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TJ, TM), European (AL, AT, BE, BG, CH, CY, CZ, DE,  
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LV, MC, MK, MT, NL, NO, PL, PT, RO, RS, SE, SI, SK,  
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(54) Title: FLEXIBLE STEEL RING FOR A DRIVE BELT FOR A CONTINUOUSLY VARIABLE TRANSMISSION AND  
METHOD FOR PRODUCING SUCH

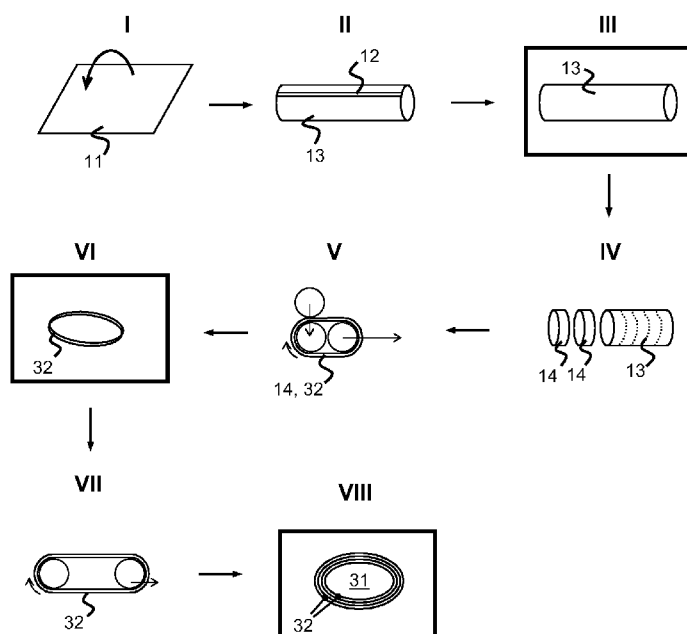


FIG. 3

(57) Abstract: The invention relates to a method for the simultaneous precipitation hardening and (gas soft) nitriding of an endless flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel to be used as or in a drive belt (3) for a continuously variable transmission. The ring (32) comprises between 0.5 and 2.5 mass-% chromium and the simultaneous precipitation hardening and nitriding is carried out at a temperature of 500 degrees centigrade or more. After simultaneous precipitation hardening and nitriding, the ring (32) is provided with a nitrided surface layer of the ring (32) comprising chromium nitride precipitates.

FLEXIBLE STEEL RING FOR A DRIVE BELT FOR A CONTINUOUSLY  
VARIABLE TRANSMISSION AND METHOD FOR PRODUCING SUCH

The present invention relates both to a flexible steel  
5 ring according to the preamble of claim 1 hereinafter and  
to a method for producing such a ring. This type of ring  
is used as a component of a drive belt for a continuously  
variable transmission for, in particular, automotive use  
such as in passenger motor cars. The drive belt is  
10 typically composed of two sets of mutually concentrically  
arranged, i.e. nested rings that are inserted in a recess  
of transverse members of the drive belt. The drive belt  
comprises a plurality of these transverse members that are  
arranged in mutual succession along the circumference of  
15 such ring sets. In such drive belt application thereof, an  
individual ring normally has a thickness of only 0.2 mm or  
less, typically of about 0.185 mm.

In the transmission the drive belt is used for  
transmitting a driving power between two shafts, whereto  
20 the drive belt is passed around two rotatable pulleys,  
each pulley associated with one such transmission shaft  
and provided with two conical discs defining a  
circumferential V-groove of the pulley wherein a  
circumference section of the drive belt is accommodated.  
25 By varying an axial separation between the respective  
discs of the two pulleys in a coordinated manner, the  
drive belt's radius at each pulley -and hence the  
rotational speed ratio between the transmission shafts-  
can be varied, while maintaining the drive belt in a  
30 tensioned state. This transmission and drive belt are  
generally known in the art and are, for example, described  
in the European patent publication EP-A-1243812.

It is further generally known in art that the  
performance of the drive belt is directly linked to not  
35 only the combined tensile strength of the ring sets, but  
to a large extent also the fatigue strength of the  
individual rings thereof. This is because, during rotation  
of the drive belt in the transmission, the tension and

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bending stress in the rings oscillate. In practice, it is universally resorted to special steel compositions, in particular so-called maraging steels, as the basic material for the rings in order to realize the desired  
5 performance of the drive belt.

A well-known and commonly applied basic material in this respect is maraging steel that is available in a broad range of alloy compositions that, in addition to iron, include substantial amounts of alloying elements  
10 such as nickel, molybdenum and cobalt. During the so-called aging heat treatment of such maraging steel at a temperature exceeding 400 degrees Celsius (deg.C.), typically of around 480 deg.C., at which temperature these latter elements form and grow into precipitates, such as  
15  $\text{Ni}_3\text{Mo}$ . Such inter-metallic precipitates significantly increase the hardness and toughness of the maraging steel, i.e. of the rings, as expressed by the yield strength thereof. A minimum required core hardness value after such aging process is 500 HV1.0 and preferably the core  
20 hardness has a value in the range from 550 to 575 HV1.0.

Additionally, the maraging steel rings are subjected to the heat treatment of nitriding, in which process ammonia gas is dissociated into hydrogen gas and nitrogen atoms that are absorbed from a process gas into the metal  
25 lattice through the outer surface of rings, typically also at a temperature of around 480 deg.C. By such absorbed nitrogen, the rings are provided with a compressively (pre-)stressed surface layer that greatly enhances the wear resistance and fatigue strength of the rings, as is  
30 required for/in the drive belt applicant thereof. By such nitriding process it is typically aimed for a nitrided surface layer having a layer thickness in the range from 25 to 35 micron.

In the art, the desire exists to combine these two  
35 heat treatments of aging and nitriding into a single process step of so-called dualling. This desire is based on process efficiency considerations, namely to reduce overall processing time, handling effort, as well as

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maximizing the utilization of floor space, equipment and investments. This dualling process is described in relation to the flexible steel ring component of the drive belt in EP1753889 (A1) and later in WO2012/083975 (A1).

5        Although the process step of dualling, i.e. of simultaneous aging and nitriding, of flexible steel rings is thus known in the art and, indeed, is successfully applied in practice, severe limitations exist in relation thereto. It has appeared that, in order to realize a  
10        required core hardness in combination with a required nitrided surface layer thickness of the rings, generally only a very narrow window is available for suitable process settings for the dualling process, in particular in terms of the temperature and the composition of the  
15        process gas composition in the oven chamber and of the duration of the heat treatment. Furthermore, such narrow window of suitable process settings was found to change considerably in relation to the specific composition of the maraging steel basic material, even to the extent that  
20        previously allowed tolerances on the alloying composition of the maraging steel basic material have to be narrowed specifically for the dualling process. In certain cases, i.e. for certain maraging steel alloying compositions applied in drive belts, in particular those compositions  
25        that age relatively slowly and that thus require a relatively long process time to reach the required core hardness, no suitable process settings seem to be available at all. In these cases, the nitrided surface layer simply becomes too thick and the rings become too  
30        brittle in the time that it takes to reach the required core hardness by aging, i.e. for the precipitate formation process to complete.

It is an object of the present disclosure to mitigate the above-described problems. In particular, it is aimed  
35        to broaden the allowed tolerances on the alloying composition of the maraging steel basic material.

According to the present disclosure this object is realized by including an amount of chromium in the

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maraging steel basic material. Chromium does not directly contribute to the material properties of the maraging steel that are required for the flexible steel ring of the drive belt, but chromium was found to be beneficial  
5 nonetheless in an unexpected way. The benefit of adding chromium to the set of alloying elements of the maraging steel can be understood as follows.

In contrast with sequentially performed aging and nitriding, in the dualling process, nitrogen atoms are  
10 introduced into the maraging steel while the said inter-metallic precipitates are incubating and growing. At this stage of the aging or precipitate forming process, atomic molybdenum is thus available. Although such atomic molybdenum is intended to bond with nickel to form the said  
15 inter-metallic  $\text{Ni}_3\text{Mo}$  precipitates, in the dualling process it can, unintended, bond with nitrogen to form non-metallic  $\text{MoN}$  and  $\text{Mo}_2\text{N}$  precipitates as well, but only near the surface of the ring. As a result of these multiple options for the molybdenum to form bonds with other  
20 elements, the material properties of the nitrided surface layer were found to vary considerably in relation to not only the process settings of the dualling process, but also in relation to characteristics of the surface of the individual rings such as surface roughness. This makes the  
25 control of the dualling process very (in some cases even impractically) sensitive, in particular in mass manufacture.

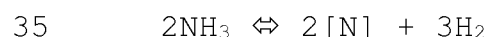
According to the present disclosure, the practicality of the dualling process can be improved by adding chromium  
30 to the alloying composition of the maraging steel and by applying a relatively high temperature in excess of 500 deg.C. in the dualling process. At such high temperature the chromium in the maraging steel alloy compositions reacts, i.e. bonds with the nitrogen to form chromium  
35 nitrides, i.e.  $\text{CrN}$  precipitates near the surface of the ring (where nitrogen is present through diffusion from the ring surface). As a result the molybdenum remains much more available for its intended purpose of forming the

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said inter-metallic  $\text{Ni}_3\text{Mo}$  precipitates also near the surface of the ring. Advantageously, in this manner the hardness value resulting from the aging process, i.e. from the inter-metallic precipitation formation, becomes much  
5 more consistent and -thus- far better controllable by the process settings of the dualling process.

Furthermore, by the presence of chromium in the maraging steel alloy the formation of the known, so-called, compound layer consisting of iron nitrides, such as  $\text{Fe}_x\text{N}_y$ ,  
10 at the surface of the flexible steel ring is advantageously suppressed. Such a compound layer is known to be detrimental to the mechanical properties of the flexible steel ring, in particular to the fatigue strength thereof. In other words, within the known teaching the  
15 presently proposed dualling process, in particular the high process temperature of over 500 deg.C. applied therein, would not be considered because the compound layer is then expected to form. However, by the said presence of chromium, the compound layer will not form, at  
20 least not within the presently discussed process window of the dualling process in terms of the process temperature and the ammonia content of the process gas atmosphere.

For obtaining optimum effects and results within the context of the present disclosure, the dualling process is  
25 preferably carried out at a temperature in the range between 515 to 525 deg.C. for 55 to 75 minutes. Other preferred process settings of the dualling process preferably entail keeping the ammonia content of the process gas atmosphere at less than 5 vol.-%, more  
30 preferably within the range from 1 to 3 vol.-%. Preferably, such ammonia content is controlled by controlling the equilibrium constant  $K_N$  of the nitriding reaction in the gas phase at the surface of the flexible steel ring:



and

$$K_N = (p[\text{NH}_3]) / (p[\text{H}_2]^{1.5})$$

with

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$p[\text{NH}_3]$  and  $p[\text{H}_2]$  representing the partial gas pressure of ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) and of hydrogen ( $\text{H}_2$ ) respectively

More preferably, such equilibrium constant  $K_N$  is  
5 controlled to a value within the range from 1 to 3 bar<sup>-1/2</sup>.

Furthermore, the most suitable maraging steels within the context of the present disclosure are taken from the range of alloying compositions containing 17 to 19 mass-% nickel, 4 to 8 mass-% molybdenum, 4 to 14 mass-% cobalt,  
10 0.5 to 2.5 mass-% chromium, 0.4 mass-% titanium or less and up to 2 mass-% aluminum with balance iron and with inevitable contaminations such as oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorous, silicon, etc.

The above-described basic features of the present  
15 disclosure will now be elucidated by way of example with reference to the accompanying figures, whereof:

figure 1 is a schematic illustration of a known drive belt and of a transmission incorporating such known belt;

20 figure 2 is a schematic illustration of a part of the known drive belt, which includes two sets of a number of flexible steel rings, as well as a plurality of transverse members;

figure 3 diagrammatically represents a known  
25 manufacturing method of the ring that includes a process step of nitriding; and

figure 4 diagrammatically represents a heat treatment process of dualling in accordance with the present disclosure.

30 Figure 1 shows schematically a continuously variable transmission (CVT) with a drive belt 3 wrapped around two pulleys 1 and 2. Each pulley 1, 2 is provided with two conical pulley discs 4, 5, where between an annular, predominantly V-shaped pulley groove is defined and  
35 whereof one disc 4 is axially moveable along a respective pulley shaft 6, 7 over which it is placed. A drive belt 3 is wrapped around the pulleys 1, 2 for transmitting a rotational movement  $\omega_1$  and an accompanying torque  $T_1$  from

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the one pulley 1 to the other one pulley 2 (rotational movement  $\omega_2$  and accompanying torque  $T_2$ ) and vice versa. Each pulley 1, 2 generally also comprises activation means that can impose on the said at least one disc 4 thereof an  
5 axially oriented clamping force directed towards the respective other pulley disc 5 thereof, such that the belt 3 can be clamped between these discs 4, 5. Also, a (speed) ratio of the CVT between the rotational speed of the driven pulley 2 and the rotational speed of the driving  
10 pulley 1 is determined thereby. This CVT is known per se.

An example of a known drive belt 3 is shown in more detail figure 2 in a section thereof. The drive belt 3 is made up of two sets 31 of mutually nested, flat and flexible steel rings 32 and of a plurality of transverse  
15 members 33. The transverse members 33 are arranged in mutual succession along the circumference of the ring sets 31, in such manner that they can slide relative to and in the circumference direction of the ring sets 31.

The transverse members 33 take-up the said clamping  
20 force, such that friction between the discs 4, 5 and these transverse members 33 causes a rotation of the driving pulley 1 to be transferred to the so-called driven pulley 2 via the likewise rotating drive belt 3 (and vice versa).

During operation in the CVT the drive belt 3 and in  
25 particular the rings 32 thereof are subjected to a cyclically varying tensile and bending stresses, i.e. a fatigue load. Typically the resistance against metal fatigue, i.e. the fatigue strength of the rings 32, thus determines the functional life span of the drive belt 3.  
30 Together, the properties of the basic material that is used and the process steps that are applied in the manufacturing thereof, determine the fatigue strength of the end-product rings 32.

Figure 3 illustrates a relevant part of the known  
35 manufacturing method for the drive belt ring set 31, as it is typically applied in the art for the production of metal drive belts 3 for automotive application. The separate process steps of the known manufacturing method



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are indicated by way of Roman numerals.

In a first process step I a thin sheet or plate 11 of a maraging steel basic material having a thickness of around 0.4 mm is bend into a cylindrical shape and the meeting plate ends 12 are welded together in a second process step II to form a hollow cylinder or tube 13. In a third step III of the process, the tube 13 is annealed. Thereafter, in a fourth process step IV, the tube 13 is cut into a number of annular hoops 14, which are subsequently -process step five V- rolled to reduce the thickness thereof to, typically, around 0.2 mm, while being elongated. After rolling, the hoops 14 are usually referred to as rings 32. Also after rolling the rings 32 are considerably more flexible than before rolling, i.e. as compared to the thicker hoops 14.

The rings 32 are subjected to a further, i.e. ring annealing process step VI for removing the work hardening effect of the previous rolling process step by recovery and re-crystallization of the ring material at high temperature. Thereafter, in a seventh process step VII, the rings 32 are calibrated by being individually mounted around two rotating rollers and being stretched to a predefined circumference length by forcing the said rollers apart. In this seventh process step VII, also internal stresses are imposed on the rings 32.

Thereafter, the rings 32 are heat-treated in an eighth process step VIII of so-called dualling, namely of combined, i.e. simultaneous, ageing or bulk precipitation hardening and nitriding or case hardening, either as a separate component or as (pre-)assembled into ring sets 31 (which latter variant is illustrated in figure 3). More in particular, such combined heat-treatment involves keeping the rings 32 in an oven chamber containing a controlled gas atmosphere or process gas that comprises ammonia, nitrogen and hydrogen gas. In the oven chamber, i.e. in the process gas, some of the ammonia molecules decompose at the surface of the rings 32 into hydrogen gas and nitrogen atoms that can enter into the metal lattice of

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the rings 32. By these interstitial nitrogen atoms the resistance against wear as well as against fatigue fracture of the rings 32 is known to be increased remarkably. Additionally, inter-metallic precipitates  
5 incubate and grow, which precipitates significantly increase the strength and toughness of the rings 32.

Typically, in this eighth process step VIII of dualling, it is aimed to provide the rings 32 with a core hardness of at least 525 HV1.0 and with a nitrided surface  
10 layer or nitrogen diffusion zone with a layer thickness of at least 25 micron up to 35 micron at most, at least for rings 32 having a thickness of 0.18 to 0.19 mm.

In practice it was found that such dualling process (step VIII) is difficult to control, at least with  
15 sufficient accuracy and stability in terms of the material properties of the end-product flexible metal ring 32. For example such resulting material properties can vary considerably in relation to variations in the maraging steel alloy composition of the basic material 11, as well  
20 as in relation to the actual process settings of the dualling process (step VIII). In view of these limitations of the known dualling process (step VIII), applicant set out to analyze the relevant influence factors with an aim to realize a less sensitive, more robust and broadly  
25 applicable dualling process.

According to the present disclosure and as illustrated in figure 4, such a more robust and broadly applicable dualling process is found in applying a process temperature therein that has previously not been considered. In  
30 particular, it is proposed to apply a process temperature in excess of 500 deg.C. In the illustrated example, the process temperature is in the range between 515 and 525 deg.C, a process gas ammonia content is in the range between 1 and 3 vol.-% and a process duration is in the  
35 range between 55 and 75 minutes.

The present disclosure, in addition to the entirety of the preceding description and all details of the accompanying figures, also concerns and includes all the

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features of the appended set of claims. Bracketed references in the claims do not limit the scope thereof, but are merely provided as non-binding examples of the respective features. The claimed features can be applied  
5 separately in a given product or a given process, as the case may be, but it is also possible to apply any combination of two or more of such features therein.

The invention(s) represented by the present disclosure is (are) not limited to the embodiments and/or the  
10 examples that are explicitly mentioned herein, but also encompasses amendments, modifications and practical applications thereof, in particular those that lie within reach of the person skilled in the relevant art.

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## CLAIMS

1. Method for the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding of an endless, flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel for use in or as a drive belt (3) for a continuous variable transmission, characterized in that the maraging steel of the flexible ring (32) contains between 0.5 to 2.5 mass-% chromium and in that the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding is carried out at a temperature above 500 degrees Celsius.

2. The method for the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding of an endless, flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel according to claim 1, characterized in that the maraging steel of the flexible ring (32) contains between 17 to 19 mass-% nickel, between 4 to 8 mass-% molybdenum, between 4 to 14 mass-% cobalt, between 0.5 to 2.5 mass-% chromium, 0.4 mass-% titanium or less and up to 2 mass-% aluminum with balance iron.

3. The method for the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding of an endless, flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel according to claim 1 or 2, characterized in that the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding is carried out at a temperature in the range between 515 and 525 degrees Celsius for 55 to 75 minutes.

4. The method for the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding of an endless, flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel according to a preceding claim, characterized in that the simultaneous aging and gas nitriding is carried out in a gas atmosphere comprising 1 to 5 volume-% ammonia and preferably less than 3 volume-% ammonia.

5. An endless, flexible ring (32) made from maraging steel for use in or as a drive belt (3) for a continuous variable transmission obtained with the method according to the method according to a preceding claim, characterized

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in that the flexible ring (32) is provided with a nitrided surface layer wherein chromium nitride precipitates are present.

- 5 6. The flexible ring (32) according to claim 5, characterized in that the flexible ring (32) is provided with a nitrided surface layer having a thickness in the range from 25 to 35 micron and having a core hardness in the range from 500 to 575 HV1.0
- 10 7. The flexible ring (32) according to claim 5 or 6, characterized in that the flexible ring (32) has a thickness in the range from 0.18 to 0.20 millimeter.

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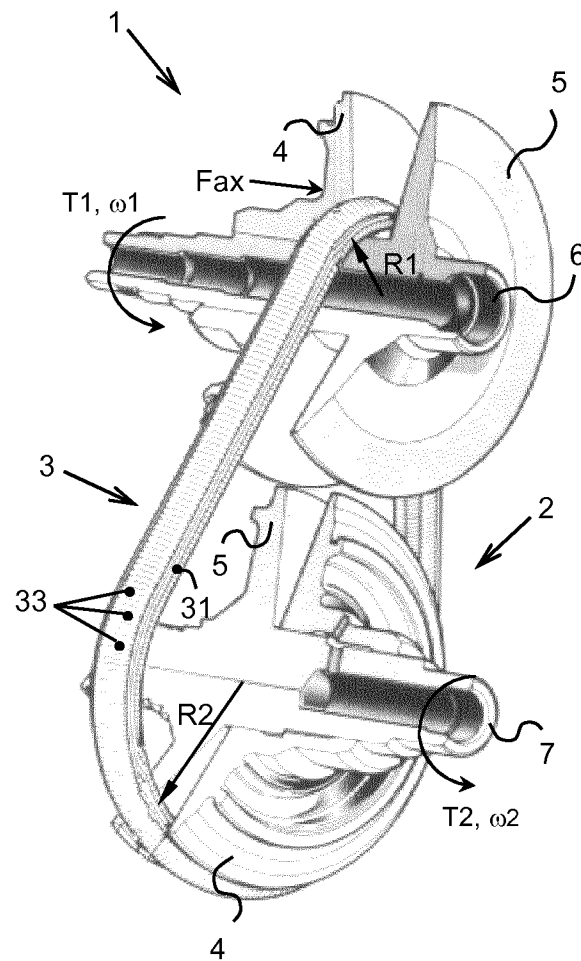


FIG. 1

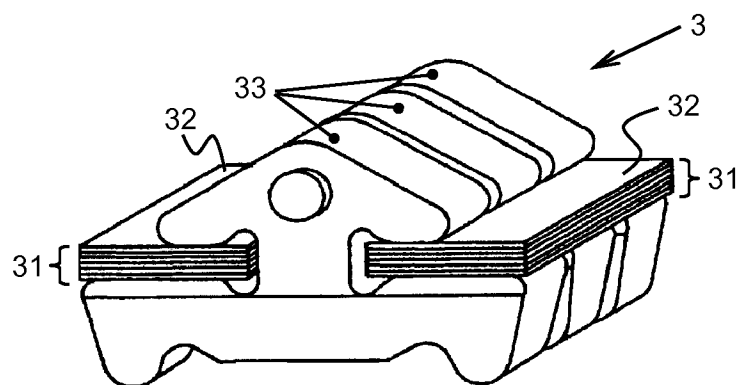


FIG. 2

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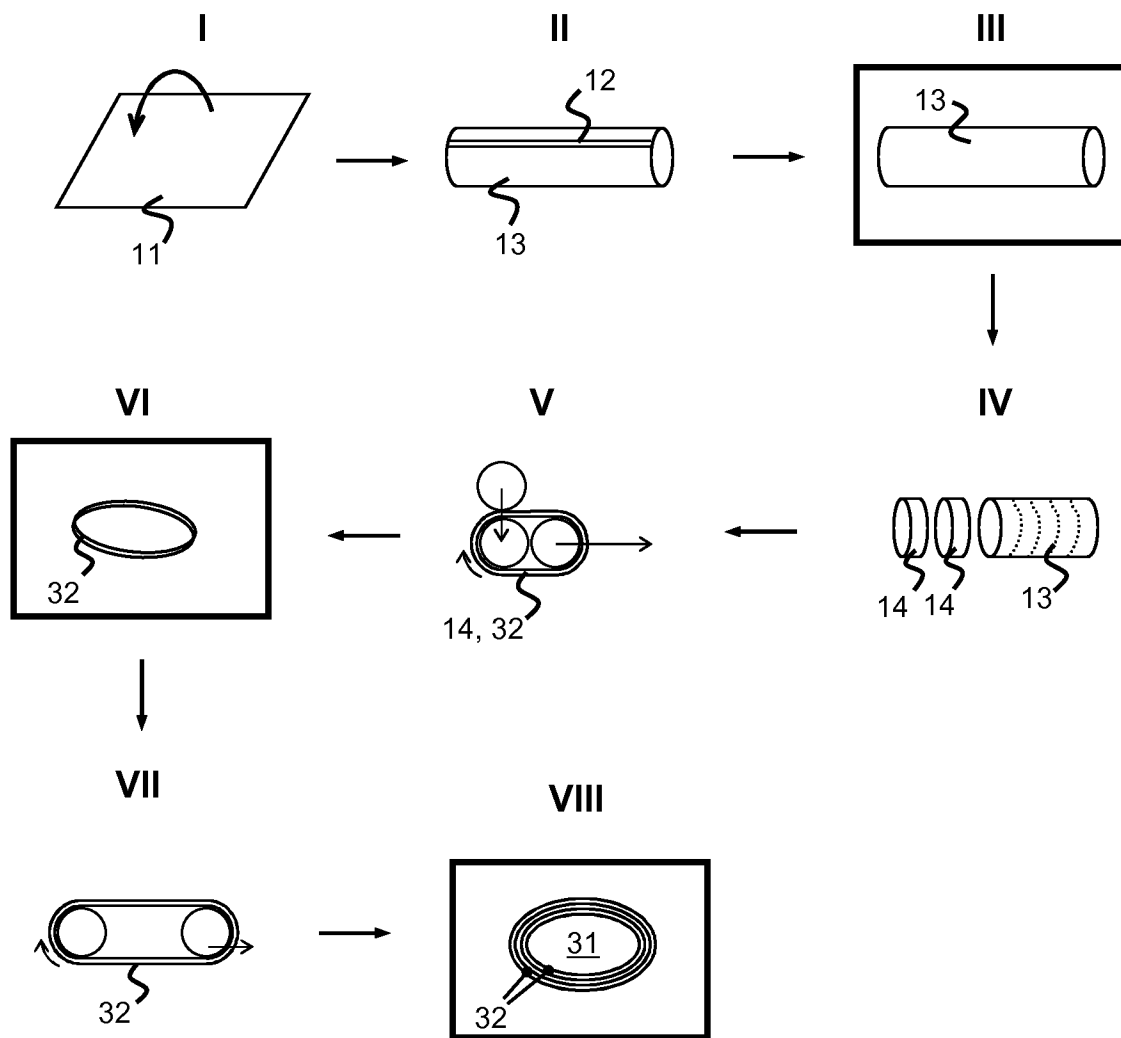


FIG. 3

VIII

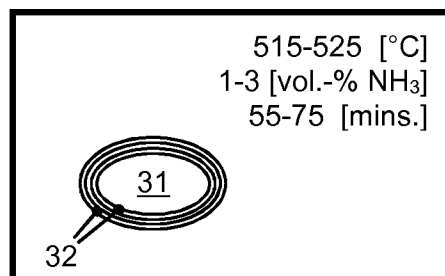


FIG. 4

## INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No  
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A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER		
INV.	C23C8/26 C22C38/52	C22C38/08 F16G5/16
	C22C38/18	C22C38/40 C22C38/44
ADD.		
According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC		
B. FIELDS SEARCHED		
Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) C23C C22C F16G		
Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched		
Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used) EPO-Internal, WPI Data		
C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
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Y	paragraphs [0035] - [0038], [0045], [0063]; claim 1	1-4
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X	EP 1 111 080 A2 (HITACHI METALS LTD [JP]) 27 June 2001 (2001-06-27)	5-7
Y	paragraphs [0013], [0016], [0034], [0041], [0044]; claims 1,2,3,8	1-4
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X	EP 2 412 836 A1 (HITACHI METALS LTD [JP]) 1 February 2012 (2012-02-01)	5-7
Y	paragraphs [0024], [0027], [0038]; claim 1; figure 1	1-4
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<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> See patent family annex.		
* Special categories of cited documents : "A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance "E" earlier application or patent but published on or after the international filing date "L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified) "O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means "P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed "T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention "X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone "Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art "&" document member of the same patent family		
Date of the actual completion of the international search  25 January 2016		Date of mailing of the international search report  01/02/2016
Name and mailing address of the ISA/ European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016		Authorized officer  Chalaftris, Georgios



## INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No  
PCT/EP2015/025106

C(Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
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A	WO 2009/134119 A1 (BOSCH GMBH ROBERT [DE]; PENNINGS BERT [NL]) 5 November 2009 (2009-11-05) claims 1,7-9,11,12 -----	1-7

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Information on patent family members

International application No

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