

# 1757. Dynamics of the formation of thin LaNbO<sub>4</sub> films using magnetron sputtering

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**Abstract.** Doped lanthanum niobate thin films were deposited using magnetron sputtering technique. W and Mg cathodes were used for doping LaNbO<sub>4</sub> thin films. Thin films were deposited on two types of substrates: amorphous optical quartz (SiO<sub>2</sub>) and polycrystalline Alloy 600 (Ni-Cr-Fe). The structural and morphological analysis was performed using X-ray diffraction (XRD), scanning electron microscopy (SEM), energy dispersive spectrometry (EDS), atomic force microscope (AFM). The nonequilibrium growth of the thin films and the nonlinear dynamics of the sputtered atoms and their oxides is observed. XRD analysis revealed that Mg promotes crystallite formation in La<sub>1-x</sub>Mg<sub>x</sub>NbO<sub>4</sub> thin films and W inhibits crystallite formation in LaNb<sub>1-x</sub>W<sub>x</sub>O<sub>4</sub> thin films. EDS analysis showed that La<sub>1-x</sub>Mg<sub>x</sub>NbO<sub>4</sub> and LaNb<sub>1-x</sub>W<sub>x</sub>O<sub>4</sub> thin films are nonstoichiometric. They have deficit or excess oxygen and Nb (compared to lanthanum). It was noticed that the nonstoichiometry has influence on the morphology of thin films. The cross section of formed thin films analysis showed that grains or fibers are not visible in the thin films with excess oxygen concentration and thin films with deficit of oxygen has fiber type structure. Oxygen concentration also influences the surface morphology. The roughness of the surface increases (0.2 nm ÷ 0.3 nm for La<sub>1-x</sub>Mg<sub>x</sub>NbO<sub>4</sub> and 0.2nm ÷ 0.8 nm for LaNb<sub>1-x</sub>W<sub>x</sub>O<sub>4</sub>) with decreasing oxygen concentration.

**Keywords:** thin film growth, lanthanum niobium oxide, microstructure, magnetron sputtering.

## 1. Introduction

The formation of the thin films by depositing particles on a substrate and controlling the surface properties enable to get the materials for various technological applications. The physical properties of the thin films are strongly related to their morphologies and surface roughness. Despite the large investigation on proton conductivity of doped LaNbO<sub>4</sub>, there is a lack of their morphology and structure investigations [1-3]. Strength, toughness, hardness, thermal expansion coefficient, density and electrical properties change under influence of microstructure. For example, strength of nanocomposite materials increases with decreasing grain size and proton conductivity decreases due to phase transition and space charge effect in grain boundaries [4-6].

Microstructure depends on the formation method and doping effects. The most attractive dopants for substitution on the La site are Ca<sup>2+</sup>, Sr<sup>2+</sup>, Mg<sup>2+</sup> and on the Nb site are Ti<sup>4+</sup>, Sn<sup>4+</sup>, Zr<sup>4+</sup> [7]. These elements have the lowest solution energy and similar ionic radii to La<sup>3+</sup> and Nb<sup>5+</sup> respectively. The solubility of the dopants is up to 1 mol % in it [3]. LaNbO<sub>4</sub> is usually synthesized and formed via conventional solid state reaction, spray pyrolysis, spin coating, screen printing, pulsed laser deposition, etc. [8-12].

Magnetron sputtering method was not used for deposition of doped LaNbO<sub>4</sub> thin films, although thin films deposited using this method are clean, dense, have good adhesion and etc. In addition, the deposition processes are quite well investigated, especially the growth evolution and the dynamics of the atoms and particles deposited on the substrate and forming the thin films. The deposition of the atoms and particles is described through two main models: random deposition with surface relaxation and the migration of the particles to reproduce surface layer by layer. The obtained structure of the film can be described using structure zone models (SZM). Three structure zone models are known: Movchan-Demchishin SZM, Thornton SZM and Barna-Adamik SZM [13-15]. Two of these models (Thornton and Movchan-Demchishin) are conventional and one

(Barna-Adamik) is derived.

Movchan-Demchishin model describes structure evolution of coatings during physical vapor deposition process [15]. According to it, thin film structure depends on substrate temperature ( $T_s$ ) and coating material melting temperature ( $T_m$ ) ratio. The growth of thin films is divided into three zones: zone I ( $T_s/T_m < 0,3$ ), zone II ( $0,3 < T_s/T_m < 0,45$ ) and zone III ( $T_s/T_m > 0,45$ ).

Thornton model describes structure evolution during sputter deposition process. This model suggests that the structure of the films depends on argon pressure and on substrate temperature ( $T_s$ ) and coating material melting temperature ( $T_m$ ) ratio. The growth is also divided into zones: zone I ( $T_s/T_m < 0,1$ ), zone T ( $0,1 < T_s/T_m < 0,3$ ), zone II ( $0,3 < T_s/T_m < 0,5$ ) and zone III ( $T_s/T_m > 0,5$ ) [14].

Barna-Adamik SZM states that impurities and dopants have influence on the thin film growth [13]. The impurities and dopants can interact with the surface in two ways. Dopants dissolve in crystal lattices or segregate on the growing crystal faces [16]. So, impurities which are dissolved in to lattices have no influence on the growth of the coating. The influence of the impurities increases with increasing their concentration in coating. It is also known that impurities can promote (promoters) or inhibit (inhibitors) grain growth. For example, oxygen is inhibitor and tin is promoter for aluminum [13]. Therefore the aluminum grains shrink with increasing oxygen concentration and widen with increasing tin concentration.

As mentioned above there is lack of investigations on structure of doped lanthanum niobate. There is investigated only Mg and Ca influence on phase transition from low temperature monoclinic (Fergusonite) to high temperature tetragonal (Scheelite) [17, 18]. Transition can be described as a shear transformation in which the Scheelite structure is partially conserved while certain sheets are slightly shifted [19]. It is known that Mg and Ca dopants decrease phase transition temperature [18, 19]. Fergusonite-to-Scheelite transition of pure lanthanum niobate occurs at  $510 \pm 15$  °C and of doped at 490 °C. However, it is possible that not all the materials have such effect. In case of doped  $\text{TiO}_2$ , dopant radius and valence influence phase transition [20]. In addition dopant concentration has influence on strains of crystal lattice and strains may influence phase transition [21, 22].

Three magnetrons system used in these experiments gives very complex morphological structure which can not be described by convectional statistical mechanics. There are a few dynamic models describing the morphological evolution of the thin film growth. Dynamic scaling theory considers the surface with fractal morphology which is resulted by surface diffusion and random fluctuations during growth [23, 24]. Drotar's dynamic growth model is extending the dynamic scaling model by taking into account shadowing (sputtered particles stick to the surface on the highest surface points) and re-emission (non-sticking particles on the lowest surface points) processes [24, 25]. These models give large discrepancy between theoretical and experimental approaches for complex materials. Monte Carlo simulation methods that include shadowing and re-emission effects during the thin film growth were successful in explaining thin film growth and states that the values of surface roughness and surface growth in general do not depend on the experimental system [24]. Therefore the aim of our work is to investigate the influence of Mg and W dopants concentration on the dynamics of formation of lanthanum niobate thin films using magnetron sputtering technique.

## 2. Experimental

$\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  and  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films were formed using magnetron sputtering technique on amorphous optical quartz ( $\text{SiO}_2$ ) and polycrystalline Alloy 600 (Ni-Cr-Fe) substrates. The substrates were cleaned in an ultrasonic bath in pure acetone and treated with  $\text{Ar}^+$  ion plasma (10 min) before deposition. The temperature of the substrates was 300 °C during deposition. The substrate was rotated in order to achieve greater homogeneity (rotation speed – 8 RPM).

Three magnetrons system was used to form doped lanthanum niobate thin films. La (pulsed,

150 kHz) and Nb (DC) cathodes were used for the deposition of  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films and Mg (DC) or W (DC) cathodes were used for doping (Table 1 and Table 2). The deposition was done in Ar (30 sccm) and  $\text{O}_2$  (6 sccm) gas environment.

X-ray diffractometer “Bruker D8 Discover” and “EVA” software were used to determine the structure of the deposited thin films. Measurements were carried out in a  $20^\circ$ - $70^\circ$  range using  $\text{Cu K}\alpha$  ( $\lambda = 0.154059$  nm) radiation.

The surface profiles of the doped lanthanum niobate thin films were scanned with an atomic force microscope “AFM NT-206” (dynamic mode, resolution 0.1 nm). The roughness ( $R_q$ ) was calculated using surface profilograms and “Surface Explorer” software. Mathematical expression of surface roughness is:

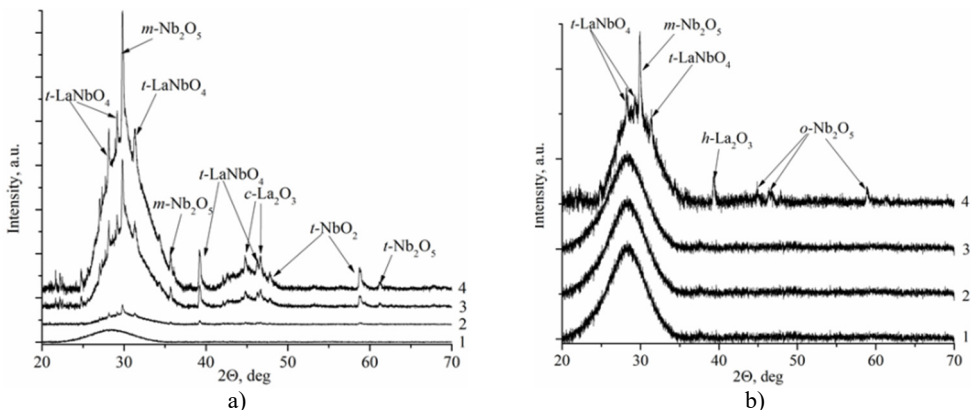
$$R_q = \sqrt{\frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n y_i^2}, \quad (1)$$

where  $n$  – number of scanning points,  $y_i$  – vertical distance from the mean line to the  $i$ th data point.

The cross sectional images of the surface were made using scanning electron microscope “Hitachi S-3400N”. Elemental composition analysis was carried out with energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscope – “Bruker XFlash QUAD 5040”.

### 3. Results and discussion

Deposited thin films have two types of the structure: nanocrystalline and amorphous.  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films have nanocrystalline structure if Mg concentration is higher than  $c_{Mg_f} = 0.4$  mol % (Fig. 1(a)).  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films are amorphous if W concentration is higher than  $c_{W_f} = 1$  mol % (Fig. 1(b)). Nanocrystalline materials are formed due to inhibiting or promoting properties of dopants. EDS measurements prove this assumption. Peaks intensities are higher in XRD spectra with increasing magnesium molar concentration in the thin film (Fig. 1(a), Table 1) and show that Mg promotes crystallite formation. Different situation is with tungsten dopants. Peaks disappear in XRD spectra with increasing tungsten molar concentration in thin film and show that W inhibits crystallite formation.



**Fig. 1.** XRD spectra a)  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films formed on optical quartz substrates, 1  $\div$   $c_{Mg_f} = 0.1$  mol %; 2  $\div$   $c_{Mg_f} = 0.4$  mol %; 3  $\div$   $c_{Mg_f} = 0.7$  mol %; 4  $\div$   $c_{Mg_f} = 1.1$  mol %; and b)  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$ , thin films formed on optical quartz substrates, 1  $\div$   $c_{W_f} = 6$  mol %; 2  $\div$   $c_{W_f} = 1.7$  mol %; 3  $\div$   $c_{W_f} = 1.3$  mol %; 4  $\div$   $c_{W_f} = 1$  mol %

Mg doped  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films have secondary phases of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NbO}_2$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  and W doped  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films have secondary phases of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  (Fig. 1).  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  were formed due to random collisions between metal atoms and oxygen on the substrate surface. It means that niobium, lanthanum and oxygen may form  $\text{LaNbO}_4$ ,  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NbO}$ ,  $\text{NbO}_2$ ,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  and etc. On the other hand, metal oxide could be sputtered from the target [26].

EDS investigation of  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  and  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films (Table 1 and Table 2) showed that all  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  films have excess of oxygen. There were also noticed that almost all films have deficit of Nb comparing to La. The excess of oxygen can be explained by oxygen interstitials and the deficit of Nb can be explained by the existence of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NbO}_2$ ,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  secondary phases (Fig. 1(a)). Low La, Mg and Nb particle flux (or partial pressure) compared to oxygen flux (or partial pressure) can influence the formation of oxygen interstitials [27].

There is a different situation in  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films. Thin films have deficit or excess of oxygen and excess (compared to La) of Nb. The explanation of oxygen excess or deficit is similar to  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  case. Low La, Mg and Nb particle flux compared to oxygen flux influence the formation of oxygen interstitials and high La, Mg and Nb particle flux compared to oxygen flux influence oxygen vacancy formation. Excess of Nb appeared because of pure niobium sputtering domination against niobium oxide sputtering. In addition,  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  secondary phases were formed in thin films (Fig. 1(b)).

**Table 1.** Elemental composition of deposited  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films measured by EDS

Power of magnetrons, W			Molar concentration of element in film, mol %				Amount of Mg in film compared to La ( $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$ ), mol %
$P_{La}$	$P_{Nb}$	$P_{Mg}$	$c_{La_f}$	$c_{Nb_f}$	$c_{O_f}$	$c_{Mg_f}$	$c_{Mg_s}$
200	200	130	9.8	13.8	76.3	0.1	1.3
200	150	130	12.7	11.9	75.0	0.4	3.0
200	160	150	13.7	10.3	75.4	0.7	4.8
200	150	100	14.0	11.9	73.0	1.1	7.2
200	200	100	14.3	21.9	62.3	1.5	9.6

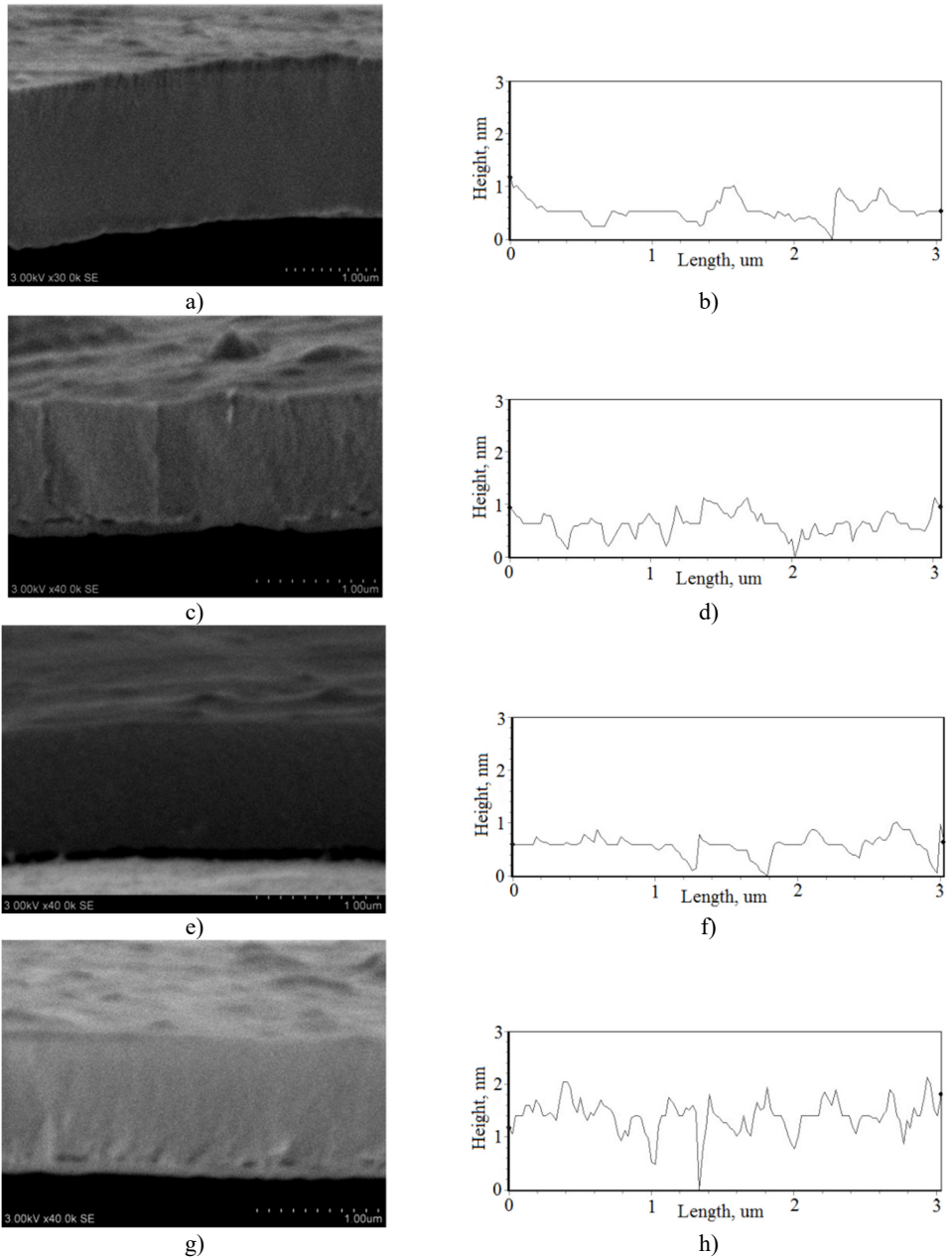
**Table 2.** Elemental composition of deposited  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films measured by EDS

Power of magnetrons, W			Molar concentration of element in film, mol %				Amount of Mg in film compared to La ( $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$ ), mol %
$P_{La}$	$P_{Nb}$	$P_W$	$c_{La_f}$	$c_{Nb_f}$	$c_{O_f}$	$c_{W_f}$	$c_{W_s}$
200	120	3	10.7	10.0	78.3	1.0	9.0
200	150	5	14.5	28.6	55.6	1.3	4.4
200	120	8	10.0	9.6	78.7	1.7	15.0
200	140	20	15.2	25.5	53.3	6.0	19.0
200	150	40	10.3	21.7	59.0	9.0	29.3

Thin films are dense and have no cracks and pores (Fig. 2. and Fig. 3.). There are also not visible columnar and grainy structures in cross sectional images. In comparison, thin films formed by pulsed laser deposition have big pores and voids [12].

Grains are not visible in Mg doped  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films due to low substrate temperature ( $300^\circ\text{C}$ ) comparing to  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  melting temperature ( $1650^\circ\text{C}$ ) and high impurities concentration. It agrees with Thornton and Barna-Adamik models [13, 14]. Substrate surface has high energy at low temperatures. So surface diffusion is very low and this leads to the formation of small grains. In addition,  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films have  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  secondary phases and undissolved Mg. Undissolved Mg acts as promoter and secondary phases may act as inhibitors and/or promoters for grain growth. However, the biggest influence has oxygen excess. It is known that oxygen acts as inhibitor in Al grain growth process [13]. It limits grain boundary migration process and diffusion processes. So, oxygen may have the same effect for  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films. Oxygen concentration should be 66.6 mol % in stoichiometric  $\text{LaNbO}_4$ . In comparison, oxygen concentration varies from 76.3 mol % to 73 mol % in deposited  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films and from

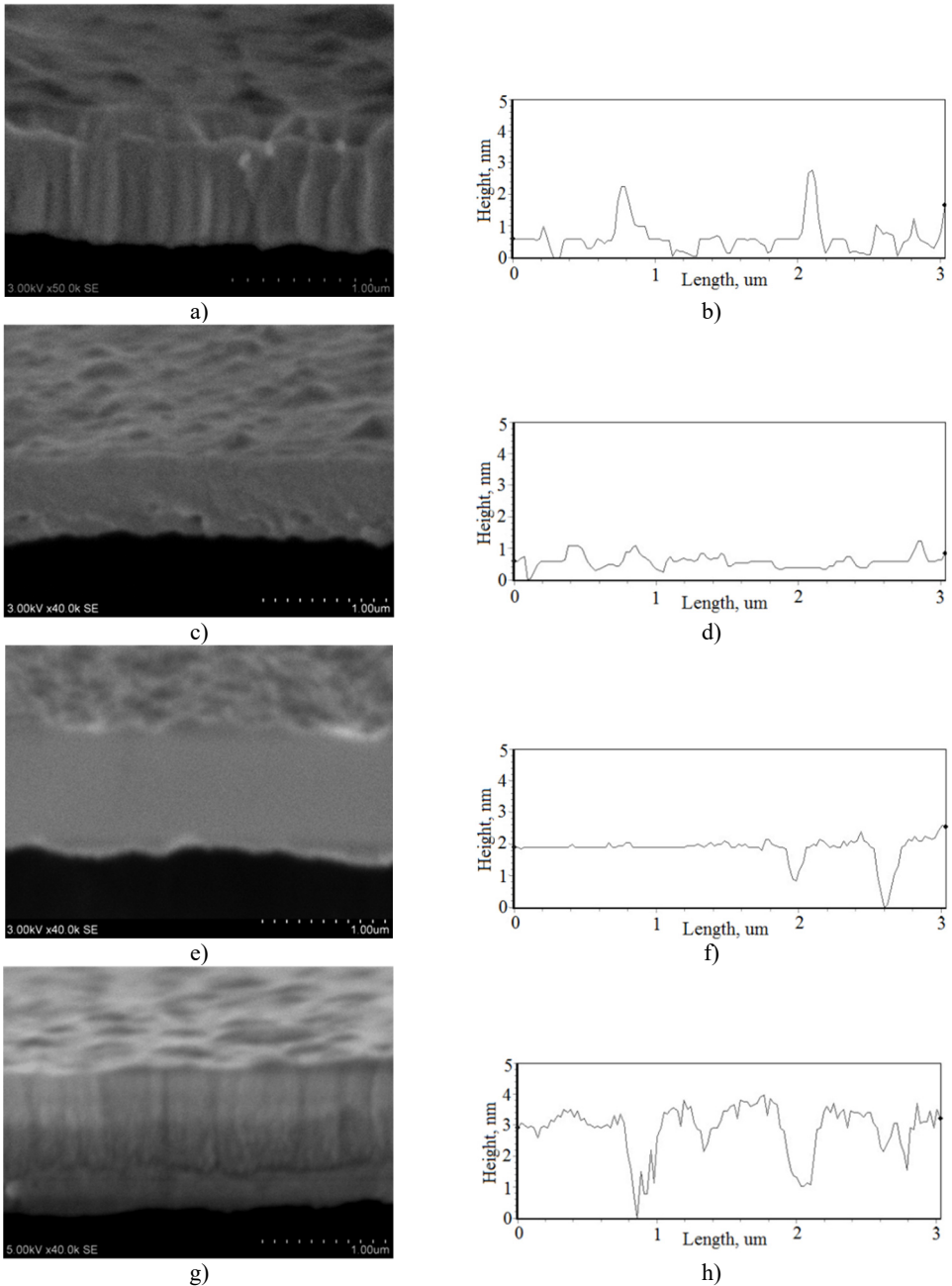
78.7 mol % to 53.3 mol % in deposited  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films.  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films have fibrous grains (Fig. 3(a), (g)) if thin film has deficit of oxygen and that proves the influence of oxygen.



**Fig. 2.** a), c), e), g) SEM cross section images and b), d), f), h) AFM profilograms of  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films: a) and b) –  $c_{O_f} = 78.3$  mol %; c) and d) –  $c_{O_f} = 75$  mol %; e) and f) –  $c_{O_f} = 75.4$  mol %; g) and h) –  $c_{O_f} = 73$  mol %

The nonequilibrium growth of the thin films is observed and the influence of oxygen excess and the concentration of the dopants is also visible in AFM profilograms (Fig. 3(b), (d), (f), (h)).

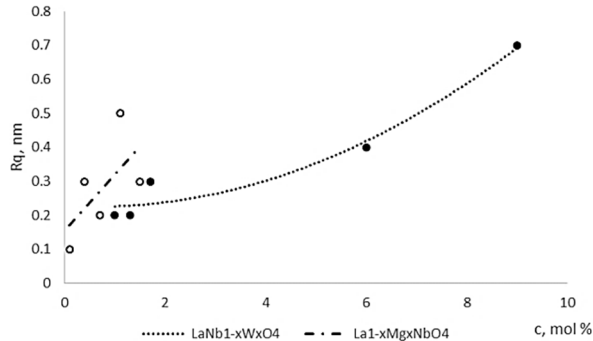
It is seen that the roughness height distribution over the surface is changing non linearly depending on the dopants concentration in excessive oxygen environment (Fig. 4).



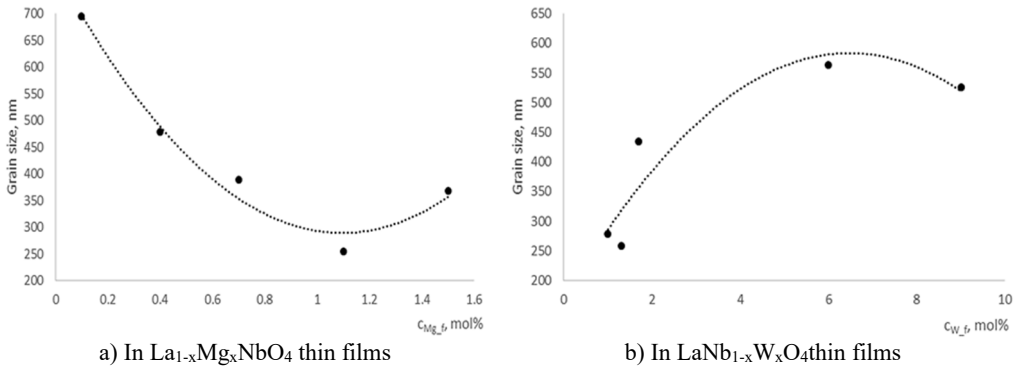
**Fig. 3.** a), c), e), g) Cross section photos and b), d), f), h) profilograms of  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films:  
 a) and b) –  $c_{O_f} = 55.6$  mol %; c) and d) –  $c_{O_f} = 78.3$  mol %; e) and f) –  $c_{O_f} = 78.7$  mol %;  
 g) and h) –  $c_{O_f} = 53.3$  mol %

With technological parameters being the same for all the experiments, the growing mechanism of the thin films is changed due the influence of the dopants. According to the XRD

and AFM profilograms the surface roughness is increasing by increasing the Mg concentration and the cristallinity of the formed thin films. The amorphous thin films (Fig. 1(a), profilogram 1) exhibit smooth surface as the growth of the thin film is depicted as layer by layer growth with low mobility of atoms (adatoms) forming amorphous films. As the cristallinity increases the density of the nucleation centers increases also and facilitates the process of coalescence (Fig. 5).

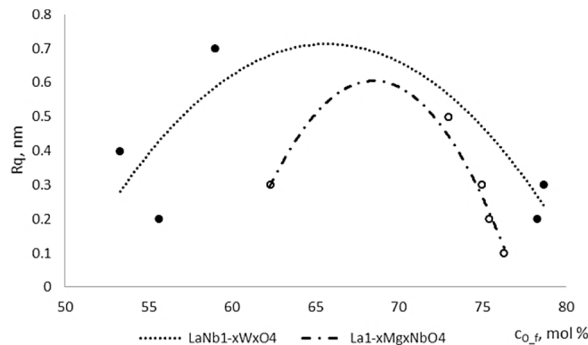


**Fig. 4.** The roughness dependence on Mg and W concentration in  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  and  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films respectively



a) In  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films  
 b) In  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films  
**Fig. 5.** Grain size dependence on dopants concentration

Thin film surface has higher roughness with decreasing oxygen concentration in  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films (Fig. 6). The same situation is in  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films. The roughness calculations prove it.  $R_q$  increases from 0.2 nm to 0.3 nm with decreasing oxygen concentration in  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films and from 0.2 nm to 0.8 nm in  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films.



**Fig. 6.** Roughness dependence on oxygen concentration in  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  and  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films

This shows that dynamics of the atom diffusion process is faster at oxygen deficit conditions

than at oxygen excess conditions. The surface roughness is changing non monotonously. Other authors achieved similar results. P. Gondoni et al. formed  $\text{AlZnO}$  thin film by pulsed laser deposition at room temperature at different oxygen pressures. Thin films formed at higher oxygen pressure had smaller grains [28]. Kai-Huang Chen et al. also noticed that  $(\text{Bi}_{3.25}\text{Nd}_{0.75})(\text{Ti}_{2.9}\text{V}_{0.1})\text{O}_{12}$  films deposited using DC magnetron sputtering has smaller grains with increasing oxygen concentration in thin film [29].

#### 4. Conclusions

The nonequilibrium growth of the thin films and the nonlinear dynamics of the sputtered atoms and their oxides is observed. Deposited  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  and  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films have two types of the structure, nanocrystalline and amorphous. Nanocrystalline materials formed due to inhibiting or promoting properties of dopants. It was found that Mg promotes and W inhibits crystallite formation.

Mg doped  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films have secondary phases of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NbO}_2$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$  and W doped  $\text{LaNbO}_4$  thin films have secondary phases of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ . It happened due to technological deposition parameters: metal and metal oxides sputtering ratio, oxygen flux and etc.

$\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  and  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films are nonstoichiometric. They have deficit or excess oxygen and deficit or excess Nb (compared to lanthanum). Nonstoichiometric films formed due to existence of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ , oxygen interstitials and undissolved Mg.

The existence of  $\text{La}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{Nb}_2\text{O}_5$ , oxygen interstitials and undissolved Mg has influence on the microstructure of thin films. SEM cross section images showed that thin films with lower oxygen concentration has fiber type structure. It means that oxygen acts as inhibitor during grain growth process.

Roughness height distribution over the surface is changing non linearly depending on the dopants concentration in excessive oxygen environment. Oxygen concentration influences surface microstructure. Thin film surface has higher roughness with decreasing oxygen concentration.  $R_q$  increases from 0.2 nm to 0.3 nm in  $\text{La}_{1-x}\text{Mg}_x\text{NbO}_4$  thin films and from 0.2 nm to 0.8 nm in  $\text{LaNb}_{1-x}\text{W}_x\text{O}_4$  thin films.

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