



Cite this: *Nanoscale*, 2023, **15**, 18613

## Understanding Yb<sup>3+</sup>-sensitized photon avalanche in Pr<sup>3+</sup> co-doped nanocrystals: modelling and optimization†

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Among different upconversion processes where the emitted photon has higher energy than the one absorbed, photon avalanche (PA) is unique, because the luminescence intensity increases by 2–3 orders of magnitude in response to a tiny increase in excitation intensity. Since its discovery in 1979, PA has been observed in bulk materials but until recently, obtaining it at the nanoscale has been a significant challenge. In the present work, the PA phenomenon in β-NaYF<sub>4</sub> colloidal nanocrystals co-doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup> and Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions was successfully observed at 482 nm (<sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> → <sup>3</sup>H<sub>4</sub>) and 607 nm (<sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> → <sup>3</sup>H<sub>6</sub>) under excitation at 852 nm. The impact of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ion concentration and pump power dependence on PA behavior was investigated, *i.e.* PA non-linearity slopes of luminescence intensity curves as a function of pump power density as well as PA thresholds. The highest slopes, namely 8.6 and 9.0, and the smallest thresholds equal to 286 kW cm<sup>-2</sup> and 281 kW cm<sup>-2</sup>, observed for emission bands at 607 nm and 482 nm, respectively, were obtained for NaYF<sub>4</sub>:0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup>,15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> colloidal nanocrystals. Besides experimental research, simulations of PA behavior in Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup> co-doped materials were performed based on differential rate equations describing the phenomena that contribute to the existence of PA. The influence of different processes leading to PA, *e.g.* the rates of nonradiative and radiative transitions as well as energy transfers, on PA performance was simulated aiming to understand their roles in this complex sensitized system.

Received 1st September 2023,  
Accepted 30th October 2023

DOI: 10.1039/d3nr04409b

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## Introduction

Photon avalanche (PA) is a highly non-linear upconversion process during which the luminescence intensity increases rapidly with a minute pump power density increase. In consequence, the characteristic s-shape curve of luminescence intensity ( $I_L$ ) as a function of pump power density ( $I_p$ ) is obtained and could be described by the following power law:

$$I_L = I_p^S, \quad (1)$$

where  $S$  signifies a slope of the curve and, next to the PA threshold ( $PA_{TH}$ ) indicating the value above which PA exists, is

a characteristic parameter used to describe the PA process. PA was first observed in 1979 by Jay S. Chivian in singly Pr<sup>3+</sup>-doped LaCl<sub>3</sub> and BaCl<sub>3</sub> single crystals, with a vision to count medium infrared photons at *ca.* 4.5 mm,<sup>1</sup> which were responsible for the intermediate <sup>3</sup>H<sub>5</sub> level population and enabled efficient photoexcitation by a green laser source, leading to the <sup>3</sup>H<sub>5</sub> → <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub> ESA transition. It was predicted that PA nanoparticles may open new possible fields of applications;<sup>2</sup> however, obtaining PA at the nanoscale has been a challenge. All features and characteristics of the PA phenomenon have only recently been clearly and undoubly evidenced in colloidal NaYF<sub>4</sub> and LiYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals doped with Tm<sup>3+</sup> ions at the nanoscale.<sup>3,4</sup> Since then, the impacts of the local environment,<sup>5</sup> host matrix<sup>6</sup> and light induced photodarkening and recovery in singly Tm<sup>3+</sup>-doped<sup>7</sup> ions have been studied, and a general multicolor PA emission thanks to the core-shell design and energy migration through a Yb<sup>3+</sup> (ref. 8) or Gd<sup>3+</sup> (ref. 9) migration network has been demonstrated. At the nanoscale, PA emission has also been demonstrated in NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals co-doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup> and Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions.<sup>8</sup> In the latter case Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions work as a sensitizer and establish an energy migration network, hosting the migrating PA mechanism (MPA)<sup>8</sup> or sensitized PA (SPA).<sup>10</sup> These studies confirmed the

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† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available. See DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1039/d3nr04409b>



applicability of the Yb<sup>3+</sup>, Pr<sup>3+</sup> PA system for sub-diffraction imaging<sup>8</sup> and luminescence nanothermometry,<sup>10</sup> as predicted previously.<sup>2,11</sup> However, the mechanisms of sensitization of Pr<sup>3+</sup> avalanche emission by co-doping with Yb<sup>3+</sup> have to be further studied and clarified.

There are some key conditions required to obtain PA. Firstly, the excitation wavelength has to be resonant with excited state absorption (ESA) and simultaneously far from resonance with ground state absorption (GSA). Additionally, the absorption cross section from the excited state ( $\sigma_{\text{ESA}}$ ) has to be much higher than from the ground state ( $\sigma_{\text{GSA}}$ ), which is described as  $\beta = \frac{\sigma_{\text{ESA}}}{\sigma_{\text{GSA}}}$  and should be above 10<sup>4</sup>. In order to populate the metastable state, from which ESA can occur, cross-relaxation (CR) processes are necessary. CR relays on the exchange of energy between two ions, one of which is in a higher excited state and the other in a basic energy state. These two ions average their energies and thus produce two ions in an excited, metastable state. Consequently, the population of the metastable level increases in a loop, and absorption occurs more efficiently, which translates into PA emission. The characteristic features of PA are also slow luminescence rise times. Furthermore, to quantify the dynamics of relative changes of the luminescence intensity for the pump power changes, we introduce the parameter  $D_{\text{AV}}$ , which is the PA luminescence intensity enhancement in response to doubling the excitation power densities, *i.e.*:

$$D_{\text{AV}} = \frac{I_{\text{L}}(2 \cdot I_{\text{P}})}{I_{\text{L}}(I_{\text{P}})} \quad (2)$$

The subject of the present work is SPA in  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals co-doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup> and Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions. Multicolor PA emission at 482 nm (<sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> → <sup>3</sup>H<sub>4</sub> transition) and 607 nm (<sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> → <sup>3</sup>H<sub>6</sub> transition) was successfully observed under excitation at 852 nm wavelength in samples co-doped with 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions and 0.1, 0.3, 0.5 or 0.7% of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions. The impacts of the concentration of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions and nanocrystal architecture on PA properties have been studied. In particular, the essential parameters describing the avalanching system, like  $S$ ,  $PA_{\text{TH}}$ , rise times and  $D_{\text{AV}}$  were investigated in detail. Additionally,  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals singly doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup>, *i.e.* 0.1%, 0.5%, 1% and 3% ions, were synthesized and investigated, aiming to understand the role of CR and sensitization by Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions. Moreover, another motivation behind our work was to critically evaluate the origin of red Pr<sup>3+</sup> emission, as a discrepancy exists in the literature about the energy level (either <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> or <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub>) responsible for this transition. Furthermore, simulations of the PA process in Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup> co-doped crystals were performed. Based on the supposed PA mechanisms and relatively low phonon tetrafluoride materials, differential rate equations (DREs) were rationalized as compared to previous reports. Additionally, we have adopted a ‘knock-out’-like approach in DRE modelling, aiming to understand the influence of different individual phenomenological parameters on the PA process, *i.e.* the role of the rates of all the important non-radiative and radiative transitions as well as energy transfers was investigated. This knowledge is essential to further optimize the

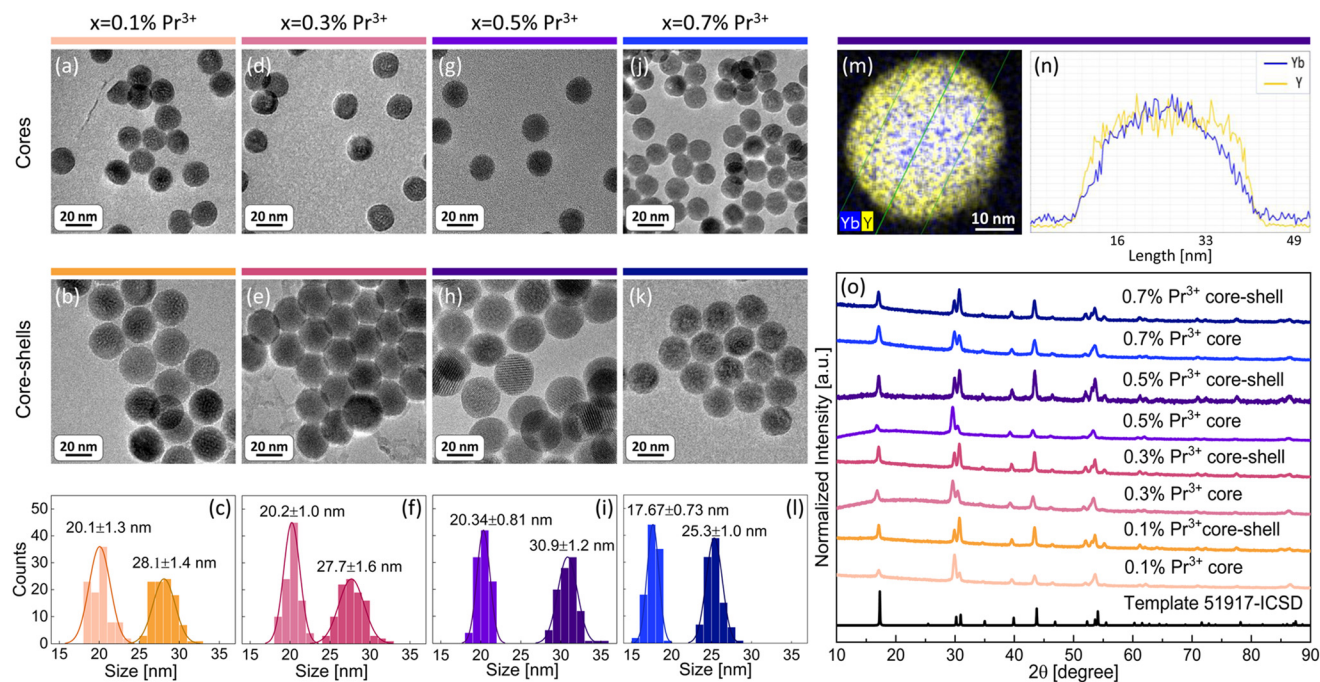
performance (*e.g.* decrease the PA threshold, increase PA gain or PA slopes) of these avalanching materials for numerous future photonic applications, and likewise to qualitatively understand the generic mechanisms behind sensitization in photon avalanching by other co-dopants.

## Results and discussion

The aim of the present work was to understand the origin and mechanism of PA emission of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions at the nanoscale. Therefore, a set of  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> colloidal nanocrystals singly doped with 0.1%, 0.5%, 1% and 3% of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions was synthesized. Additionally, based on earlier reported MPA in Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup> co-doped  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanoparticles,<sup>8</sup> a set of samples co-doped with 15% of Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions in a wide range of concentrations of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions, *i.e.* 0.1%, 0.3%, 0.5% and 0.7%, was synthesized. All materials were synthesized by thermal decomposition of lanthanide salts in a core and core-shell architecture. Morphology and structural characterization was carried out for all prepared nanocrystals (Fig. 1 and Fig. S1, S2†). X-ray powder diffraction (XRD) reflexes of the investigated samples are compatible with the XRD pattern of the hexagonal ( $\beta$ ) structure of NaYF<sub>4</sub> crystals (Fig. 1o and Fig. S2†), which confirms a pure  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> phase of the synthesized nanomaterials. The sizes of the nanocrystals were estimated based on transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images. Exemplary TEM pictures and histograms with average dimensions of the synthesized nanocrystals are presented in Fig. 1 and panels (a–l) in Fig. S1.† The diameters of the core nanoparticles are in the range of 16–20 nm and the core-shell dimensions are within 18–31 nm. Most of the crystals feature narrow size distribution, except for core-shell nanocrystals doped with 0.5% of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions, where, next to bigger core-shell particles (21 nm), smaller ones (around 10 nm) are observed (Fig. S1b†). We suppose that the shell material, besides crystallization on core nanoparticles, crystallized also as smaller undoped NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals, as we discussed later on the basis of core and core-shell dimensions. An indirect proof of shell deposition is the bigger size of core-shell nanoparticles than that of core nanocrystals. Additionally, undoped shell deposition is directly evidenced by the exemplary energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) map and the profile of Yb<sup>3+</sup> and Y<sup>3+</sup> ions prepared for core-shell NaYF<sub>4</sub>:0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup>,15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals (Fig. 1m and n). The thicknesses of shells were calculated based on the average dimensions of nanocrystals. For most of the spherical core-shell nanoparticles, the shell thickness is around 4 nm (Table 1) with the exception of 0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup>-doped ones, which have a shell thickness of around 2 nm (Table S1†). It is evidence that part of the shell material in this sample crystallized as smaller, undoped  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> particles. In the case of ellipsoidal core-shell nanocrystals, the shell thickness is around 2 nm in width and between 4 nm and 6 nm in length (Table S1†).

To determine the PA luminescence parameters, the 852 nm wavelength as the excitation one was used,<sup>8</sup> which is resonant





**Fig. 1** Characteristic of  $\beta$ - $\text{NaYF}_4$  nanocrystals co-doped with  $x\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$  and  $15\%\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions showing PA: (a, d, g and j) transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images of core nanoparticles; (b, e, h and k) TEM images of core-shell nanocrystals; (c, f, i and l) histograms with average sizes of core and core-shell nanocrystals. (m) Energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) map and (n) EDS profile of  $\text{Yb}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Y}^{3+}$  ions in the core-shell  $\text{NaYF}_4:0.5\%\text{Pr}^{3+}, 15\%\text{Yb}^{3+}@ \text{NaYF}_4$  nanocrystals; (o) X-ray powder diffractions of the  $\beta$ - $\text{NaYF}_4$  structure (template) and all the samples.

**Table 1** Average dimensions and shell thicknesses of  $\beta$ - $\text{NaYF}_4$  nanocrystals co-doped with  $x\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$  and  $15\%\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions

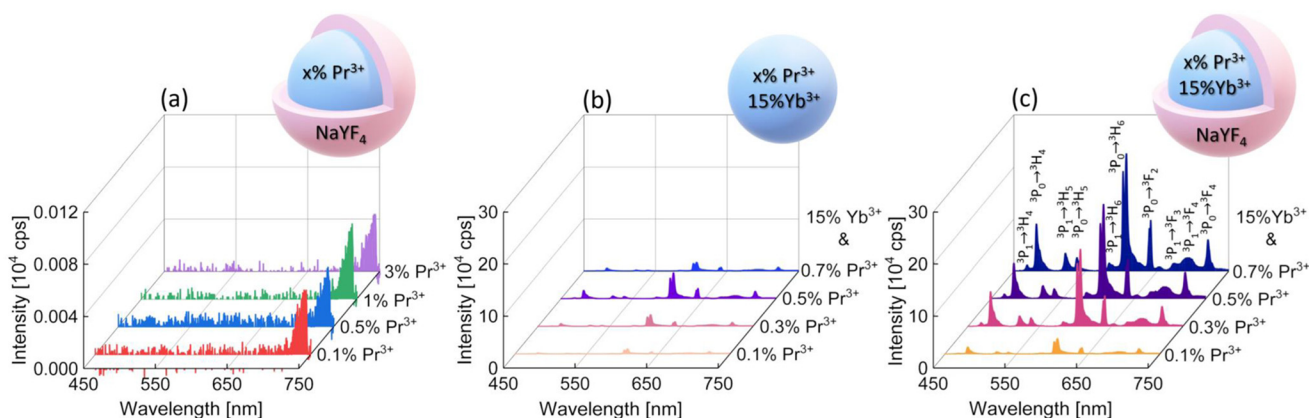
Dopants $x\%\text{Pr}^{3+}, 15\%\text{Yb}^{3+}$	Average core diameter [nm]	Average core-shell diameter [nm]	Average shell thickness [nm]
$0.1\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$	$20.1 \pm 1.3$	$28.1 \pm 1.4$	$4.0 \pm 1.4$
$0.3\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$	$20.2 \pm 1.0$	$27.7 \pm 1.6$	$3.8 \pm 1.3$
$0.5\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$	$20.34 \pm 0.81$	$30.9 \pm 1.2$	$5.3 \pm 1.0$
$0.7\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$	$17.67 \pm 0.73$	$25.3 \pm 1.0$	$3.80 \pm 0.86$

with  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ESA ( $^1\text{G}_4 \rightarrow ^3\text{P}_1$ ) and simultaneously far from resonance with the GSA of these ions, as is required for PA. Measurements were performed at room temperature (RT). At the beginning, singly  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$ -doped samples were investigated. The range of ion concentrations was deliberately chosen starting with a very low content, namely 0.1% of  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ions, ending at 3%. It can be expected that a high concentration of ions would lead to the concentration quenching of luminescence intensity. However, even nanocrystals with low  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ion concentrations showed no emission under these excitation conditions (Fig. 2a). The peak at around 725 nm is an artifact resulting from a laser diode and no emission was observed from singly  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$ -doped nanocrystals. Therefore, nanocrystals co-doped with  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions were investigated. The 852 nm wavelength can excite  $\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions, and then, by energy transfer (ET) processes, the absorbed energy can be further transferred to  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ions. The core and core-shell samples co-doped with 15%

$\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions and 0.1%, 0.3%, 0.5% or 0.7% of  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ions successfully showed multicolor emission in the range from 450 nm to 700 nm (Fig. 2b and c). Comparing the emission spectra of the core and core-shell samples, the core-shell nanocrystals feature significantly higher luminescence intensity, confirming the role of the inert passive shell, which protects optically active ions from environment impacts. Furthermore, for the sample singly doped with  $0.5\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$  ions, no avalanche emission was observed, and the sample co-doped with  $0.5\%\text{Pr}^{3+}$  and  $15\%\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions exhibited multicolor emission, which proves that  $\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions play a key role as a sensitizer of PA emission.

The emission bands of the samples co-doped with  $\text{Pr}^{3+}$  and  $\text{Yb}^{3+}$  ions were assigned to the following transitions:  $^3\text{P}_1 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_4$  (468 nm),  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_4$  (482 nm),  $^3\text{P}_1 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_5$  (522 nm),  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_5$  (538 nm),  $^3\text{P}_1 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_6$  (583 nm),  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_6$  (607 nm),  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{F}_2$  (641 nm),  $^3\text{P}_1 \rightarrow ^3\text{F}_3$  (672 nm),  $^3\text{P}_1 \rightarrow ^3\text{F}_4$  (693 nm), and  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{F}_4$  (720 nm) (Fig. 2c). In the literature, the assignment of emission bands in the 580–620 nm range is ambiguous, as in some reports, they are interpreted as emission from the  $^3\text{P}_1$  level, while others are from the  $^1\text{D}_2$  level.<sup>8,12–17</sup> Here, as also earlier,<sup>10</sup> we assigned the emission at 607 nm to the  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_6$  transition. Considering the emission at 607 nm ( $16475 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ), the energy mismatch is lower for the  $^3\text{P}_0 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_6$  transition ( $\Delta E = 16400 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ) than for the  $^1\text{D}_2 \rightarrow ^3\text{H}_4$  transition ( $\Delta E = 16800 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ ). Additionally, to prove that the emission at 607 nm comes from the same level as 482 nm, fluorescence lifetime decay curves for these wavelengths were measured in a wide range of temperatures. Luminescence lifetime curves





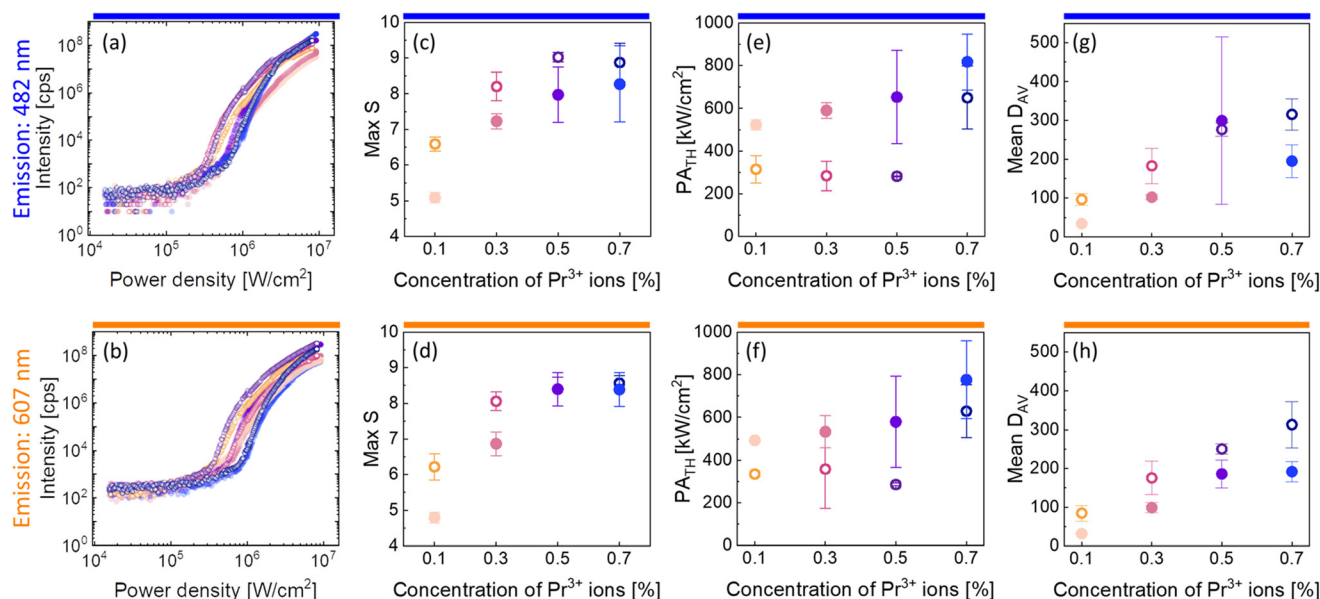
**Fig. 2** Anti-Stokes emission spectra of  $\beta$ -NaF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals: (a) core–shells singly doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions; (b) cores co-doped with x%Pr<sup>3+</sup>, 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>; (c) x%Pr<sup>3+</sup>, 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> co-doped cores with a passive shell with assigned transitions. The presented emission spectra were recorded under 852 nm excitation (1.5 MW cm<sup>-2</sup>) at room temperature.

measured at RT are presented in Fig. S3.† The values of the short and long components of the decay time curves and  $\frac{A_1}{A_1 + A_2}$  as a function of temperature are shown in Fig. S4a–d.† The average values of the lifetimes were calculated using the formula:

$$t_{\text{avr}} = \frac{A_1 t_1 + A_2 t_2}{A_1 + A_2}, \quad (3)$$

giving 13.6  $\mu$ s and 17.6  $\mu$ s for emissions at 607 and 482 nm (both at RT), respectively (Fig. S4a and c†). Measurements of the mentioned luminescence lifetimes helped to confirm that

the 607 nm and 482 nm emissions originate from the same level and assign them to 482 nm ( $^3P_0 \rightarrow ^3H_4$ ) and 607 nm ( $^3P_0 \rightarrow ^3H_6$ ) transitions. These emission bands, as one of the most intense, were additionally chosen to measure the emission intensity as a function of pump power density. The power density of excitation wavelength increases from 10<sup>4</sup> W cm<sup>-2</sup> to around 10<sup>7</sup> W cm<sup>-2</sup> with small (between 1000 and 2000 W cm<sup>-2</sup>) steps. As a result, characteristic s-shaped curves were obtained (Fig. 3a and b). The pump power dependence measurements were carried out at least two times and the average maximum  $S$  and average PA<sub>TH</sub> were calculated (Fig. 3c–f and Table S2†). By comparing the core samples with their



**Fig. 3** Characteristic of PA emission in the core and core–shell  $\beta$ -NaF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals co-doped with 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> and 0.1%, 0.3%, 0.5% or 0.7% of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions. Subsequent columns: (a and b) pump–power dependence of PA luminescence; (c and d) maximum values of  $S$ , which are a measure of nonlinearity of the PA process (eqn (1)); (e and f) PA<sub>TH</sub> pump powers as a function of the concentration of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions. (g and h) Mean values of  $D_{\text{AV}}$  parameters indicating the efficiency of the PA process. These properties were recorded for core (●) and core–shell (○) nanoparticles at 482 nm (top row) and at 607 nm (bottom row). Average values and standard deviations for (c–h) were calculated based on a few (2–4) measurements.



core-shell counterparts, it can be noted that the slope values (Fig. 3c and d) are higher for the core-shell samples, while thresholds (Fig. 3e and f) are lower in their case. Secondly, the inert shell plays an important role in protecting the optically active core from environment impacts, which might result in luminescence quenching. Analyzing Fig. 3c and d, which show the results obtained for various Pr<sup>3+</sup> doping concentrations, it can be observed that average slope values increase with the amount of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions up to 0.5% and then decrease a bit for 0.7%Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions. For both PA emissions, *i.e.* 482 nm and 607 nm, the biggest average slopes were detected for the core-shell  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals co-doped with 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>, 0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions, which amount to similar values of 9.0 and 8.6, respectively (Table S2†). In the case of thresholds (Fig. 3e and f), for PA emissions at 482 nm and 607 nm, the smallest PA<sub>TH</sub> values were observed for the core-shell  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub>:15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>,0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals (281 kW cm<sup>-2</sup> and 287 kW cm<sup>-2</sup>, respectively) (Table S2†). Overall, besides Stokes emission lifetime similarity (Fig. S3†), the similarity of the PA behavior at 482 and 607 nm further indicates the same origin of both emission bands, *i.e.* <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub>, and further suggests that no or negligible emission originates from the <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub> level. This simplifies the description of the sensitized photon avalanche mechanism and has serious implications for further, more detailed analysis and simulations that were carried out. Based on the PA performance, the core-shell 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> and 0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup> co-doped  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals were found to be optimal for PA emission in this investigated set of samples. It is compliant with earlier research.<sup>8</sup> We expect that PA emissions are extremely sensitive to even minor factors responsible for excitation, and therefore the resulting slopes of the pump power dependence curves are not as high as reported from confocal setups. Moreover, one may expect that in core-shell nanoparticle architectures, ion intermixing between the core and shell may occur,<sup>19,20</sup> and thus the actual dopant ion concentration may be slightly diluted there. In consequence, optimal conditions for PA emission may become diminished, leading to reduced nonlinearity and an increased PA threshold. However, regardless of the exact values of *S* nonlinearity, we draw general conclusions and observe and discuss trends in order to instruct further development of PA nanomaterials as well as clarify the mechanism of PA sensitization.

There were calculated *D*<sub>AV</sub> values (Fig. 3g and h), which, according to eqn (2), describe how much the luminescence intensity increases upon doubling the power density. The core-shell nanocrystals turned out to be more sensitive to the changes and the most sensitive was the  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub>:15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>,0.7%Pr<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> sample. Another characteristic PA feature is the slowing down of the emission rise time for power densities close to the threshold. Here, parameters  $\tau_{50\%}$  and  $\tau_{80\%}$  were adopted to describe the time needed to obtain 50% and 80% of maximum luminescence intensity (at an infinitely long excitation time), respectively. The average values of  $\tau_{50\%}$  and  $\tau_{80\%}$  are presented in Fig. S5.† The highest values of rise times were observed for  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub>:15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>,0.1%Pr<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals.

To understand the PA mechanism, besides experimental investigations, simulations of the PA process in the Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup>

co-doped system and in singly Pr<sup>3+</sup>-doped nanocrystals were performed. Compared with earlier studies,<sup>8</sup> here a significantly simpler energy diagram of the Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup> system was adopted for modeling. The supposed PA mechanism in the Pr<sup>3+</sup>, Yb<sup>3+</sup> ion co-doped system is demonstrated in Fig. 4a and, excluding gray elements, was used to write DREs (eqn (S1)–(S7)†). The correspondence of the properties measured at 607 and 482 nm indicates that the emissions come from the same level and therefore the <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub> level can be excluded from analysis. This feature allowed us to rationalize the rate equation model as compared to earlier studies, perform the next computational studies in a more effective way and draw general and more clear conclusions about the origin of PA in the PrYb system studied here. As expected, the 852 nm wavelength, thanks to its resonance with the ESA [<sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub> → <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub>] transition in Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions as well as its incompatibility with the GSA of Pr<sup>3+</sup> (Fig. 4a), turned out to be appropriate for PA. Absorption cross sections from the ground and excited states in Pr<sup>3+</sup> were indicated in modeling as  $\sigma_{\text{ESA}}$  and  $\sigma_{\text{GSA}}$ , respectively. As was experimentally evidenced, the Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions are necessary for the existence of PA. Thus, the absorption cross section in Yb<sup>3+</sup> was also taken into consideration ( $\sigma_{\text{Yb}}$ ).

The metastable level (starting with ESA) should be initially populated to provide efficient ESA. Here, three energy transfer processes populating the metastable <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub> level in Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions were considered. First, CR between Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions [<sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub>, <sup>3</sup>H<sub>4</sub>] → [<sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub>, <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub>] (*W*<sub>CR1</sub>), second, *w*<sub>65</sub> indicating energy transfer upconversion (ETU) from Pr<sup>3+</sup> to Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions [Yb<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>2</sup>F<sub>7/2</sub>, Pr<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub>] → [Yb<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>2</sup>F<sub>5/2</sub>, Pr<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub>] and finally, *w*<sub>71</sub> energy transfer (ET) from Yb<sup>3+</sup> to Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions [Yb<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>2</sup>F<sub>5/2</sub>, Pr<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>3</sup>H<sub>4</sub>] → [Yb<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>2</sup>F<sub>7/2</sub>, Pr<sup>3+</sup>: <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub>]. These ETU and ET were also considered as energy transfer processes going in opposite directions and indicated as *w*<sub>74</sub> and *w*<sub>64</sub>, respectively. Additionally, CR populating the <sup>3</sup>H<sub>5</sub> level in Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions (*W*<sub>CR2</sub>) was considered. This process was the basis for obtaining PA in Pr<sup>3+</sup> for the first time by Jay S. Chivian,<sup>1</sup> therefore, it should not be overlooked in the first approximation, despite the fact that the ESA occurs from <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub> and not <sup>3</sup>H<sub>5</sub>. Consequently, radiative and nonradiative emission processes from <sup>3</sup>H<sub>6</sub> and <sup>3</sup>H<sub>5</sub> levels were taken into consideration, namely  $\tau_3$ ,  $\tau_2$ , NR<sub>32</sub> and NR<sub>21</sub>. Other two nonradiative processes, *i.e.* NR<sub>54</sub> and NR<sub>43</sub>, were also considered. Because both PA emissions (482 nm and 607 nm) originate from the same <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> level, we could disregard the <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub> level from further analysis and thus simplify the description of the phenomenological energy transfer DRE model and speed up the data simulation presented in Fig. 4. Simultaneously, emissions from <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub> are weaker compared with emissions from <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> (Fig. 2c). This is because of a small energy break between levels <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub> and <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub> (<600 cm<sup>-1</sup>), which can be easily bridged by matrix phonons (energy of one phonon in NaYF<sub>4</sub> ~350 cm<sup>-1</sup>). Thus, in the modeling, the <sup>3</sup>P<sub>1</sub> level has been disregarded. Emission bands from <sup>3</sup>P<sub>0</sub>, <sup>1</sup>G<sub>4</sub> and Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions were characterized by lifetimes at these levels:  $\tau_5$ ,  $\tau_4$  and  $\tau_{\text{Yb}}$ , respectively. Based on the supposed PA mechanism and analyzing the emission spectra of PA nanocrystals, the processes illustrated as gray in Fig. 4a have been omitted from the modeling. Finally, the DRE (eqn (S1)–(S7)†) model was designed to evaluate and qualitatively understand the PA











around 70 °C under a nitrogen atmosphere and a mixture of NaOH (12 mmol) and NH<sub>4</sub>F (20 mmol) in 13 mL of methanol was added. Then, the solution was stirred for 10 minutes at 60 °C. Subsequently, the temperature was increased to 80 °C and the solution was maintained under these conditions for 45 minutes to slowly evaporate methanol. Then, the mixture was heated up to 110 °C and kept under vacuum for 15 minutes. After removing methanol, the reaction temperature was quickly increased to 300 °C and the synthesis spanned for one hour under a nitrogen atmosphere. Then, the solution was cooled down to around 80 °C and the nanoparticles were precipitated by the addition of ethanol and centrifugation at 10 000 rpm for 10 minutes. After that, the prepared nanocrystals were dispersed in a minimal amount of *n*-hexane and again precipitated with ethanol at 14 000 rpm for 10 minutes. The resulting nanoparticles were dispersed in 10 mL of chloroform.

**Ellipsoidal shell deposition.** Nanocrystals with an inert ellipsoidal shell were prepared by the thermal decomposition of oleate salts. At the beginning a precursor in the form of lanthanide acetates from Y<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> (2.5 mmol) was prepared as described earlier. The next steps were analogous to the core synthesis. Oleic acid (30 mL) and octadecene (75 mL) were added to the round-bottomed flask containing the precursor. The solution was heated up to 140 °C and kept under vacuum for half an hour. Subsequently, the mixture was cooled down to around 60 °C under a nitrogen atmosphere and a solution of NH<sub>4</sub>F (12 mmol) and NaOH (20 mmol) in 13 mL of methanol was added to the flask. The dilution was heated up to 80 °C and the flask was opened for 45 minutes to slowly evaporate methanol. The temperature was then increased to 110 °C and the solution was kept under vacuum for 15 minutes. Then, the solution was cooled down to 60 °C and the earlier prepared core nanocrystals dispersed in chloroform were added to the flask under a nitrogen atmosphere. Then, chloroform was evaporated. Afterwards, the mixture was heated up to 300 °C and kept under a nitrogen atmosphere for one hour. After synthesis, the solution was cooled down to about 80 °C and ethanol was added to precipitate the nanoparticles. The nanocrystals were separated by centrifugation at 10 000 rpm for 10 minutes. Afterwards, the nanoparticles were washed with *n*-hexane, once more precipitated with ethanol, centrifuged at 14 000 rpm for 10 minutes and finally dispersed in chloroform (10 mL).

**Spherical shell deposition.** Nanoparticles with a spherical shell were prepared by the thermal decomposition of trifluoroacetates. At the beginning a precursor in the form of trifluoroacetates was prepared, as described above. Afterwards, sodium trifluoroacetate (5 mmol), oleic acid (40 mL) and 1-octadecene (40 mL) were placed in a round-bottomed flask containing the precursor. Subsequently, the solution was maintained under vacuum at 120 °C for half one hour to remove residual oxygen and water. Afterwards, the mixture was cooled down to 60 °C under a nitrogen atmosphere, the core nanocrystals (5 mL) were added to the flask and the mixture was stirred for 10 minutes. Then, chloroform was evaporated. At the beginning the temperature was increased up to 80 °C and the flask was opened for 30 minutes, and subsequently,

the temperature was increased up to 110 °C and the solution was kept under vacuum for 15 minutes. Afterwards, the solution was quickly heated up to 300 °C and maintained under a nitrogen atmosphere for one hour. After that, the solution was cooled down to 80 °C and the nanocrystals were precipitated by the addition of ethanol and centrifuged at 10 000 rpm for 10 minutes. Then, the precipitated nanoparticles were dispersed in *n*-hexane and once more precipitated with ethanol and then centrifuged at 14 000 rpm for 10 minutes. Finally, the nanocrystals were dispersed in chloroform (5 mL).

**Setup description and the methodology of PA measurements.** The photoexcitation power density dependence of luminescence intensity was investigated and measurements of the PA rise times were performed on a custom-built optical microscopy system. The range in which the pump power density laser can be measured is 10<sup>2</sup>–10<sup>7</sup> W cm<sup>-2</sup>. The sample was excited with a single mode laser diode (FPL852S – 852 nm, 350 mW), producing an 852 nm beam. The outgoing laser beam passes through a set of gray filters of different densities that attenuate the light, so the power density of the excitation light can be precisely controlled without spectral tuning. Then, a dichroic mirror (DMSP805R) reflects the excitation beam to the side (left) port of an inverted microscope (Nikon Ti-2 Eclipse). Furthermore, the laser beam was focused by the objective lens (Nikon Plan Apo 40×, NA = 0.95, W.D = 0.21 mm) on a sample placed on a microscope cover slip (Menzel-Glaser, 24 × 60 mm). The sample's emission was collected by the objective lens and it exited through the left port of the microscope and then passed through the dichroic mirror (DMSP805R), where it could be simultaneously recorded using two PMT detectors (1001M and 2101M from Thorlabs) connected to a four-channel photon counter (quTAG). The luminescent light of the sample was separated by a dichroic mirror (DMSP505R), and then selected in front of the detectors by bandpass filters (F01-475 – Semrock and 600BP – Omega Optical). Thus, it is possible to record luminescence intensities by two channels at 480 nm and 610 nm, simultaneously. The obtained experimental data were analyzed using our home-developed Matlab code, which is described in the following point. Using an Andor Shamrock i500 spectrograph equipped with a Newton CCD camera (DU920P-BEX2-DD), emission spectra were recorded. The absorption spectra shown in Fig. S7† were recorded using a Cary 5000 UV-Vis-NIR spectrophotometer (Agilent Technologies). Excitation and emission spectra as well as lifetimes were collected with a FLS1000 (Edinburgh Instruments).

**Calculations of *S* and PA<sub>TH</sub> values.** *S* and PA<sub>TH</sub> values were determined using our home-developed Matlab code, which is available in our web repository (<https://github.com/LuNASianalysis/Photon-Avalanche-PA>). Our algorithm was based on the fitting of the linear function to the logarithm from the raw data (which is analogous to fitting the exponential function to raw data) point by point. For each of the points, the fit covers the maximal range of the surrounding data, which fulfils the given certainty. Such an approach allowed us to reduce the impact of the noise on the determined *S* values. The highest *S* values which were obtained for



the analyzed dataset were selected for presentation. Similarly, the  $PA_{TH}$  values were determined as the power corresponding to the cross-section point of the lines tangent to the logarithm of the raw data for the pre-avalanche region and tangent to the logarithm of the raw data in the range of maximum  $S$  values. The s-shaped curves were measured few times (2–4) and based on them, the average  $S$ ,  $PA_{TH}$  and  $D_{AV}$  values together with the standard deviation were determined.

## Conclusions

In summary, SPA emission at 482 nm ( $^3P_0 \rightarrow ^3H_4$ ) and 607 nm ( $^3P_0 \rightarrow ^3H_6$ ) under excitation at 852 nm in  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> colloidal nanocrystals co-doped with 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> and a small (0.1 to 0.7%) amount of Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions was successfully observed and studied. We have clearly demonstrated the critical role of undoped shell passivation in the PA emission characteristics, which is obviously beneficial and diminishes the impact of the local chemical environment (quenchers, solvent) on both the emitting (Pr<sup>3+</sup>) and sensitizing-migrating (Yb<sup>3+</sup>) ions. Under the same experimental conditions no emission from singly Pr<sup>3+</sup> ion-doped  $\beta$ -NaYF<sub>4</sub> nanocrystals was observed under 852 nm photoexcitation. It emphasizes the key role of Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions, which are necessary to obtain PA emission under chosen experimental conditions. During experimental investigations, the highest  $S$  of 8.6 and 9.0 as well as the smallest  $PA_{TH}$  of 286 kW cm<sup>-2</sup> and 281 kW cm<sup>-2</sup> were observed for the core-shell sample co-doped with 15%Yb<sup>3+</sup> and 0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions for emissions at 607 nm and 482 nm, respectively. Therefore, the optimal sample composition for SPA NaYF<sub>4</sub>:0.5%Pr<sup>3+</sup>,15%Yb<sup>3+</sup>@NaYF<sub>4</sub> was confirmed.<sup>8</sup> Both Stokes emission and photon avalanche emission let us clearly confirm that the <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub> level does not take part in energy transfer, and thus can be excluded, unlike in some other existing reports, from the analysis. In consequence, elimination of processes related to <sup>1</sup>D<sub>2</sub> level this let us simplify the phenomenological set of rate equations and ultimately enables to simulate the behavior, mechanism and performance of the sensitized photon avalanche emission, indicating the critical role of the Yb<sup>3+</sup> sensitizer in this system under 852 nm photoexcitation. Moreover, the simulations of SPA allowed us to understand the impact of energy transfer parameters on PA features. These calculations confirmed that PA emissions from Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions under excitation at 852 nm are possible only with the assistance of Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions; thus, crystals singly doped with Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions do not exhibit PA features at such a photoexcitation wavelength. The obtained experimental and theoretical results have shown and allowed us to understand the important role of Yb<sup>3+</sup> ions, which are necessary to obtain PA emission from Pr<sup>3+</sup> ions under excitation at 852 nm.

## Author contributions

MD: conceptualization, synthesis, data curation, data analysis, investigation, visualization, and writing the original draft; ZK: data analysis, investigation, visualization, and writing – review

& editing; KP: data analysis and writing – review & editing; OB: investigation and data analysis; LS: writing – review & editing; MS: investigation, methodology, software, and writing – review & editing; AB: conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, software, project administration, resources, supervision, validation, writing the original draft, review and editing.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

## Acknowledgements

This research was funded in whole or in part by the following projects 2018/31/B/ST5/01827 (M. D., Z. K., M. S., A. B.) and 2021/43/B/ST5/01244 (A. B.). K. P. acknowledges the financial support from NCN, Poland, grant number 2018/31/D/ST5/01328. Calculations have been carried out using the resources provided by the Wroclaw Centre for Networking and Supercomputing (<https://wcss.pl>), grant no. 529.

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