



Estonia's updated Packaging Act: a leading example of how to embed reuse nationally

[Pakendiseadus \(lühend - PakS\), RT I, 21.09.2023, 5](#)

In February 2023, as part of the need to transpose the EU's Single-Use Plastics Directive (SUPD), the Riigikogu (Estonian Parliament) passed the [Waste Act, Packaging Act and Tobacco Act Amendment Act](#). The law came into effect on 1 May 2023, with the exception of rules agreed in the SUPD that will apply later or require a transition period.

The law is broad in its scope, aiming to tackle the consumption of single-use plastics but also to incentivise the use of reusable materials, rather than the substitution of single-use plastics with another single-use material.

The changes outlined in the law introduce nationwide, legally-binding restrictions on single-use plastic products placed on the market and their labelling; wider extended producer responsibility obligations; product design requirements; and greater separate collection for plastic bottles. For example, it sets a goal of collecting 77% (by weight) of single-use plastic drinking bottles by 2025, rising to 90% by 2029.

KEY MEASURES/GOALS

The law sets an overall target of reducing the consumption of single-use plastic drinking cups and food packaging in Estonia, compared to 2022, by 2026. This includes all single-use plastic drinking containers with a cap or lid that are either filled at the point of sale or sold separately for personal use. It targets specifically containers for ready-to-eat food or food which can be eaten on-site - basically, anything that does not require additional cooking, boiling, or heating.

REQUIREMENTS FOR PACKAGING COMPANIES

The law outlines a general collaboration goal by forcing packaging companies to introduce their own measures that comply with the aim of the legislation: to ambitiously and continuously reduce the consumption of single-use plastic food packaging and drinking cups. Packaging companies must prepare an action plan on how they will comply with this waste reduction goal, which must be published on the company's website by September 2023.



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Packaging companies impacted by this law include those companies that use disposable plastic drinking cups and food packaging to package their goods (including when filling takes place at the point of sale).

To help track progress towards the goal of reducing packaging waste, packaging companies must start submitting data on the consumption of single-use plastic to the [national packaging register](#). Data must start to be submitted from 2024 onwards, and it's mandatory for the year 2023 (with 2022 data uploaded on a voluntary basis).

PUBLIC EVENTS

One of the most important features of the law is that, as of 1 January 2024, only reusable containers and cutlery for serving food and drinks at public events will be allowed. This requirement does not mean that drinks sold at public events should be packaged in reusable bottles, but rather that, for example, if the drink is poured out of the bottle, then a reusable cup or other reusable beverage container must be used.

When organising public events, Estonian companies and event organisers must now take into account the fact that, from 1 May 2023, it is forbidden to use:

- Food packaging made of expanded polystyrene to serve ready meals
- Styrofoam beverage packaging;
- Polystyrene drinking cups;
- Single-use plastic cutlery (knives, forks, spoons, chopsticks), plates, drinking straws, stirrers, and balloon stems.

Importantly, single-use biodegradable or bio-based plastic products are also prohibited.

Furthermore, products partially containing plastic are also subject to this ban (e.g. a cardboard plate covered with a layer of plastic). An important definition outlined in the law is that, if a product is made of cardboard but covered with a layer of plastic, then it will be classified as a plastic product and subject to the restrictions now enforced in Estonian law.

If the products were placed on the Estonian market before 1 May 2023, they may be consumed without penalty; but from after this date, new products that fit the description above may not be put onto the market.

The concept of a public event is defined as “an entertainment event, competition, show, trade event or other similar gathering of people that is not a meeting, which takes place in a public place and is open to the public.” This also includes cinemas, theatres and other events held in a public space that are open to the public. This definition is potentially helpful for other cities and governments seeking to replicate this measure.

TALLINN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Estonia's capital, Tallinn, decided to implement this measure ahead of the national regulation and has begun enforcing reuse in all its public events. Since 1 June 2023, only reusables (cups, dishes, cutlery, etc) are allowed at events with under 30.000 visitors/day. As an example, the Tallinn Marathon introduced mandatory reusable water cups at its 2022 edition, becoming the largest sport event in Northern Europe that year to use reusable items, with over 100.000 reusable cups used instead of single-use plastic packaging.

As a transition measure, bigger events in 2023 (over 30.000 people/day) can use compostable single-use dishes/cups/cutlery; however in 2023 there were only 3 events with more than 30.000 visitors per day and two of them were volunteering to only use reusables.

For example, the 13th Youth Song and Dance Festival only reusable cups and dishes were used to serve nearly 133.000 people (performers and audience). To monitor the impact of this measure, event organisers in Tallinn have to present the amount of separately collected waste generated after the event, with the waste totals being compared with results from previous years. This policy is a key part of [Tallinn's Waste Plan for 2022-2026](#).



Runners using reusable cups and their collection system during the 2022 Tallinn Marathon (photo credits: [RINGO](#))

FURTHER ANALYSIS AND IMPROVEMENTS

The law also includes an obligation towards the Estonian Ministry of Environment to conduct an analysis of the efficiency and impact of the measures enforced by the law by the end of 2024. Considering that the consumption of single-use plastic food containers and cups for beverages must decrease by 2026 compared to 2022 levels, the Ministry can submit further proposals to amend the legislation to ensure this goal is achieved if necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that the measures have mostly only come into force in recent months, it is too early to provide data on their impact. Yet the examples from Estonia, and especially its capital Tallinn, provide further evidence of the importance of proper regulation to accelerate the transition to reuse.

Strong legislation, like the one detailed in this factsheet, provides clarity to cities and businesses, with a harmonised framework and strong economic incentives for actors to make the transition to reuse models and infrastructure. In the coming years, we expect the learnings from Tallinn (and elsewhere in Estonia) to help inform the smart design and replication of similar regulations; and the further adoption of reuse systems across Europe.

For more good practices, check [Zero Waste Europe](#) and [Zero Waste Cities](#).

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Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, experts, and change agents working towards the prevention and elimination of waste in our society. We advocate for sustainable systems; for the redesign of our relationship with resources; and for a global shift towards environmental justice, accelerating a just transition towards zero waste for the benefit of people and the planet.



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