since at Y substitution the Eu^{3+} ion occupies two crystallographic positions in the structure of silicate, 4f and 6h, it forms two types of optical centers. The spectrum are the total luminescence spectrum of these two centers. The spectra contain also a broad band with a maximum at 443 nm, for which the Eu^{2+} ions are responsible ($4f^65d \rightarrow 4f^7(^8S_{7/2})$ transition). The mechanism of formation of Eu^{2+} ions can be the following. When $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ polycrystals are synthesized by high-temperature annealing of a mixture of initial components, $V_{Ca}^{//}$ vacancies are formed in the $4f$ position of the produced oxyapatite.

The $V_{Ca}^{//}$ vacancies give their negative charge to two Eu_Y^{3+} or Eu_{Gd}^{3+} ions. This leads to the formation of Eu^{2+}.

From comparison of the micro- and NP spectra it is seen that the luminescence of the Eu^{3+} ions in the nanophosphors is almost suppressed. The luminescence of the NP is due mainly to the Eu^{2+} ions. The band maximum is at ~448 nm. By decomposing the Eu^{2+} luminescence spectra into Gaussians, it is possible to estimate the luminescence maxima of the two centers formed by Eu^{2+} ions in the 6h and 4f positions in the apatite structure. The Gaussian 1 has $\lambda_{max} = 444.2$ and 2 - 472.5 nm. In the luminescence spectrum of Eu^{2+} ions of the nanosample produced by evaporation of $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ in vacuum, Gaussian I has $\lambda_{max} = 465.5$ nm and Gaussian II − $\lambda_{max} = 543.0$ nm. It can be supposed that the Eu^{2+} ions are additionally formed in the nanosamples due to radiation reduction $Eu^{3+} \rightarrow Eu^{2+}$. Such reduction during exposure to ionizing radiation (α, β, γ, X-Ray and laser) is possible in compounds containing SiO₄ groups [19,20]. The mechanism of this process can be as follows. Electron is released from the SiO_4^{4-} tetrahedron due to Si─O bond rupture during evaporation of the sample by irradiation of pulsed electron beam. The $(SiO_4^{3-})^+$ state emerges [21]. The released electron is captured by Eu^{3+} ions acting as electron-trapping centers [22]; Eu^{3+} is reduced to Eu^{2+}. Therefore, the following reactions are possible (2) и (3) [23,24]:
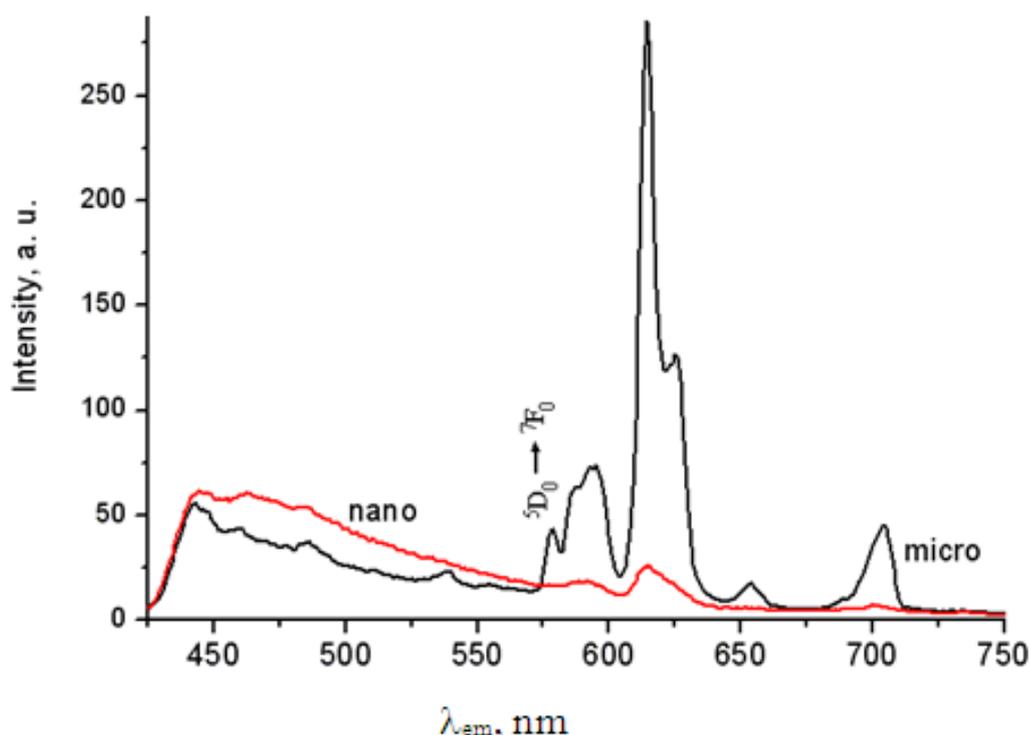
$$SiO_4^{4-} \xrightarrow{\text{EBE}} (SiO_4^{3-})^+ + e,$$

(2)

$$Eu^{3+} + e \rightarrow Eu^{2+}.$$

(3)

Fig. 4. The photoluminescence spectra of micro- and NP

Fig. 5 shows the excitation spectra of the samples. A part of the broad band in the λ_{ex} interval 260 – 300 nm is due to the charge transfer process for the Eu^{3+} ions in the microsamples. For the NP, this band is virtually absent, which is indicative of a decrease in the concentration of Eu^{3+} ions. The broad band in the interval 310 – 400 nm is due to the transition of $4f^65d$ ions of Eu^{2+}. For the nanosample the Eu^{2+} excitation spectrum ($\lambda_{em} = 443$ nm) is almost the same as for the bulk sample.
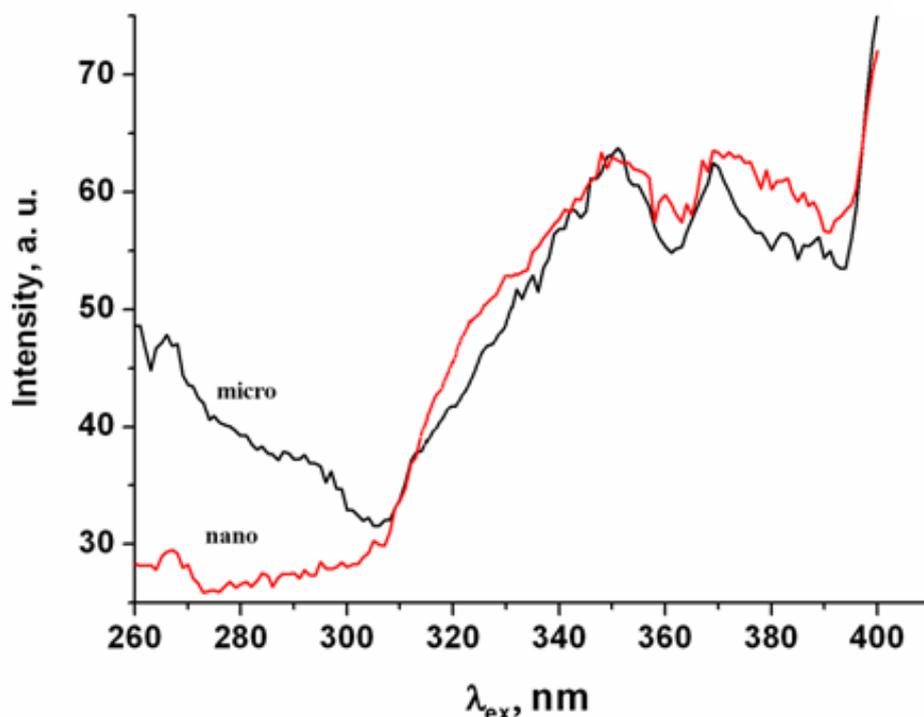
Fig. 5. The excitation spectra of the samples (λ_{em} = 443 nm) of micro- and NP

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, silicate NP in the nanoamorphous state have been produced for the first time from polycrystals of the composition $Ca_2Y_8(SiO_4)_6O_2$: Eu by electron beam evaporation of target. The spectral luminescent characteristics of $Ca_2Y_{6.4}Eu_{1.6}Si_6O_{26-\delta}$ phosphors in polycrystalline state and in nanoamorphous state obtained on the basis of polycrystals have been studied. It was found that the Raman spectrum is modified when the particles decrease from micro- to nanodimensional state. A resonance transfer of excitation energy from the Eu^{3+} ions to the Eu^{2+} ions in micro- and nanophosphors was detected.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was carried out in accordance with the state assignment of the Institute of Solid State Chemistry, Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences and plans for research and development.

The authors thank I. V. Baklanova, for help with the recording of Raman-spectra and PL-spectra of the samples.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Biography of author(s)

Prof. M. G. Zuev
Institute of Solid State Chemistry, Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia.
Ural Federal University (Named After First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin), Ekaterinburg, Russia.

He is a Professor, Doctor of Chemistry, Chief Researcher of the Oxidation Systems Department of the Institute of Solid State Chemistry of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Professor of the Department of Physical and Colloidal Chemistry of the Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin. He Graduated from the Ural Polytechnic Institute named after S.M. Kirov, Faculty of Physics and Technology. His Research interests include solid state chemistry, physical and inorganic chemistry, problems of synthesis of new materials, spectroscopy, solid state medical chemistry. He has more than 170 articles, 33 Russia patents and 9 monographs. The spectral properties of new nanosized phosphors obtained by evaporation by a pulsed electron beam have been studied for the first time by him. Nanoamorphous blue and white phosphors were obtained and The effect of the shift of the maxima of the photoluminescence spectra of nanoparticles of simple oxides in a constant magnetic field is found. A new scientific direction has been created: solid state medical chemistry. New radiopaque substances for medicine have been developed.

Dr. V. G. Il'ves
Institute of Electrophysics, Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia.

He is a Senior Researcher, Electrophysical Technologies Group, UB RAS Institute of Electrophysics. He graduated from the Department of Experimental Physics of the Physics and Technology Faculty of the Ural Polytechnic Institute in 1981. Until 1984, he worked as a design engineer at an engineering plant. He completed a full-time postgraduate study at the Institute of Solid State Chemistry In 1990, and Ph.D. degree in technical sciences at the Institute of Electrophysics UB RAS In 2010. He worked in the field of business (1993-2004). His main area of scientific interests is materials science. His main publications are devoted to the synthesis and study of the physicochemical properties of nanopowders of oxides and fluorides of various metals using the method of pulsed electron evaporation and studies of phase equilibria and thermodynamic properties of low-melting alloys based on III-V p-metals. Recently, he has been actively developing a line of research related to the use of nanopowders in biomedicine and catalysis. He investigated the ferromagnetic properties of a number of nanopowders of various nonmagnetic metal oxides and fluorides in the bulk state (the so-called d0 ferromagnetism). Based on the research results, he received several patents for inventions, published one monograph and more than a hundred different publications in domestic and foreign journals. He has participated in two international scientific projects of the Russian Foundation for Basic Research.

Prof. S. Yu. Sokovnin
Ural Federal University (Named After First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin), Ekaterinburg, Russia.
Institute of Electrophysics, Ural Branch of Russian Academy of Sciences, Ekaterinburg, Russia.

He is a Doctor of Technical Sciences, head of group of electrophysical technologies, Institute of Electrophysics of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Yekaterinburg, Russia. He is a Professor of the Department of Experimental Physics, Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin. He was born in 1960 in Tomsk, Russia. He graduated from the Tomsk Politechnical Institute in 1983 with the diploma of engineer-physicist. He graduated from the post-graduate courses of the IEP UB RAS and got a degree of Candidate (1994) and Doctor of Technical Sciences in Electrophysics in 2005. He developed several repetitive nanosecond electron accelerators for industrial application in radiation technologies. He developed a method for production of nanopowders, including evaporation of a target by a pulsed electron beam, condensation of the vapor of the material in a low-pressure gas, and deposition of nanopowders on a large cold square crystallizer. By this method, it is possible to produce oxide nanopowders with the specific surface up to 338 sq. m/g at the production rate of up to 10 g/h and the energy consumption about 120 W□h/g.

Dr. E. Yu. Zhuravleva
Ural Federal University (Named After First President of Russia B. N. Yeltsin), Ekaterinburg, Russia.

She is an Associate Professor of the Department of Experimental Physics of the Physico-Technological Institute of the Ural Federal University named after the First President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin. She is leading specialist of the Laboratory of Applied Nuclear Physics of the same university. She is a Graduate of the Faculty of Physics and Technology of the Ural Polytechnic Institute named after S.M. Kirov with the qualification of an engineer-physicist with a degree in Automation and Electronics. After completing full-time postgraduate studies, she defended her thesis. The topic of her dissertation work was the use of gamma-activation analysis for the analysis of various natural and industrial objects using the bremsstrahlung of the M-20 microtron, in the construction of which she took part. She was Trained at the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna. Her research interests in the field of accelerator technology, in particular, electron accelerators, nanotechnology, radiation technologies in the field of material modification, in medicine and biology, and in food processing. She is an Author of over 50 publications.

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