Ireland's presidency of the EU is accompanied by arts events that might produce a memorable six months, writes Shane Hegarty.

How Europe could light up the country

The host towns

- Bratislava will host Slovakia
- Dublin will host Estonia
- Vilnius will host Lithuania
- Tallinn, Co. Kerry, will host Czech Republic
- Riga will host Latvia
- Vilnius will host Hungary
- Sofia will host Malta

We asked ourway to bring forward proposals for a programme of events and activities that would help forge new friendships and connections. It was felt that it was important to promote Irish arts abroad and to celebrate the cultural diversity abroad in our own unique way. If we stuck with politics, it would be a very boring celebration and presidency and welcome for the accession countries.

It’s also about getting a wider message across to the new member states. We have found, when talking to these countries, that they feel they have a challenge in maintaining their languages and arts, of holding on to their culture. Ministers from these countries have stated again and again that it’s a worry. But they have had to hold on through more trying and difficult circumstances than now, and what could not be defeated by guns or bombs is not going to be defeated by this.

It's often forgotten that these countries look to us as an example of what can be achieved. It requires their populations that it is possible to preserve their identity within a large economic union. And by expressing ours it gives credence to that argument that it is possible even after 31 years of membership of the EU to preserve our identity.

The main events at home will occur around the accession date, with the first event beginning the previous week. White Europe looks towards Dublin Castle, tourists will be looking to the sky as the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer brings his Vectorial Elevation event to the city for two weeks. Described as the world's largest interactive artwork, it consists of 80 searchlights pointing skyward, their beams visible from 80 miles away. The public will choreograph the lights by creating designs on the website. The site will also be used to relay and record the screams of each design's 12-second life. When Vectorial Elevation was brought to Valencia, Spain, in 2002 the website received 3.5 million hits.

On April 30th Dublin will be treated to a large fireworks display, marking the arrival of midnight across the EU's three time zones. The next day has been chosen for Day of Welcome, and 10 Irish towns will each host an accession country, having created an event to welcome it (see panel). The Department was keen to involve towns around Ireland, not just Dublin. "The host-town idea, of course, had been so successful in the Special Olympics, so it appeared to be the right way forward," says O’Donoghue. "Each town has received 650,000, which must match. "We wanted to showcase the entire country to the accession countries and the world, to show that this is what the new Ireland is about and not just about the capital."

Dublin will host a Fair Day, at which all 25 EU member states will be represented by stands. It is seen as mirroring the tradition of the fair as a place to welcome arrivals of a town and to learn about them. The day will culminate in a rock concert in the centre of the city, although details are yet to be confirmed.

In Patrick's Day, the organisation that has run Dublin's official St Patrick's Day events since 1990, will manage Day of Welcome and Vectorial Elevation. Having broadened its scope to the regions in recent years, it will also manage the input of the 10 towns. "It's important to remember that the Irish have a reputation for being the best at throwing a party," says O'Donoghue, "so it was important that we had the best administrative expertise available.

The visits from accession-country artists will be a key element of the presidency. The Abbey Theatre, for example, will feature Polish, Hungarian and Slovenian companies. Dublin International Film Festival will screen films from the countries, while the Irish Chamber Music Festival will include a visit by the Vintners String Quartet. The Department's tactic has been to work with festivals and other organisations rather than arrange all of the events itself, encouraging co-operation and then giving assistance.

It has adopted the same philosophy with the artists who will represent Ireland abroad during the presidency, first...