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Marek Bouska, Virginie Nazabal, Jan Gutwirth, Tomas Halenkovic, Petr Nemec. Radio-frequency magnetron co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te phase change thin films. *Journal of Non-Crystalline Solids*, 2021, 569, pp.121003. 10.1016/j.jnoncrysol.2021.121003 . hal-03331139

**HAL Id: hal-03331139**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03331139v1>**

Submitted on 15 Sep 2021

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## Radio-frequency magnetron co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te phase change thin films

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## **Abstract**

Radio-frequency magnetron co-sputtering technique with GeTe and Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub> targets has been used for the deposition of Ge-Sb-Te amorphous thin films. Fabricated layers cover broad region of chemical composition (~17.4-35.0 at. % of Ge, ~14.2-29.0 at. % of Sb) with slight variation in Te content (50.8-53.6 at. % of Te). Upon annealing-induced crystallization, large variations in electrical contrast up to eight orders of magnitude were found. Phase change from amorphous to crystalline state leads also to drastic changes of optical functions demonstrated by optical contrast values up to  $|\Delta n| + |\Delta k| = 2.96$  for GeTe layers at Blu-ray wavelength. Reflectivity contrast at Blu-ray wavelength reaches up to ~43% with increasing content of GeTe in Ge-Sb-Te thin films, confirming importance of GeTe content in Ge-Sb-Te thin films.

**Keywords:** radio-frequency magnetron co-sputtering; thin films; chalcogenides; phase transitions

## 1. Introduction

More than 50 years ago, reversible electrical switching phenomenon in amorphous chalcogenides was first time reported by Ovshinsky [1]. In the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s, phase change materials based on Ge-Sb-Te [2] and/or Ag-In-Sb-Te [3] systems have been discovered. The main scientific as well as technological interest of these inorganic materials is their ability to transform quickly and reversibly between amorphous and crystalline phases. Fast phase transformation can be induced reversibly through varying the electric field or temperature by heating *via* a laser pulse in optical recording applications [4, 5]. The extraordinary properties of phase change materials based on Ge-Sb-Te ternary system are connected with changes of optical reflectivity (up to 30%) and/or electrical resistivity (several orders of magnitude) taking place upon phase transition [6].

The optimization of phase change materials has led to the development of optical storage media such as digital versatile disks (DVD) or Blu-ray disks (BD) [7, 8]. A typical material composition from Ge-Sb-Te system used in applications is  $\text{Ge}_2\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_5$ , where the ratio (GeTe):(Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub>) is 2:1, or  $\text{Ge}_8\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_{11}$ , where (GeTe):(Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub>) = 8:1 [8-10]. Moreover, phase change materials are considered for non-volatile memories and recently for other photonic applications such as integrated all-photonic non-volatile memories, optical color rendering, nanopixel displays, and reconfigurable nanoplasmonic devices or active terahertz photonics [9, 11].

For the fabrication of Ge-Sb-Te thin films, different deposition techniques such as thermal (flash) evaporation [12, 13], pulsed laser deposition [14, 15], chemical vapor deposition using metal-organic precursors [16, 17] or atomic layer deposition [18] can be exploited. Another, widely used deposition technique is magnetron sputtering which is considered as a method preserving well the stoichiometry of the target material during the deposition process and producing thin films with good adherence as well as good

homogeneity and uniformity for industrial processes [19, 20]. Radio-frequency (RF) co-sputtering technique brings specifically advantage of deposition thin films with various compositions by only adjusting electrical power ratio applied on individual cathodes, making this method cost-effective for compositional studies of materials' properties [21]. Moreover, co-sputtering is efficient to fabricate amorphous thin films whose composition is out of the glass-forming region of the system under study [22].

Magnetron sputtering is widely used for the growth of Ge-Sb-Te thin films, as reported for example in Refs [23-25]. However, co-sputtering method is less frequent and mainly used for the doping of Ge-Sb-Te materials with other elements such as C (RF sputtering [26]), Al (RF [26]), Ti (DC [27]), Ni (DC/RF [28]), Cu (DC/RF [29]), Se (DC [30]), Zr (DC/RF [31]), Sn (RF [32]) or Bi (DC [26], RF [32]).

Contrary, RF co-sputtering is used in this work to explore fabrication of thin Ge-Sb-Te films within broad region of chemical composition varying only the electrical power ratio applied to GeTe and Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub> sputtering targets without necessity of exploiting many different compositions of the targets from Ge-Sb-Te system when simple RF sputtering is employed.

Thus, in this paper, Ge-Sb-Te thin films with different (GeTe):(Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub>) ratio were prepared by RF co-sputtering. Fabricated films were characterized in as-deposited state (amorphous phase) as well as in crystalline state (after by thermal annealing) using atomic force microscopy (AFM), scanning electron microscopy (SEM) with energy-dispersive X-ray analysis (EDS), X-ray diffraction (XRD), electrical resistivity, and variable angle spectroscopic ellipsometry data.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

The RF magnetron co-sputtering of Ge-Sb-Te thin films was performed at a room temperature using MPE600 multi-chamber deposition system (Plassys-Bestek) equipped with symmetrically arranged confocal deposition cluster consisting of three cathodes [21, 33].

The thin films were fabricated using the 2'' polycrystalline chalcogenide targets with nominal composition of GeTe and Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub> (99.999 %, ALB Materials, Inc., USA). Thin films were deposited onto borosilicate glass (used for XRD, spectroscopic ellipsometry, and electrical resistivity measurements) and single crystalline silicon wafers <100> substrates (exploited for SEM, EDS, and AFM experiments). The experimental conditions were kept constant throughout all the depositions, *i.e.* background pressure of  $\leq 5 \times 10^{-7}$  mbar, argon working pressure of  $5 \times 10^{-3}$  mbar maintained by 75 sscm flow rate and substrate-target distance of about 8 cm with substrate holder rotation. To study the effect of crystallization, as-deposited films were annealed in inert atmosphere (pure argon) at the temperature of 230 °C (to assure that the crystallization to fcc structure proceeded) for 120 min and slowly cooled down to room temperature.

The surface morphology of the Ge-Sb-Te films and their chemical composition were studied using scanning electron microscopy (SEM, JEOL JSM 6400) linked with energy-dispersive x-ray spectroscopy analyzer. Atomic force microscopy (Solver NEXT, NT-MDT) was used to study topography of Ge-Sb-Te layers within typical scanned area of 5  $\mu\text{m}$  x 5  $\mu\text{m}$  in a semi-contact mode. X-ray diffraction technique (D8-Advance diffractometer, Bruker AXS) was exploited to determine the structure of Ge-Sb-Te samples using Bragg–Brentano  $\theta$ – $\theta$  geometry with CuK $\alpha$  radiation and secondary graphite monochromator. The diffraction angles were measured at room temperature from 5 to 65° (2 $\theta$ ) within 0.02° steps. Sheet resistance temperature dependences measurements at 2 °C.min<sup>-1</sup> were carried out using a four-point probe based on van der Pauw method [34].

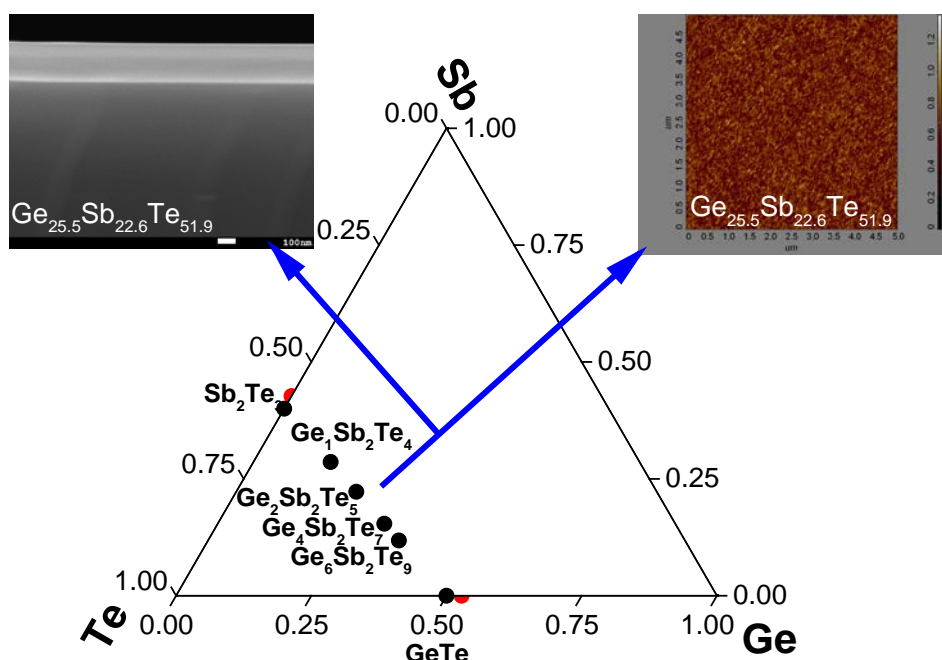
Two variable angle spectroscopic ellipsometers (J. A. Woollam Co., Inc., Lincoln, NE, USA) were employed for the optical characterization of studied materials: first ellipsometer with automatic rotating analyzer for the spectral range 0.3 - 2.3  $\mu\text{m}$  (UV-NIR), measuring 100 revolutions with wavelengths steps of 20 nm at selected angles of incidence ( $50^\circ$ ,  $60^\circ$ , and  $70^\circ$ ); second ellipsometer with rotating compensator for 1.7-20  $\mu\text{m}$  range using angles of incidence as above, 50 scans, 15 spectra per revolution, resolution of  $16\text{ cm}^{-1}$ . For the analysis of VASE data in broad measured spectral region (300 nm - 20  $\mu\text{m}$ ), we used Cody-Lorentz (CL) oscillator model which includes the correct band edge function, weak Urbach absorption tail description as well as Lorentz oscillator function [35]; this model is convenient for the description of amorphous chalcogenides optical functions [20, 36]. Drude-type contribution for free carriers was added to the CL oscillator for crystallized samples as well as for as-deposited  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  which is partially crystalline.

### 3. Results and discussion

The chemical composition of deposited Ge-Sb-Te films estimated by EDS is visualized in the ternary diagram (Fig. 1) as well as in Table 1. For a reader's convenience, Fig. 1 shows also selected stoichiometric compositions located on GeTe- $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  tie-line:  $\text{Ge}_1\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_4$ , *i.e.* (GeTe):( $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$ )=1:1;  $\text{Ge}_2\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_5$ , *i.e.* (GeTe):( $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$ )=2:1;  $\text{Ge}_4\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_7$ , *i.e.* (GeTe):( $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$ )=4:1;  $\text{Ge}_6\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_9$ , *i.e.* (GeTe):( $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$ )=6:1. In comparison with the nominal composition, the as-deposited films sputtered from single targets at RF power of 20 W are only slightly overstoichiometric in Ge or Sb content (+2.8 at. % for Ge, +2.7 at. % for Sb). For co-sputtered layers, broad range of composition was successfully covered (~17.4-35.0 at. % of Ge, ~14.2-29.0 at. % of Sb) with slight variation in Te content (50.8-53.6 at. % of Te) by varying RF power on the two cathodes. We note that the error limit of the used EDS method is  $\pm 1$  at. %.

Thin films fabricated by (co-)sputtering technique were homogeneous and amorphous as confirmed by optical/electron microscopy, except of sputtered  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  films which were partially crystalline (traces of rhombohedral  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  in  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  films) as determined from XRD patterns. On annealing of sputtered GeTe and co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te films at  $230^\circ\text{C}$ , crystallization proceeds while cubic symmetry ( $Fm\bar{3}m$ ) of the annealed films was confirmed by XRD data. The annealing of  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  layers leads to the formation of rhombohedral  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  with large preferential orientation.

The films' morphology studied *via* SEM, depicted as inset of Fig. 1, showed smooth surface of deposited films without any significant cracks or holes. For all as-deposited thin films, root mean squared roughness values ( $Sq$ ) determined by AFM (exemplified as inset in Fig. 1) were found to be lower than  $\sim 0.3$  nm confirming smooth surface of the layers. On the other hand, films' roughness determined by AFM for annealed layers increased (up to  $\sim 1.4$  nm for GeTe films) which is consistent with the crystallization phenomenon of the films upon annealing.



**Fig. 1** Ternary Ge-Sb-Te diagram with indicated positions of (co-)sputtered thin films' composition (red symbols), targets' composition as well as selected stoichiometric

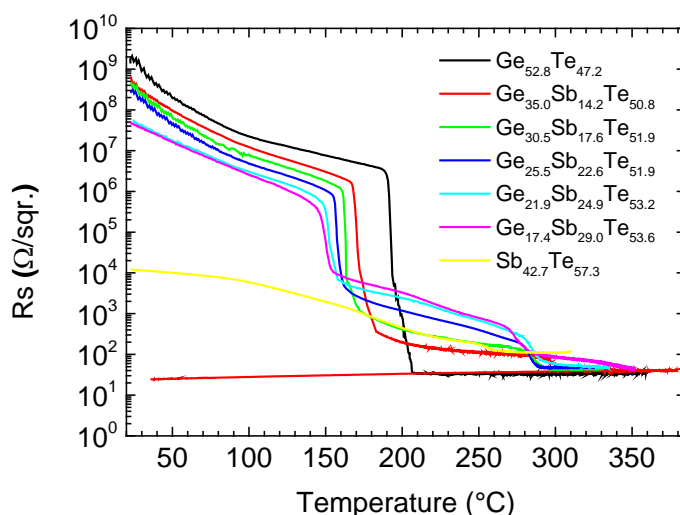


compositions located on GeTe-Sb<sub>2</sub>Te<sub>3</sub> tie-line (black symbols). Right inset illustrates AFM scan (5 μm × 5 μm) of Ge<sub>25.5</sub>Sb<sub>22.6</sub>Te<sub>51.9</sub> thin film. Left inset shows SEM micrograph of cross-section of the same film.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te thin films: chemical composition (from EDS, ±1 at.%), crystallization temperatures (amorphous → fcc,  $T_{c1}$ ; fcc → hexagonal,  $T_{c2}$ ; ±1 °C) and electrical contrast values (in terms of sheet resistance ratio between crystalline and amorphous phases  $R_{s(cr)}/R_{s(am)}$ ) determined from sheet resistance measurements, thickness ratio between crystalline and amorphous state  $d_{cr}/d_{am}$ , optical band gap for both, crystalline and amorphous films ( $E_g^{opt}$ , ±0.02 eV), optical contrast  $\Delta n+i\Delta k$  ( $n,k(crystalline)$ - $n,k(amorphous)$ ) values at wavelength of 400 nm, absolute values of optical contrast at 400 nm in terms of  $|\Delta n|+|\Delta k|$ , and dielectric function  $\epsilon_\infty$  for both, crystalline and amorphous layers, determined from spectroscopic ellipsometry. The films used for EDS measurements were deposited onto silicon substrates, while those for sheet resistance and spectroscopic ellipsometry measurements were prepared onto glass substrates. Note that error in determination of thickness is ±2 nm.

Chemical composition	$T_{c1}   T_{c2}$ (°C)	$R_{s(cr)}/R_{s(am)}$	$d_{cr}/d_{am}$	$E_g^{opt}$ cr   am (eV)	$\Delta n+i\Delta k$ @ 400 nm	$ \Delta n + \Delta k $ @ 400 nm	$\epsilon_\infty$ cr   am
Ge <sub>52.8</sub> Te <sub>47.2</sub>	190   -	$2.7 \times 10^{-8}$	0.845	0.45   0.66	-1.20+i1.76	2.96	26.5   12.7
Ge <sub>35.0</sub> Sb <sub>14.2</sub> Te <sub>50.8</sub>	169   295	$8.0 \times 10^{-8}$	0.870	0.50   0.71	-1.24+i1.51	2.75	34.2   13.6
Ge <sub>30.5</sub> Sb <sub>17.6</sub> Te <sub>51.9</sub>	163   287	$1.1 \times 10^{-7}$	0.907	0.47   0.71	-0.99+i1.33	2.32	34.3   14.1
Ge <sub>25.5</sub> Sb <sub>22.6</sub> Te <sub>51.9</sub>	157   283	$1.8 \times 10^{-7}$	0.901	0.49   0.69	-0.99+i1.27	2.26	33.8   14.7
Ge <sub>21.9</sub> Sb <sub>24.9</sub> Te <sub>53.2</sub>	150   285	$9.9 \times 10^{-7}$	0.953	0.47   0.68	-0.88+i0.82	1.70	32.1   15.3
Ge <sub>17.4</sub> Sb <sub>29.0</sub> Te <sub>53.6</sub>	145   277	$1.1 \times 10^{-6}$	0.935	0.38   0.66	-0.73+i0.88	1.61	31.7   16.3
Sb <sub>42.7</sub> Te <sub>57.3</sub>	-   -	$9.4 \times 10^{-3}$	1.00	0.29   0.45	-0.23+i0.52	0.75	41.6   35.7

The crystallization temperatures were evaluated based on temperature dependences of thin films' sheet resistance ( $R_s$ ). The crystallization of the co-sputtered amorphous Ge-Sb-Te films into fcc phase was identified in the region of  $\sim 145$ - $169$  °C, while transition from fcc to hexagonal phase proceeds between  $277$  and  $295$  °C (Table 1). The former one is characterized by abrupt decrease of  $R_s$  (Fig. 2). Both transitions are more precisely determined as peak temperatures of  $d(\ln R_s)/d(1/T)$  first derivatives. The crystallization temperatures are slightly dependent on content of GeTe in the films. On the other hand, sputtered GeTe film shows only amorphous-to-fcc phase transition occurring at  $\sim 190$  °C. For sputtered  $Sb_2Te_3$  layer, the phase transition (amorphous-to-hexagonal) is not sudden but rather evidenced by continuous decrease of sheet resistance. Table 1 also summarizes electrical contrast values (in terms of sheet resistance ratio between crystalline and amorphous phases  $R_{s(cr)}/R_{s(am)}$ ) determined from sheet resistance measurements, showing broad range covering several orders of magnitude. With growing content of GeTe in co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te thin films, the electrical contrast is increasing up to  $R_{s(cr)}/R_{s(am)} \sim 8.0 \times 10^{-8}$  for  $Ge_{35.0}Sb_{14.2}Te_{50.8}$ , while the highest electrical contrast was observed for sputtered GeTe layer ( $\sim 2.7 \times 10^{-8}$ ).



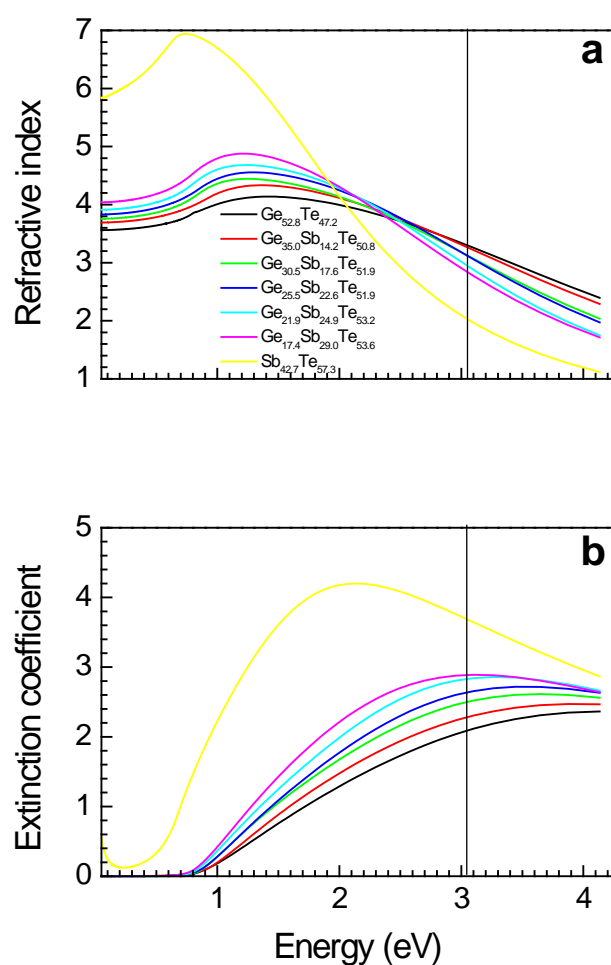
**Fig. 2** Sheet resistance of as-deposited Ge-Sb-Te layers (deposited on microscope glass substrates) temperature dependence.

The thickness of the as-deposited samples under study, determined by ellipsometry, was in the range of ~110-180 nm (range enabling easy implementation of spectroscopic ellipsometry data analysis). On the other hand, the thickness of annealed layers (except  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$ ) was ~5-15% lower in comparison with the thicknesses of as-deposited ones (Table 1); observed thickness changes are comparable with that ones for Ge-Sb-Te thin films reported earlier (~3-13% for pulsed laser deposited layers [14, 15]). The largest thickness decrease due to amorphous-to-fcc phase transition was detected for sputtered GeTe film.

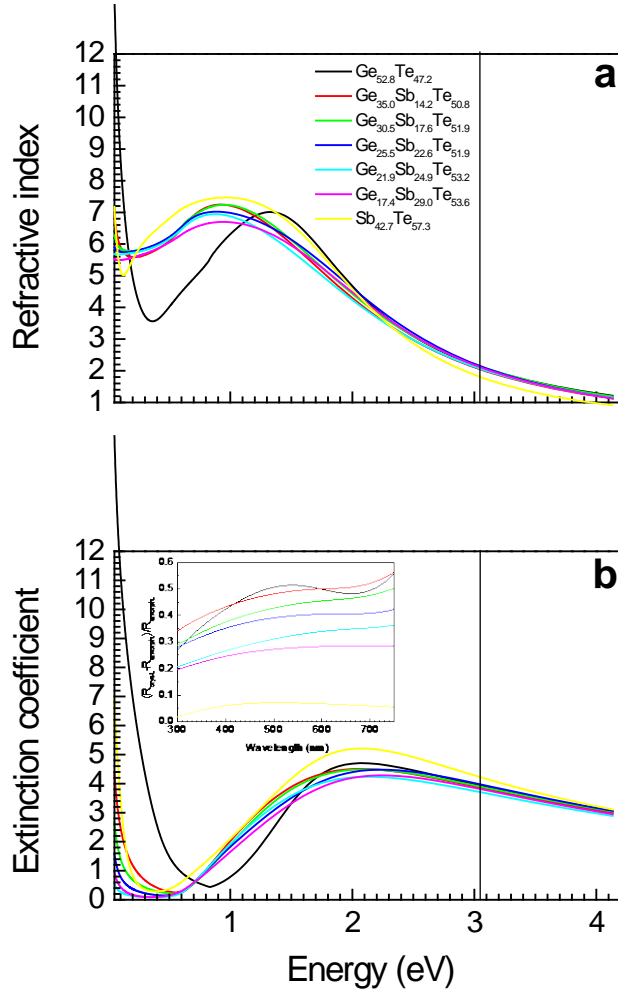
Application of CL model for ellipsometry data analysis allowed the determination of band gap ( $E_g$ ) values for both as-deposited as well as fcc crystalline films (Table 1). Sputtered GeTe and co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te films exhibit  $E_g$  values in range of 0.66-0.71 and 0.38-0.50 eV for amorphous and crystalline thin films, respectively, correlating well with already published data [15]. Upon crystallization, the  $E_g$  values of studied Ge-Sb-Te films decrease (about 0.2-0.3 eV) which is consistent with previously reported results [15, 25]. Band gap energy determined for sputtered as-deposited  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  layer (~0.45 eV) is consistent with data found in the literature (optical bandgap of ~0.52-0.80 eV in amorphous state and bandgap energies of ~0.15-0.32 eV in crystalline state [15]) taking into account fact that the layer is partially crystalline.

Best fit optical functions, i.e. refractive index and extinction coefficient spectral dependences, deduced from spectroscopic ellipsometry data analysis for both, the as-deposited and annealed Ge-Sb-Te thin films are shown in Figs 3 and 4, respectively. As seen, in studied spectral and compositional region, the refractive index and extinction coefficient vary drastically. To assess the refractive index and extinction coefficient changes, optical contrast  $\Delta n + i\Delta k$  ( $n, k(\text{annealed}) - n, k(\text{as-deposited})$ ) values at wavelength of 400 nm and absolute values of optical contrast at 400 nm in terms of  $|\Delta n| + |\Delta k|$  were extracted and summarized in Table 1. Lowest values of optical contrast as well as its absolute value were

found for binary  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  layers ( $\Delta n+i\Delta k = -0.23+i0.52$ ,  $|\Delta n|+|\Delta k| = 0.75$ ). Contrary, co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te films show particularly larger optical contrast reaching values of  $\Delta n+i\Delta k = -1.24+i1.51$  and  $|\Delta n|+|\Deltak| = 2.75$  for  $\text{Ge}_{35.0}\text{Sb}_{14.2}\text{Te}_{50.8}$  composition. Highest values were observed for sputtered GeTe films ( $\Delta n+i\Delta k = -1.20+i1.76$ ,  $|\Delta n|+|\Deltak| = 2.96$ ). Optical contrast values achieved in this work are generally comparable with similar compositions of the films from Ge-Sb-Te system [8]. It is evident that larger content of GeTe in Ge-Sb-Te layers leads to higher value of optical contrast.



**Fig. 3** Optical functions of as-deposited (co-)sputtered Ge-Sb-Te thin films deposited on microscope glass substrates: (a) spectral dependences of refractive indices, (b) spectral dependences of extinction coefficients. Vertical lines represent wavelength of 405 nm used in BD technology.



**Fig. 4** Optical functions of annealed (co-)sputtered Ge-Sb-Te thin films deposited on microscope glass substrates: (a) spectral dependences of refractive indices, (b) spectral dependences of extinction coefficients. Inset shows calculated reflectivity contrast  $(R_{cr}-R_{am})/R_{am}$ . Vertical lines represent wavelength of 405 nm used in BD technology.

The optical constant  $\epsilon_{\infty}$  was determined using dielectric function  $\epsilon_1$  as its value at 0.05 eV (energy close to zero) after subtraction of Drude contribution to the absorption where necessary (crystalline samples as well as as-deposited  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  layers). The values of  $\epsilon_{\infty}$ , listed in Table 1, present behaviour typical for phase change materials with lower ( $\sim 13-16$ ) and larger ( $\sim 27-34$ ) values for amorphous and crystalline phase, respectively. Note that high value of  $\epsilon_{\infty}$  for as-deposited  $\text{Sb}_2\text{Te}_3$  films is because these films are partially crystalline.

Using ellipsometry data, reflectivity spectral dependences of both, amorphous and crystalline Ge-Sb-Te films were also calculated and plotted as ratio  $(R_{cr}-R_{am})/R_{am}$  (inset of Fig. 4). Calculated reflectivity contrast at BD wavelength increases with increasing content of GeTe in Ge-Sb-Te thin films up to ~43%, confirming importance of GeTe content for this group of phase change memory materials.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this work, Ge-Sb-Te amorphous thin films were fabricated by RF magnetron co-sputtering technique exploiting GeTe and  $Sb_2Te_3$  targets. The exploited fabrication technique allowed depositing thin films within broad range of chemical composition (~17.4-35.0 at. % of Ge, ~14.2-29.0 at. % of Sb) with slight variation in Te content (50.8-53.6 at. % of Te). As seen from AFM and SEM observations, the quality of fabricated Ge-Sb-Te amorphous layers is good, with smooth surface, without significant cracks or holes. On annealing at 230 °C, the amorphous Ge-Sb-Te films undergo phase change to crystalline layers with cubic symmetry ( $Fm\bar{3}m$ ) as results from XRD patterns. Sheet resistance temperature dependences revealed that the electrical contrast between annealed and as-deposited films is increasing with growing content of GeTe in co-sputtered Ge-Sb-Te thin films up to  $R_{s(cr)}/R_{s(am)} \sim 2.7 \times 10^8$  for GeTe layers. Phase transition from amorphous to crystalline state is accompanied by the particular thickness change of the films; its decreases on annealing by ~5-15% was observed. Optical band gap values (0.66-0.71 and 0.38-0.50 eV for amorphous and crystalline thin films, respectively) show their decrease of about 0.2-0.3 eV upon crystallization. Huge changes of optical functions are also demonstrated by optical contrast values up to  $|\Delta n| + |\Delta k| = 2.96$  for GeTe layers at Blu-ray wavelength. Finally, reflectivity contrast at this wavelength reaches up to ~43% with increasing content of GeTe in Ge-Sb-Te thin films. All the obtained data confirm importance of GeTe content in Ge-Sb-Te thin films. Based on achieved results,

co-sputtering was proven to be prospective method the fabrication of thin films with potential applications in the field of phase change memory materials.

### **Acknowledgements**

Support from the Czech Science Foundation (Project No. 18-03823S) is greatly acknowledged. The authors appreciate also the financial support from LM2018103 project funded by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. Authors are thankful to Assoc. Prof. L. Beneš and Mr. J. Prikryl for XRD and sheet resistance temperature dependences measurements, respectively.

**Competing financial interests:** The authors declare no competing financial interests.

**Author contribution statement:** Conceptualization, P.N. and V.N.; methodology, V.N. and P.N.; investigation, M.B., J.G., T.H., V.N. and P.N.; writing—original draft preparation, P.N.; writing—review and editing, P.N. and V.N.; funding acquisition, P.N.

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